THE STATUS OF SHIAS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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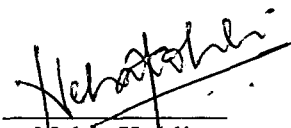for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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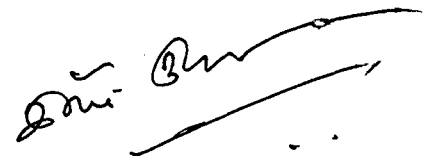
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CONTENTS

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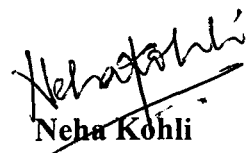
My thanks to all my friends who were there for me. Kuttu for giving me the use of his computer and broadband Internet, not to mention writing CDs and floppies for me; Stuti Banerjee for listening with a sympathetic ear to my problems and feeding me lunch so many times; Uma and Sarani for the sympathy and understanding they displayed; Gitanjali for being there when I was going through a very rough patch; Prachi for listening to my rantings; Arvind for his 'Arvind-isms'; Ajish for always allaying my fears about Sir and the dissertation; my MPhil classmates – Stuti Bhatnagar, Ayem, Sangeeta, Jafar, Chaitanya all the others who made classes such fun; friends with whom I have lost a rapport and touch – they all have made my life and this experience richer.

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Neha Kohli

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

West Asia appears to be largely homogenous on account of its constituents being largely Arab and Islamic. However, it is actually varied and heterogeneous, comprising various ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. Religion is a vibrant and all-encompassing feature of life in this heterogeneous mosaic. It is especially so in the case of many of the regimes in the region which derive their legitimacy from religion. For many countries Islam forms the basis for legitimacy of the political order. Islam is the foundation on which society and polities are constructed. No better example of this relationship exists than Saudi Arabia.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Al-Mamlaka Al-Arabiya Al-Saudiya*, is a unique entity, a monarchy sustained by a combination of religious orthodoxy and oil wealth, with a historical legacy like none other. Another characteristic peculiar to the Kingdom is that it is the only country named after its rulers, the Al-Saud. A strategically important politico-religious pact, between the family of Al-Saud and the followers of Wahhabism, made some two-and-a-half centuries ago has become the force behind the state. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was forged at a time that saw sweeping changes across most of the region. The 20th century literally dragged the Arabian Peninsula, and its people, dormant for a millennium, into the modern era.

It's history during the 20th century, both before and after its establishment in 1932, is concerned with state formation. The founder of the modern Kingdom, Abd Al-Aziz Ibn Abd Al-Rahman Al-Saud (hereafter referred to as Ibn Saud) created a stable and durable state with vast territories and diverse peoples under its authority. What effect did this have, especially on those who differed from the Wahhabi Saudis in their beliefs? A large segment of the population incorporated within the new state was Shia. Their beliefs not only differed radically from Sunni Muslims, most of whom were followers of the doctrine of Wahhabism, and viewed the Shias as heretics and apostates.

The dilemma of Arab Shias – both as an oppressed religious *minority* in a number of states, such as Saudi Arabia, and as an oppressed religious *majority* in others, such as Bahrain – gets to the heart of the dilemma of modern Arab politics. It is a significant

observation given that at present some 14 million Shia Arabs live in across the Gulf and have been facing discrimination within these states. Any discussion on the Shias of Saudi Arabia thus reflects, to a large extent, the dynamics of the political system not only within Saudi Arabia but also beyond. It also speaks much for the character as well as the successes and failures of the Arab State and regional political systems.

From a profile of the Kingdom in general, to a look at certain issues in particular, this chapter attempts an analysis of the historical background to the issue under consideration – the status of Shias in Saudi Arabia. For this purpose an attempt has been made to look at the origins of the Shia-Sunni schism. Beginning with the historical evolution of Islam, its important features and constituents, the discussion moves to the basis of the split between Shia and Sunni Islam. It then looks at both the sects of Islam and finally tries to analyze the reasons for Sunni hostility towards the Shias. An attempt is also made to place the status of the Shia minorities of Saudi Arabia in the larger context of minorities in West Asia and within the concerned literature.

SAUDI ARABIA: A GENERAL PROFILE

This introduction to the Kingdom and its constituent units begins with a look at its general profile – its geo-political profile; the economy sustained by oil; unique societal norms; and, finally, the realm of religion. Religion is an all-encompassing feature of Saudi life, polity and society. It permeates all aspects of the state and the lives of its people, be they the majority Sunni or minorities such as the Shias. Thus, it is important to study and analyze these aspects of the kingdom.

GEOGRAPHICAL PROFILE

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies an important place in West Asia. Geographically, it is located over almost 90 percent of the Arabian Peninsula, covering an area of 1,960,582 million sq. km, with the city of Riyadh as its capital. The other cities of some importance are the commercial centre of Jeddah on the country's west coast on the Red

Sea; Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities of Islam; and the eastern cities of Dammam, Khobar and Dhahran, with strategic oil installations, crucial to the country's economy. The country has four major provinces, that reflect natural and historical geo-political segments – Hijaz on the west coast; Asir in the southwest; Al-Ahsa on the east coast, with its vital petroleum resources; and the central heartland of Najd, to which region the ruling family, the Al-Saud, trace their origins.

Modern-day Saudi Arabia (the Arabia of yore) is situated on a strategic point on the world map. Since ancient times it has been part of the routes of trade linking the Far East with the Mediterranean. The western province of Hijaz, and the eastern province of Al-Ahsa have been exposed to other peoples and culture and this made them rather urbanized and cosmopolitan society, as compared to Arabia's heartland. Since the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD, Hijaz gained further importance. The two holy cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina are situated in this region. In the last 14 centuries, the region has been host to millions of faithful, on the Haj pilgrimage. This has only added to its cosmopolitan character. The central heartland, comprising the province of Najd, over the centuries developed a Bedouin, tribal culture which largely depended on tribal linkages in areas that did not have much settled population.

The Kingdom's terrain is primarily desert with rugged mountains in the southwest, in the provinces of Hijaz and Asir. The country faces a rather arid climate, with great extremes of temperature in the interior; and high humidity and temperature along the coast. It must be remembered that terrain and climate have also gone a long way in shaping the socio-political structure in different parts of the Peninsula. Even today the Hijazis resent the imposition of the social, religious and political ideologies of the Najdis on them, as their historical background has led to society, religion and political structures evolving differently from that of the Najdis.

POLITICAL PROFILE

The Arabian Peninsula had never been unified under a single political authority till conquest by Ibn Saud in the early 20th century, the only exception being the time of the

Prophet Mohammed and the advent of Islam. Rather, the region was characterized by political fragmentation, with the presence of several big and small entities – the Ottomans in Hijaz, the Ismaili Makramid dynasty in the Najran valley, the Zaidis in Yemen, the Ibadis in Oman, amongst other smaller chieftains. In the holy city of Mecca, the political authority was the Hashemite Sherif. Thus, local centres of political authority did exist; however, there was no single central political entity that had authority over the Peninsula. Before the formation of the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Ibn Saud, there had been two preceding Saudi states in the mid-18th and 19th centuries. However, these were largely limited to within the central heartland of the province of Najd, and did not have much overall political significance.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came into being officially in 1932. It is a monarchy ruled by the family of the Al-Saud. The political structure of the Kingdom differs much from even monarchies in other parts of the world. While those such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, or even Thailand and Japan, are constitutional monarchies where the monarch is more of a titular head, that is not the case in Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom is a monarchy without elected representative institutions or political parties. The King is the ultimate authority in all matters and by law has power vested in his hands. The present monarch is Fahd, one of the sons of the founder Ibn Saud, who unified the country in the early 20th century.

The Saudi monarchy governs according to the precepts of a rigorously conservative form of Islam. Neither the government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state. This intertwining of the religious with the temporal sphere is apparent in how Ibn Saud used Wahhabism, a deeply conservative and puritanical doctrine as an instrument to gain and wield power. According to scholars, "the result was the creation of a political order in which paramount authority is in the hands of an executive who fills three traditional roles, that of tribal leader (*sheikh*), religious leader (*imam*) and king (*malik*)."[1]

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[1] George A. Lipsky, *Saudi Arabia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (Connecticut, 1959), p. 5

The current political situation within the Kingdom is such: political parties are prohibited and dissent is unwelcome if not suppressed. In 1992 King Fahd instituted a set of reforms, known as the Basic Law of Government, under which he appointed a *Majlis Al-Shura* or Consultative Council and similar provincial assemblies. However, the holy book of the Muslims, the Quran, and the *Sunna* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad are officially considered the country's constitution. The *Majlis* began holding sessions in 1993 with 60 members and was expanded in 1997 to 90 members. It was further expanded to 120 members in 2001. However, it does not enjoy many powers and is largely an advisory body that reports to the King, who has the final say in all matters of state.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Saudi Arabia is a one-resource economy, and that one resource is oil. Saudi Arabia, according to scholars, is an example of a classic rentier state, with the state being a functional extension of the ruling family.[2] The country is the world's largest producer of oil and according to current estimates, if the world's total estimated reserves stand at one trillion barrels of oil, the Saudi Arabia accounts for around 250 billion barrels, or one-fourth of the total estimated reserves. It is also estimated that the country has natural gas reserves amounting to six trillion cubic metres. Thus energy resources form the bulk of Saudi exports in its entirety. These vast reserves of oil, with an increasing demand the world over, gives Saudi Arabia a certain amount of power. At no other time was this more apparent than during the oil crisis of October 1973.[3] At the forefront of this crisis was Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Arab oil-producing nations.

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[2] See Gewn Okhrulik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States", *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 3, April 1999, p.297

[3] In the Oil Crisis in 1973, Saudi Arabia and the other Arab oil-producing countries of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), under the umbrella of the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), unilaterally announced an immediate cut in their production of crude oil and an increase in its price. There was to be a decrease in oil production by 5 per cent every month. There was also an imposition of an oil embargo on the United States and The Netherlands in Europe following massive arms supplies to Israel during the 1973 October War. Though tne war was the immediate reason precipitating the crisis, there were other factors involved. Oil, its production and facilitation to worldwide markets, had, till the formation of the OPEC in September 1960 been in the hands of the giant oil companies. These were the 'Seven Sisters' which included Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, Standard Oil Company of California, Socony-Vacuum Oil Company, Gulf Oil Corporation, the Texas Company, Royal Dutch-Shell Oil Company and the British Petroleum Company. These oil companies had complete

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Kingdom's share of the world oil and energy markets increased almost three-fold. "By 1981, Saudi Arabia supplied over 15 per cent of the world's oil and 7.4 per cent of all energy consumed. Saudi Arabia's revenues increased from $334 million in 1960 to a whopping $101 billion in 1981."[4] Oil wealth has transformed the Kingdom, bringing it from a backward, conservative tribal set up into the modern era. It has enabled the regime to use this wealth to bolster its agenda and ideology. During the 1970s, especially after the Oil Crisis of 1973, the Saudi economy grew, as the earnings from its oil exports grew. This inevitably changed the dynamics of polity and society within its borders.

SOCIAL PROFILE

The Kingdom is a conservative Islamic state. It follows a strict interpretation of Islam in the form of Wahhabism. This can be observed even in modern Saudi Arabia, which is, compared to many other western and even Islamic societies, a closed and conservative society. Modern Saudi society is a direct derivation of the traditional patriarchal and tribal society that evolved in the region over millennia, even before the advent of Islam. This varied greatly depending on the geographic location and, consequently, with contacts with other cultures, peoples and religious beliefs. Owing to the Peninsula's largely being rugged desert terrain, society here did not evolve into settled agricultural units, as was the case in ancient Egypt along the Nile, for example. For the most part, society was pastoral, nomadic with strong tribal linkages. However, since the 10th century onwards and even well into the 20th century, there existed throughout the Persian Gulf littoral and into Central Arabia, emirates that ruled over settled and nomadic populations.[5] Thus, the ancient tribal way of life, evolved over three millennia, remain relatively unchanged till the turbulent times at the turn of the 20th century.

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and exclusive control of the oil within the producer nations. OPEC was formed in 1960 as a cartel to break this hold. And the hold of the companies was actually broken with the 1973 crisis. The real producers of oil were thus able to get an immensely huge share of the profits, as compared to before the crisis.

[4] Sheikh Rustum Ali, *Oil, Turmoil and Islam in the Middle East* (New York, 1986), p. 42

[5] These emirates were sometimes able to control areas of considerable influence by virtue of their tribal alliances. And as these alliances shifted or changed, so did the extent of central authority. See Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (London, 1981), p. 34.

The predominant form of social organization, which had evolved over centuries, was tribal. According to scholars, "this was a kinship unit, formally based on real or imagined descent from a common ancestor through the male line."[6] Whether it was a settled community, as was the case in towns and oases such as Mecca, Medina, Al-Qatif in the east, Al-Riyadh in the north, or nomadic pastoral communities, such as the Bedouins, the tribe was the unit that constituted economic, political or military activities. Each tribe was led by a leader known as the *sheikh*, an honorific title.

The dominant relationships in Saudi society are personal, evolved over centuries, and having seen little change in some aspects despite modernization. Scholars see "allegiance to Islam, loyalty to the family (defined in terms of a group of close male kin), and loyalty to the tribe" as the strongest bonds felt by most Saudi Arabians.[7] Sedenterization, modernization wrought by oil wealth, consolidation of political power under a single authority such as the monarchy, did not radically change the tribal structure of society. Although it is true that society here is today much more settled and urbanized than before, yet old patterns of society have not completely died out and traditional values, such as loyalty to kin, pride in lineage, and devotion to tribal leaders and rulers remained strong. However, oil wealth, and a 'womb to tomb' welfare system, provided by the leadership has led to a generation of highly educated Saudis, who are increasingly demanding more, in terms of social, political, religious and economic rights from the government. Hitherto, the latter could ignore such demands; however, today, it has to at least listen, if not give in, to such demands.

Apart from being predominantly tribal, Arabian society was also patriarchal. This is a general malaise within most Islamic communities today and Saudi Arabia is no different. Rather, it is even more conservative when it comes to women and their rights. Segregation of sexes is rigidly enforced in almost all walks of life and women have but limited opportunities to work and prove their capabilities, even though they are the most educated segment of Saudi society. They have no political rights, in a country where even

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[6] Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (London, 1974) revd edn., p. 36

[7] See Lipsky, n.1, p. 2

men have limited political rights. They bear the brunt of the male domination in almost every sphere of life, even in their homes. The huge bureaucratized machinery of the religious authority, the *ulema*, has further institutionalized the lower social position of women.

RELIGIOUS PROFILE

Its huge oil reserves have made Saudi Arabia's position in the world and its relationship with its immediate neighbours, the larger Islamic community and other countries of great significance. Yet, this is not the only reason. In fact, Saudi Arabia's leadership in the Muslim world is also bolstered by the presence of the holy cities, Mecca and Medina, within its borders. Not only does this give it a stature within the Muslim world, the current Saudi monarch King Fahd, declared himself the *Custodian of the Two Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina,* thus bestowing upon the Kingdom and the institution of monarchy an unparalleled status.

Though the Kingdom has been in existence for just the last seven decades, it represents a much older alliance, one that can be traced to a pact between the Al-Saud and the Al-Wahhab families made by Mohammed Ibn Saud and Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab in 1744. It is from the latter's name that Wahhabism is derived. It is on the basis of this pact that the Kingdom supports the doctrine of Wahhabism, a puritanical version of Sunni Islam. Wahhabism has been the mainstay of the ruling Al-Saud since the mid-18th century. The commitment given to Wahhabism by their ancestors some two centuries ago is still honoured by the family of Al-Saud today.

Wahhabism is orthodox Sunni Islamic doctrine as prescribed by Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab during the 18th century. Monotheism is a major theological tenet of Wahhabism. The followers of Wahhabism consider all versions of Islam, deviant from the mainstream Sunni version, as un-Islamic and heretical; this colours their view of those who do not subscribe to the same beliefs, as is the case with Shia Muslims. They are against practices such as polytheism, worship of graves, saints, Sufism and mysticism as endorsed by the Shias, as well as rituals, dancing, festivals commemorating saints etc. These occurrences

are viewed as a corruption of Islam that have to be done away with. Furthermore, Wahhabism places the Quran and the *Sunna* and *Hadith*, which are the recorded and validated sayings of the Prophet Mohammed above all other sources of Islamic law. These cannot be subject to interpretation or change.

Another belief intrinsic in the Wahhabism is that there can be no intercession between the believer and God. Wahhabism also does not assign the Prophet with the same important status as other versions of Islam. It is believed that there is no one more important than *Allah* and that any devotion to the Prophet should not deviate from devotion to *Allah*. Wahhabism exults in the ethos of piety, austerity and egalitarianism as existed in the days of the Prophet. It also condones the Islamic punishments that have been carried down through the ages – even extreme punishments such as stoning to death for adultery. Finally, an important tenet of Wahhabism is its endorsement of *Jihad* – that is, to fight a virtuous war on behalf of Islam.

Desert polity in Arabia has always been based on the ascendance of one powerful clan. Since 1744, this has been the case with the Al-Saud in Najd. The rise of the Saudi-Wahhabi confederate is an example of the basic inter-tribal social and political interactions – alliances and feuds. The latter meant that every tribesman was also a warrior, whether nomad or peasant.[8] Scarce resources meant that feuding over them was inevitable; however, this feuding also took place irrespective of scarcity of resources, and became an integral part of desert life. This militant attitude of the people was the perfect vehicle for the task of spreading the message of Al-Wahhab and integrating those converted to Wahhabism within the larger confines of a nascent Saudi state, ever since the mid-18th century. The nomadic tribes were the first converts to the message of Al-Wahhab in the 18th century. Their 20th century descendents, the *Ikhwan*[9] too were staunch

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[8] See For more on inter-tribal relationships and interactions see Halliday, n. 6, pp. 38-9; Lipsky, n. 1, pp. 2-4; and Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (London, 1981), pp. 29-75

[9] The *Ikhwan* were a fellowship of Bedouins and staunch Wahhabis. Ikhwan literally means 'brotherhood', and was set up by Ibn Saud and were the main forces that helped many of the territories that make up the modern Kingdom, during his various campaigns during the 1920s. The *Ikhwan* came to an inglorious end after they rebelled against the ruler in 1929-30; the rebellion was ruthlessly crushed. For more on the *Ikhwan*'s role in expanding and consolidating the Al-Saud's rule over Saudi Arabia see H. St. John Philby,

followers of the doctrine dedicated to the task of spreading the doctrine of Wahhabism. The Saudi-Wahhabi combine has benefited most from this particular quality of the desert tribes.

OPPOSITION TO THE RULERS

By 1932 the domination of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance over what is today Saudi Arabia was complete. The descendents of Al-Wahhab, together with the religious *ulema* have been the mainstay behind the ruling family. The latter itself needs the former to legitimize its rule in the country. And despite the riches wrought from the oil boom, and a drive towards modernization, this alliance has held firm.

However, in a state where religion is so powerful, omnipresent and all-permeating, it is the tool used by the rulers to legitimize their rule. It is also the resort of those opposed to this rule, be they the majority or the minority.[10] The rise of the opposition to the regime in the Kingdom in the 1990s "represented a new type of activist, the product of the era of affluence,"[11] wrought by immense oil wealth. Demands for political freedoms, relaxation of social restrictions, freedom to practice one's own religion, etc., are all sophisticatedly couched in the language of Islam, which is acceptable to the common people, and also begets the attention of the regime. Religion gives the opposition the same legitimacy it does the rulers; and each in turn uses religion to de-legitimize the other.

It is necessary to emphasize here that Wahhabism is a doctrine that seeks a return to the purity of early Islam. For the followers of Wahhabism, any deviation from their

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Arabia of the Wahhabis (London 1928), Philby, *Saudi Arabia* (New York, 1955), Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (London, 1981), and John S. Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and their role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom 1910-1930* (Leiden, 1978).

[10] Especially since 1990, opposition to the Saudi government has become increasingly active and vocal. The mainstream opposition is of the majority Sunni; however, there is also some Shia opposition. Though their demands are generally varied, they have strong Islamic overtones. The major figures too are religious figures – for example, Shia leader, Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, and Sunni clercis such as Safar Al-Hawali, Salman Al-Auda, and dissidents abroad including Mohammed Al-Masari and Saad Al-Faqih. Calls for reform in the form of petitions also reflect the overarching influence of Islam, such as the 1990 *Petition for Change* and *Memorandum of Advice*; and the Shia petition, *Partners in One Nation*, of 2003. For a detailed discussion of the evolution and agenda of Saudi opposition groups see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York, 1999).

[11] Joseph Kostiner, "State, Islam and Opposition in Saudi Arabia", in Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Efraim Inbar, ed., *Religious Radicalism in the Greater Middle East* (London, 1997), p. 80

understanding of Islamic history and jurisprudence is tantamount to a betrayal of the values of piety and equality, that was the raison d'être of Islam itself, as revealed by God to the Prophet Mohammed. Wahhabism is a form of Sunni Islam, and thus, with its orthodox outlook tends to conflict with other heterodox Islamic sects and beliefs. Within the Saudi set-up, Shia Muslims have long been a focus of Wahhabi ire. The Shias differ radically from the Sunni Muslims over certain fundamental issues within Islam and have, over the centuries, developed certain traits that have led them to be viewed with suspicion by orthodox Sunnis such as the followers of Wahhabism. These as well as the Shia-Sunni divide are discussed in some detail further in this chapter.

THE SHIA-SUNNI DIVIDE

Religion and politics are intertwined to a very large extent in Islam. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that these are not considered separate, disparate spheres. This politico-religious principle enabled the creation of a vast spiritual empire, the most widely spread and influential of its time in the medieval world. However, though the followers of the Prophet were able to establish a unified spiritual empire to a great extent, politically the empire was never a unified, homogenous unit.[12]

The spiritual unity of early Islam, however, did not last for very long. From almost the very beginning the new faith was rent by a schism brought on by the issue of succession to the Prophet's legacy. Since the new faith itself did not accept the principle of separation between the religious and political spheres, it was inevitable that the successor to the Prophet would control both the spiritual and temporal aspects of the faith, and could exploit the legacy of the Prophet. Thus, succession was a key issue, one that would determine the future direction of Islam. It was a clear reflection of power politics, one

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[12] Even after succession to the Prophet was decided in favour of the majority Sunnis, and the establishment of a successive series of Caliphates as the political face of Islam, the Islamic community was never a singe unified political whole. Each area and region of this vast spiritual empire had its own political entity. The Arabian Peninsula never politically dominated this spiritual empire. Rather, within half a millennium, the centres of political, and to a great extent, religious power passed on to other centres such as Damascus and Baghdad, and finally to the Ottoman Caliphate. till the latter was abolished in 1924 by the revolutionary government led by Mustafa Kemal Attaturk.

that had been seen earlier in Christianity over the legacy of Jesus Christ, which was won by the Roman Church, to the exclusion of other centres of the Christian faith. Within a mere half century of its origin, a schism rent the fabric of Islam, resulting in a split, out of which came the majority Sunnis and the minority Shia.[13] Two major institutions appeared, the caliphate (accepted by the majority Sunni Muslims) and the Imamate (an essentially minority Shia institution).

The successor to the Prophet, who became the first of the caliphs, was Abu Bakr (632-634 AD). He was not only one of the first to convert to the new faith, but also the Prophet's father-in-law. His reign was followed by that of Umar Ibn Al-Khattab (634-644 AD). The third caliph was Uthman Ibn Affan (644-656 AD). The fourth caliph was Ali Ibn Abi Talib (656-660 AD), the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. These were the *Rashidun* or the first 'rightly-guided' caliphs of Islam, universally recognized by Muslims. Violence and political strife marred the rule of these caliphs, and barring Abu Bakr all the other three died violently.

The *Rashidun* were chosen as per an ancient Arab custom known as the *bay'a*, which literally denoted a commercial transaction or agreement. In the *bay'a*, the elders from a tribe would elect from among themselves the one person they considered most capable of ruling; the rest of the tribe concurs and thus agrees to abide by the decisions of the one chosen. The consensus, in the form of the *bay'a*, took place during the election of Abu Bakr as the successor to the Prophet.

The election of Prophet Mohammed's successors by this method is the accepted beliefs among the Sunni Muslims. According to their version of events, Abu Bakr, elected by the traditional *bay'a* took the title of Khalif Al-Rasul Allah (successor of the Prophet of God).[14] The second caliph, Umar, was nominated for the position by an ailing Abu Bakr; this nomination was done in consultation with the leaders of the community of Muslims, then confirmed through the *bay'a*. A council of six members, which was nominated by

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[13] Of the world's Muslim population the Shias account for around 15 percent.
[14] See Anwar Alam, *Religion and State – Egypt Iran and Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Study* (Delhi, 1998), p. 36

Umar, chose the third caliph Uthman. Four of the council of six voted for Uthman over the candidacy of Ali. This was followed by a general *bay'a*.

The caliph Uthman was murdered in an uprising that included some of Ali's supporters.[15] Ali was chosen as the fourth caliph even though he had lost an earlier bid for the position when Uthman was elected caliph. Ali's claims to the succession and his election as caliph had been hotly contested since the beginning. Ali's caliphate was marred by conflict with the Umayyids, who were kin of the third caliph. In 657 AD, at the battle of Siffin, Ali was defeated by Muawiyya (who later became the Umayyid caliph) and compelled to submit to arbitration of his claims to the caliphate. Ali was murdered around four years after he became caliph and the caliphate passed into the hands of the Umayyid dynasty, who were Sunnis.

The issue of Ali's right to the Prophet's succession and his murder became the rallying point for those opposed to the Umayyids. Ali's followers came to be known as Shias, derived from the Arabic *Shi'at* Ali, which meant the 'partisans of Ali'. They believed that only Ali and his lineal descendents were the true inheritors of the legacy of the Prophet. Shias believe in Ali as an *imam*, who "quickly became the great martyr (*shahid*) of Shii Islam."[16] The death of his sons – Hassan in 670 AD and that of Hussein on the battlefield against the Umayyids at Karbala in 680 AD – furthered the cause of the Shias. Karbala became a site of pilgrimage for Shias as it broke completely from mainstream Sunni Islam, and Shiism soon spread in Iraq and from there further onward.

The Sunnis, under the Umayyids moved the centre of political power to Damascus; however, under them the consensus model of electing the caliph ended. The council of elders no longer "represented the collective wisdom and unity of the Muslim community as reflected in the unity of its leader. The *Shura* or consultative process was confined to

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[15] Tamara Sonn, *Between Qur'an and Crown: The Challenge of Political Legitimacy in the Arab World* (Boulder, Colorado, 1990), p. 36. See also Lipsky, n. 1, p. 36. From almost the beginning there was a section of Muslims who claimed the legitimacy of succession to the Prophet ran through his direct lineal descendents. They claimed a hereditary legitimacy for Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, as his successor. They held that the arbitration of Ali's claims to the caliphate was inadmissible as a clear mandate lay in maintaining the caliphate in Ali's descendents.

[16] Sonn, n. 15, p. 37

members of the caliphal family and their associates"[17] Their successors, the Abbassids, made Baghdad the seat of the caliphate.

Initially, the issue of succession to the Prophet, whether it was Sunni or Shia, was a political squabble. What originated as a movement over the question of political legitimacy over generations soon took on ideological and doctrinal overtones. "In theory, Sunnis believe that the leader (*imam*) of the Muslim community should be selected on the basis of communal consensus, on the existing political order, and on a leader's individual merits...a premise that has been inconsistently practiced within the Sunni Muslim community throughout Islamic history."[18] They contend that the caliphate is the only institution that had a right to lead the Muslim community thereon. However, the Shias contend that only Ali and his descendents could be the true successors of the Prophet and repudiate Sunni claims to the primacy of the caliphate.

At the heart of the Shia-Sunni divide lie certain stereotypical beliefs that colour traditional Sunni thinking. According to scholars, "from a Sunni perspective the Shia represent a schismatic religious group, whose Islam is unorthodox and suspect, whose attitude towards the state is unreliable, who prefer to maintain a communal life separate from Sunnis, and whose spiritual (if not political) loyalty lies in Iran."[19] None of these stereotypes is accurate, but all have an element of truth in them under certain circumstances. These shall be discussed with regard to the Shias of Saudi Arabia in the succeeding chapters.

WHO ARE THE SHIAS?

The Shia faith is centred on the martyrdom of Ali and his sons, Hassan and Hussein. It is especially commemorative of the death of Hussein at Karbala. This event that is an

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[17] Alam, n. 14, p. 39

[18] Christopher M Blanchard, *Islam: Sunnis and Shiites*, Report # RS21745, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, dated 10 February 2005, p. 2

[19] Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, "Is Shiism Radical?", *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. VII, no. 1, March 2000, URL: http://www.meforum.org/article/35/ accessed on 18 May 2005

occasion for remembrance even today in the form of the highly-emotional and ritualistic festival of *Ashura*, which takes place on the 10th day of the month of *Moharram*, the first month in the Muslim calendar. *Ashura* involves ceremonial mourning by the Shias, including self-flagellation, a feature that is viewed by Sunnis with abhorrence. Ceremonious and ritualistic, *Ashura* reinforces Shia religious traditions through the telling of Hussein's martyrdom, and the moral lessons to be learned from it.

The Shias follow the doctrine of the Imamate. They believe that the Prophet designated Ali as his successor and consider him to be the first true leader or *imam* of the Muslim community. Each successive *imam* after Ali "chose a successor and, according to Shiite beliefs, he passed down a type of spiritual knowledge to the next leader."[20] They performed the roles of both spiritual and political leaders. However, concluded Christopher Blanchard, as the Shias "increasingly lost their political battles with Sunni Muslim rulers, the *imams* focused on developing a spirituality that would serve as the core of Shiite religious practices and beliefs."[21]

Shiism has an inherent messianic ideology, with regard to the *imams*. The line of *imams* continued uninterrupted till the second half of the 9th century. In 874 AD the 12th *imam*, Abu al Qasim Mohammed Ibn Hassan, disappeared and is held by most Shias to be in occultation. They contend that he is 'hidden *imam*', who will return as the *Mahdi*[22] at an appointed time to lead the community. The Shia faith also has a peculiar characteristic, one that only serves to increase apprehension amongst orthodox Sunnis. This is the phenomenon of *taqiyya*, developed over centuries of Sunni domination and persecution, which compelled them to hide their true faith and avoid public disclosure. This phenomenon is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The Shia faith is itself not unified and homogenous. There are different forms of Shiism practiced, depending on the allegiance to and acceptance of the line of *imams*. The largest segment of tne Shias is comprised of the Jaafri Shias, also known as the 'Twelvers,' on

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[20] See Blanchard, n. 18, pp. 4-5
[21] Ibid, p. 5
[22] The *Mahdi* literally means the 'redeemer'.

account of their belief in the line of 12 infallible and divine *imams*, the last of whom is in occultation. In the absence of the *imam*, the Twelvers' "devolve the performance of his religious functions upon the Shiite clergy, ulema, who are entitled to make interpretations of Islamic doctrine and act as intermediaries with *Allah*."[23] Twelver Shiism is pervasive in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and a majority of Shias in Saudi Arabia too belong tho this sect. Following the occultation of the 12th *imam*, "a 'pacifist' trend emerged among Twelvers who chose to withdraw from politics and quietly await his coming. In the 20th century, changes in the political landscape of the Middle East led to a new competing 'activist' trend among Twelver groups in Iran and Lebanon," best represented by Ayatollah Khomeini.[24]

All Shias agree on Ali being the faith's first rightful, divine *imam*. However, there is much disagreement on the succession to Ali. These disputes have led to sub-sects within Shiism. The second largest sect of Shiism is that of the Ismailis, who broke off from the mainstream Jaafri sect in the 8th century. They recognize only the first seven *imams*; the seventh *imam* being Ismail, from whose name the terms 'Ismaili' and 'Sevener' are derived. "Historically and at least until the 16th century, the Ismailis were far more disposed than the Twelvers to pursuing military and territorial power."[25] The Ismailis are scattered throughout the world, but prominent in Afghanistan (under the Naderi clan), India, and in Pakistan, along with a presence in eastern and South Africa.

The Zaidis are a third minority sect within Shia Islam, resident mostly in Yemen. They are also known as the 'fivers' as they acknowledge the first five *imams* and differ over the identity of the fifth. The Zaidis believe in the legitimacy of Zaid, a grandson of Hussein, the martyred son of Ali, as the fifth *imam* of the Shias.[26] They do not share the Twelver belief in the 'hidden *imam*', reject the concept of the *imams*' infalliability, do not endow them with any supernatural qualities (as is the case with the Twelvers' *Mahdi*) and trace their *imams* from Zaydite succession.

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[23] Lenore G Martin, *The Unstable Gulf: Threats from Within* (Lexington, Massachusetts, 1984), p. 77.
[24] Blanchard, n. 18, p. 5
[25] Ibid
[26] See Martin, n. 23, p. 77. On the history of Zaidism in Yemen see Mohammed Ahmad Zabarah, *YEMEN: Tradition vs. Modernity* (New York, 1982), pp. 5-10

Other sects, such as the Alawites and the Druze, are generally considered to have been derived from Shia Islam, although their religious practices are secretive, and some do not regard their adherents as Muslims.[27] The Alawites are mostly present in Syria and Lebanon. The Assad family, effectively rulers of Syria since 1971, is Alawite. In Turkey, the Alevis are an offshoot group of Shiite Islam, and have often been confused with Syrian Alawites and other Shiites. Not much is known about their religious practices. The Druze community was an 11th century offshoot of the Ismailis and is concentrated in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Israel; it, however, bears little resemblance to mainstream Shiite Islam.

Sectarianism amongst the Shias does not mean that Sunni Islam is a completely homogenous phenomenon; however, it has seen lesser prominent sectarian divisions as compared to Shia Islam. Sunni jurisprudence recognizes four schools of religious law, listed here from the most liberal to the most orthodox, in that order. The Hanafi school is the oldest Sunni school of law. It was founded in Iraq by Abu Hanifa (d. 767 AD) and is prevalent in Turkey, Central Asia, the Balkans, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. The Maliki school was founded in the Arabian Peninsula by Malik Ibn Anas (d. 795 AD), and is prevalent in North Africa, Mauritania, Kuwait, and Bahrain. The third school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence is the Shafey school, founded by Muhammad Ibn Idris Al-Shafey (d. 819 AD). It is prevalent in Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen, Indonesia, and Malaysia. The most orthodox of the four Sunni schools is the Hanbali school, founded by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 AD), and is prevalent in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, parts of Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

The Wahhabi doctine, followed officially in Saudi Arabia, belongs to the tradition of the Hanbali school. The 18th century founder of Wahhabism, Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab was influenced by the works of the 14th century jurist and Hanbali scholar Ibn Taimiyya. It originated as a puritanical and revivalist movement in the 18th century, and called for a return to the fundamental teachings of Islam, as embodied in the Quran and in

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[27] Blanchard, n. 18, p. 5

the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Whahhabism, on account of a strategic alliance with the Al-Saud, has been able to expand its cope beyond that of an obscure religious reformative movement. Its main concern, as pertain to this study, is with its view of the 'other'. The followers of Wahhabism consider other non-Wahhabi Muslims, especially the Shias, as dissident heretics. The presence of significant numbers of Shias and no-Wahhabi Muslims, and non-Muslims in Saudi Arabia makes it an interesting aspect for study and analysis.

The Ibadi sect, which is centered mostly in Oman, East Africa, and in parts of Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia, has been sometimes misrepresented as a Sunni sect. Ibadi religious and political dogma generally resembles basic Sunni doctrine, although the Ibadis are neither Sunni nor Shiite.[28] The Ibadis believe in the existence of a just Muslim society. For the Ibadis, religious leaders should be chosen by community leaders on the basis of their knowledge and piety, without regard to race or lineage.

SAUDI SHIAS AS MINORITIES: A PERSPECTIVE

The region of West Asia is an ethnically, politically, religiously, culturally and linguistically diverse region. And as varied as its constituent states are the various minority community communities that exist within these states. What then is the relevant perspective with which to analyze the presence of these minorities? According to scholars, "the most relevant axis separating minorities from others in modern society is the history and political sociology of ethnicity."[29] Within the broader concept of ethnicity, the three major approaches to studying it are ethno-nationalism, ethno-regionalism and ethno-religiousness. Ethno-nationalism deals with "the attempts of ethnic groups to find territorial expression at the level of an entire state, assumed to correspond to the needs and rights of the nation."[30] Ethno-regionalism "challenges the powers of the nation-state by demanding greater local-regional autonomy for the ethnic groups or even

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[28] Ibid, p. 4

[29] Gabriel Ben-Dor, "Minorities in the Middle East: Theory and Practice", in Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor, ed., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (Boulder, Colorado, 1999) p. 1

[30] Ibid

looking toward a form of independence in the remote future."[31] Finally, ethno-religiousness "assumes an overlap of religious consciousness with some other characteristics of ethnicity…resulting in a form of ethnic activism that may or may not be territorially oriented but is of obvious political importance."[32]

However, it must be remembered that all such approaches are open to a varied range of interpretations as per participation of the concerned group in political processes. And the most important component of any analysis, be it from an ethnic perspective or not, is the relationship between the minority and the state.

Within the broader West Asian region there are various minority communities. The examples abound, from the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, to Alawites in Syria, Druze in Syria and Israel, Copts in Egypt, and nearer to home in the region of the Arabian Peninsula, the Shias in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, etc., and Bahai's, Jews, Sunnis, Kurds and Armenians in Iran. What becomes apparent as one indulges in a detailed analysis of the region is the centrality of religion, Islam, in all aspects of politics, and the impact of this feature on issues such as that of minorities. Any minority community can be considered an example and the importance of their religious identity becomes immediately apparent. This might be coupled with other factors, such as ethnicity, or might be considered on its own. Yet, in almost every discussion on minorities, the aspect of religion arches over all other considerations.

The Shias of Saudi Arabia, the object under study in this case, are a minority in Saudi Arabia. Their number, according to varied accounts and none very clear, ranges from around 3 percent of the country's population to approximately 15 percent. This just confirms that they are numerically a minority. But what about other classifications normally used to identify minorities? Religion could be taken as a defining factor. The entire region of West Asia can be taken as a long belt of Islamic societies stretching from Morocco to Iran. What appears as one is actually much varied and diverse; there are

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[31] Ibid
[32] Ibid

various groups that differ from the mainstream over religious beliefs, ethnicity, language, etc. The region is neither entirely Islamic (or following one variant of Islam) nor totally Arab ethnically, culturally or linguistically.

Scholars such as Albert Hourani defined minorities in the Arab world "as those communities that differ from the Sunni Arab majority in their religious affiliation and/or in their ethno-cultural identity."[33] As per this view, the Shias of Saudi Arabia become religious minorities. What this study hopes to accomplish is to analyze why and how the Shias' religious beliefs have relegated them to the status of religious minorities. However, what about other factors such as ethnicity, language or culture? The Saudi Shias are Arab, and have historically been residents of the Arabian Peninsula, not migrants from areas with large Shia populations, such as Iran (ethnically, culturally and linguistically Persian) and Iraq (Arab). Thus, the Saudi Shias cannot be classified as ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities.

Yet, the discrimination that they labour under is immense, and at the hands of a strong state machinery. Thus, a further aspect of their classification as a minority community becomes the political aspect. They can be considered as political minorities as they are unable to enjoy the same political rights as do the majority. This perspective, however, must be adopted with caution, especially in the case of the Kingdom, as what are considered legitimate and fundamental political rights in the rest of the world are not applicable in this case. It must be remembered that Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, governed with a strong tilt towards religious orthodoxy, and not a liberal democracy. As a matter of fact, even the majority Sunnis in the Kingdom have very limited political rights. Thus the Shias' lack of political rights is not an issue that stands out like a beacon, advertising discrimination against them.

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[33] Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (London, 1947), p. 1 quoted in P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Problems of Studying Minorities in the Middle East", *Alternatives (Turkish Journal of International Relations)*, vol. 2, no. 2, Summer 2003, URL: http://ww.alternativesjournal.net/kumar.htm accessed on 21 July, 2004

This focus of this study is on analyzing the overall status of the Shias within the Saudi Kingdom, as a minority community. However, of great importance is to also consider, specific to the Saudi context, the conception and status of minorities under the Wahhabi understanding of Islam. It is also necessary to see as to what extent has Wahhabi ideology, which recognizes only orthodox Sunni Islam, influenced the status of the Shias and led to discrimination against them. Also worthy of consideration is how the presence of a significant number of minorities fit into the Saudi system – a monarchical system where the subjects are unable to benefit from the populist system of democracy. In this context, the focus would shift to the Kingdom's official policy towards minorities.

Furthermore, this study would entail an analysis of the various problems faced by the Shia in terms of political participation, social rights, economic benefits and human rights due to their minority status in Saudi Arabia. There are currently incipient moves towards reform in Kingdom. Can these be applied to the minorities, such as the Shias? Secondly, it would also be necessary to analyze whether these moves towards reforming the country's political framework have brought about any change in their status. Is just political reform enough to mitigate the problems the Shias face, or are larger reforms necessary. Finally, studying the Shias of Saudi Arabia proved to be no easy task as not much official information is available. Similarly, there are very few venues to approach to understand their situation from the Shias own perspective.

Certain premises have been made in this study as a framework around which the research and analysis has been given shape. The first is that Saudi Arabia does not recognize the presence or existence of minorities. Secondly, Wahhabi ideology is inherently discriminatory towards the Shia minority community in the Kingdom. More importantly, the nexus between the religious and the political establishment has ensured continued discrimination against the Shias, who face greater discrimination as compared to other minorities.

The study examines the political, socio-economic, religious and legal status of the Shias of Saudi Arabia as a minority community. Chapter Two takes a detailed look at the

Wahhabi doctrine officially endorsed by the Saudi regime and the relationship between the Saudi political and religious establishments. It analyzes the impact of Wahhabi ideology on the Saudi political structure. It takes a detailed look at Wahabi history and polity that helps in understanding the conception and status of minorities within Wahabism, especially that of the Shias.

Chapter Three places the Shias in the political, economic, socio-cultural and religious spectrum of the Kingdom and analyzes their presence, representation and position in political institutions/bureaucracy, judicial system, the oil industry and other sectors of the economy, along with their social and religious status. It demonstrates the various aspects of discrimination against them in various spheres – political, social, economic cultural and religious, and seeks to understand the political, social, economic and religious constraints faced by the Shias in the Kingdom. Finally, this chapter looks at the Shia response to the existing scheme of things through various opposition movements.

Chapter Four looks at the external dimensions of the issue. Of special concern here is the impact of Iran, especially post-revolutionary Islamic Iran, on the Shias of Saudi Arabia, Saudi-Iran relationship and views and relations of the Saudi Shias with Iran. It also analyzes the Saudi response in terms of foreign policy towards the Shias within its borders. The chapter further analyzes the relations of the Kingdom with other countries, such as Iraq, Bahrain and Kuwait, which also have significant Shia populations within their borders. It addresses the influences of these neighbouring Shia populations on both the Saudi establishment and the Saudi Shias. The Saudi-US relationship and policy towards Saudi Arabia and its various minority populations are also analyzed.

Chapter 5 concludes the study with a final and overall analysis of the status of the Shia minority of Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER 2

WAHHABI IDEOLOGY AND MINORITIES

Wahhabism is a movement that has generated a great deal of attention and inquiry on account of its being formally followed in Saudi Arabia, endorsed by a compact formed between the Al-Saud and Al-Wahhab families in the mid-18th century. While attempting to study and analyze any aspect of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – as is here with regard to the status of Shias in Saudi Arabia – it is imperative to consider Wahhabism.

Wahhabism may be considered a revivalist Islamic doctrine. It is a stream of orthodox Islam, one that seeks to do away with all, so-called, 'impurities' that had filtered into Islam since its earliest days. "The followers of Wahhabism hold that their movement is *Al Dawa Ahl Al-tauhid* ('the call to the doctrine of the Oneness of God'), a return to the original principles of Islam and a repudiation of all innovations contrary to the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and the early generations of pious Muslims."[1]

It is interesting to look at the socio-economic and political climate of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the genesis of Wahhabism in Najd in central Arabia. At the dawn of the 18th century, the Ottomans were the one foreign power that had a presence on the Peninsula in the Hijaz. "The Ottoman Sultan proudly styled himself the Servant of the Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, where his delegates held offices."[2] The great empire of the Arabs – formed under the unifying banner of Islam during its early days and sweeping across the Arabian Peninsula and most of the Middle East – had given way to smaller kings and chieftains. The Shiite Ismaili Makramid dynasty controlled the Najran valley. In Yemen, the Zaidis ruled the highlands. Oman was under the control of the Ibadis and the Bani Khalid dominated most of the eastern region. However, at the same time, the Ottoman recognized the local authority of the Hashemite Sharif of Mecca. There was constant conflict between the bedouins and the urban towns-dwellers of the oases. The Peninsula was rent by sectarianism.

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[1] George Rentz, 'Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia', in Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics* (London, 1973), p. 54
[2] Ibid

Islam, too, had evolved and changed much since the days of the Prophet. However, here the important question arises as to what constitutes Islam? According to Bernard Lewis, "it denotes a religion, a system of beliefs and worship; in the other, the civilization that grew and flourished under the aegis of that religion. It thus denotes more than 14 centuries of history, a billion and a third people, and a religious and cultural tradition of enormous diversity."[3]

The story of Islam begins with that of the Prophet Mohammed in Mecca, who first preached the new religion. Preaching against the prevailing beliefs and practices he earned the hostility of important personalities and was forced to flee with his closest followers to Medina. This flight, known as the *hijra*, in 622 A.D. marks the first year of the Muslim calendar. He founded the first Muslim community at Medina. This community built by Prophet Mohammed and his associates flowed from the revelations (put forth in the Quran) and his personal leadership.[4] When the Prophet Mohammed defeated his enemies in Mecca and brought the Arabia under his control, Mecca became the holy city of Islam. Later, so did Medina.

During his lifetime, the Muslims became a political and religious community and the Prophet was the temporal as well as the spiritual head of this new state. "In the theocratic order established during Mohammed's lifetime he was judge, lawgiver and social arbiter."[5] After his death what remained was the task of spreading Islam. For this a successor was required. This was Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law and the first of the Caliphs, chosen through a consensus amongst the early Muslims.

However, even in its early days, Islam was stricken by rifts and divisions. The major rift – also pertaining to the Shias of Saudi Arabia – is that which developed over the question of the line of succession to the legacy of the Prophet. This then is the genesis of the Shia-Sunni split. The Shias believe that the line of succession runs through Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. They believe that Ali and his line of eldest male descendents were

[3] Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London, 2003), p. 3
[4] Richard K. Khuri, *Freedom, Modernity and Islam: Towards a Creative Synthesis* (London, 1998), p. 158
[5] George A. Lipsky, *Saudi Arabia: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (Connecticut, 1959), p. 36

the true and legitimate successors to the Prophet. The Sunni, the majority of Muslims the world over, believe in the institution of the Caliphate. They believe that the Caliph must be elected by a consensus rather than succeed by lineage. The Shias and the Sunni thus stand for two opposing political institutions in Islam that also contend with religious power, the Imamate and the Caliphate.

A distinguishing feature of Islam is that unlike the concept of the Christian 'Church' there is no separation of the religious and the political realm. If one looks at the history of Christian civilization, one would notice that "after a long period of domination over political power and then of resistance to change which lasted until the end of the 19th century, the Catholic Church finally lost its 'temporal' power and adamantly accommodated itself to the principle of separation between religion and state."[6]

The predominant view regarding Islam, however, does not recognize any such separation between the religious and political domains. The religion and its laws and guidelines cover both the spiritual and the temporal aspects of the life of a Muslim and his/her community. Traditional Islamic political theory holds that state and religion are inseparable. Thus, any study of politics in the Islamic world would necessarily include religion, and vice versa.

One of the chief characteristics of Islam is the importance placed on adherence to *Sharia* or Islamic law. *Sharia* refers to the guidelines and principles by which a pious Muslim must conduct himself. "It is fundamentally a doctrine of duties, a code of obligations."[7] Its primary sources include the Quran and the *Sunna* of the Prophet and secondary sources include consensus, tradition and analogical reasoning. Sachet Joseph states in his book, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*:

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[6] Sadok Belaid, *Role of Religious Institutions in Support of the State* in Adeed Dawisha and I. William Zartman, ed., *Beyond Coersion: The Durability of the Arab State* (London, 1988), p. 147
[7] Anwar Alam, *Religion and State – Egypt Iran and Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Study* (Delhi, 1998), p. 25

The *Sharia* is the epitome of Islamic thought, the most typical manifestation of the Islamic way of life, the core and kernel of Islam itself.[8]

Over the centuries political institutions all over the Islamic world underwent certain changes, including the position of the Caliph. The region saw the incorporation of the institution of monarchies into the realm of Islam, which actually does not recognize any such institution. Though Islam is a religion which seeks to avoid any intermediaries – like the Christian clergy – to access God, over the centuries there was the evolution of the *ulema*, which slowly got increasingly bureaucratized and incorporated into the Islamic system. The *ulema* today plays an important role in most Muslim societies and countries. Islam had also assimilated many pre-Islamic practices into it. It was these that incurred the displeasure of Hanbali scholar and jurist Ibn Taimiyya in the 13th century, and later inspired Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab in the 18th century.

EMERGENCE OF WAHHABISM IN ARABIA

To assess the importance of and impact of Wahhabi ideology in Saudi Arabia today, it is necessary to know how and why it emerged. As has been seen above, inter-tribal conflict and political fragmentation characterized the 18th century Arabian Peninsula. Though the Ottoman Empire had a presence in the Peninsula, especially in the Hijaz and also in the east in Al-Ahsa, the rest of the region was under the dominion of local chiefs and rulers. On the religious front, Islam too had lost its original form. It had assimilated many local influences and features over the centuries and was vastly changed from the Islam of the days of the Prophet Mohammed. "Reverence for sacred stones and trees and the cult of saints, both living and dead, was common everywhere."[9] Many practices of Muslims were considered by the more orthodox of their kinsmen as reprehensible and "falling into

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[8] Ibid, p. 24

[9] Rentz, n. 1, p. 55

the category of *shirk* (syntheism), the association of persons and things with God, who, in the common Muslim phrase, 'has no associate'."[10]

Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, of the ancient tribe of Tamim, was born in 1703 in Al-Uyaina in Najd in central Arabia. He was the scion of a prominent and prestigious family of theologians and jurists – both his father and grandfather were Hanbali judges. He received religious instructions from his father and had memorized the Quran before the age of 10. He was a well-read religious scholar having read several classic works including those on *tafsir* (exegesis), *hadith* (tradition) and *tauhid* (monotheism). Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab's theological studies, begun at home, were pursued at Medina, at Basra in southern Iraq and in the eastern Arabian oasis of Al-Ahsa.[11]

Arabia of the 18th century, as mentioned earlier, had changed immensely since the early days of Islam in the 7th century. The 18th century Najdi historian Ibn Bishr describes the prevailing situation:

> It was common for trees and rocks to be invested with supernatural powers; tombs were venerated and shrines were built near them; and all were regarded as sources of blessing and objects of vows....Moreover, swearing by other than God, and similar forms of both major and minor polytheism were widely practiced.[12]

His travels across the region exposed Abd Al-Wahhab to what he came to consider as the decay of Islam, both in Najd and abroad. Wherever he went Abd Al-Wahhab found manifestations of syntheism that were for him shocking deviations from the original teachings and practices of Islam. Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab perceived syntheism in the excessive reverence paid to saints and their tombs as well as in prayers addressed to sacred trees and stones. "For him syntheism was the one sin God himself does not

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[10] A.J. Arberry et al, ed., *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, Volume 2 – ISLAM, (London, 1969), p. 270
[11] Ibid
[12] Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, (Boulder, 1985), p. 22

forgive, the one sin that justified branding self-styled Muslims as unbelievers."[13] In his early 20s, he began to denounce these perceived 'polytheistic beliefs and practices' in society. He rejected "the corruption and laxity of the contemporary decline...(and) insisted solely on the *(Sharia)*."[14]

It was at Basra, in modern-day Iraq, that Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab openly condemned and preached against the syntheism and innovations that had crept into Islam, including the cult of saints. However, the *ulema* of Basra did not welcome his views and he was rewarded for his efforts by being driven out of the town.

Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab returned to the town of Huraimila, where his father resided and immediately began to criticize the 'polytheistic' acts and innovations of the people of Najd. His aggressive proselytizing and reforming zeal met with fierce opposition from the *ulema* and was unacceptable even to his father. So Mohammed avoided preaching publicly until after his father's death in 1741. It was at this time that he composed his most famous and important work regarding his beliefs and doctrine – *Kitab Al-Tauhid* or the Book of Monotheism. Through the medium of this work Abd Al-Wahhab set forth his views on God's oneness, attacked syntheism and spoke of the importance of returning to the uncorrupted Islam of the time of its genesis in the 7th century. Copies of this book circulated around Najd and his influence too grew rapidly. Thus, before he made a compact with the Ibn Saud, the written word was Al-Wahhab's tool for fighting what he perceived to be corruptions in Islam.

As his influence grew, the situation became precarious for Wahhab in Huraimila and so he moved back to his birthplace of Al-Uyaina, where he gained the support of the local ruler, Uthman Ibn Muammar, an influential figure in Najd. "Under the ruler's protection he carried out a series of acts dramatizing his demand for reform: cutting down sacred trees, razing the revered tomb of Zaid Ibn Al-Khattab, who had fallen in the battle against Musailima the False Prophet, and stoning an adulterous woman, thereby reviving an

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[13] Arberry, n. 10, p. 271
[14] Al-Yassini, n. 12, p. 22

ancient sentence in abeyance for many years."[15]These incidents shed light on the conception of the ideal Wahhabi society, where the rules of *tauhid* or monotheism were paramount.

However, his zealous attitude incurred the displeasure of the region's *ulema*, which intensified its attacks on the fledgling movement. Eventually, concerned with the rapidly growing popularity of the Wahhabi movement, Sulayman Ibn Mohammed, the chief of the Bani Khalid tribe that controlled the oases of the eastern Al-Ahsa, pressured Uthman Ibn Muammar to expel Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab from Al-Uyaina. Fearful of reprisal from the Bani Khalid, Uthman Ibn Muammar terminated his alliance with Abd Al-Wahhab, who was expelled from Al-Uyaina. He eventually found refuge and support in Al-Diriya, amongst the ruling family of the Ibn Saud.

ALLIANCE WITH THE HOUSE OF SAUD

"The Saudi system is the product of a desert culture marked by tribal divisions and conflict, harsh and austere living conditions, and religious piety and fanaticism."[16] Desert polity in Arabia had always been based on the ascendance of one powerful clan. Since 1744, this has been the case with the Al Saud in Najd. Before they emerged as a significant political/military force in Najd, there is little historical reference to them. The Saudi family tree begins in the second decade of the 18th century when Saud Ibn Mohammed Ibn Muqrin began his rule as the Emir of Al-Diriya. His son, Mohammed Ibn Saud made the pact with Wahhab.

The year 1744 is an important year in the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was then that Mohammed Abd Al-Wahhab, seeking refuge from the Bani Khalid and the Najdi *ulema*, sought and was granted refuge in Al-Diriya, which was ruled by Mohammed Ibn Saud. The latter had been persuaded by his wife and brothers to receive

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[15] Rentz, n. 1, p. 56

[16] Mahmud A. Faksh, *The Future of Islam in the Middle East: Fundamentalism in Egypt, Algeria and Saudi Arabia*, (Connecticut, 1997), p. 89. For more on the development of desert culture and tribal society in the Arabian Peninsula see Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (London, 1981), pp. 17-75

Al-Wahhab. The result was a compact, an alliance whereby the one was promised dominion over lands and men in return for his supporting the other's cause of reform. "The ruler swore allegiance to the reformer in the cause of Islam and declared his readiness to undertake the jihad."[17]

This agreement was one that benefited both parties to a great extent. Almost from the beginning, Wahhabism "was given the strongest support from the Al-Saud whose political authority was, in turn, given the sanction of religious validity."[18] Al-Wahhab settled in Al-Diriya and soon converts to his zealous and reformist ideas came flocking in thus increasing his popularity. For the Al-Saud, this connection to an increasingly popular reformer meant a 'religious' sanction to their aspirations for expansion. In turn, religion ruled the state. Wahhabism has influenced all aspects of life – be they social, economic or political – in Saudi Arabia. "The Wahhabi *ulema* gave explicit approval to the hereditary rule of the Al-Saud; and the Islamic belief that all men are equal within the *umma* gave credence to the Saudi policy of eliminating tribal particularisms and urban rivalries to establish its own paramount authority."[19]

The Sheikh[20] became the supreme authority in questions regarding religion. Even today, the descendents of Sheikh Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab hold prominent positions in Saudi society and administration. Abdullah bin Mohamed Al Al-Shaikh is justice minister while Abd Al-Aziz Al Al-Shaikh is the *mufti* (the country's highest religious authority), both descendents of Al-Wahhab.

The historical alliance between the Al Wahab and Ibn Saud families combined the sword (and the will to use it) and the faith, which meant that its leaders were able to expand their control beyond the confines of the Najdi desert. It is on the basis of this 1744 pact

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[17] Rentz, n.1, p. 56
[18] Christine Moss Helms, *The Cohesion of Saudi Arabia: Evolution of Political Identity* (London, 1981), p. 78
[19] Ibid
[20] In Saudi Arabia Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab is *the* Sheikh and his descendents bear the title of Al Al-Sheikh. They are the only family to bear this title, even the ruling family's title is just Al-Saud.

that the Kingdom still supports the doctrine of Wahhabism, which, in turn, has been the mainstay of the ruling family/tribe since the mid-18th century.

Christine Moss Helms divides the subsequent development of Saudi history after Mohammed Ibn Saud into three periods: the initial period from 1745 to 1818; the intermediate period covering 1824 to 1885; and the current period beginning 1902.[21] One common element linking these periods and distinguishing it from other emirates and sheikhdoms of Arabia was the effective union of political/military organization and religious ideology beginning with the alliance of 1744. The Saudi monarchy has thus evolved in congruence with the Wahhabi religious tenets. This agreement between the Al-Saud and the followers of Wahhabism has become the raison d'être of the Saudi state and has supported, consolidated and legitimized the Saudi monarchy.

The Saudi rulers of Najd embraced and took up the cause of Wahhabism and promoted it through the use of military force. An important legacy of Wahhabism is its religious zeal and owing to the 1744 pact, its militancy in spreading its ideas and establishing Saudi dominion. In a series of campaigns, they carried their rule and their faith to much of central and eastern Arabia and even raided the lands of the Fertile Crescent that was under the direct Ottoman administration.[22] In 1792, the Wahhabis annexed the oasis of Al-Qatif, in the east in Al-Ahsa, and destroyed the Shiite plaes of worship there. In 1802, these forces captured the Shiite holy city of Karbala, which is the resting place of Hussain, the revered *Imam* of the Shias, and demolished sites and objects sacred to the Shias. They then turned their gaze towards the Hijaz and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where they destroyed the various shrines to saints where people offered prayers. By 1814, The Saud-Wahhabi alliance had extended its control over Najd, Al-Qatif and Al-Ahsa in the east and Hijaz covering territory from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea.

The first Wahhabi state thus established remained in existence till 1818. By this time it began to be viewed as a threat by the Ottoman Sultan. The Ottoman government

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[21] See Helms, n.18, p. 77
[22] See Lewis, n. 3, p. 93

eventually authorised Mohammed Ali, ruler and creator of modern Egypt, to crush the rising Wahhabi empire and in 1818, an Egyptian expedition was sent to Al-Diriya under Ibrahim Pasha. [23] This expedition, combined with the forces of the Al-Rashid tribe, destroyed the town. The then Saudi Emir Abdullah was taken to Constantinople and beheaded. This brought about the end of the first Saudi-Wahhabi kingdom.

The Saudi-Wahhabi state was re-established by Turki Ibn Abdullah, a cousin of the Emir Abdullah. He established himself in Al-Riyadhin in 1824. His son Faisal took over after Turki's assassination. Faisal's death in 1865 triggered a civil war between his sons and the result was that the authority of the state was undermined. The Ottomans consolidated their hold on Hijaz and also extended their control over northern part of Al-Ahsa. The House of Rashid gained strength in Najd and drove Abd Al-Rahman, the father of Ibn Saud, architect of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, into exile in Kuwait.

The current chapter in the evolution of the Saudi state was written by Ibn Saud in 1902. In that year, Ibn Saud "left his place of exile in Kuwait and in a bold exploit captured Al-Riyadh from the forces of the House of Rashid."[24] Thus, he rebuilt the foundations of the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance in Najd by 1906 and from there fanned out to conquer the Peninsula under the banner of reformist Islam. By 1913, he had thrown the Ottomans out of Al-Ahsa in the east and was setting his sights on Hijaz. To aid in these endeavours, he had built up an army of the *Ikhwan*.

The *Ikhwan* – literally, 'brothers' – were composed of those bedouins who were staunch followers of Wahhabism. Starting about 1912, Ibn Saud had encouraged the bedouins to found townships that were part agricultural settlements, part military cantonment as well as centres for the propagation of Wahhabi ideology and doctrine. These *Ikhwan* provided their services to Ibn Saud in the building of the state; their religious zeal combined with military tactics would carry the message of Al-Wahhab and establish the rule of Saud over Arabia and all those who did not subscribe to the Wahhabi conception of Sunni

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[23] See Lipsky, n. 5, p. 11
[24] Rentz, n. 1, p. 64

orthodoxy, who were thus deemed as 'unbelievers'. The best example of those the *Ikhwan* and followers of Wahhabism saw as 'unbelievers' were the Shias. One by one, the provinces that today make up Saudi Arabia began to fall to the *Ikhwan*, beginning with Asir in the southwest, then Jabal Shammar and finally the Hijaz.[25]

In the years following World War I, the drawing of borders in the Arabian Peninsula had led to growing rivalry between the Hashemite Sharif Hussein and Ibn Saud. This conflict was not a new one. In the mid-18th century, a mere four-five years after Ibn Saud and Al-Wahhab made their pact, the Wahhabis began having difficulties with the Sharif of Mecca.[26] The conflict between Hussein and Ibn Saud deepened when Hussein proclaimed himself as the Caliph of Islam in 1924[27], as both then became contenders for the leadership of the large Islamic community. Ibn Saud invaded Hijaz in 1926 and forced Sharif Hussein to abdicate. The rule of the Hashemites who were the traditional guardians of the holy cities ended and Ibn Saud took up the title of 'King' after the conquest of Hijaz being recognized as such by Britain and other great powers. The conquest "gave the Saudi leadership a major boost by linking it with Islam to a degree that had no equal."[28]

By the late 1920s, the *Ikhwan* had ceased to be of much use to Ibn Saud. Rather, they were fast becoming a liability and a source of embarrassment, especially whenever any attempts at modernization were made. They soon fell out of favour. The led to many *Ikhwan* revolting against Ibn Saud; the revolt was crushed in 1930. According to Fred Halliday, "the modern Saudi state has its origins in the conflicts of the 18th century, when ,the northern peninsula was temporarily united, by a coalition of tribes led by the Saudi tribe from Najd. This coalition produced, for the first time since Mohammed, a force

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[25] For the *Ikhwan*'s role in expanding and consolidating Ibn Saud's rule over what is today Saudi Arabia see Helms, n. 18; H. St. John Philby, *Arabia of the Wahhabis* (London 1928), Philby; *Saudi Arabia* (New York, 1955); and John S. Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and their role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom 1910-1930* (Leiden, 1978).

[26] See Rentz, n. 1, p. 58. Wahhabi pilgrims faced arrest, confinement and were finally banned from Mecca. The Wahhabis finally managed to enter the city in 1803.

[27] See Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic and Energy Dimensions* (Connecticut, 2003), p. 16. Also see Lipsky, n. 5, pp. 13-15

[28] Faksh. n. 16, p. 91

capable of imposing a single authority on the whole area." [29] By 1932 the domination of the Saud-Wahhab alliance over what is today Saudi Arabia was complete. On September 23, 1932, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came into existence under Ibn Saud.

In the early years of the Kingdom under Ibn Saud, "Wahhabism, by cohering previously divided tribes, could even have said to have played a progressive role without which any future liberation would have been impossible. In one single respect, its forced sedentarization of certain tribes, it also attacked the nomadic structure of peninsular society."[30] However, the conservative stance and rather orthodox religious interpretations of Islam subscribed to by Wahhabism, coupled with support of the Al-Saud, led to a concentration of power in the hands of a single family.

Modernization was inevitable, in those fast-moving decades of the early 20th century. Changes that did not come into conflict with the fundamental principles of Wahhabism and Islam would be accepted. Thus, though the state was essentially Wahhabi in character, it was so modestly.[31] Modernization would not fall victim to old-world, conservative religious ideologies. Yet, the ruling family of Saud still adheres largely to rather hardline Wahhabi ideals and percepts regarding many contemporary issues in the Kingdom – for example, on the issue of women's rights or dealing with non-Wahhabi Muslims, they are still dictated largely by Wahhabi beliefs. Only when perceived inevitable do they deviate from this position. The oil boom and the subsequent riches it brought have not changed this situation. Instead, oil riches continue to sustain the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance into the 21st century.

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[29] See Fred Halliday, *Arabia Without Sultans* (London, 1974) revd edn., p. 47
[30] Ibid, p. 49
[31] The Saudi ruler, Ibn Saud, was visionary enough to realize that modernization for the nascent state was inevitable. The kingdom would tread firmly on the path to modernization and there would be no deviations from it. However, any new changes would be accommodated within the overarching superstructure of (Wahhabi) Islam. An example of this was the introduction of the radio in the kingdom. The radio was a modern device and hence found no mention in the Quran or *Sunna* of the Prophet. To make it acceptable to the conservative *ulema* the first radio broadcast in the kingdom played passages from the Quran. It then received a positive sanction from the *ulema*.

FUNDAMENTALS OF WAHHABI IDEOLOGY

Wahhabism is a brand of conservative, orthodox Sunni Islam. Sunni Islam, which is more dominant and widespread as compared to Shia Islam, consists of four classical schools of jurisprudence –

- The Hanafi School
- The Maliki School
- The Shafey School; and
- The Hanbali School

The legal school followed in Wahhabism, and indeed in Saudi Arabia, is the Hanbali school, one of the four schools of *Fiqh* or religious law within Sunni Islam. It is considered to be the most conservative of the four schools. The school follows the teachings of *Imam* Ahmad Ibn Hanbal. This school is predominant among Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula. This school of Islamic law is often seen as the strictest and most orthodox of the four schools generally recognized by Sunni Muslims, but also the most adherent to *Sunna* in Islam – that is, both the life of Prophet Mohammed and his recorded and validated sayings. These are together supposed to constitute a moral example for the Muslim to study, discuss and emulate.

Ibn Hanbal denounced, in varying degrees, any accretion that allowed too much leeway in interpreting the Quran and *Sunna* and thus affected the purity of Islam. "In the view of Hanbali followers, the obligations of Islam derived solely from the Quran and the *Sunna* and everything else was *bida* or 'innovation'."[32] The founder of Wahhabism, Mohammed Abd Al-Wahhab, was influenced by the 14th century Muslim theologian, scholar and jurist Ibn Taimiyya, who was an exponent of the teachings of Ibn Hanbal.

Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328) was an intellectually brilliant jurist, reformer, preacher and scholar of Islam. Religious extremists contend that "if something is neither in the Quran or the *hadith*, nor has been mentioned by the companions…then it is an illegitimate

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[32] Helms, n.18, p. 80

innovation."[33] Ibn Taimiyya was of the same opinion – for him the teachings of the Quran and *hadith* were paramount, above any other opinions or teachings. This was a time of sweeping changes in Islamic societies in Arabia. The age of classical Islam – the first six centuries – was beginning to yield to outside influences. Classical Islamic civilization fell before the Mongol and Turkish invasions and the age of medieval Islam began. This period witnessed many interpretations of Islam, often of non-Arab origin and mystical.[34] Ibn Taimiyya was thus concerned with the survival of Muslim communities. He believed that plurality of opinions within Islam would sow discord and weaken the community. Islamic legitimacy could thus be rooted only in the original teachings of the Prophet – the Quran and *hadith* – and a return to the original, pure values of Islam.

Ibn Taimiyya's teachings had major implications for later Wahhabi doctrine. The first had to do with the relationship between the state and religion. Though, for Ibn Taimiyya, the *ulema* were responsible for religious laws, a government that accepted and supported Islam and the *umma* and followed the *Sharia* was perfectly acceptable. Thus, for the Wahhabis, the hereditary rule of the Al-Saud was legitimate. Secondly, a return to a 'pure' Islam was a major concern. For this, Ibn Taimiyya – like Ibn Hanbal and Al-Wahhab – turned to the Quran and the *Sunna*. "Any accretions after the initial pristine years of *salaf*, the first three generations of Islam, was considered *bida* or innovation."[35] This had added to the unwillingness, by the Wahhabis, to move out of the purview of their narrow interpretations of Islam. Finally, Ibn Taimiyya abhorred saint worship and cults of shrines and graves as this was – opposite to his contention of *tauhid* or monotheism, which recognizes the presence and supremacy of only one God. This rather uncompromising view was carried forward into later purist and orthodox movements like Wahhabism.

"The Wahhabis call themselves *Ahl Al-tauhid* (people of Unity) or *Muwahhidun* (Those who Profess the Doctrine of the Unity of God). They refer to their movement as *Al-Dawa Al-Najdiya* (The Najd Call); *Al-Dawa Ila-Tauhid* (The Call for Tauhid); and simply *Al-*

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[33] Khuri, n. 4, p. 168
[34] See Lipsky, n. 5, p. 42
[35] Helms, n.18, p. 81

Dawa (The Call)."[36] This seems to show that for its followers it was a 'call' or 'summons' to return to the pure Islam of the early days. This message was to be spread within the larger Muslim community as well.

In his travels Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab had been struck by what he considered to be decadent social and religious conditions in Arabia. A descendent of Abd Al-Wahhab wrote in *Majmu A: Al-Tauhid Al-Najdiya* in 1927:

> Know that the people of Najd – nomad and settled – before the Sheikh Al-Islam (Abd Al-Wahhab)...were in the *jahiliya* (ignorance characterized by the pre-Islamic period). Islam had become almost unknown. Evil, corruption, *shirk* and *kufr*[37] were widespread in towns, villages, cities and among the desert and the sown. Idols and images were widespread. The people had abandoned *zakat*.[38]

The aim of Abd Al-Wahhab then was to eliminate all paganistic and 'un-Islamic' rituals and eradicate all such forms of popular Islam that were to him, as were for Ibn Taimaiyya before him, responsible for the disunity of the *umma* or community. At the core of Wahhabi ideology lies a set of six tenets, which dominated Al-Wahhab's teachings and distinguished Wahhabism from other reformist movements. These are:

- *Tauhid* (monotheism);
- *Tawasul* (intercession);
- *Ziyarat Al-Qubur* (visitation of graves and erection of tombs);
- *Takfir* (charge of unbelief);
- *Bida* (innovation); and
- *Ijtihad* and *Taqlid* (original juristic opinions and imitation)

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[36] Ibid, p. 83
[37] According to Christine Moss Helms, in the earliest Suras of the Quran, *Kufr* meant the 'the concealing of (or being ungrateful of) God's blessings. It later came to signify 'unbelief' or 'infidelity'.
[38] Helms, n. 18, p. 84

Another concept that has much significance in Wahhabi ideology is that of *Jihad*. This concept is discussed as it sheds some light on the hardline and militant character of Wahhabism.

TAUHID

Tauhid or monotheism is a central theological tenet of Wahhabism. Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab considered it 'the eternal religion of God'; indeed, it is "the religion of Islam itself."[39] The Wahhabis distinguished three categories of *Tauhid*:

- *Tauhid Al-Rububiya* (unity of Lordship) – It is the assertion of the unity and oneness of God. All Muslims must recognize the absolute and unique lordship and His deeds above everything in the world.

- *Tauhid Al-Illahiya* (unity of divinity) – This stands for the call every Muslim believes in: '*There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet.*' The Worship of God is to be his alone. The Prophet Mohammed is God's servant and is not to be worshipped in place of God. However, the prophet's teachings are to be followed and observed by devout Muslims.

- *Tauhid Al-Asma Wa Al-Silafat* (unity in the names and attributes of God) – This concept deals with God's characteristics. The one God is beneficient, merciful and knowledgeable. The Wahhabis were anthropomorphic and interpreted every passage in the Quran referring to God and his attributes literally.

TAWASSUL

Another belief intrinsic in the Wahhabism is that there can be no intercession between the believer and God. For Abd Al-Wahhab, Ibadat or worship referred to "all the utterances and actions – inward as well as outward – that God desires and commands."[40] Any devotion to the Prophet should not deviate from devotion to God. This tenet of Wahhabism is against polytheistic practices like praying to and seeking protection from stones, idols, trees and saints. Especially prohibited is seeking intercession from dead saints. In fact, in Wahhabi reasoning, one cannot ask even the Prophet to intercede on one's behalf to absolve guilt or escape punishment.

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[39] Al-Yassini, n. 12, p. 27
[40] Ibid

ZIYARAT AL-QUBUR

In expounding his doctrine of Tawassul or intercession, Abd Al-Wahhab warned believers against the worship of saints and visitations to their graves and shrines. The Wahhabis, according to Ayman Al-Yassini, viewed with utter indignation the practice of grave visitation and the building of domes near graves. This would ultimately lead to the crime of polytheism and idol worship, as was the case in pre-Islamic Arabia. To avoid this, the Wahhabis urged the destruction of such tombs and sites. Wahhabism also preaches against decoration and illumination of burial sites. The destruction of tombs is an important tenet of Wahhabism, the evidence for which is the destruction of the tomb of Hussain in Karbala in 1802 and the demolition of shrines in Mecca and Medina. It is a policy that continued into the 20th century when in the early 1900s "the Saudi government destroyed a shrine in Jiddah supposedly containing the remains of Eve, and banned popular devotions at the site."[41]

TAKFIR

This tenet of Wahhabism states that mere affiliation with Islam is not sufficient to prevent a Muslim from gravitating towards polytheistic practices and becoming a polytheist. Moreover, the person who utters the *shahada* (proclamation of faith) and still practices polytheism, as defined by the Wahhabis should be denounced as an infidel and killed.[42] Fighting such 'infidels' is a duty of every devout believer of Islam.

BIDA

The Wahhabis define *bida* or innovation as any doctrine or action that does not find mention in the Quran, the traditions or in the authority of the companions of the Prophet. Wahhabism holds the view that there can be no innovations apart from the Quran, *Sunna* and *Hadith*, which are the sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. For them syntheism, which violation of God's doctrine of oneness, proceeds from *bida* which have infiltrated into the Islamic community over the centuries. Wahhabis reject as *bida* such acts as celebrating the Prophet's birth, seeking intercession from saints and reciting the *fatiha* (the opening

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[41] Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Wahhabite Polity*, in Ian Richard Netton, ed., *Arabia and the Gulf: From Traditional Society to Modern States* (London, 1986), p. 77
[42] See Al-Yassini, n. 12, p. 28

lines of the Quran) on behalf of the founders of the Sufi orders after the five daily prayers, etc.[43]

IJTIHAD AND TAQLID

Wahhabism calls for complete adherence to the Quran, *Sunna* and *hadith*. These cannot be subject to interpretation or change. Wahhabism considers all other versions of Islam, deviant from the mainstream Sunni version, as un-Islamic. The complete adherence to the Quran and *Sunna* means that the Wahhabis also reject the other three schools of Islamic jurisprudence if they do not concur with these two primary sources of law. The Wahhabis also reject the idea that the 'doors of *ijtihad*[44] are closed'. Even the percepts of the Hanbali school are not final. Islamic law *is* subject to interpretations, though only from the very few sources that the Wahhabis allow to be true. Therefore, even for the Wahhabis the process of *ijtihad* can always take place – though it is restricted to within their own very narrow version of Islamic jurisprudence.

JIHAD

An important legacy of Wahhabism is its endorsement of *jihad* – that is, to fight a 'holy', 'virtuous war' on behalf of Islam. According to Bernard Lewis, "this was one of the basic tasks bequeathed to Muslims by the Prophet."[45] This translation of *jihad* as holy war comes from a more fundamental and abstract concept which means 'to endeavour, strive, exert' and only when interpreted in its most narrow sense does it mean 'to wage a holy war'. Thus, *jihad* is both a figurative and literal struggle. "As a member of the Islamic community, a Muslim struggles for an internal spiritual reform in the path of God against the profane aspects of his human existence while at the same time waging an external struggle against those who oppose his goal or the well-being of his religion."[46]

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[43] Ibid, p. 29
[44] See Alam, n. 7, pp. 29-30 and Al-Yassini , n. 12, pp. 28-29. *Ijtihad,* or individual reasoning, is a way of deriving the rules of Sharia in a particular issue from the sources of law. It allows for logical reasoning in cases where legal precedents do not exist. *Ijtihad* has become the main instrument for interpreting the Prophet's 'divine' message, relating it to changing conditions in Islam. However, there is a general consensus that since the codification of the Islamic doctrine Muslims were expected to conform to the opinions and tenets of the set rules, and could not derive their own interpretations using *ijtihad*. It is in this sense that it is claimed that the 'doors to *ijtihad* are closed'. The Wahhabis however, do not agree entirely with this point of view.
[45] Lewis, n. 3, p. 23
[46] Helms, n. 18, p. 96

According to Islamic tradition, the world is divided into two houses – *Dar Al-Islam* (House of Islam) where Muslim governments rule and Islamic law prevails; and the *Dar Al-Harb* (House of War) which is ruled by non-Muslims. Theoretically then *jihad* is considered an important duty for the individual as well as the *umma* until everyone can be counted within the Dar Al-Islam. The concept of *jihad* tends to be identified most with the Crusades (1099-1290). However, it has been present in Islam since its beginning in the Quran and in the life of the Prophet Mohammed – he first waged *jihad* against the rulers of Mecca, in the spread of Islam and extension of Muslim authority over other people.

However, over the centuries the understanding of *jihad* changed and the tolerance of other social groups by Muslims, as encouraged in the Quran, was no longer so, and Muslims were not only allowed but also encouraged to attack others. *Jihad* has come to be considered as the sixth pillar of Islam. Wahhabism had always shown antipathy towards foreigners and non-Muslims; however, most of their opposition was directed towards those they considered apostates – especially the Shias. "The Wahhabis believed that *jihad* alone would be able to rid the Peninsula of its ignorance and moral decay....Those who fought the *mushrikun* were rewarded while 'those who abandon *jihad* and involve themselves in *fitna* please the devil with this deception."[47] The Wahhabis have an uncompromising and radical position on *jihad* – any Muslim who disagreed with their interpretation of Islam and challenged their authority was an apostate and thus liable to face severe treatment at their hands.

MINORITIES: VIEW THROUGH THE WAHHABI PRISM

The rise of Wahhabism in 18th century Arabia can be seen as a response to the changes that were sweeping much of the Islamic world at the time. The glorious early days of Islam were long gone and for more than a millennium the Peninsula had retreated into

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[47] Ibid, p. 97. *Mushrikun* are those who knowingly deny the principle of *tauhid* while *fitna* indicates civil disturbance.

backwardness and political fragmentation. However, by this time, Arabia was slowly waking up to the influences of growing empires in its neighbourhood – Ottoman Turkey and British India.

Wahhabism, and its alliance with the Al-Saud, has given rise to a resilient state. And, more than any other Arab country, the principle that 'Islam is a religion and a state'[48] prevails in Saudi Arabia. An important point to be recalled here – whether it has to do with the presence of a significant minority community or not – is that Saudi Arabia is not a nation-state created and run on secular lines. It is a country with a monarch as the only ruler and its political institutions do not resemble those in the west or even in many other democratic societies in the Third World. There are no institutions resembling democratic Parliaments or judiciaries and even more limited rights. The country's Constitution includes the Quran, *Sunna* and *hadith* of the Prophet Mohammed. "The religious establishment in Saudi Arabia enjoys more than in any other country in the Arab world, incontestable control over the ideology of state and governmental institutions."[49] The *ulema* supervise general state policy, compliance with Islam and control important sectors like education, social and religious institutions, judicial procedures and institutions etc. In turn, the monarchy derives support for itself from the religious establishment. Thus the policies of the Saudi state are mostly a clear reflection of Wahhabi beliefs and attitudes.

This is most clear in the context of the Saudi Shias. The Saudi monarchy and its strict adherence to Wahhabism, and the status of the Shias have also to be looked at in the larger context of Shia-Sunni antagonism, which can be traced back to the earliest days of Islam over the question of succession to the Prophet Mohammed.

One of the most striking points of reference to Wahhabism or Wahhabi ideology is the stress that is laid on their radical intolerance of all but their own adepts to the extent of ascribing unbelief (*takfir*) to all others.[50] However, one clarification is required here.

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[48] See Belaid, n. 6, p. 149
[49] Ibid, p. 150
[50] Al-Azmeh, n. 41, p. 75

From the beginning, "the ire of the Wahhabis was directed not against outsiders but against those whom they saw as betraying and degrading Islam from within...those whom the Wahhabis saw as corrupting and debasing the true Islamic heritage of the Prophet and his companions."[51] Though Wahhabism has been portrayed in the above chapter as a self-perceived reformist doctrine, it was also a revivalist one.

For the Wahhabis any deviation beyond their narrow interpretation of Islam is unacceptable. "The puritanical and iconoclastic philosophies reflected in this sect historically have resulted in conflict with other Muslim groups. Wahhabism opposes popular religious practices such as saint veneration, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, and practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism." [52] This can also be s en in their various acts aimed at removing the perceived 'impurities' that had crept into Islam, such as the sacking of Shiite holy places such as Karbala and destruction of shrines and idols in Mecca and Medina. The examples abound. However, when it comes to religion, the Wahhabis are at their most intolerant. Aziz Al-Azmeh states that Shiite Muslims throughout the history of Wahhabism and until the establishment of Saudi Arabia have been a favoured target of unremitting Wahhabi ferocity, ideological as well as military.[53]

It is in this context that one has to look at the status of the Shias within Saudi Arabia. Of the Kingdom's current population of an estimated 26,417,599 million, the population of the Shias is estimated to be around 300,000 or 15 per cent of the Saudi population.[54] They are the largest non-Sunni Islamic sect in Saudi Arabia, and live in the eastern province of the country. Here they constitute around one-third of the population. They share the other Saudis' ethnic Arab background and Arabic language, but they have distinct religious beliefs from the majority Wahhabi Sunni Muslims. This has meant problems for the Shias

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[51] Lewis, n. 3, p. 94
[52] See Christopher M. Blanchard, *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya*, Report # RS21695, Congressional Research Service, Library of Conagress, dated 10 February 2005, p. 2
[53] Al-Azmeh, n. 41, p. 77
[54] For latest Saudi population figures see *The World Factbook 2005*, Internet edition, URL: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sa.html accessed on 8 May 2005. For estimates of Shia population see also Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (London, 1999)

in Saudi Arabia. Their religious beliefs, distinct from Wahhabism, set them apart from the majority Sunni and expose them to immense discrimination, which is largely establishment-sponsored. The Saudi Shias are, according to Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, "the only Shia in the Muslim world who are formally denied the status of Muslims."[55] They are viewed by the Wahhabis and Sunni Muslims as unbelievers and even tagged as apostates. And since Wahhabism tends to reject, if not outrightly deny, other Islamic sects, the Shias' religious beliefs have relegated them to the dubious status of religious minorities.

Their numbers in the country, however, do not guarantee recognition. Shiites in Saudi Arabia are currently subject to a plethora of political, cultural, and economic discriminatory policies. From education in schools and colleges to religion to employment, the Shias have faced severe discrimination at the hands of the Saudi-Wahhabi combine. The fact that the Wahhabi doctrine brands the Shias as heretics has only fuelled the discrimination against them. The Saudi Shias are denied presence and a place in official Saudi history.

Another context of measuring the oppression of Saudi Shias is looking at other groups that are marginalized and discriminated against. One striking thing about Saudi society is the element of overall control. Beneath this veneer Saudi society is anything but controlled. It is clear that the Saudi Shias face widespread discrimination. Yet, overall, Saudi citizens themselves have limited rights – especially political and religious rights. There is a *Majlis Al-Shura* (Consultative Council), established by law in 1992. However, the body is nominated by the King and thus, not popularly elected or reflecting the aspirations and choice of the Saudis. The strength of the *ulema* makes them the ultimate authority regarding religion. In this scenario, many groups such as women do not enjoy many rights. Various practices in the Kingdom, such as the segregation of the sexes, restrictions on women including a ban on their driving vehicles, etc., can be related

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[55] Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (London, 1999), p. 183

directly to Wahhabi influences on the Saudi socio-political scene. Joining this bandwagon with even more limited rights are foreign nationals and workers in the country.

One of the largest groups in Saudi Arabia facing large-scale restrictions includes Saudi women. There are relatively higher levels of education within this group, as compared to Saudi men. Yet, as Fred Halliday pointed out, "women are almost entirely absent from public space in Saudi Arabia, fleetingly glimpsed in black cloaks at shopping malls, or being driven by male drivers and relatives around town."[56] Education is still segregated though women have had access to free higher education and women account for almost 60 percent of university graduates. Women can own, inherit and manage property. However, they still cannot legally drive a car on the roads and need to be escorted by male relatives. Islamic law stipulates that daughters receive only half the amount of inheritance than sons; in *Sharia* court a woman's testimony is of lesser value than a man's and one man's testimony is equal to that of two women. They also earn less than men and do not get jobs matching their educational qualifications and these too in limited sectors like education, healthcare, limited businesses, media etc.

If Saudi citizens have limited rights then non-Saudis and non-Muslims face an even greater challenge. The Saudi government does not permit public non-Muslim religious activities and there is sporadic harassment of people of faiths other than Islam. [57] Foreigners cannot reside and work in Saudi Arabia unless they have a Saudi sponsor. Any political activity on part of foreigners is not tolerated. Labour laws cannot protect workers – for example, they cannot seek redress for mistreatment by their employers. Contracts generally tend to favour the employer. Complaints in labour courts are few for fear of deportation.[58]

The Shia Muslims are sharply restricted against political organizing, do not have a right to free expression, are restricted from equal access to the Saudi police/military or high

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[56] Fred Halliday, *Nation and Religion in the Middle East* (London, 2000), p. 172
[57] See Cordesman, n. 27, p. 179
[58] SeeAnthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Military and Security Dimensions* (Connecticut, 2003), pp. 288-89

office and are socially excluded from better jobs. Members of the Shia minority are also the objects of officially sanctioned religious discrimination. The above scenario puts into perspective the discrimination faced by the Saudi Shias in a country where the average citizen too has limited rights. It would be wishful thinking to expect that a minority in such a situation would not face oppression.

As mentioned earlier, the nexus between the Al-Saud and the Wahhabis has become the raison d'être of the modern Saudi state and has supported, consolidated and legitimized the Saudi monarchy. The Al-Saud have used this relationship with the religious establishment to consolidate its power and position and bring about modernization. In turn, they have to accommodate the wishes and beliefs of the Wahhabis. Thus their policies toe the Wahhabi line to a great extent. As a result, religious sects that do not ascribe to the same beliefs and values lose out and face severe discrimination. The Shias of Saudi Arabia, maligned, pushed out of the Saudi mainstream and trodden upon are the recipients of this legacy.

CHAPTER 3

TREATMENT OF SHIA MINORITIES

The roots of modern-day monarchy of Saudi Arabia can be traced to the country's heartland – the province of Najd – and to the family of the Al Saud. Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without elected representative institutions or political parties. King Fahd, a son of founder Ibn Saud is the current king. The monarchy here has evolved along with the spread of Wahhabi tenets in the country's society and the Saudi King is also the leader or *imam* of the community. "The Saudi royal family, which heads the monarchy, is integrally linked with it and structured to befit the tribal formations that underpin Saudi society."[1] This has taken place through a series of political intermarriages with strong tribal, religious and business groups, which ensures their loyalty and support to the Al-Saud. Such connections are advantageous for the latter as they ensure their position and authority. The monarchy has constantly evolved along with the process of state formation. "The Saudi state has a particularly convoluted history of state-building, as it turned from a nascent, tribal chieftancy, to a more organized, monarchical state, and finally into a wealthy, bureaucratized state."[2]

Saudi Arabia is an Islamic, monarchical state. The Saudi monarchy governs according to the precepts of a rigorously conservative form of Islam. Islam is the official religion and the Quran and the *Sunna* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad are the country's Constitution. The Government, according to the US State Department, limits the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam and prohibits the public practice of other religions.[3] The Shias of Saudi Arabia are accorded a societal and legal status that puts them below the majority Sunni in the country. These Shias are denied the status of being Muslims. Their religious beliefs and traditions are viewed as going against the monotheistic percepts of the Wahhabis. This has led them to be viewed with suspicion and disfavour. They are considered as non-Muslims within the Wahhabi purview, which tends to disregard any interpretation of Islamic doctrine other than its own. The Shias, therefore, bear the brunt of being numerical as well as religious minorities on account of their subscription to Shiism.

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[1] Joseph Kostiner & Joshua Teitelbaum, "State-Formation and the Saudi Monarchy", in Joseph Kostiner, ed., *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder, 2000), p. 131
[2] Ibid, p. 132
[3] *International Religious Freedom Report 2004*, Internet Edition, released by the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, US Congress, URL: http://www.state.gov accessed on 30 January 2005

The population of the country is around 26,417,599 including 5,576,076 non-nationals with an annual growth rate of around 2.44 per cent.[4] Excluding the large number of foreign workers and expatriates, the country's native population can be broadly divided into Arab (90 per cent), and Afro-Asian (10 per cent) – The numbers of Shias are estimates and the figures are often disputed as it is difficult to accurately ascertain their number on account of insufficient and often unreliable data.[5] According to Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke the number of Shias range from 300,000 (as per official Saudi estimates) to over one million (estimates by Shias themselves).[6] According to Anthony Cordesman, the Shias "make up about 5-6 percent of Saudi Arabia's total population and something under 10 percent of its native population, although some estimates go as high as 15 percent."[7] Cordesman gives numbers varying from 400,000 and 700,000 to around two million.

Saudi Arabia has several religious sects. The Sunni sects include the majority Hanbali sect, officially endorsed by the state, which originated in the central region of the country and has come to be the most dominant in the form of Wahhabism. Other Sunni schools of jurisprudence – the Shafey, Maliki and Hanafi schools – have much more limited membership and tend to be concentrated toward the west of the country.

The Shia Muslims are the largest non-Sunni Islamic sect in Saudi Arabia. The majority live in the oil-rich eastern province where they constitute around 40 percent of the population. They account for nearly 95 per cent of the population in the Al-Qatif oasis and half the population in the Al-Hufuf oasis.[8] The Shias of Saudi Arabia, it must be stressed, are ethnically Arab. Culturally, linguistically and even racially these Shias are

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[4] For the latest population figures see *The World Factbook 2005*, Internet Edition, URL: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sa.html, accessed on 8 May 2005

[5] The Saudi government does not conduct regular census. Thus, there are no official Saudi figures for the Shias. One thus has to depend on sources like the US State Department or published data in books etc. And since each source seems to give a different count of Saudi Shias, the estimates tend to vary a lot.

[6] See Graham E. Fuller & Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (London, 1999), p. 180

[7] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic and Energy Dimensions* (Connecticut, 2003), p. 206

[8] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 180

Arab and not Persian, as it often pointed out, even though they look to Iran as the seat of the Shiite faith. Iran, with its great centres of theological learning, such as Isfahan and Qom, is the only Islamic state in the world which officially subscribes to Shiism. It consequently supports Shia learning and theology. Thus Shias the world over, be they of different racial, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, gravitate towards Iran as the centre of the Shiite faith. This is the case with Saudi Shias as well. The Arab Shias have occupied this region for centuries and were originally town-dwellers and farmers. Historically Arabia's Sunni population mostly included Bedouins. It is the Shias' distinct religious beliefs that differentiates them from the majority Wahhabi Sunni Muslims and has led them to be the target of government-sponsored discrimination in a number of spheres.

Among the Shias, the most numerous are the Jaafari Shias – also known as the Twelvers on account of their belief in the Twelve Imams – dominate the eastern region. The south has a mix of Ismaili (the Seveners) Shias and Zaidi (Fivers) Shias.

The Jaafari Shias constitute the majority in the country's eastern province of Al-Ahsa. They also have big communities in Medina and Wadi Fatima and smaller communities in Jeddah and Riyadh. Their number is a matter of dispute, and range from 900,000 to two million.[9] They are the largest and most active minority in the country. Most of the data available regarding Saudi Shias pertains to the Jaafaris or the Twelver Shias. Very little information is available on the other Shiite sects in the country.

The Ismaili Shias are concentrated in the Southern region of Najran. Almost the entire Yam tribe is Ismaili. Their numbers vary from 200,000 to one million according to different sources.[10] Their present leader, known also as Al Dayee, is Sheikh Hussain Bin Ismail Al Makrami. Discrimination against them has increased in the past few years after the appointment of the region's current governor, Prince Mashaal Bin Saud.[11] The

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[9] Saudi Institute, *Religious Freedom in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Focus on Citizens 2001*, Internet Edition dated 21 March 2004, URL: http://www.saudiinstitute.org accessed on 28 June 2004
[10] Ibid
[11] Ibid

Ismailis are prevented from using their distinctive prayer call, including in their own mosques.

The Zaidi Sect is concentrated in the southern cities of Asir, Najran, Jeddah and Yunbo. There are no known Zaidi mosques or any organized religious institutions; Saudi Zaidis rely on Yemeni Zaidis for spiritual guidance. Their number is not known and they tend to hide their faith in Sunni-dominated cities.

There is also, what the Washington-based Saudi Institute[12] refers to as the phenomenon of the 'Hidden Shias'. Extreme anti-Shia feelings and discrimination in the predominantly Sunni cities compels many Shia not to publically disclose their faith. This is in keeping with a Twelver Shia custom called *Taqiyya*, which includes the "dissimulation of one's religious views under circumstances where it would be dangerous to display them."[13] This concept has for long been a reason for the Sunni distrust of Shias in the Kingdom. Many Shias from Medina, Asir and Najran live in Jeddah and other cities and do not declare their faith. Also, there is not much contact between the Shias and the Sunni Saudis even in large cities like Riyadh. The custom of *Taqiyya* tends to add to the discrepancy in their numbers since many Shia consciously do not reveal their religious status.

The followers of Wahhabism have garnered the reputation of being rather extreme in their beliefs. They exhibit intolerance towards anyone who does not subscribe to their belief and ideology. Najd has always been the conservative heartland of Arabia; other provinces like Hijaz and Al-Ahsa, on the major ancient trading routes, were exposed to other people and ideologies and consequently their inhabitants were more liberal in their

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[12] The Saudi Institute is a Washington-based dissident organization, founded by Ali Al-Ahmad, a Saudi Shia, which describes itself as "an independent, non-partisan organization that disseminates solid information about Saudi Arabia..." It claims to be at the "centre of a global network of reliable individuals, some of whom, due to the closed nature of the Saudi political system, have no other outlet for their views," according to the organization's website www.saudiinstitute.org. Information provided by the Saudi Institute is often used by other online websites such as www.shianews.com. In light of limited information available on Saudi Arabia and its minority Shia population, information made available by the Saudi Institute can be considered, though analyzed in moderation.

[13] A.J. Arberry et al, ed., *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, Volume 2 – ISLAM, (London, 1969), p. 287

outlook. From the time Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab secured a compact with the Al-Saud, the former's religious ideology has dictated the workings of the state. It must be remembered that the Saudi ruler of Najd at the time, Mohammed Ibn Saud, was more than willing to ascribe to Al-Wahhab's teachings as he himself believed in them. Modern Saudi Arabia's rulers too are committed to Wahhabi ideology. In this context, the Shias have come to face the ire of the Saudi-Wahhabi leadership.

The treatment meted out to the Shias under Sunni regimes in the Muslim world is a reflection of power politics – both ancient and modern. The Shia-Sunni rift developed in the days of nascent Islam. The fight over the succession to the Prophet Mohammed was a reflection of political squabbles rather than any deep religious schism. Those who succeeded the Prophet – be it the consensus-elected Caliphs or the lineal descendents of *Imam* Ali – would then have the right to exploit the legacy of Prophet Mohammed. The same can be observed in the case of Shia minorities today. Though religious differences have widened during the 15-odd centuries of Islam, Shia minorities are the victims of both religious and political power equations. This is especially the case in Saudi Arabia.

The preceding chapter analyzed the Wahhabi doctrine and conception of minorities in Saudi Arabia. The Shiite perception of events is equally important. For the Shias, "the Saudi Wahhabis represent the greatest calamity to their community in their entire history."[14] Since 1792, when the Wahhabi forces of Ibn Saud descended on Al-Qatif, a major Shiite centre in eastern Arabia, and destroyed the Shiite places of worship there, the Shias have been subject to a sustained campaign of destruction of their way of life. In 1802 these forces attacked Karbala and sacked the tomb of Hussein. Such intermittent attacks against the Shias continued till the capture of Al-Ahsa by the Wahhabi *Ikhwan* under King Ibn Saud in 1913.

The Wahhabis assigned the Shia the status of "distinct heretics, polytheists because of their veneration of saints...and thus guilty of the sin of shirk or spliting the oneness of

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[14] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 180

God."[15] The mission of the Wahhabis, as they saw it, was to purify Islam of all 'corrupting' influences. The eastern province of Al-Ahsa was considered to be a breeding ground for innovations (unacceptable to the purist Wahhabis) due to the religious practices of its Shia population, such as veneration of saints and their tombs, ritual mourning and flagellation, and the Shias' belief in the lineal descendents of *Imam* Ali as the true successors of the Prophet. Therefore, the Shia became the prime target of the Wahhabis and the latter's austere practices were imposed upon the Shias.

Eventually within the parameters of the state, an unspoken accord developed. As long as the Shia conducted their religion in private they would be tolerated. They would not face forcible conversion or be persecuted for the crimes of apostasy or polytheism, although the Wahhabi *ulema* have been free to continue their vituperative denouncement of the Shias and their way of life. Even though the Shias were Saudi citizens they could "not fully participate in public life, could not publicly practice their religion, and would have little recourse against state-sponsored discrimination on the basis of their religion."[16] They do not enjoy the same rights as do their Sunni counterparts and the regime tends to turn a blind eye towards any discrimination against them.

In the seven decades since the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, anti-Shia feelings and the resultant discrimination against them has also undergone many changes. The initial trend of anti-Shia wave was represented by the Bedouin *Ikhwan* forces, in the early 20th century who were driven by their commitment to Wahhabi values. However, with the establishment of the kingdom in 1932, and with the Al-Saud establishing control over the areas conquered by the *Ikhwan* this discrimination became institutionalized. Instead of spontaneous raids into Shia territories, the governing mechanisms took over implementing discrimination against the Shias. Increasingly, over time, these forms of discrimination became incorporated into the state's institutions and became almost of a second nature in Saudi polity and society.

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[15] Ibid
[16] See Michael Herb, "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neigbouring Regime: Iran and the Shia of the Arab States of the Gulf", in Leonard Binder, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (Florida, 1999), p. 161

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE SHIAS

The Shias of Saudi Arabia, akin to other minority communities, sit at a position of disadvantage. However, they are both a numerical and religious minority in a Wahhabi state, and are the only Shia in the Muslim world who are formally denied the status of being Muslims. "The Shias feel that unlike other groups in the kingdom, they are victimized by both Sunni anti-Shia feelings and certain state policies that discriminate against them."[17] It has become readily apparent that the Shias are subject to a plethora of discrimination in Saudi Arabia. This chapter looks at the various spheres wherein this discrimination can be analyzed – religious, cultural and economic and legal.

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION

The Saudi state has followed a policy of systematic religious discrimination against its Shia minority and the co-players in this practice are the Wahhabi *ulema*. The *ulema*'s weapon is the *fatwa*. In 1927 Saudi senior ulema issued *fatwas* that condemned the Shias as apostates or non-believers and one such *fatwa* called upon Ibn Saud to use compulsion in converting the Shiites of the realm to Sunnism.[18] The *ulema*'s recommendation was that the Shias of Al-Ahsa, under the Al-Saud's domination since 1913, should become 'true Muslims' and abandon their innovations. The *Ikhwan* had pressured the *ulema* to issue a *fatwa* requesting Ibn Saud to prohibit the Shia from praying in public, from observing the anniversaries of the Prophet and his relatives' deaths and from performing pilgrimages to important Shiite centres of Karbala and Najaf in Iraq. The *Ikhwan* also wanted the Shia to attend the mosque five times a day.

This practice continued and in a *fatwa* issued in 1991 by a senior Saudi cleric Bin Jibrin reasserted the status of the Shia as non-believers. Therefore, under such a law it was not juridically illegal to kill the Shias.[19] A *fatwa* was also issued against the Shia community by Abd Al-Rahman Al-Barrak, a respected professor at the Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University. "Asked whether it was permissible for Sunnis to launch a jihad

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[17] Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York, 1999), p. 197
[18] Arberry, n. 13, p. 275
[19] See Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 183

against Shiites, Al-Barrak answered that if the Shiites in a Sunni-dominated country insisted on practicing their religion openly, then yes, the Sunni state had no choice but to wage war on them."[20]

There are certain stereotyped beliefs regarding the Shias amongst Sunnis in Saudi Arabia. "At the popular level, there is a widespread traditional belief amongst Saudi Sunnis that all Shias nourish the deep-seated goal while on the pilgrimage to Mecca, to smear human excrement on the holy Kaba; indeed at least one Shiite from abroad was allegedly executed several decades ago for this crime."[21] The Shias are also thought to spit in their food before eating it. Devout Wahhabis believe that shaking hands with a Shia spoils a Muslim's ablutions. "Shias are also believed to curse the first three 'rightly-guided' caliphs (Al-Rashidun) or successors of the Prophet, who were selected over Ali from within the Prophet's family."[22] Saudi Sunnis are forbidden to eat the food of the Shia during during the ceremonies of Ashura. Strict followers of Wahhabism do not buy meat slaughtered by Shias as it is believed to be unclean. Intermarriage between Shias and Sunnis is prohibited.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of almost all mosques in the Kingdom and they all fall under the ministry's jurisdiction. Mosques built by private citizens must be handed over to government control. The Ministry pays the salaries of *imams* (prayer leaders) and others working in the mosques. In such an environment of control the rights of the Shias to build mosques and *hussayniyyat* are severely curtailed. *Husayniyyat* are Shia religious and social institutions that perform the functions of a community centre. Religious sermons, weddings and funerals are usually held here. They are illegal in the country and are usually built using home permits.

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[20] See Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 1, January-February 2004, p. 46. Doran, however, does not specify when the *fatwa* was issued.
[21] Fuller & Francke, n.6, p. 183
[22] Ibid

In the past, Shias have been permitted to build new *hussainiyyat* in Qatif and Ahsa, but the Government has closed Shia mosques built without government permission. "In 1990 the Saudi authorities closed down the Hawzat Al-Mubaraza, a religious school that had been operating for 16 years, and arrested some of its teachers."[23] In 2001 seven *husayniyyat* were closed in Al-Ahsa during Mohharam commemorations.[24] The *Imam* Al-Hussain mosque in Al-Battalia in the eastern province was shut down by the authorities. In March 2001, religious police reportedly closed a Shia mosque in Hofuf because it had been built without government permission.[25]

It is illegal for the Shias to hold religious sermons at home. The Jaafari Shias in Medina, a substantial minority in the city, have no mosques – the government destroyed their mosque and *husayniyyat* decades ago.[26] They maintain underground mosques and pray in the basements of private homes. The Shias – Jaafaris, Ismailis and Zaidis – are not allowed to build mosques. Most of their existing mosques date back to the Ottoman rule and are privately constructed. The report *Religious Freedom in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Focus on Citizens 2001* issued by the Saudi Institute also claims that there are no Zaidi mosques in the country. There are also no exclusively Shafey or Maliki mosques.

According to the US State Department, the Government issued permits to construct Shia mosques and a new mosque was constructed in Qatif in 2003. The Shia tend to decline government offers to build state-supported mosques because the Government would prohibit the incorporation and display of Shia motifs in any such mosques. Also, the Shias are prohibited from using their distinctive call for prayer – inclusive of the phrase 'I testify that Ali is one of God's believers'. They must confirm to Sunni practice in this regard and omit this phrase.

The annual *International Religious Freedom Report* released by the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, of the US Congress, also highlights the intensity of

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[23] Ibid. See also Saudi Institute, n. 9
[24] See Saudi Institute, n. 9
[25] *International Religious Freedom Report 2002*, Internet Edition, released by the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, US Congress, URL: http://www.state.gov accessed on 23 October, 2004
[26] Saudi Institute, n. 9

religious discrimination against the Shias. During the period covered by the 2004 report, authorities continued to permit a greater degree of freedom to Shiites in the eastern city of Qatif than in the past. Religious practices and gatherings, previously illegal, were overlooked. There were no reports of meeting places being closed in Qatif.[27] However, in other areas with large Shia populations, such as Al-Ahsa and Dammam, there continued to be restrictions on Shia religious practices. There were no reports of police interference with Ashura celebrations in 2003.[28] Ashura celebrations are permitted on the condition that rituals like self-flagellation (traditional Shia practice) and large-scale public marches do not take place, and the police monitor these celebrations. In Qatif's city center, large groups of Shia gathered to hear Shia clerics speak and to purchase books and other religious items.[29] Many Shias still travel to Qatif or even Bahrain to participate in Ashura because of restrictions on public observances in other parts of Saudi Arabia.

The Government continued sporadically to enforce other restrictions on the community, such as banning Shia jurisprudence books and excluding Shia perspectives from the extensive religious media and broadcast programming. The Shias also claim that they are not allowed possess any written religious material and face imprisonment if they attempt to bring any such material into the kingdom. Also, as of 2001, according to *Human Rights Watch*, at least seven Shia religious leaders – namely, Abd Al-Latif Muhammad Ali, Habib Al-Hamid, Abd Al-Latif Al-Samin, Abdallah Ramadan, Said Al-Bahaar, Muhammad Abd Al-Khidair, and Habib Hamdah Sayid Hashim Al-Sadah – reportedly remained in prison for violating these restrictions.[30] Other Shia religious leaders detained by the authorities include Sheikh Ali Bin Ali Al-Ghanim (arrested in August 2000 and released in 2002), Sheikh Mohammed Al-Amri in March 2001 and four unnamed Shia sheikhs taken into custody in 2000. An appeal on Amnesty International's website states that Kamil Abbas Al-Ahmad, brother of Saudi Shia activist Ali Al-Ahmad, founder of the

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[27] *International Religious Freedom Report 2004*, n. 3
[28] Ibid
[29] Ibid
[30] *World Report 2002*, Internet Edition, issued by Human Rights Watch, URL: http://www.hrw.org accessed on 4'December, 2004

Washington-based Saudi institute was sentenced to five years in prison without a proper trial and on unclear charges.[31]

The year 2001 also saw violent clashes between Ismaili Shiites and security forces in the southwest province of Najran in April. By some accounts, Saudi religious police raided an Ismaili mosque, closed it down, and confiscated its books. Protesters then assembled in front of the home of Najran's provincial governor, Prince Mashaal Bin Saud Bin Abd Al-Aziz. The unrest was variously attributed to public Shia observance of Ashura for the first time in many years, the closure of an Ismaili mosque, the arrest of an Ismaili cleric, and tensions along Saudi's border with Yemen, where Ismailis have strong links.[32] There was, till recently, a travel ban faced by the Shias if they wanted to go to Iran. The Saudi government lifted this ban in 2001.

Another problem faced by the Shias is the religious police – the Committee to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice – commonly known as *Mutawwa'in* in the country. This force is primarily concerned with enforcing the precepts of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. The *Mutawwa'in* commonly harass the Shias. In November 1998, several *Mutawwa'in* attacked and killed an elderly Shia prayer leader in Hofuf for repeating the call to prayer twice (a traditional Shia practice).[33]

CULTURAL DISCRIMINATION

The cultural arena is another area in which Saudi Shias claim to face discrimination. Shiite books, music and religious tapes are banned and their possession is punishable.[34] Certain Shiite names, state Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, are prohibited. The Shias are forbidden to publish material on their history or culture. Official Sunni narratives attempt to show the homogenous (to be read as Wahhabi) structure of Saudi society. The most apparent manifestation of cultural discrimination is reflective of the

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[31] The details of the appeal are available on the URL http://web.amnesty.org/appeals/index/sau-010303-wwa-eng. Kamil Al-Ahmed's detention is also mentioned in *World Report 2003*, Internet Edition, issued by Human Rights Watch, URL: http://www.hrw.org accessed on 4 December 2004

[32] *World Report 2002*, n. 30

[33] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Military and International Security Dimensions*, (Connecticut, 2003), p. 295

[34] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 184

regime's attempts to deny the Shias their place in history. The majority of Saudi Shias live in the country's east, the region historically known as Al-Ahsa. The regime has renamed this as the 'eastern province' – a geographic entity without any reference to its ancient heritage.

Another arena in which the Shia faith and history is denied is in the field of education. Religious curriculum forms an important part of Saudi education. Even in this sphere, the Wahhabi doctrine and version of events is forced upon the minority community. The Shia are not only forbidden to teach Shiism but are required to study Wahhabism – including its official denunciation and distortions of Shiism.[35] Islamic history taught in schools tends to portray the rise of Wahhabism as inevitable in light of the moral, culutral and political decay in the Arabian peninsula. It tends to highlight the negative influences of the sects that deviated from 'true Islam'.[36] The struggle for succession after the Prophet Mohammed, resulting in the Shia-Sunni divide and the subsequent development of Shiism are not discussed. Such an omission of Shias from history is significant. No mention is made of their diversity, beliefs or practices. Thus Saudi students remain ignorant on the issue.

A look at schoolbooks of religious subjects reveals the antipathy towards Shiism. The course on *Tauhid* or Islamic Monotheism is concerned with the life and work of Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and his role in Saudi history. However, the focus of the texts "is on awakening students to the dangers of polytheism which lurk in all sorts of ritual acts from the veneration of saints to magic tricks and sorcery to Sufi mysticism and Shia mourning for Hussein, although neither Sufi nor Shia are mentioned by name."[37] The textbooks stress the puritanical Wahhabi tenets and denounce those who live contrary to these. Thus, "the Shias, because of their ritual mourning celebrations and

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[35] Ibid

[36] See Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Political Legitimacy and the Production of History", in Lenore G. Martin, ed., *New Frontiers in Middle East Security* (London, 1998), p. 30

[37] See Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Manning the barricades: Islam According to Saudi Arabia's School Texts", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2, Spring 2003, p. 232

cemetery visitations are...portrayed in the texts as polytheists, apostates and social outcasts to be shunned."[38]

This sort of government-sponsored (the Ministry of Education is under the control of the *ulema*) indoctrination begins at the school level and continues beyond, thus impacting all spheres of Saudi society. Shiites are banned from teaching in Saudi schools. There are no Shia principals in the approximately 300 female schools in the eastern province. Hence an increasing number of teachers are trained only in Wahhabi percepts. Thus, there is no one who can provide an alternative view to the existing scheme of things. The Shias face this sort of religious indoctrination with little or no means of their own to counter them. "The Shias are therefore afraid of the dissipation of their culture and identity and fear assimilation into the culture imposed by the state, including the erosion of Shiism as a faith and a tradition in favour of Wahhabism."[39]

ECONOMIC DISCRIMINATION

Another important area in which the Shias face immense discrimination is the economic sphere. Though the majority of the country's Shias literally live atop the country's oil, they have not benefited from the same. The eastern province of Al-Ahsa and Shia towns such as Al-Qatif and Hofuf have not shared in the prosperity apparent in the rest of the country. The province was earlier under the governorship of the Bin Jiluwi family who had the reputation of being particularly repressive on Shias. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979-80, gripped by revolutionary fervour the Shias in Al-Ahsa rioted. One of the responses of the Saudi government was to replace the governors – the Bin Jiluwi – as they recognized the danger of not responding to the situation. The Bin Jiluwi governor was replaced by a member of the royal family in 1983. The economic condition of the province has been described in some detail in the Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Report of 1996:

> Despite the wealth of natural resources, however, the Eastern
> Province is one of the most impoverished regions in Saudi
> Arabia. Compared to other regions in Saudi Arabia, the

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[38] Ibid, p. 239
[39] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 185

government has spent much less on construction projects, roads, medicine, and education in the Eastern Region. One journalist observes that the houses are unimaginably poor by modern Saudi standards. Shanties were commonplace until the early 1980s, and Shia cities and towns still lack the modern medical facilities available in cities like Riyadh and Jedddah. It was not until 1987 that the Saud: government built Al-Qatif Hospital – the first modern hospital in the Eastern Province.[40]

Such poor infrastructure is characteristic of areas not directly associated with the oil industry. Cities like Dammam, Ras Tanura, Dahran, with major oil and petroleum installations were developed considerably by the authorities. Since the establishment of the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) and the beginning of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia, the Shias have worked in the petroleum industry. "They were a more stable and better-educated workforce than Sunni Bedouin. The Shiites also showed more interest in secondary and technical education....As a result, Shiites made up 30 percent to 40 percent of the ARAMCO workforce from the 1950s to the late 1970s, often rising to relatively senior positions."[41] And they were also part of security at these installations till the mid-to-late 1970s.

This did not mean that they did not face discrimination. The Shias contributed the bulk of semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the Saudi oil industry. A minority also occupies higher posts. This was probably the only sector of employment open to the Shias as ARAMCO was not completely Saudi-owned. The Americans who had a stake in ARAMCO would consider technical competence rather than religious affiliations as a factor in employing Saudis, thus benefiting the Shias in terms of employment. At the time of the 1953 oil workers strike at ARAMCO, there were an estimated 13,000 Shia workers in the company who went on strike.[42]

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[40] Ibid, p. 181
[41] Anthony H. Cordesman, n. 7, p. 207
[42] Joseph Kechchian. *Succession in Saudi Arabia* (New York, 2001), p. 97

While there is no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shia, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some companies – including companies in the oil and petrochemical industries – Shias are passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots.[43] The US State Department states that there is an absence of Shia representatives at management levels at most of the country's largest government agencies and private companies. Over time Shias have been systematically let go from employment in the oil industry, especially from ARAMCO where they once constituted one-third of the workforce and professional-technical jobs.[44]

Apart from the oil industry the Shias have traditionally had very little opportunities for employment. While there are some Shia who occupy high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies, many believe that openly identifying oneself as Shia will have a negative impact on career advancement. The Shias are discriminated against in government employment, especially in national security-related positions, such as in the military or Ministry of Interior. They are barred from posts in the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and there are no Shia members of the country's highest religious authority, the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars. There are no Shias in high bureaucratic-government posts.[45]

Shias are also banned from teaching and are excluded from at least 50 per cent of Saudi universities and research institutions.

LEGAL DISCRIMINATION

The Shias are barred from posts in the country's judiciary. According to the US State Department, the government permits Shia Muslims to use their own legal tradition to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. However, there are only two such judges, one in Qatif and one in Al-Ahsa. Also, testimony by Shias is often ignored in courts of law or is deemed to have less weight than

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[43] *International Religious Freedom Report 2003*, Internet Edition, released by the Bureau of Human Rights, Democracy and Labor, US Congress, URL: http://www.state.gov accessed on 23 October, 2004
[44] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 185
[45] See Fuller & Francke, n.6, pp. 185-6. Such cases are also documented in *International Religious Freedom Reports 2004-1999* and Human Rights Watch *World Reports 2004-2002*

testimony by Sunnis. For example, in May 2001, "a judge in the eastern province ruled that the testimony of two Shia witnesses to an automobile accident was inadmissible."[46]

PROCESS OF REFORM AND THE SHIAS

The Saudi monarchy governs according to the precepts of a rigorously conservative form of Islam. Neither the government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state. Political parties are prohibited and dissent is unwelcome if not suppressed. In such a scenario the Kingdom underwent a major reform process in 1992. On March 1, 1992, the kingdom issued two new laws – the Basic Law of Government and the Consultative Council Law. These laws at the time seemed to indicate the kingdom's move toward the eventual formation of a constitutional monarchy. However, both laws remain subordinate to the country's official constitution – the Quran and the *Sharia*. The drafting of such a Basic law has been on the Saudi agenda since its formation. Many promises were made in between especially whenever the ruling regime would face internal dissent; for example, after the succession crisis in 1962 when there was immense discontent against King Saud; and in 1979 after rebels took hold of the Grand Mosque at Mecca for two weeks; and the Shia riots of 1980. Each time promises for reforming the political system were made but nothing materialized.

Similarly the Kuwait crisis of 1990-1 saw, along with a threat to Saudi Arabia's external security, signs of widespread internal unrest and criticism within the Kingdom. The crisis was the first time in its modern history that the Kingdom had been faced with the threat of invasion by a neighbouring Arab state. The legitimacy of the Al-Saud's rule, supported as it was by Wahhabi ideology, was questioned. Also revealed was the dependency of the rulers on western powers and assistance. The presence of foreign troops on Saudi soil created differing opinions in Saudi society, brought the *ulema* back to the political centre stage, and led to the formation of dissident groups. The Al-Saud, grappling with their sudden weakness, had no option but to consider some sort of reform.

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[46] *World Report 2002*, n. 30

Two petitions – the first secular and the second religious – were presented to King Fahd through formal channels. The first, *Petition for Change* in December 1990, emanated from a group of 43 intellectuals and suggested a 10-point reform programme designed to make Saudi Arabia a 'modern Islamic state'.[47] The signatories stressed the need for the formation of a consultative council, equality before law, freedom of the media, curbing corruption in province administration, among others. The second petition, *Memorandum of Advice*, circulated in February 1991, was signed by 51 religious and academic personalities and was endorsed by the Grand Mufti Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz Bin Baz.[48] It was a reaction to the earlier petition and emphasized on the role and influence of religion in matters of government policy. It too called for the establishment of a consultative council, cleansing of corruption, equitable distribution of public wealth and strengthening of the army and religious institutions etc. These two petitions represented the secular and religious reformist movements in the Kingdom. The Basic Law thus had to reflect a balanced concern in the interests of both secular and religious opinions. However, the Saudi Basic Law was peculiar to the Saudi system, and should not be considered as facilitating a western-oriented democratic set-up. In an interview with several Arab newspapers in March 1992, King Fahd "ruled out western-style democracy for Saudi Arabia. Democracy, he elaborated, must be in conformity, politically and socially, with Islam."[49]

The Basic Law introduced in March 1992 affirms the supremacy of the *Sharia* as the fundamental law of the land; however, it also gives the King the final word as to its implementation. Further, the Law appears to separate executive, legislative and judicial functions of the government, yet the King enjoys the final prerogative. Thus, the Basic Law tends to concentrate power even more within the ruler's hands and only adds to the King's influence. In the words of one scholar, "it aims are to emphasize the role of the

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[47] M.H. Ansari, *The Islamic Boomerang in Saudi Arabia: The Cost of Delayed Reforms* (New Delhi, 2004), pp. 14. See also Madawi Al-Rasheed, "God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 50, nc. 3, Summer 1996, p. 362

[48] See Ansari, n. 47, p. 15

[49] See Rolin G. Mainuddin, "Democratization, Liberalization, and Human Rights: Challenges Facing the Gulf Cooperation Council", in Paul J. Magnarella, ed., *Middle East and North Africa: Governance, Democratization and Human Rights* (Aldershot, England, 1999), p. 129

Saud family in government and reinstate the hereditary principle of succession, and other features pertaining to the royal family and its role in the affairs of the state."[50]

The centerpiece of the Basic Law pertains to the establishment of a Consultative Council or *Majlis Al-Shura*. In 1992 King Fahd appointed a Consultative Council and similar provincial assemblies. The *Majlis Al-Shura* began holding sessions in 1993 with 60 members and was expanded in 1997 to 90 members. It was further expanded to 120 members in 2001. "As prescribed by a royal decree, the purpose of the *Majlis* is to provide *nasiha* (advice) to the king in four general areas: the kingdom's laws; the general plan of economic and social development; the annual reports submitted by ministries and other state agencies; and international laws treaties and agreements."[51] The *Majlis* is largely an advisory body as power by law is in the King's hands. However, it also plays the role of mediator between the people and the authorities.

The *Majlis Al-Shura* is one body in which Shias have seen some representation. The inclusion of one Shia member in this body in the first *Majlis* from 1993-1997 was in keeping with Saudi policy of the time. It came after the Saudi government concluded negotiations with the leading Shia opposition group – the Reform Movement (earlier known as the Islamic Revolution Organization). It was a tacit recognition of the Shias existence and refuted those who would deny Shias a place in Saudi politics on account of ideology or doctrine. Hitherto the Shias had not seen any political recognition or participation in government. The number of Shias in the council was increased to two in the second *Majlis* in 1997 when the strength of the *Majlis* itself was also expanded.

The Shias are still represented in *Majlis* – they have two appointed members from the top ranks of academia and the bureaucracy in the Council who represent the more moderate Shia opinion. However, this is a disappointing number as Shia representation in the *Majlis* of 120 members is less than two per cent. With estimated numbers of Saudi Shias

[50] Madawi Al-Rasheed, "God, the King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 50, no. 3, Summer 1996, p. 364

[51] R. Harir Dekmejian, "Saudi Arabia's Consultative Council", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 52, no. 2, Spring 1998, p. 206

ranging from at least 4-5 percent to 15 percent, only two members in the *Majlis* is not an adequate representation. Also, since the Council itself is largely powerless, being nominated by the King, minimal Shia representation here does not signify much.

The Basic Law, however, does not provide for freedom of religion. Despite some government sanction for participation in public life, discrimination against the Shias has remained steady, if not increased, in the years since. Thus, the Basic Law, ultimately also provides for the suppression of the country's Shia minorities in keeping with general Saudi policy.

The actual reform process of 1992 had three statutes. The first was the Basic Law of Government, the second was the establishment of the Consultative Council or *Majlis Al-Shura*. The third was the Law of the Provinces. These three statutes were meant to establish the basis of government, and regulate political participation through the *Majlis* and regional government. The third statute, the Law of the Provinces, was concerned with reforming local government. It defined the rights and duties of provincial governors; affirmed the dominant role of the Interior Minister in the regional government; and created provincial councils consisting of the governing prince, his deputy, local representatives of government and ten citizens nominated by the King.[52]

Recently, in March 2005, the second stage of the municipal elections at the local level was held in Saudi Arabia. Shias in the country's eastern province turned out in large numbers to vote in these elections, responding to calls for the same from Shia clerics. According to one of the leading Shia sheiks in the kingdom, Sheikh Ali Al-Nasr: "The role of these councils is limited, but [elections] are a chance to assert the presence of the Shia as equal citizens."[53] Although the Shias do not expect much from such (limited) processes, they felt that this was an opportunity to register their presence and grievances,

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[52] Madawi Al-Rasheed, n. 50, p. 364

[53] See *Shia to make their mark in Saudi polls*, Internet Edition, 27 February, 2005, URL: http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5ED8D07C-C075-469E-BD0E-257289E42E0F.htm accessed on 3 July 2005. For more on Shias in Saudi local elections see Ali Khalil (Agency France Presse), "Marginalized Shiites stand up to be counted in Saudi local elections", Internet Edition, 28 February 2005, URL: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=13012 accessed on 3 July 2005

and to send a message to the government about their conditions. One Shia voter was quoted as saying: "I hope we can get our minimum rights. This is something better than nothing."[54] However, none of Saudi Arabia's women had the right to vote in this election, be they Shia or Sunni.

SHIA OPPOSITION TO SAUDI REGIME

The sphere of political activity in Saudi Arabia is as it is limited. There are no political parties, no periodic elections or elected bodies. The Saudi Shias already tagged as being 'the other' and looked upon with suspicion have even lesser opportunities for political activity. Shias in Saudi Arabia "exhibited little separate political identity until after World War II, although the Shiite clergy were relatively well organized by Saudi standards and the Shiite elders did furnish a traditional political framework at the local level."[55]

Shia opposition to the Saudi regime is not a phenomenon that appeared suddenly as a result of the heightened emotions of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. "Shiite opposition to the Saudi regime before the Iranian Revolution largely came in the form of Shiite participation in leftist movements, such as the illegal Saudi Communist Party or other illegal radical leftist movements, such as the Arab Socialist Action Party in the Arabian Peninsula."[56] This was reflective of the larger socialist tendencies sweeping across the Middle East in the heydays of Arab nationalism. Shia opposition in the Kingdom has not been a consistent phenomenon, following a set path. It ranges from strikes at oil installations during the 1950s and 1960s, to violent agitation in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, to taking the route of formal petitions in the 1990s in order to get their message across to the authorities. In doing so and at each level the Shias' technique has gained in sophistication.

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[54] See *Saudi Shia flock to polls*, Internet Edition, 3 March 2005, URL: http://english.aljazeera.net /NR/exeres/84CBBC2F-11D0-4A59-BDE3-5B3EBFF104A3.htm accessed on 3 July 2005

[55] Cordesman, n. 7, p. 207

[56] Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 186

During the 1950s, the Shia workers at ARAMCO went on strike twice, in 1953 and 1956. In 1953, the workers went on strike in protest against poor working conditions during a visit by the then Saudi monarch King Saud Bin Abd Al-Aziz. The strike resulted in a three-week halt in oil production. "Although the strike moved ARAMCO to introduce fiscal demands and improve working conditions, the ruling family opposed the vast majority of the demands on security grounds....Instead, the Al-Saud quelled the uprising by dispatching army troops."[57] The uprising of 1956 was indicative of the increasing trend of Arab nationalism that was sweeping the region since Nasser came to power in Egypt in 1952. It occurred at the same time as the renewal of a US lease on the Dahran air base.

It must be recalled here that the development of the Saudi oil industry has had a most beneficial impact on the oppressed, largely agricultural, Shiite community of the eastern province.[58] Many Shias from the rural areas of the Al-Ahsa oasis moved to the coastal oil towns of Dammam, Al-Khobar, Ras Tanura and Dharan seeking a better life. ARAMCO's willingness to employ Shias became the opportunity to earn a living. Until nationalization, ARAMCO was owned in part by the Saudis and included a significant American stake. The latter's involvement meant that they would consider technical competence rather than religious affiliations as a factor in employing Saudis, thus benefiting the Shias in terms of employment. Also, ARAMCO was the largest employer in the eastern province. By 1978, Shias made up nearly half of ARAMCO's workforce. Working in the oil industry also opened up vistas for education and training. "This was instrumental in the rise of a Shiite middle class and intelligentsia alongside a socially-conscious working class."[59]

Despite this, the Shias continued to face distrust and discrimination from their Sunni neighbours. The sharp increase in oil prices following the crisis of 1973 did not result in any major changes in the lot of the Shias in the east. The educated and working class Shias had been involved with trade union and radical nationalist movements since the

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[57] Kechchian, n. 42, p. 98
[58] See Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis* (London, 1993), p. 83
[59] Ibid

1950s. However, Shia unrest and protests against the regime's discriminatory policies and neglect led to the growth of local radical and separatist organizations. In 1970 severe riots in Al-Qatif led to the town being sealed off for a month. In 1975, King Khalid tried to placate the increasingly vocal Shias by improving industrial and communications infrastructure in the eastern province. The education system was improved and "a number of Shias were provided with secure government jobs."[60] Yet the frustration against the younger generation of Shias would not decrease with continuing government discrimination and they became progressively more militant.

ISLAMIC REVOLUTION ORGANIZATION

One such militant organization was the Organization for Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula that emerged in 1975. It began to derive monetary support from Iran especially after the Revolutions. Popularly known as the Islamic Revolution Organization (IRO) and having exclusively Saudi Shiite membership, it formed part of the growing religious opposition to the Saudi state. Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar has been the leader of the IRO (as well as its later manifestation, the Reform Movement) from the organization's inception. It's agenda was radical and included the following taken from a pamphlet circulated during the Haj of 1981:

> Their (Saudi) regime is the most dangerous enemy of Islam
> because they use the cover of religion to legitimate their
> otherwise un-Islamic rule....We demand: (1) an immediate end
> to the wave of indiscriminate arrests in Qatif and Ahsa (both are
> Shii regions), and the release of all political prisoners —
> especially those arrested in the eastern province while practicing
> the religious tires of Ashura. (2) we deplore thedictatorship of
> the Al-Saud and demand that an Islamic constitution be
> produced to secure democracy and progress of our people. (3)
> our Muslim people in the Arabian Peninsula are one people,
> regardless of sect, condemning the regime's sectarian policy of
> inciting Sunnis against Shias....[61]

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[60] Kechchian, n. 42, p. 99

[61] Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, (Boulder, 1985), p. 123

Mamoun Fandy has described the period from 1975 to 1980 as the militant phase of this organization when its leaders aimed to "purify Islam from 'Sufi practices and the selective usage of religion to bolster a certain regime's legitimacy'."[62] They showed little or no understanding of regional and international politics and the implications of their activities. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the take-over of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by neo-*Ikhwan* Sunni rebels[63] further reinforced the organization's radicalism. Labour unrest in the oil fields since 1978 (a response to similar unrests in Iran), the Iranian Revolution in 1979 followed by the Mecca siege, continuous revolutionary rhetoric and propaganda from Tehran and the Shia riots in Bahrain also bolstered the Saudi Shias. They defied a government ban on *Ashura* celebrations and kick-started riots in the country's eastern province.

Three days of rioting in 1979 by the Saudi Shias was enough to galvanise the Saudi regime into taking measures. Admitting that it had neglected the province, the regime took steps to minimize further damage. Massive investments in Al-Ahsa's development and economic and infrastructure were promised. The education system and other services were to be reformed. A modern vocational training centre was built. New commercial centres were built and Shiite businessmen were helped to expand their enterprises.[64] Shia officials were appointed to high yet secondary positions in the administration – indicative of the fact that they were still excluded from many privileges. Those arrested during the riots were granted royal pardons and, importantly, the government legalized *Ashura* processions.

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[62] Fandy, n. 17, p. 198

[63] Juhaiman Al-Utaibi took over the Grand Mosque at Mecca in November 1979 along with his band of rebels, known as the neo-*Ikhwan*. This takeover came on the 50th anniversary of the *Ikhwan* revolt against King Abd Al-Aziz in 1979 that the latter suppressed ruthlessly. The mosque was in state of a siege for two weeks and eventually the Saudis had to call in foreigners to end the siege and free the mosque. The Al-Saud were taken by surprise at the event, concerned as they were by an extremely vocal revolutionary Iran on the other side of the Gulf. The incident at the Grand Mosque caught the Saudis napping and bolstered the impression of Saudi Shias and organizations like the IRO that the Al-Saud were no longer a strong entity.

[64] See Abir, n. 58, p. 86

Following a wave of arrests of suspected IRO activists during the mid-1980s, the organization's agenda underwent a change. According to Mamoun Fandy, by 1988 it had abandoned revolutionary rhetoric in favour of a more universal agenda of democratization and human rights. "The new agenda called for broader participation of citizens in running the affairs of their government, for limiting the absolute power of the King, and for curtailing police power to detain and arrest those who even verbally criticized the regime."[65] In 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the IRO broke away from Shiite organizations in other countries such as Iran and Bahrain, and renamed itself the Reform Movement. Political action and media pressures were to be its tools of trade. Shia opposition leaders "increasingly pushed for collective action and popular empowerment, seeking to limit citizens' dependence on the Saudi state."[66]

The Reform Movement's demands included giving Shia Islam the status of a recognized Islamic sect; freedom of worship including the right to build Mosques and practice religious rights; Shia religious education in state schools in Shia-majority areas; freedom of expression including the right to publish and import Shia books; freedom to establish seminaries and religious schools; the cessation of the government's anti-Shia campaign; Shia religious courts to be granted the same powers as Sunni courts over matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance; equal opportunity, especially in universities and employment; and the improvement of the infrastructure in Shia areas.[67]

"In 1991, a number of leading Shiite dissidents with offices in both London and Washington, calling themselves the International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula (ICDHR-GAP), began to publish anti-regime material."[68] *Al-Jazeera Al-Arabiyya* was its principal publication and the material was disseminated both within the Kingdom and amongst Saudis abroad using the communications technologies of fax and the Internet. Another journal known as the *Arab Monitor* was published in Washington. At the same time another journal appeared in

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[65] Fandy, n. 17, p. 199
[66] Ibid
[67] See Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 189
[68] Ibid, p. 187

London, a monthly called *Risalat Al-Haramayn* (The Message of the Two Holy Shrines, Mecca and Medina), which was published by a group calling itself *Tajammu Ulema Al-Hijaz* (The Hijazi Ulema Group).[69] According to Joshua Teitelbaum, the magazine was pro-Iranian and sought to play on regional feeling of exclusion that Hijazis feel at the hands of Saudi Najdis.

Having been caught unawares by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and facing the rise of Sunni-led Islamist opposition within the Kingdom, the Saudi government responded by promulgating the Basic Law in 1992. However, this also compelled the government to talk to the Shia opposition, which was also a response to the increasingly moderate stance adopted by the latter. Thus in October 1993 adopting a policy of conciliation the Saudi government came to an agreement with the Shia opposition. The Shia activists would stop publishing anti-regime material abroad – in keeping with this *Al-Jazeera Al-Arabiyya* ceased publication by August 1994. In return, approximately 200 Shias were allowed to return to their homes in Saudi Arabia, prisoners and detainees were released, and passports were to be issued to members of the Shia minority in the Kingdom.[70]

SAUDI HEZBOLLAH

Another organization that represents some Shiite opposition in Saudi Arabia is the Saudi Hezbollah. "In 1988 and 1989, a previously unknown group called Saudi Hezbollah claimed credit for a series of terrorist attacks on petrochemical installations and the assassination of Saudi diplomats abroad (in Ankara, Bangkok, and Karachi)."[71] Most of their communiqués came from Beirut. "Saudi Shiites in the eastern province founded the Saudi Hezbollah in the 1980s as a reaction to the harshness of Saudi treatment of what many Wahhabis regarded as a suspect branch of Islam."[72] This organization sought Iranian support, was probably run by followers of Ayatollah Khomeini and advocated the

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[69] Joshua Teitelbaum, *Saudi Arabia's Shii Opposition: Background and Analysis*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policy paper # 225 dated November 14, 1996, Internet edition, URL: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org accessed on 14 January, 2005

[70] See Geoff Simons, *Saudi Arabia: The Shape of a Client Feudalism* (London, 1998), pp. 24

[71] Teitelbaum, n. 69

[72] Cordesman, n. 7, pp. 197

overthrow of the Saudi government and the formation of an Islamic state in Saudi Arabia such as the post-revolution Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Hezbollah has had its disagreements with the Reform Movement, especially regarding the 1993 agreement the latter made with the Saudi regime. It boycotted the negotiations between the regime and the Reform Movement and criticized the Reform Movement for making excessive concessions to the regime.[73] Estimates by Saudi Shias themselves place the Hezbollah's membership at about 250 active members, with about 1000 additional supporters in the country.

In June 1996, a US military housing facility – Khobar Towers – was bombed, following a series of violent acts and bombings in the Kingdom the previous year. Nineteen Americans died in the bombing and the regime fell back on its policy of blaming the Shias and foreign forces, implying an Iranian hand as well. By mid-September "the international Arabic language press reported that Shias were being detained for the Al-Khobar attack and that they had confessed to bringing the explosives from Lebanon."[74] Earlier that month, the Hijazi Ulema Group protested the "arrest of Shia cleric Hashim Muhammad Al-Shakhs. It listed 23 other Shia *ulema* held in detention.[75] Human rights groups claimed that around 200 Shias were detained by the regime in connection to the Khobar bombing. The Shias vehemently denied any hand in the bombing and the regime could never adequately explain Shia involvement. The US also felt that an Iranian hand was involved in the attacks. However, by 1997, the growing Saudi-Iranian rapproachment saw a reluctance on part of the Saudis to fully endorse the US' stand. Investigations were quietly concluded, and Prince Nayef, the Saudi Interior Minister declared them closed in 1998. However, none of the results of the investigations were ever made public.

In the United States "on June 21, 2001, a federal grand jury in Alexandria, Virginia, indicted 13 Saudi militants and a Lebanese chemist for the attack on the Al-Khobar

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[73] See Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 191
[74] Teitelbaum, n. 69
[75] Ibid

Towers."[76] The indictment also pointed a finger at the Saudi Hezbollah for involvement in the attack; Hezbollah denied the charge.[77]

FORMAL PETITIONS

The next phase of Shia opposition took the route favoured by a lot of the Sunni opposition – that of formal petitions to the King. In April 2003 a petition – *Partners in One Nation* – signed by 450 Shia men and women calling for reforms was sent to Crown Prince Abdullah. It is significant that in the country where the political and religious establishment tends to view Shias with disdain and scorn, the Crown Prince met with Shia leaders and accepted their petition. While emphasizing Islamic and national unity as well as explicit support for the royal family, the document expressed its solidarity with the signatories of a petition titled *Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation*, submitted in January 2003. This January 2003 petition also had, amongst its numerous signatories, some 20 Shias – including Shiite activists Mohammed Mahfuz, Jafar Al-Shayib, Sheikh Zaki Al-Milad, from Qatif, and Al-Watan journalist Najib Al-Khunaizi.[78]

The Shia petition *Partners in One Nation* called for "structural change as well as justice, security, equality and stability."[79] Urging an end to discrimination and the 'fanatical sectarian tendencies stimulating hatred', the document called for equal representation of Shias in government positions such as the *Majlis Al-Shura*, the cabinet, diplomatic posts and in military and security fields.[80] The petition implored the regime to stop 'unlawful' arrests, interrogation, detention at borders etc. It also demanded educational reform, a national programme promoting tolerance, human rights, intellectual and religious freedom, laws allowing for the prosecution of hate crimes as well as a public announcement "by leaders of this country to respect Shia rights in the Kingdom and equality with other citizens."[81] Greater freedom for worship and religious institutions,

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[76] Cordesman, n. 7, p. 196

[77] The indictment is given in some detail in Cordesman, n. 7, pp. 197-204

[78] See Stephane Lacroix, "Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New 'Islamo-Liberal' Reformists", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3, Summer 2004, p. 362

[79] Toby Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, vol. 228, Autumn 2003, URL: http://www.merip.org/mer/mer228/228_jones.html accessed on 30 January, 2005

[80] Ibid

[81] Ibid

right to publish religious books and creation of an official government organization to oversee their religious affairs as well as the institutionalization of religious courts with 'suitable legal executive power' was also requested [82]

The changes that Shia opposition to the Saudi regime underwent have been analyzed above. Shia activism in Saudi Arabia and from abroad, through dissident organizations and publications, had by the early 1990s entered its latest phase, different from the earlier revolutionary activism. However, till the rise of the liberal Sunni reformists in Saudi Arabia they were by and large unable to find common ground with the other Saudi opposition, and were in the local context, vastly isolated and outnumbered. From 1998 onwards, the rise of a Saudi liberal Islamist reformist constituency "gave Shiite intellectuals an opportunity to reintegrate themselves into the local context."[83] Their demands and discourse also changed.

The core of their discourse is concerned, as is the case with the larger liberal Saudi opposition, with human rights, democracy, and civil society. However, according to Lacroix, there is a greater emphasis on Islam, in comparison to the early 1990s. The idea is to portray an image of the Shias not just as liberals or those who wish for only democratization and liberalization separate from Islam. In the words of Sheikh Zaki Al-Milad, "we wish to propose a project that is at the same time democratic and Islamic."[84]

Secondly, Lacroix identifies a trend that is of some significance, of the Saudi Shia intellectual movement towards championing Saudi nationalism, and its institutionalization into their political discourse. This is something that the Saudi Shias have long been at pains to point out to their detractors. Saudi Shia intellectual Mohammed Mahfuz states: "We are Saudi and we love our country. All that we ask for is the unity of the Saudi nation to truly become a reality. It is in this framework, and in no other, that we want the Shiite question to be settled."[85] According to Al-Milad, the Shias

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[82] Ibid
[83] Lacroix, n. 78, p. 357
[84] Ibid
[85] Ibid

"no longer want to be assimilated to the rest of the Shiites who live in the Gulf and to be suspected of being a fifth column of the neighbouring states. We want to be a fully recognized constituent of the Saudi nation."[86]

SUNNI OPPOSITION MOVEMENTS AND SAUDI SHIA

Historically, Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke opine, the Saudi Shia have only been able to cooperate with leftists or those Saudis with socialist leanings within the Kingdom, and not with the rightist religious opposition.[87] This is still the case. There is no common ground for the Shia and Sunni opposition to come together in their opposition to the Saudi authorities. The Sunni religious opposition in Saudi Arabia derives its mandate from the same religious values that the regime uses to legitimize its rule and discriminate against the Shia. They use Wahhabi ideas and concepts to criticize the ruling family. Thus they are uncomfortable, if not outright against, cooperating with the Shia opposition. Sunni opposition groups also fear the anger of both the regime and the *ulema*, especially the latter who tend to view the Shias as heretics and issue issue *fatwas*, sermons and statements denouncing Shia beliefs and faith. Thus any association with the Shias could sound the death knell for Sunni opposition movements. However, within the broader Sunni opposition, the Hijazi ulema, owing to their own historical and cultural antipathy towards Najdi Wahhabism, is the only section of the Sunni opposition in the country that could make overtures of cooperation toward the Shias. But that is still in the realm of conjecture till definite proof can be obtained.

What is clear is that critics of the Saudi regime themselves work within the system and that by and large the Sunni opposition is rather conservative. Furthermore, their perspective is that of the superiority of Wahhabi Islam over the rest. Even hardliners and radicals like Osama Bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda stress on a return to puritanical values rather than any western-style liberal changes. The Sunni opposition ranges from criticism of the royal family and their dominance of Saudi history, corruption in administration, the

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[86] Ibid
[87] Fuller & Francke, n. 6. p. 194

Saudi political system (or lack thereof) to propagating hatred against communities such as the Shias.

Mamoun Fandy in *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* and Michael Scott Doran, in "The Saudi Paradox" in *Foreign Affairs* analyzed the attitude of the major Sunni opposition movements towards the Shia opposition. Osama Bin Laden and his organization Al-Qaeda's stand is: "We firmly believe that the Shiite heretics are a sect of idolatry and apostasy, and that they are the most evil creatures under the heavens."[88] Radical Sunni Islamists' hatred of Shias goes beyond their hatred of the Jews and Christians, says Michael Scott Doran. The Sunni clerics such as Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali and Salman Al-Auda have a deep-seated mistrust of the Shias. Al-Auda wants the government to expel what he calls *Al-Rafida* (the rejectionists), a reference to the Shia of the eastern province.[89]

Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali, in a scathing response to the Shia petition accepted by Crown Prince Abdullah, characterized the petition as "an attempt by the Shia minority to tyrannize the Sunni majority."[90] He claims that the Shias have throughout history conspired with foreign enemies, such as the Mongol invaders in the 13th century and presently the Americans against the Sunnis. The latter are for him victims of a Judeo-Christian-Shiite conspiracy. Al-Hawali also warned the Shias of over-stepping the limits on them stating that it could result in a civil war. "If the (Sunni) majority gets riled, it will act – a matter that could lead to the complete annihilation of the (Shiite) minority."[91]

Mohammed Al-Masari, of the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CLDR) initially stated willingness to cooperate with the Saudi Shia against the regime and actually announced a historic cooperation agreement between Sunni and Shiite opposition groups.[92] This cost him a lot of support within the Kingdom and he eventually changed his position taking an anti-Shia stand. Al-Masari's vision of a future Saudi state is a

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[88] Doran, n. 20, p. 46
[89] Fandy, n. 17, p. 101
[90] Doran, n. 20, p. 47
[91] Ibid, p. 48
[92] See Fuller & Francke, n. 6, p. 195

restrictive one and accords the Shia very little leeway. Members of the Shia minority of Saudi Arabia would not be allowed any influential positions and would be second-class citizens to an even greater degree than they are now.[93]

The Movement for Islamic Reform and its leader Saad Al-Faqih (which broke away from CLDR), and the movement's followers inside Saudi Arabia also mistrust the Shia. Though Al-Faqih does not dismiss the Shia as non-Muslims, and was willing accept a tactical alliance with them to overthrow the regime, due to the latter's 1993 accord with the government, holds such an alliance out of the question.[94] For Al-Faqih an alliance with the Shia could cost him his followers in the Kingdom, an unacceptable risk.

The Shias, for their part, also view any prospects for cooperation with the Sunni opposition negatively. They fear that the Wahhabis will use them as added leverage against the Saudi government to strengthen their own position, whereas the Shias will then lose even the minimal gains they have made in the 1990s and will sink back into conditions of acute persecution. Also they perceive that any Sunni movement in the Kingdom will automatically be intolerant of Shias, They therefore prefer to take a cautious approach and work with the regime.

However, the picture indicated by the attitude of Saudi Sunni opposition to the Shias is not so bleak. The newer discourse of the Saudi Shias, with its emphasis on Islam and strong nationalist leanings, along with human rights, and democratization, is close to that of the liberal Islamists, and strikes a chord with the latter. There exist several channels of communication between the Sunni and Shia liberal Islamists. The 'Tuesday Salon', founded in Al-Qatif in 2000, and supervised by Shia intellectual Jafar Al-Shayib, has the participation of prominent Sunni Islamist figures such as Abdullah Al-Hamid and Tawfiq Al-Qusayyir, and Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, leader of the Reform Movement was invited to lecture on 'social peace' at a weekly salon organized by Abdullah Al-Hamid in April 2001.[95]

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[93] Fandy, n. 17, p. 146
[94] Ibid, p. 173
[95] See Lacroix, n. 78, p. 357

The Shia minority of Saudi Arabia is an unenviable lot. In Saudi Arabia Islam is the foundation on which society and polities are constructed. This tends to work against the Shias. Thus from the establishment of the Saudi kingdom they have been variously discriminated against. Facing largely hostile rulers for long the Shias tended to bond together on the basis of their religious beliefs. They are aware of the political realities – they are a minority in Saudi Arabia and can therefore only hope to live and work within the existing system. They have neither the numbers nor the support – both internal and external – to bring about any sudden or radical change in the prevailing situation within the Kingdom. They have the requisite numbers in the country's eastern province, but living on top of the oil reserves surely ensures that autonomy from the rest of Saudi Arabia is an unattainable dream. So, they have bided their time and expressed their support for the very regime that views them with disfavour.

The Shia leaders are realistic and realize that a sudden removal of the Al-Saud could lead only to a worsening of the situation for them. Compared to hardline religious leaders, the Al-Saud offer them some hope. Thus, they have tended to adopt a cautious approach, especially since the 1990s. This approach and the moderate stance of its leadership have over the years ensured that the Saudi regime does not consider the Shias as only a threat. The longevity and success of the Shia opposition depends much on maintaining this status quo.

CHAPTER 4

EXTERNAL DIMENSIONS

The preceding chapters analyzed, in some detail, the status of Shias in Saudi Arabia but it is equally important to consider the external dimensions of the issue. Saudi Arabia is the largest country on the Arabian Peninsula. However, its domination extends beyond its immediate neighbourhood, not only due to its size, but also on account of its being the home of the two holiest places in Islam – Mecca and Medina. Though Saudi Arabia can play a role akin to that of a 'big brother' to its smaller neighbours, its own ambitions tend to be balanced by is larger neighbours – Iraq and Iran.

Iran has shared a chequered relationship with Saudi Arabia. Iran is the only state where Shiism is the state religion and an overwhelming 89 percent of its 68 million population are Shia.[1] In the immediate aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran made attempts to build up connections with Shias in other Muslim states, including Saudi Arabia. This would obviously pose a problem for its neighbourhood and beyond since there exist large Shia populations in and around the Persian Gulf. Iran has also been a major player in regional politics and a military power (as was apparent during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq war). For Saudi Arabia a strong Shiite Iran, with the reality of a few million Shias in its own backyard, is an omnipresent dilemma.

Iraq has posed a threat to Saudi security both on account of its internal tensions and external aspirations. Iraq has one of the largest populations of Arab Shias in the region (around 65 percent) – ruled for long by a Sunni minority. Any changes within Iraq could have implications for Saudi Arabia and its neighbours owing to the presence of large numbers of Shias in their backyard. Secondly, Iraq, for long, had laid claim to Kuwait. Its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought to fore a new, dangerous scenario for Saudi Arabia and its smaller Gulf neighbours. The Saudis felt that their vulnerabilities had been exposed and Iraq emerged as a threat to their very security. Saudi Arabia was one of the foremost supporters of the western coalition against Iraq in the Gulf War of 1991. However, its position had changed by 2003 when a coalition of western powers, led by the US and Britain, undertook a campaign to depose Saddam Hussein. Saudi support

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[1] For latest population figures see *The World Factbook 2005*, Internet Edition, URL: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ir.html, accessed 8 May, 2005. Iran's population is 89 percent Shia, 9 percent Sunni, and Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Bahais make up the final 2 percent.

during this campaign was extremely limited. Though a visibly chastened Iraq has been and will be most acceptable to the Saudi regime, the reality of an Iraqi government with Shia participation across its border, and the possible repercussions regarding its own Shia population, is a cause of concern in the kingdom.

The third area of focus in this chapter is the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), namely those that have significant Shia populations within their borders. Within the GCC, Kuwait and Bahrain have significant Shiite populations, as does Saudi Arabia. The birth of the GCC in 1981 occurred in a time of regional turmoil. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan, Iran had just undergone an Islamic revolution and within a few months of this revolution, Iran and Iraq (the latter backed by the US, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf monarchies) were at war. What is to be seen here is whether the presence of similarly large Shiite people (as both majorities and minorities) in its neighbourhood has impacted the behaviour of Saudi Shias, and what are the similarities and differences in the response of the Saudi regime and the regimes of its neighbours to this problem.

Finally, this chapter looks at Saudi-US relations, both historical as well as contemporary, especially the period since 2001. Saudi Arabia is both a partner in and a focus of the American 'War on Terror'. It remains to be seen what impact this has on the Saudi regime and its policy towards minorities.

SAUDI ARABIA AND SHIITE IRAN

Iran and Saudi Arabia have not had the smoothest of relationships. At the time when Ibn Saud was leading his men in conquering the territories that make up modern Saudi Arabia, Iran too was undergoing inner turmoil. Movements like the tobacco revolution of the 1890s were aimed against the growing influence of the British in Iran (then Persia). William Knox D'Arcy obtained the first major concession in the Gulf region for Great Britain in Persia in 1901. This concession granted to the British by the Qajar Shah was "the catalyst for the emergence of the constitutional revolution of 1906, an occasion when

the Iranians united against the monarchy, calling for constitutional limitations on the Shah's power."[2]

Oil concessions were being granted in other areas as well by the 1930s. After the World War I ended the struggle for oil in the Middle East intensified. In 1930, the Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL) obtained a concession in Bahrain. In 1933, SOCAL acquired the first concession in Saudi Arabia. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1937. The major company that operated in Saudi Arabia was the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO). Thus, both Iran and Saudi Arabia emerged as oil producers albeit of different stature. Iran benefited from the oil boom much earlier than Saudi Arabia. However, Saudi Arabia contains the largest estimated as well as proven oil reserves in the world. This led to both seeking much greater roles within their immediate neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf and beyond in the larger Muslim world.

During the Cold War, the Persian Gulf largely remained under the American sphere of influence. The US had emerged as a willing successor to the British as the empire withdrew further away from the Middle East. Following the emergence of the radical republican nationalist Ba'athist regime in Iraq in 1958, that country soon "became the principal local threat to the Gulf monarchies, most directly by threatening Kuwait's independence in 1961."[3] Along with moving closer to the US, the Saudi regime (and its neighbouring Gulf monarchies) also came closer to Iran. The Shah formally renounced Iran's long-standing but ambiguous claim to the Bahrain islands in 1971. This meant that with Iran no longer a threat to any of its smaller neighbours, Saudi Arabia and Iran could work together to contain the very large threat emanating from republican Iraq.

"In the 1970s the United States adopted a 'twin pillar' policy under [President Richard] Nixon that claimed to see both Iran and Saudi Arabia as key 'pillars' supporting moderate and anti-Communist positions in the Gulf. In practice, however, the US clearly relied on

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[2] Tareq Y. Ismael, *Middle East Politics Today: Government and Civil Society* (Florida, 2001), p. 112
[3] See Barry Rubin, "The Persian Gulf Amid Global and Regional Crises", in Barry Rubin, ed., *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf,* (London, 2002), p. 8

the Shah."[4] Together they would contain republican Iraq. This in turn was part of the larger Nixon Doctrine of building up regional allies. In the words of a senior American official:

> In the spirit of the Nixon Doctrine, we are willing to assist the Gulf States but we look to them to bear the main responsibility for their own defence and to cooperate amongst themselves to instill regional peace and stability. We especially look to the leading states of the area, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to cooperate for the purpose.[5]

This Iranian-Saudi cooperation was a result of a basic co-incidence of regional aims. According to Richard Haas, "whatever anxiety Saudi leaders felt about Iran's ambitions and strengths was allayed by the recognition that the two states shared many sources of security."[6] They both were wary of Soviet activities in the region as well as any signs of radical Arab nationalism that would threaten their regimes or cause any disruption in oil production. Also, the two neighbours tended to balance and complement each other. "Iran, for all its military might, was never able to challenge Saudi legitimacy and leadership among Arab states, while Saudi Arabia, for all its economic and political influence, lacked the ultimate arbiter of military power."[7]

By the late 1970s this situation changed. Internal rumblings and dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime and its policies within Iran exploded in late 1978 and early 1979 in the form of the Islamic Revolution. At the forefront of this move were the people led by the *ulema*. Leading the call for revolution was a senior cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had become a popular religious-political figure despite his forced exile. "Khomeini's themes of anti-Americanism, his fervent opposition to Zionism, his opposition to the Shah's autocracy, and his emphasis on Islam attracted a large audience which cut across

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[4] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-first Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic and Energy Dimensions* (Connecticut, 2003), pp. 110-111

[5] Richard Haas, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Twin Pillars in Revolutionary Times", in Hossein Amirsadeghi, ed., *The Security of the Persian Gulf* (London, 1981), p. 152

[6] Ibid, p. 161

[7] Ibid

class distinctions and ideological persuasions."[8] The political agitation of 1978-79, directed by the *ulema*, in particular Khomeini, led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in February 1979 after the Shah had fled the country, thus placing the leadership of Iran under a fundamentalist Shiite theocracy.

That Iran had undergone a revolution and had consolidated as a theocratic republic was enough a cause for concern in Saudi Arabia. "The Islamic Republic in Iran distinguished itself from its predecessor by adopting anti-Western rhetoric and attacking Muslim countries allied to the West, including Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran aimed to export its model of Islamic government and revolutionary experience to other countries, especially those with considerable Shia minorities."[9] The revolution had changed the entire security balance of the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular.[10] Saudi Arabia and its neighbouring monarchies now had to contend with a strong, republican Iraq as well as a successful revolutionary Iran.

Since the beginning the new republic had an aggressive foreign policy objective for the promotion and spread of revolutionary Islam in the Gulf. "Institutionalization of the Islamic Republic was accompanied by attempts to export the revolution."[11] This was targeted against these regimes who were perceived to bee serving the interests of imperialist powers like the US (termed by Iran as the 'Great Satan'). A renewed commitment to Islam, and following the Iranian experience, any country or people could free itself from such imperialist domination. According to Ayatollah Khomeini:

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[8] Ismael, n. 2, p. 120

[9] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, 2002), p. 156. This Iranian propaganda of exporting the revolution was targeted especially at Saudi Arabia and Gulf monarchies of Kuwait and Bahrain. These countries have significant numbers of Shias who look to Iran for spiritual guidance. Spontaneous incidents in which the Shias within these monarchies defied bans on Ashura (a Shiite holy festival commemorating Imam Hussein's death during the Islamic month of Moharram) in 1979 and 1980 would have seemed to the newly victorious revolutionary government in Tehran that Shias around the Gulf were willing to take on their respective regimes. Hence, a pledge of support for them was expounded in the form of the concept of exporting the revolution. However, Realpolitik tends to govern and dictate actions of states rather than emotional connections. The export of the Revolution and support for Shiite brethren across the Gulf became secondary to Iranian national interests.

[10] A revolution in Iran opened a window of opportunity for Saudi leadership aspirations in the Gulf region. However, the fall of the Shah in Iran, with whom the Saudi regime had reasonably friendly relations, and the theocracy taking over the reigns of Iranian leadership, put an end to this.

[11] John L. Esposito, "Political Islam and Gulf Security", in John L. Esposito, ed., *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform?* (Colorado, USA, 1997), p. 53.

> Islam does not recognize monarchy and hereditary succession....All the rulers are afraid their own people will follow the example of Iran....I hope other Islamic countries which are bound by worldly values...will rid themselves of these bonds and join their Iranian brothers in this great crusade, so that they can become victorious in their fight against the superpowers.[12]

The methods to export the revolution ranged included propaganda efforts to teach Muslims about the Iranian example. In this case, any material assistance was not required as the oppressed Shias in the Gulf monarchies would themselves rise up against their dictatorial governments. Other opinion within Iran felt that propaganda was not enough and that the revolution's export required both financial and military assistance. One such organization promoting the active export of the revolution was the short-lived organization *Satja*, established in the spring of 1979 by Mohammad Montazeri, son of Ayatollah Hosain Ali Montazeri, and Mehdi Hashemi.[13]

Yet, revolutionary rhetoric did not aid in and result in the overthrow of the monarchies' regimes. The revolution actually galvanized opposition within the monarchies who were already concerned with the political and economic grievances of the Shia minorities. Khomeini's call for similar revolutions was directed not entirely specifically at the Shias of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. It was also aimed at the larger Muslim world. It was a universal call that he hoped would appeal to Muslims and cut across any divides:

> The reasons which led Muslims at one time to become Sunnis and Shiites do not exist any longer....We are all Muslims....This is an Islamic Revolution....We are all brothers in Islam.[14]

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[12] Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Crusade of Modern Islam* (London, 1986), p. 146

[13] Satja was one of the earliest radical organizations calling for the export of the Revolution. However, its contacts with various non-state groups within other countries the Middle East, and its activities, brought it into conflict with the Islamic leadership and the foreign policy goals of the provisional government in 1979. It was forced to disband soon after. Montazeri and Hashemi then started the Liberation Movement; Montazeri was killed in 1981 and Hashemi became its leader.

[14] Ibid, p. 173

Such a call, in light of further events in 1979, would have seemed to the Saudis and others a challenge to their very existence. Hence not only was Iran viewed with suspicion, the Shia minorities were hemmed in between an increasing vigilant regime on the one hand and Iranian promises for aid on the other. For the first time since its inception, the kingdom's foundations appeared to be weak. This opened an opportunity not only for the Shias but also for Sunni Islamists opposed to the Al-Saud.

By the late 1970s, Saudi Arabia was one of the richest countries in the developing world. It owned oil, a resource of immense significance to the world and especially for the west, which generated immense revenues. The kingdom had claimed to be an Islamic state – one that followed and enforced the *Sharia* and was strictly Wahhabi in character. However, "in the eye of Islamic groups there was a growing gap between professions of loyalty to the *Sharia* and the actual practice as reflected in the consumption oriented society at large and the corruption and ostentatious display of wealth and luxury at the top by the Saudi ruling family."[15]

Nineteen Seventy-nine while posing an external threat to Saudi Arabia – in the form of revolutionary Iran – also brought signs of internal dissent that called into question the stability of the Saudi regime and the state itself. The crisis brought to light the schisms and dissentions that had emerged in the Saudi society over questions of modernization and its perceived impact on Islam and the state. It also highlighted the vulnerability of the state and its rulers to internal dissent. On 20th November, 1979 during the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, Islamist Sunni militants, also known as the neo-*Ikhwan*[16], led by Juhaiman Al-Utaibi seized the Grand Mosque at Mecca. The Saudi leadership was caught by surprise by the siege at Mecca.

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[15] Khalid Bin Sayeed, *Western Dominance and Political Islam: Challenge and Response* (Karachi, 1995), p. 83
[16] The siege at Mecca came 50 years after Saudi Arabia's founder Ibn Saud ruthlessly suppressed an *Ikhwan* rebellion in 1929-30. Juhaiman and many of his followers were descendants of those *Ikhwan*, who were formidable Islamic warriors and believers in Wahhabism. With similar calls for denunciation of corrupt practices and return to a pure Islam, Juhaiman and his band of men were known as the neo-*Ikhwan*.

Those who seized the Mosque "denounced the Saudi regime and proclaimed the appearance of a Mahdi (redeemer)."[17] They called for a new age of Islam, one unadulterated by the corruption and deviations of the past. In Juhaiman Al-Utaibi's words:

> Those who lead the Muslims with differing laws and systems
> and who only take from religion what suits them have no claim
> to our obedience and their mandate to rule is nil.[18]

Juhaiman Al-Utaibi was also a disciple of Sheikh Abd Al-Aziz Bin Baz the erstwhile ultraconservative head of the Supreme Religious Council of Saudi Arabia. He had pressurized the Saudi authorities to release Juhaiman and some of his followers when they had been arrested in June 1978; Bin Baz saw them as misguided but sincere Muslims who need not be persecuted for their beliefs. It took two weeks, *fatwas* from the *ulema*, headed by Sheikh Bin Baz, denouncing the takeover of the grand Mosque and supporting the rule of the Al-Saud, and foreign troops to flush out the militants from Mecca. Juhaiman's actions, though fantastical (a seizure of Islam's holiest site), were seen by the Muslims as a sacrilege and thus undermined his and his followers proclaimed religiosity and sincerity towards reform.

At about the same time as the Saudis regained control over the events in Mecca, the Saudi Shias rioted in the eastern province. Most countries, including the Shah's Iran, had imposed a ban on the Shia festival of *Ashura*, a highly emotional event commemorating the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein at the battle of Karbala in the year 680 AD. However, emboldened by a resurgent Islamic Iran, the Saudi Shia (and indeed their counterparts in Bahrain and elsewhere along the Gulf) took it upon themselves to defy the ban on the holy day of *Ashura* in the month of *Moharram* in 1980 and took to the streets. "Initial clashes between the police and the *Ashura* marchers mushroomed into violence as

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[17] Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, (Boulder, 1985), p. 124. See also William B. Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980s: Foreign Policy, Security and Oil* (Wahington D.C., 1981) pp. 93-96; T. Sreedhar, *The Gulf: Scramble for Security* (New Delhi, 1983), pp. 59-63; and Al-Rasheed, n. 9, pp. 143-46
[18] Bin Sayeed, n. 15, p. 83

mobs went on the rampage, burning cars, attacking banks, looting shops."[19] The riots lasted for three days and were centred in Al-Qatif. These spontaneous uprisings in defiance of state-imposed bans on Shia ceremonies and commemorative marches and meetings on *Ashura*, especially in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, showed these regimes the level of fervour that could be generated by the developments surrounding Iran.

The revolutionary Shiite leadership in Iran, and especially Khomeini, calling for exporting the revolution and exhorting their Shiite brethren across the Gulf to rise up against their monarchical masters, also posed a new challenge. From a Saudi perspective, the rhetoric of Iranian revolutionary leaders, who called for the overthrow of all monarchies as being un-Islamic, presented a serious subversive threat to the regimes in the area. Revolutionary Iran served as the catalyst for the strengthening of opposition amongst the indigenous Shia populations across Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Iraq and Kuwait.

These political disturbances in the Kingdom during 1979 and 1980 reinforced the perception in the Kingdom that Iran was exploiting, even inciting, discontent as part of a concerted policy to export its revolution and that Islamic Iran was a serious security threat. "On 13 December, 1981, the Bahraini security forces announced the arrest of a 75-member group bent on toppling the Al-Khalifa regime and announcing the establishment of an Islamic republic."[20] The plot had been organized by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, led by an Iranian Shiite cleric, Hadi Al-Mudarrisi, who was to head the new regime, and reportedly supported by Iran. The Al-Saud have always had a special interest in Bahrain and though the plans for this attempted coup were foiled, the Saudis had a rude awakening. A western envoy in Riyadh commented on the Saudi reaction to the coup attempt in Manama:

> The Saudis went crazy....They felt the whole Shia community
> had stabbed them in the back.[21]

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[19] Wright, n. 12, p. 150

[20] Uzi Rabi & Joseph Kostiner, "The Shiis in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest" in Ofra Bengio & Gabriel Ben-Dor, ed., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (Boulder, 1999), p. 177

[21] Wright, n. 12, p. 160. The incident led to a strong reaction on part of the Saudi regime in the country's Shia-dominated eastern province, including a travel ban and special security checks on Shias from the area.

The Saudi government consequently was not displeased when Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980. Though both the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad and the Islamist regime in Tehran were viewed by the Saudis as detrimental to their security, they preferred to back Iraq at the time when Iran was seen as a greater threat. Also, the war diluted if not eliminated the threats posed by these two countries to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia remained officially neutral throughout the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War – it did not send troops to fight on behalf of Iraq, supply military know-how or technology, or allow use of its air bases (as was the case with American and coalition troops in the Gulf War of 1990-91). In practice, though, its policies of financial assistance made it an effective Iraqi ally. The Gulf monarchies "subsidized its war effort with billions of dollars of aid albeit often concealed as loans, and lobbied for other countries – especially the United States – to back Iraq."[22] According to King Fahd, Saudi financial assistance to Iraq amounted to $25.7 billion.[23] The Kingdom and the other Gulf monarchies viewed Iraq as essentially fighting as their defender against the radical Islamic threat emanating from Iran.

The thorniest issue in Saudi-Iranian relations during the 1980s was not Riyadh's discreet support of Baghdad but the annual Haj pilgrimage. Contention over the participation in Haj rituals of large contingents of Iranian pilgrims, who saw the Haj as a platform for expounding their revolutionary, Islamist agenda, symbolized the increasing animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In 1981, hundreds of Iranian pilgrims staged protest in Medina, near the Prophet's tomb, chanting and shouting the rhetoric of the revolution. "Tehran Radio actually boasted about the pilgrims' defiance of Saudi warnings, claiming that thousands protested in a wave of violence."[24] Tehran insisted that its pilgrims had a religious right and obligation to engage in political demonstrations during the Haj. The Saudis, however, believed that the behaviour of the Iranian pilgrims violated the spiritual significance of the Haj and regular such incidents badly marred already tense relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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[22] Rubin, n. 3, p. 9
[23] See Al-Rasheed, n. 9, p. 157
[24] Wright, n. 12, pp. 159

Tensions increased yearly without a satisfactory resolution until the summer of 1987, when efforts by Saudi security forces to suppress an unauthorized demonstration in front of Mecca's Grand Mosque during the Haj led to the deaths of more than 400 pilgrims, most of whom were Iranians. In Tehran, angry mobs retaliated by ransacking the Saudi embassy. The setting of a quota system for pilgrims, in reality aimed at controlling the number of Iranian pilgrims coming to the Haj, by the Saudis fuelled Iranian anger further. These incidents severed the frayed threads that still connected Saudi Arabia and Iran; in early 1988, Riyadh cut off diplomatic relations with Tehran.

Although Iran began to indicate its interest in normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia as early as 1989, officials in the kingdom remained suspicious of Tehran's motives and did n⁻t reciprocate its overtures for almost two years. The Gulf War of 1991, however, significantly altered Saudi perceptions of Iran. The unexpected emergence of Iraq as a serious threat refocused Saudi security concerns and paved the way for a less hostile attitude toward Iran. Despite their lingering doubts about Tehran's aims vis-à-vis the Shia population of southern Iraq, the Saudis recognized after the war that they and the Iranians shared an interest in containing Iraq and agreed to discuss the prospects of restoring diplomatic relations.

The Saudi-Iranian relations have been progressing quite well as is evident by the meeting between former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami and Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah at the Organization of Islamic Conference summit in Tehran in 1997, as well as regular visits by Saudi and Iranian officials to each other's countries.[25] In 1998, the Haj quota for Iranian pilgrims was increased. On their part, Iranians at the Haj have significantly toned down their rhetoric.

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[25] Since moderate President Khatami came to power in Iran in 1997 there has been a burgeoning Saudi-Iranian rappoachment. In November 1997, King Fahd was invited to visit Iran and in February 1998, former Iranian President Rafsanjani visited Saudi Arabia for 10 days. Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal and Defence Minister, Prince Sultan visited Iran in 1999. Iranian President Khatami made a landmark visit to Saudi Arabia also in 1999. These indicate a trend towards cooperation rather than confrontation. Later in 2003, Iran and Saudi Arabia also found common ground in denouncing the American-led war in Iraq in 2003.

SAUDI SHIAS AND IRAN

Shias, who are citizens and natives of largely Arab, Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, have always been suspect of their loyalties. To give a parallel example, just as the loyalty of Palestinian Arabs who are Israeli citizens is called into question by Jews and Palestinians alike, much in the same way the Shia of Saudi Arabia have had their loyalty to the Saudi state questioned. It is a given supposition amongst the ruling regime, religious *ulema* and the majority Sunni population that the Shias in Saudi Arabia, of Arab descent, owe their loyalties to Iran. That there is some emotional and spiritual connection between the Saudi Shia and Iran cannot be denied for after all Iran is today the recognized seat of Shiism the world over. However, any relationship between them is subject to variables such as Saudi domestic politics, regional environment and Iran's policies as well. According to Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, "Arab Shia variously look at Iran from three different vantage points: as a major centre of Shiite faith, as the centre of an Islamist ideology, and as a state."[26]

IRAN AS THE CENTRE OF SHIISM

Iran does not have any religious sanction as the seat of Shiism. History has conspired to grant upon it the status of an important Shiite centre. However, historically Iraq has been the spiritual home of the Shia faith and way of life. It is in modern Iraq that most of the Shia Imams are buried, including Imam Ali and Imam Hussein whose tombs are situated in Najaf and Karbala respectively. Iran adopted Shiism as the state religion only under the Safavid dynasty in the 1500s. It was Iraq, especially Najaf and Karbala, that were the great Shiite centres of theology – and the faith thus remained essentially Arab. However, "as Iran developed its position from the 16th to the 20th centuries as the sole official Shiite state in the Muslim world, its power over Shiism inevitably grew, and in a process that also began to place a heavy and unique stamp of Persian culture not so much upon the theology, as the practice of Shiism."[27] It was only in the 20th century that the prestige of

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[26] See Graham E. Fuller & Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (London, 1999), p. 71

[27] Ibid, p. 72

Najaf and Karbala as centres for Shiite theology were rivalled by Iranian cities of Isfahan and Qom.

The most important reason for Iran emerging as an unrivalled centre of the Shiite faith was the policies adopted by the Republican, Ba'athist regime in Iraq. The regime frowned down upon religion and religious practices. It was in the 1970s that the persecution of the Shia led to most of the Shiite clergy being forced out of Iraq. They then made their way into Iran. There was also no apparent Shiite leadership within the other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain etc., which contain significant Shiite populations and nothing was done to foster the growth of such to counter the growing prestige of Iran. "Shias today thus have little option other than to look to Iran for some degree of leadership in pronouncement on things religious (or even political/religious)."[28]

IRAN AS THE SEAT OF ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

For Arab Shias, observed Fuller and Francke, the second area in which Iran looms large was that it was the seat of contemporary radical ideology. After attaining power, Khomeini's rhetoric articulated "a revolutionary ideology towards the region that called for the overthrow of corrupt, despotic and westernized rulers and for the pursuit of Islamic social justice in all Muslim lands."[29] This rhetoric found a ready audience amongst the Shia populations in Saudi Arabia and around the Gulf. These people perceived themselves as being oppressed by their rulers and so took Khomeini's call as one for asserting their rights against their Sunni oppressors – an example being the Shia riots in Saudi Arabia in the early 1980s. However, traditionally the Shias have kept themselves at a distance from power politics and continue to do so.[30]

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[28] Ibid, p. 73

[29] Ibid, p. 74

[30] Barring isolated violent incidents in the early 1980s and activities of organizations like the IRO and Saudi Hezbollah, the Saudi Shias have preferred negotiating with the regime. Overtly they have reaffirmed their support for the Al-Saud keeping very much in the background. They are content with limited representation in the country's *Majlis* and have taken to dealing with the regime through petitions. A petition *Partners in One Nation* signed by 450 Shia men and women was accepted by the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah in 2003; the Shias were also a part of a national dialogue convened by the Crown Prince in June 2003, a first for the Shias.

IRAN AS A STATE

Shiism in Iran has a distinctive 'Persian' touch to it. This is historically different from Arab Shia culture. Although the Arab Shia in countries such as Saudi Arabia do look up to Iran as a major centre of the Shiite faith, they are nevertheless aware that Iran, in terms of its policies towards and relationships with its Gulf neighbours, is governed by its strategic national interests rather than any concern for Shiite brethren. When it comes to securing its own national interests, Iran is governed by realpolitik as much as any other state. As a result, in many instances the Arab Shias tend to identify with their Sunni Arab counterparts rather than Iranian Shia of Persian descent. They have never attempted to overthrow their Sunni regimes despite considerable provocation and have never, especially in Saudi Arabia where they live in the oil-rich province, made any demands for autonomy.

It is true that the Shia in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region tend to look up to Iran as the contemporary seat of Shiism. They go there to study at noted centres of theology like Qom. However, these people often face discrimination and contempt. According to some scholars, Arab Shias accuse the Iranians of being arrogant and chauvinist. Shia Arabs who took refuge in Iran complain "that they cannot get jobs or start businesses simply because they are Arab."[31] This discrimination covers not only government policies but personal life as well: for example, laws issued by the Iranian *Majlis* in the 1990s "prevent an Arab man marrying an Iranian woman under Iranian jurisdiction – wildly contrary to Islamic law."[32]

On their part, the Iranians too tend to look down on he Arabs as a whole – they view the latter as uncouth and uncivilized. "Iranians on the popular level tend to look down on the Arabs as a whole, to view them as primitive Bedouin 'locust eaters' from the desert as opposed to the ancient urbanized Persian culture going back many thousands of years."[33] And though Iran has provided refuge to Shia facing persecution in their homelands, it tends to provide support to these and Shia political groups within the parameters of its

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[31] See Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 76
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid, p. 79

own interests and foreign policy. Iran might indicate support for the Arab Shia in the Gulf region, but this is subordinate to Iranian national interests. However, the perception remains in these other states, such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, that Iran has always been reaching out to other Shiites, and has tried to influence their status and position within their respective countries. The result is that in Saudi Arabia fingers are pointed at Iran even in case of Saudi domestic problems. A case in point is the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia. The immediate reaction of the Saudi regime was to point the finger at its Shias and Iran. The investigation later foundered over insufficient evidence and the Iranian-Saudi rapprochement of the late 1990s.

The Arab Shias are fully aware of the political, cultural and social differences between them and the Iranians. Iranian Shiism, centred on the martyrdom of Hussein is more ceremonial as compared to Arab Shiism, which is centred on *Imam* Ali. The cultural differences between the flamboyant Persian culture and the more austere Arab desert culture here assume greater importance. Islamic Iran's 25-year-long struggle against western dominance in the Muslim world definitely appeals to the Shia, as also to the secular Sunnis. Conversely, its militant attitude and continuous rhetoric has also harmed Shia communities in countries like Saudi Arabia by creating tensions between the former and the ruling regime – for example, Saudi Shias (and an Iranian connection) were immediately suspect for the 1996 Al-Khobar bombing.

According to Michael Herb, over the years "the Shii community in Saudi Arabia has displayed only modest opposition to the Al-Saud, particularly taking into account the weight of, social, economic and political discrimination under which the Saudi Shia labour."[34] The Shias have only two appointed members out of 120 in the Saudi Consultative Council; they have no presence in the military or security forces or the upper levels of government and the judiciary; are barred from positions in the Haj ministry and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs[35]; and lack autonomy even in their regional

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[34] Michael Herb, "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neigbouring Regime: Iran and the Shia of the Arab States of the Gulf", in Leonard Binder, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East* (Florida, 1999), p. 160

[35] See Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 186

affairs. Indeed, they must conform to Sunni-Wahhabi practices and face widespread anti-Shia religious indoctrination. Even ARAMCO, that earlier provided most jobs to the Shia, has a hiring ban regarding Shias.[36]

As has been observed in the preceeding chapters, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents an alliance between the Al-Saud and Al-Wahhab, according to which a puritanical and orthodox version of Sunni Islam prevails in the country. The roots of the Shiite problem can be traced to this pact, which has supported and legitimized the Saudi monarchy. The followers of puritanical Wahhabism are inherently hostile to the Shias whom they consider heretics. The Shia Muslims are the largest non-Sunni Islamic sect in Saudi Arabia and constitute significant number. Yet, they are discriminated, as mentioned earlier, in almost all aspects of Saudi life.

However, despite so much establishment-sponsored discrimination against them, the Shia in Saudi Arabia have not openly gone against the regime. The only time that they did so was in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1979-80. Affected by revolutionary fervour the Saudi Shia defied a ban on the ceremonies of *Ashura*, resulting in riots. Thus, an informal ethnic contract between the Shia and the Al-Saud, in place since the 1920s allowing the Shias to practice their faith and way of life as long as they did not do so publicly endures till date. According to Michael Herb, "the ethnic contract between the Al-Saud and the Shias had the following nature: the Shia could be Shia, if they wished, without the threat of death, forced conversion, or expropriation."[37] Nevertheless the Shias have been at the receiving end of things since then as the Al-Saud owe too much to the Wahhabis to exert any measure of control over them.

In 1979-80 the Shia, concluded Herb, seemed to be testing the stability of the Saudi regime. However, the circumstances that led to the fall of the Shah and the rise of an Islamic theocracy in Iran could not be duplicated in Saudi Arabia. The Al-Saud have much more control over their state than the Shah had over Iran – in this, the Al-Saud have

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[36] See Herb, n. 34, p. 161
[37] Ibid.

made sure not to alienate the powerful *ulema*, as the Shah did to his detriment. Also, the Saudi Shias being numerically few in a Sunni majority, that looks down on them, could not hope to get the latter's support to bring down the Al-Saud and their religious cohorts.

Yet, the riots and unrest of 1980 did work out somewhat to the Shias' advantage – resources were poured into Al-Ahsa by the regime to improve infrastructure and public services. Schools, hospitals were opened, housing, roads and other infrastructure improved. Even then, the Shiite areas, barring cities associated with the petrochemical industry, have not been able to reach the same standards as Riyadh, Jeddah etc. Despite these conditions, the Shias have remained loyal to the Saudi state and regime, especially in any further confrontations with Iran. In 1993, the Saudi government managed to secure an agreement with Shia opponents whereby the Shiites would stop publishing material abroad that was critical of Saudi Arabia's policies and human-rights abuses.[38] In return some Shiite dissidents and opposition members were allowed to return home, prisoners were released and passports were issued to the Shias in the Kingdom. Since then majority of the Shias too have taken the route as the other Saudi reform-seekers – that of petitions. The Shias in Saudi Arabia are fully aware of the limitations of their situation and are content to work mostly from within the regime's parameters to improve their lot.

SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAQ

Saudi relations with Iraq have been most problematic, vacillating from tension to de facto alliance to war. With the Republican Ba'athist regime in Baghdad seeking to play a greater role in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, and Saudi Arabia wishing the same on religious as well as economic grounds[39], Saudi-Iraqi ties consequently were strained. The kingdom tried to contain the

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[38] See Geoff Simons, *Saudi Arabia: The Shape of a Client Feudalism* (London, 1998), p. 24. *Al-Jazeera Al-Arabiya* was one dissident publication that ceased after the agreement between Shias and the Saudi regime in 1993.

[39] Saudi claims to leadership of the Arab and Islamic world flow from its being custodians of the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina. This legitimized its position vis-à-vis various pan-Arab, nationalist and republican movements in other states. This was carried forward into other arenas – the Saudis were instrumental players in the 1973 oil crisis, one of the first members of the Organization of Petroleum

spread of Iraqi radicalism during the 1970s by strengthening its relations with neighbouring states such as Iran, Kuwait and Syria; it also sought to come closer to the US (as part of Nixon's twin pillar policy). Beginning about 1975, however, Iraq began to moderate its foreign policy thus significantly lessening tensions between Riyadh and Baghdad. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic relations with Iraq were relatively cordial by the time the Iranian Islamic Revolution erupted in 1979.

The Saudis and Iraqis both felt threatened by the Iranian advocacy of exporting Islamic revolution, having significant numbers of Shias, and this shared fear fostered Saudi support for Baghdad during the latter's war with Iran. Although Riyadh declared its neutrality at the outset of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, it helped Baghdad in nonmilitary ways. For example, during the conflict's eight years, Saudi Arabia provided substantial financial assistance to Iraq, reserved for Iraqi customers part of its production from oil fields in the Iraq-Saudi Arabian Neutral Zone, and assisted with the construction of an oil pipeline to transport Iraqi oil across its territory.[40]

However, in August 1990, only two years after Iran and Iraq had agreed to cease hostilities, Iraqi forces unexpectedly invaded and occupied Kuwait. From a Saudi perspective, Iraq's action posed a serious threat to its immediate security, even more than a possible Iranian-supported subversion. Fearful of Saddam Hussein's ultimate intentions, Saudi Arabia become involved directly in the war against Iraq during January and February 1991.

> Although the US was the principal military power in the coalition of forces that opposed Iraq, the kingdom's air bases served as main staging areas for aerial strikes against Iraqi targets, and personnel of the Saudi armed forces participated in both the bombing assaults and the ground offensive. This

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Exporting Countries (OPEC) to unilaterally declare price increases and impose embargoes on western nations.

[40] See section on regional security, *Saudi Arabia Country Studies*, Federal Research Division, US Library of Congress, Internet edition, URL: http://www.country-studies.com/saudi-arabia/regional-security.html accessed 14 January, 2005

conflict marked the first time since its invasion of Yemen in
1934 that Saudi Arabia had fought against another Arab state.[41]

Post-war Saudi policy focused on ways to contain potential Iraqi threats to the kingdom and the region. Saudi officials considered Iraq as the greatest single political and military threat the kingdom faced. This led to Riyadh supporting Iraqi opposition forces that advocated the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government. Till the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Saudis pursued a policy of limited political accommodation with Iraq.[42] "As part of this policy of accommodation, the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry reportedly received a request from the Federation of Iraqi Chambers to facilitate visit by a group of Iraqi businessmen to the Kingdom as part of moves to normalize business ties between the two Arab neighbours."[43] Baghdad was also keen to convince the Kingdom in order to sign a free-trade zone agreement. The Saudis also benefited immensely from the sanctions regime against Iraq. They contributed an estimated $20 billion to the war effort; however, they earned an estimated $100 billion in oil sales during the sanctions imposed on Iraq.

This scenario had changed in 2003. Saudi-US relations had been under severe strains since September 11, 2001 and the Saudi regime's response to the proposed US-led war against Saddam Hussein was apprehensive and cautious. The Saudis were against the war. This was a complete turnabout from its position during the Kuwait crisis of 1990-91. The Saudis were grappling with the reality of Saudi militants' involvement in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US and facing increasingly vocal criticism from within the country from amongst Islamist forces. The regime's downfall was being contemplated by many. Also, the George W. Bush administration's intense focus on terror, Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, and Saddam Hussein meant an increasing and interventionist role of the US in the region. The Saudis were wary of intense focus on

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[41] Ibid
[42] See Cordesman, n. 4, pp. 52-56. This included limited popular support for military action against Iraq in Saudi Arabia even before the 2003 war going back to the days of sanctions and UN inspections. During the second Clinton administration, the US failed to convince the Saudis to permit use of their military bases in case there was a US-led attack against Iraq.
[43] Venkat Raman, "Fair to Thaw Saudi-Iraq Relations" *AsiaNZ Business Chronicle*, Internet Edition, URL: http://www.asianzbc.co.nz/story/july2002/fair.asp accessed 8 May, 2005

their own practices. They thus did not give the same level of support to the US-led War on Iraq as they did to the 1991 campaign.

In March 2003, the Bush Administration led the US into war, in a bid to topple Saddam Hussein. An effort was made to link up this campaign in Iraq to the larger 'War on Terror', still being carried out in Afghanistan. The campaign entrenched American troops in Iraq, with the initial goal of removing Saddam from power. With Saddam's fall, however, the political situation in Iraq changed dramatically. It came to signify a battle for control of the country. Yet, this was fought not directly against the American forces, which were largely unwanted by common Iraqis, but rather between various factions within Iraq. Emboldened with the removal of the dictator, the largest contingent of Iraq's population comprising 65 percent of the total population, the Shias suddenly found an avenue to gain power. The same can be said of the Kurds in the north. Both had, for decades, been under the domination of Sunni minority regimes. Within the Iraqi Shias too, there was the moderate faction, led by the Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, and that led by Moqtada Al-Sadr, who has extremist leanings.

After almost two years of fighting, conflict and insurgency within Iraq, elections were held to establish the country's Parliament. The coalition of Shia parties, the United Iraqi Alliance, won 48 percent of the votes. The Kurdish alliance won 26 percent of the votes, coming second, followed by the Iraqi List led by former interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. However, the Sunnis, who were the ruling class in Iraq till the American operations began in 2003, lost that privileged position. Turnout figures from the election show the depth of the Sunni boycott – or at least the fear that kept them away from the polls.[44] Thus the Shias lead the new government in Iraq and the Sunnis have but a fraction of the power they once exercised over Iraq's minions.

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[44] Jon Leyne, *Analysis: Shia Iraq Reaps Reward*, Internet Edition, dated 13 February 2005, URL: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4262865.stm accessed on 3 July 2005

SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAQI SHIAS

Iraq is the historical and spiritual home of Shias. Political Shiism originated in Iraq in the 1950s. Both Saudi Arabia and Iraq have significant Shia populations. However, while in Saudi Arabia the Shias are a minority, in Iraq they are actually in a majority.- Of its population of 26 million 60-65 percent are Shia and 32-37 percent are Sunni Muslims.[45] Shias dominate the central and southern regions of the country. "Since the creation of modern Iraq in 1921, the country's Sunni minority has wielded disproportionate influence over the Shia majority and the Kurdish minority. Sunni dominance has been bolstered by both the preponderance of Sunni governments in the Arab world and by the West, which until recently viewed Saddam Hussein's regime as a bulwark against the influence of revolutionary Shia."[46]

Shiite dissent in Iraq was institutionalized by the Hizb Al-Da'wa Al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Call Party of Iraq).[47] Persecuted severely by the regime in the 1970s, the party had established roots around the Gulf and eventually came under Iranian influence and set up within Iran. "Although Iraqi Shias had long been politically marginalized, sectarian confrontation did not become salient until the 1970s, when conflict emerged between the Sunni-dominated Ba'ath Party and the Shia Da'wa Party."[48] Though inspired by the Iranian Revolution, Iraqi Shias did not wish to replicate the political theology of the Islamic Republic.

There have always been differences between Iraqi and Iranian Shias and each are loyal to his/her regime, even the repressive Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein. The Iran-Iraq war saw Iraqi Shias fighting Iranian Shias. The Iraqi Shias have mounted a few large-scale rebellions against the Iraqi state. A revolt in 1991, mounted just after Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War failed for lack of outside support; also because "Iraqi ayatollahs failed to exploit the Shia rebellion, offering little in the way of guidance, much less open advocacy

[45] For latest population estimates see *The World Factbook 2005*, Internet Edition, URL: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/iz.html accessed 8 May, 2005.

[46] Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shiis and Building Iraqi Democracy*, dated March 21, 2003, paper no. 03/03 # 10, Internet edition URL: http://www.aijac.org.au/updates/Mar-03/210303.html accessed 8 May, 2005

[47] See Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 48

[48] Nakash, n. 46

for the formation of a separatist Islamic government."[49] Historically, "the vast majority of Iraqi Shias have rejected calls to implement a political system favoring the rule of the Islamic jurist (*vilayat-e-faqih*), instead choosing to reaffirm their commitment to Iraqi nationalism."[50] In the elections held in January 2005 in Iraq, the Shias have, for the first time, become part of the government.

The Saudis fear a resurgent Iraq, especially under a Shiite regime, a scenario appears more real with the Shia-led United Iraqi Alliance's resounding performance in the recently held election in January 2005. Having won a majority of the votes, and strongly placed on the new Iraqi political map, the Shiites are part of a coalition government. This large Shiite majority in a neighbouring country has neither had much to do with Saudi Shias nor vice versa. Saudi Shiite dissidents have their own indigenous organizations, such as the Organization for Islamic Revolution and a Saudi Hezbollah (active in the late 1980s). Saudi Shias, unlike their Iraqi counterparts, lack a strong religious leadership; also, the Al-Saud with their Wahhabi counterparts have a strong support base amongst the majority Sunnis. Unlike the Iraqi Shias, who with numerical strength and outside help are active in current Iraqi politics, the Saudi Shias are too few in number and politically too weak to organize against the Saudi regime.

The change in regime in Iraq, formation of a coalition government consisting of Sunnis, Kurds and the majority Shias, and the evident numerical power of the Iraqi Shias is a cause for concern in Saudi Arabia. Though on the one hand it will have a reasonably stable neighbour to the north, on the other hand the regime would fear the impact of such a scenario on the Shias of its eastern province, who are in a majority there. As of now, the eventual effect of a Shiite-led Iraq on Saudi Shias remains to be seen.

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[49] Ibid
[50] Ibid

SAUDI ARABIA AND GCC STATES

Saudi Arabia's ties with the small Arab oil-producing states along its eastern flank have been historically close.

Of the six states that make up the GCC, it is Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait that have significant Shia populations within their borders. "With 70 percent of GCC nationals and 88 percent of its total land area, Saudi Arabia is the great power of the GCC."[51] Bahrain and Kuwait, though much smaller and rather dependent on Saudi Arabia, contain around 70-75 percent and 25-30 percent Shia populations respectively. How do these monarchies reconcile with presence of Shias within their borders? Does Saudi Arabia dictate the policies of the other states towards their Shia populations? How significant are the Shia populations to the relationships between these countries?

SAUDI ARABIA AND BAHRAIN

The Saudis have looked at the tiny archipelago as the gateway to their kingdom[52], and Bahrain has always been dependent on Saudi Arabia. Even before the Iran-Iraq War had begun, these countries' perception was that Iranian agents fomented demonstrations and riots among the Shia population within their borders. Renewed alarm about Iran was aroused in December 1981 when Bahraini security forces foiled an attempt to depose the Al-Khalifa regime and announced the arrest of a seventy-five member group.[53] Another coup attempt followed in December 1987 led again by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain; this attempt, however, failed to attract much Shiite support.

The Bahraini Shias comprise of native Bahrainis and Shias of Persian descent. The situation of the Shias in Bahrain, in terms of government oppression, is similar to that faced by Saudi Shias. "The Al-Khalifa regime inflicted discrimination and hardship on

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[51] Turki Al-Hamad, "Imperfect Alliances: Will the Gulf Monarchies Work Together?" in Barry Rubin, ed., *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf*, (London, 2002), p. 27

[52] See Wright, n. 12, p. 160. In the aftermath of the attempted Bahranian coup of 1981, the Saudis built a causeway linking Bahrain to their mainland, thus bringing the island nation physically closer to themselves.

[53] See Rabi & Kostiner, n. 20, p. 177

the Shias, including sporadic physical attacks by Sunnis."[54] The Shias were banned from practicing their religious ceremonies, especially *Ashura*. They could not own land, were not employed in state security services and were barred from holding high and important ministerial positions in the government – situation similar to that faced by Saudi Shias.[55]

In the 1990s, "there were widespread disturbances amongst the Shia population and violent repression by the ruling family. This violence, and related moves such as naturalizing Sunnis from outside the country, exacerbated the sectarian divide in Bahrain."[56] Though Shias in Bahrain are a majority, the ruling family – the Al-Khalifa is Sunni.[57] The large numbers of Shias in Bahrain (70 percent of native population) are best reflected in the Bahraini Parliament of 1973-75 – 16 of the 30 elected members of the body were Shia. In 2002, a new *Majlis Al-Nuwwab* was elected comprising 40 elected members. Of these only 12 are Shia, as a result of a boycott called by Bahrain's leading Shia opposition group, the *Jami'yya Al-Wifaq Al-Watani Al-Islami*, in protest of weakening of parliamentary powers in the country's 2002 Constitution.[58]

The Saudi regime has its eyes constantly on the Bahranian archipelago. The ruling families of the two monarchies share ties as well; the Al-Saud and the Al-Khalifa both trace their lineage to Najd. The Al-Saud spend a considerable sum subsidizing the Al-Khalifa – "Saudi Arabia reportedly provides up to 45 percent of Bahrain's budget."[59] Any uprising in Bahrain – be it Shia or even Sunni – would lead to an immediate Saudi military response. Scholars have argued that there are three reasons for Riyadh bolstering the Bahraini regime's hard-line policies against their Shia population:

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[54] Ibid, p. 173

[55] For a comparative analysis on Shias of Bahraini and Saudi Shias see Fuller & Francke, n. 26, pp. 119-154, Herb, n. 34, pp. 165-68, Rabi & Kostiner, n. 20, pp. 171-88

[56] Michael Herb, "Prince and Parliaments in the Arab World", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 3, Summer 2004, p. 376 The violence was on account of the Shias demanding the return to the 1973 constitution, the Bahraini National Assembly (dissolved in 1975) and on addressing the issue of unemployment.

[57] For latest population estimates see *The World Factbook 2005*, Internet Edition, URL: http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ba.html accessed 8 May, 2005. Of Bahrain's population of 688,345 including 235,108 non-nationals, 70 percent are Shias.

[58] See Herb, n. 56, p. 377

[59] See Herb, n. 34, p. 167 and Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 152

- Saudi Arabia is unalterably opposed to any spread of democratic governance in the region that might pressure the Saudi regime itself.[60] Bahrain's move towards democratization through a new Constitution and *Majlis* is an example of how Shias still have a voice in a Sunni-ruled country.

- Secondly, the Wahhabi ideology of the Saudi kingdom sets it in strong opposition to the Shia and would never comfortably live alongside the Shia in power in neighbouring states if it can be avoided.[61]

- Finally, the Bahrainian Shia have close ties to Saudi Shia, so that any success of the Bahraini Shia would have immediate impact on the aspirations of the Saudi Shia, however, different their own political situation is as a small minority.[62]

The Saudi regime, in short, has much at stake in Bahrain, and consequently remains a strong influence on the Al-Khalifa. Bahrain itself being a tiny nation with limited resources is in turn dependent on support from Saudi Arabia. Bahraini Shias, for their part, see a Saudi hand in the way their own regime treats them – especially in the Saudi attempt to export their own brand of Sunni Wahhabism to the islands – "the Saudis send Wahhabi literature to Bahrain to influence Sunni thinking."[63] "Saudi Arabia is also perceived by many Bahraini Shias as a more violent and intractable society...unlike Bahrain's more sophisticated and historically more tolerant environment."[64] And any blatant, overt Saudi interference in Bahrain's affairs, especially with regard to the Shias, would only make matters more difficult for the regime in its own Shia-dominated eastern province. The Saudis cannot afford to have free contacts between the Shias of Al-Ahsa and those in Bahrain, mainly for security reasons. A stable Bahrain is a lesser security concern for the Saudis.

SAUDI ARABIA AND KUWAIT

The Shias in Kuwait, forming around 25-30 per cent of the population, are in a much better position as compared to their counterparts in neighbouring Saudi Arabia. In 1938,

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[60] See Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 152
[61] Ibid
[62] Ibid
[63] Ibid, p. 153
[64] Ibid

as the Al-Sabah gained control over what would become Kuwait, the Shias emerged as allies of the new regime. The Shias of Kuwait consequently have integrated well into Kuwaiti society and have a greater sense of belonging regarding the state. One reason for this is that in response to the wave of democratization and reform sweeping the world in the post-Cold War era the Kuwaiti regime gave a prompt response. Elections to the Kuwaiti National Assembly were held quite regularly in the 1990s and elected Shia deputies sit in the Assembly.

However, "the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, and the subsequent war between Iran and Iraq, undid the previous calculations of the Kuwait regime toward Iran, toward Iraq, and toward Kuwait's Shia."[65] The 1980s were turbulent times for the Shias of Kuwait. From 1983 to 1988 Shiite groups in separate incidents bombed American and European interests in the country, sabotaged oil installations, hijacked Kuwaiti aircraft, and, in May 1985, carried out an assassination attempt against the Emir of Kuwait.[66] In 1989 a few Shia were arrested for an alleged coup attempt. The regime responded to these threats with repressive measures, arrests and deportations of Shia nationals. Shias in the Kuwaiti oil industry suffered as well.

Such events had led to the Kuwaiti regime backing Iraq in the war against Iran. However, Kuwaiti support for the Iraqi war effort was repaid by an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.[67] A strong display of patriotism on part of the Kuwaiti Shias went a long way in allaying Sunni suspicions regarding them as well as increasing their credibility in Sunni eyes. The Shias were viewed by the Kuwaiti regime as potentially threatening, on account of their ties to Iran, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. The Kuwait crisis changed that perception. The Shias denunciation of Saddam Hussein's invasion of their country and support for the regime went a long way in reconciling the latter to them. The

[65] Herb, n. 34, p. 164
[66] Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 162. On the issue see also Abbas Abdelkarim, ed., *Change and Development in the Gulf* (London, 1999), p. 136
[67] Iraq never considered Kuwait as an independent state and always laid claim to Kuwaiti territory. In the post-Saddam era, Kuwait is grappling with issues such as the effects of internal Iraqi politics such as the emergence of the Shias in the January 2005 elections in Iraq and the effects of such instances on its own significant Shia population. Kuwait has always been more open to political reform as compared to its neighbouring monarchies – just last month, in June 2005, it gave voting rights to women – and the Shias also fare relative better than in the other monarchies.

Shias were no longer a threat to the regime, Iraq was a bigger threat, and they arose in Kuwaiti esteem after the war in 1991.

However, the status of the Kuwaiti Shias too has limits. Their 'loyalty' too continues to be suspect. Yet the Shias have a share in the Emirate's oil wealth and the welfare state. Unlike neighbouring Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti Shias do not live in poverty. However, they do face subtle forms of discrimination – they are excluded from 'sensitive' areas of government. The Shias also complain that they are being excluded from the oil industry.[68] Though they have greater political rights, including the right to vote and run in parliamentary elections, the Shias hold only about 10 percent seats in the Kuwaiti Parliament, in contrast to their numbers in the country. There are no Shiite political organizations in Kuwait; there are no permitted political parties in the monarchy.

Though Iraq has historically been the greatest cause for concern in Kuwait, for the Shias the greatest threat is the dramatic increase in Wahhabism and its followers who study in Saudi Arabia and follow the authority of senior Saudi clerics. "Whether with active or passive endorsement of the Saudi government, Wahhabism in spreading in Kuwait, as it is in Iraq and Bahrain."[69] The Wahhabi view branding Shias as heretics is spreading the fastest within traditionally conservative tribal groups in Kuwait, thus tending to deepen prejudices against the Shias. Any Saudi interference in Kuwait, as mentioned above, seems to be covert.

SAUDI ARABIA, QATAR AND THE UAE

In Qatar and UAE, the Shia minorities do not face the same sectarian strife that is found within Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. There is a considerable lack of information, as is the case in Saudi Arabia, regarding the Shia population in Qatar. The estimates vary from 18-88 per cent[70], an immense discrepancy. The relations between this minority and the regime in Qatar apparently share cordial relations. Qatar does have a sort of a standoff with Saudi Arabia; whether this affects the Shia minorities in both countries is not very clear.

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[68] Fuller & Francke, n. 26, p. 168
[69] Ibid., p. 172
[70] Herb, n. 34, p. 168

The UAE has a substantial Shia population, of largely Persian descent. The Emirates have had a long-standing dispute with Iran over the Abu Musa and Tunb islands in the Persian Gulf. The Shia community in the Emirates is not overtly pro-Iran. Despite the dispute over the islands, the Shias are a major factor in facilitating the strong economic ties that the Emirates have with Iran.

Saudi leaders have historically regarded both aggression and externally supported subversion as potential threats to their country's national security. To that has been added the concern in the Saudi regime regarding its Shia minority. A primary foreign policy objective was to maintain political stability in the area surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. Their principal concerns tended to focus on their two more populous and powerful neighbours, Ba'athist Iraq to the north and Shiite Iran across the Persian Gulf. Since 1979 concerns regarding the Shias have become a serious issue for Saudi policymakers. Saudi Arabia's relationships with its big and small neighbours reflect not only its external threat perceptions but internal security concerns as well. Though there is an increasing western presence in the region and a Shia-led government seems set to take power in Iraq, its effect on Saudi Shias, though still in the realms of conjecture, has begun to unfold.

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UNITED STATES

The Saudi US relations actually date back to the early days just after the establishment of the former. In 1933, a year after the formation of Saudi Arabia the Standard Oil Company of California obtained a concession in the kingdom and oil was discovered in 1937. The Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO) was, until nationalization by the Saudis, the biggest entity in the Saudi petrochemical sector. According to Anthony Cordesman, concerns over oil and security have thrust the US and Saudi Arabia together. Saudi Arabia depended on the US " for security and many aspects of its development. The United States depends on Saudi Arabia to provide oil exports, use its swing production

capacity to help stabilize the oil market, and provide basing and military support for US power projection in the Gulf."[71]

There is another side to this relationship, one that has become apparent since the 11 September attacks in 2001. A conservative, religious monarchy and a liberal, interventionist democracy have little in common. There is distrust in the US of the Saudi support for Wahhabism and Arab causes; on the other hand, the Saudis are angered by the US' continued support of Israel. There is little popular understanding of the Saudi system in the US and thus calls for democratization like in the west only generate fear amongst the Saudis. Within the kingdom the emergence of hard-line extremists that oppose the kingdom's relations with the US has caused cracks to develop in this relationship. There is widespread and deep-rooted opposition to the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia, evident by incidents such as bombing of US military bases, such as that at Al-Khobar in 1996.

However, the instance that defined a new era in US-Saudi relations, since the 1973 oil crisis, was the 11 September, 2001 attacks on the US. Fifteen of these 19 militants who carried out these attacks were of Saudi origin. They were members of an organization called Al-Qaeda led by a Saudi dissident, Oslama Bin Laden. Bin Laden was a veteran of the Afghan struggle against Soviet occupation and had switched his anger onto the Saudi royal family, whom he deemed corrupt and unfit to rule, and for their strong ties with western powers especially the US. The attack on the World Trade Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC sparked off tensions between the two countries, a 70-year-old relationship based on friendship and cooperation notwithstanding. The events of 9/11 led to the Saudis also re-evaluating their relationship with the US. The intense international focus on it revealed a regime that was extremely uncomfortable with the growing influence of Islamist opposition to it.

The current level of anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia is rooted in the country's politics. The country is in the hands of the ruling family of Al-Saud – within this set-up power is

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[71] Cordesman, n. 4, p. 103

concentrated into very few hands. The kingdom is facing problems ranging from the question of succession to King Fahd[72], to an expanding population, economic crises and mushrooming of religious and sectarian opposition. According to Michael Scott Doran, the "Saudi monarchy functions as the intermediary between two distinct political communities: a westernized elite that looks to Europe and the United States as models of political development, and a Wahhabi religious establishment that holds up its interpretation of Islam's golden age as a guide."[73] This balancing act by the Al-Saud has subject them to widespread criticism from within and beyond.

Hard-line, religious Saudis perceive the US, along with Israel, to be the "leaders of a global anti-Islamic movement – Zio-Crusaderism – that seeks the destruction of true Islam and dominion over the Middle East."[74] Its most effective weapon is 'democracy'. Thus any attempts by the US to introduce its version of democratization, such as in Iraq, is seen as attacking the very foundations of Islam. In turn, this rage is let out in the form of attacks on American interests in Saudi Arabia. Sporadic attacks on westerners continue – including a suicide bombing of an American compound in Riyadh in 2003 and a hostage crisis in Jeddah last year. Saudi clerics "legitimize the daily attacks on American soldiers in Iraq's 'Sunni Triangle'"[75] as well as attacks on Iraqi Shias.

There is, amongst the Saudi religious opposition, says Michael Scott Doran, the belief that the Saudi Shias are conspiring with the US in its war to destroy Islam. The fear is that any reform of the Saudi system on the lines of western democratization will bring the Shias into the political mainstream and this is unacceptable to the conservative Wahhabis who consider the Shias to be a greater threat than even the Jews.

Regarding the Shias, the US had been concerned with the status of the Shias but not enough to interfere in Saudi politics. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and

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[72] Who succeeds King Fahd has relevance for the kingdom and its future. The present Crown Prince Abdullah is known for his liberal outlook (within the conservative realm of Saudi politica and society). However, he faces opposition from amongst his family especially from half-brother Prince Nayef, the powerful and conservative interior minister.

[73] Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 83, no. 1, January-February 2004, p. 36

[74] Ibid, p. 43

[75] Ibid, p. 51. See also Saudi Institute, *Saudi Government's Imams Prayed for the Destruction of the United States*, Internet Edition, 4 July 2004, URL: http://www.saudiinstitute.org/index.php?option=content&task =view&id=128&Itemid=39 accessed on 3 July 2005

Labor of the US Congress regularly documents the status of Saudi Shias through annual reports documenting human rights abuses against them, their religious freedom or lack of it, and so on. These reports have been released annually since 1999. However, this is part of a worldwide survey and not specifically targeted at the Kingdom. Barring a few Saudi Shia dissidents who live in Britain and the US, most Saudi Shias have little connections to and expectations from the United States despite claims of US-Shiite conspiracies. Realpolitik has till date dictated US-Saudi relations and will continue to do so.

The initial thaw in the relations between the Saudi regime and its troubled minority came with an agreement concluded between the government and the Shia opposition in 1993. According to this agreement, the government allowed Shia dissidents to return home, released prisoners and detainees and issued passports to its Shia citizens. In return, the opposition agreed to tone down its criticism of the regime and cease publication of *Al-Jazeera Al-Arabiyya* abroad. They were even given representation in the country's new *Majlis*. This did amount to a tacit recognition of the Shias; however, the Shias were unable to bring about much change in their situation. They had still not been able to change their religious status – of being viewed as heretical and as apostates in the eyes of the orthodox Sunni-Wahhabis The regime too did not want to openly defy the Wahhabi *ulema* owing to a two-century-old relationship, and also because the latter were the mainstay of their rule. Thus, the Shias' situation did not change much.

This was also the time the US, under the presidency of President Bill Clinton was making inroads into the political arena of the Middle East, especially by way of the Arab-Israeli peace process. The greatest success story, or as it was perceived by many to be, was the Oslo Accords of 1993, wherein a Palestinian entity was virtually guaranteed on paper. However, politics is fickle and the euphoria did not last. The US' relations with the Kingdom were sill doing well – the latter was a strong, historical ally of the former. Any incompatibility between the two, even if questioned, was not considered that important. Though the Kingdom was cited for human rights violations, not much pressure was ever put on it. Thus, if one considers that any rapprochement between the Saudi regime and the Shias was on account of fear of US interference or indictment, that was probably not

the case. The agreement between the regime and the Shias was due to the dynamics of internal politics.

However, the situation, as mentioned before, changed with the 11 September 2001 attacks on the US. Suddenly, the incompatibility of these two erstwhile friends and allies was questioned. The Saudis went on the defensive, faced with the knowledge that it was their nationals who had a major hand in the events. The Kingdom is under the scanner, especially since the last four years. Facing increasing criticism from both outside the country and within, the latter in the form of rising Islamist opposition, the Al-Saud found themselves walking a path akin to a tightrope. They had to pacify their critics, both outside and within the Kingdom, especially the Sunni Islamists.

The Shia continue to face discrimination in various spheres, more so in the religious sphere. Though they have been granted certain sops – such as, the ban on travelling to Iran was lifted in 2001, they have been allowed to construct their mosques in some areas with government permission, and so on – by and large they still labour under a lot of problems. There does not seem to be much connection between the changing nature of the US-Saudi relationship and its impact on the Shias.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In his book, *Arabia of the Wahhabis*, published in 1928, H. St. John Philby mentioned an anecdote which involved a discussion with Ibn Saud regarding the Shias of Al-Ahsa: "A suggestion had been put forward at Bahrain that Ibn Saud was interested in the question of re-opening the Iraq shrines to Shia pilgrimage on account of his Shia subjects in the Hasa. His answer to my very tentative question on the above subject was decisive: "I would raise no objection," he replied, "if you demolished the whole lot of them and I would demolish them myself if I had the chance...."[1] A moment in history captured through words that only reveal the depth of antipathy of the future Saudi king towards his Shia subjects.

The Saudi disdain and contempt of the Shias is inextricably linked to the history and evolution of the Saudi state. In the mid-18th century the foundations for the rise of the Al-Saud in central Arabia were set in place when Mohammed Ibn Saud made a pact with the reformist Mohammed Abdul Wahhab, which has guided the Al-Saud and their state policy since. It was an agreement with great many consequences. The agreement was mutually beneficial, for while Mohammed Ibn Saud asserted his right to rule over rival emirs, Al-Wahhab was able to ensure the spread of his religious zeal under the patronage of a powerful clan.

This pact also strengthened the antagonism that the Sunnis felt for the Shias, and eventually institutionalized it within the future Saudi state. Wahhabi antipathy towards Shias has been a feature of all three Saudi states since the mid-18th century. The Al-Saud, even in modern times, have honoured their commitment to this ideology. Wahhabism in as much has become the raison d'être of the Saudi state. With this historical legacy, what exactly is the status of the Shias of Saudi Arabia?

To begin with, Shias are a *numerical* minority, in that the majority Sunni Muslims in terms of population vastly outnumber them in the Kingdom. This is a reflection of the larger Muslim world where the Shias account for around 15 percent of all Muslims worldwide. This numerical strength (or lack of it) has a spill-over effect in other aspects

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[1] H. St. John Philby, *Arabia of the Wahhabis* (London, 1928), p. 66

of their existence. Being a numerical minority means that their lack of numbers leads them to be unable to garner for themselves a better position and status in a society where orthodox Sunni Wahhabism is the norm.

The Shias are also a *religious* minority in that they do not conform to the majority's conception of all things religious. Wahhabi ideology is inherently discriminatory towards the Shia minority. Within the Wahhabi scheme of things, the Shias are considered apostates and heretical, and are viewed as worse than even non-Muslims. Shia practices such as veneration of saints, tombs, celebration of the Prophet's status and lineage through Ali, etc., are considered to go against the very basic Wahhabi ideal of monotheism. For the followers of Wahhabism, even the veneration of the Prophet takes one away from the true and only God. Islam as a religion defines the identity of the Muslim both as an individual and within the larger *umma*. Though they are Muslims, the Shias are denied this very identity by Wahhabism. A denial of this basic identity means that the Shias can be conveniently forgotten and relegated to the lowest rung of the political and socio-economic scale within the state, and submit them to a wide range of government-sponsored discrimination.

The minority status of the Shias of Saudi Arabia is also a *political* issue. They have practically no political rights, as we understand them, in terms of universal adult franchise, right to form political parties and associations, to stand in elections. However, this is tempered to a large extent by the overall lack of political rights faced by the entire Saudi population, be they of any social or religious background. Yet, what sets the Shias apart is that the majority of the Kingdom's Shias literally live atop the rich petroleum reserves that sustain the Kingdom's economy and the position of the rulers. This historical anomaly – the Shias have historically been a majority in the eastern province – only makes their position more precarious.

How does this translate into recognition or lack thereof by the Saudi state? The denial of an Islamic identity to the Shias is further complicated by the fact that the Saudi state tends to ignore their presence, at least officially. In any official profile of the Kingdom,

the Shias are not mentioned. No mention is made of their presence in even the very limited census information released by the regime. A façade of Wahhabi-Sunni homogeneity is maintained at all costs. However, circumstances have forced the regime to recognize their presence. Mostly, it has been the Shias themselves who have imprinted themselves on the Saudi psyche, with the riots of 1980 in the eastern province. Though the Saudi regime has been faced with an organized Shia opposition and negotiated with them at times, the popular tendency has been to relegate them to the background.

Philby further said: "In August 1918, there seemed little enough chance of any development which would place the Wahhabis at the forefront of orthodox Islam, and Ibn Saud, whose Shia subjects in the Hasa had nothing to complain of provided they avoided ostentation in the practice of their peculiar rites, was free to speak candidly and contemptuously of the great heresy which once cleft the fellowship of Islam in twain and may yet play the leading role in a future crisis of the first magnitude."[2]

That crisis Philby foresaw came for the Saudi establishment in the turmoil of 1979. This was the greatest challenge the Kingdom had to face since its consolidation some 50-odd years back. The first was the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which led to the overthrow of the Shah, and established an Islamic Republic under a revolutionary theocratic Shiite regime. With Iran claiming the right to leadership of Shias worldwide and 'exporting' their revolution and ideology within the larger Islamic world, the impact was also felt in Saudi Arabia. Though riots by the Shias in 1980 had led the regime to placate the Shias at the time, the actual result was that the establishment began to see the Shias through a security prism. They were viewed as a phenomenon that could bring down the existing order, in which endeavour (if ever undertaken) their numbers and strategic location in the east near the oil resources, coupled with aid from Shiite Iran, would be major factors. The regime's attitude towards the thus reflected this apprehension.

However, the regime was faced, beginning 1990, with more important issues than a prospective Shia revolution. The Kuwait War undid the regime's calculations towards

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[2] Pilby, n. 1, p. 67

both its big neighbours – Iran and Iraq. Secondly, faced with the phenomenon of a rising Islamic opposition, both domestic and dissident, the regime awakened to the reality of negotiating with the former. A beneficiary of the policy of negotiation and the reform process undertaken in 1992, with the promulgation of the Basic Law, were the Shias. They were given representation in the Kingdom's new *Majlis*, a tacit, de facto recognition of their existence. Yet, this has not mitigated any problems they faced. They still legally lack recognition, are denied their rightful place in Saudi society, and face a harsh social, political and religious environment. In some cases, when the regime and its policies have been targeted by members of the Islamist opposition, as was in the Khobar bombings of 1996, the regime is quick to suspect the Shias, whether any conclusive linkages exist or not.

Their cause has not been aided much either by outside intervention or aid. Though the Saudi Shias look to Iran for spiritual guidance, they have not had any help from that country in improving their situation. Iran's tempestuous relationship with Saudi Arabia also kept the Shias under suspicion and scrutiny. But the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement of late has meant that for even Iran, the case of the Saudi Shias (never much important in the first place) is a domestic issue for the Kingdom. That said, the Saudi Shias too have never considered Iran much more than a spiritual authority.

The Saudi Shias are Arabs, ethnically, culturally and historically, and consider themselves as such. They have more in common with the Sunni Arabs rather than the Persian Shias of Iran. Thus, where affiliation to one religious doctrine binds the Shias of Arab states and Iran together, on the other hand, it can also keep them apart. Other factors that contribute to this divide encompass social and economic status, political orientations, and even ethnic differences. Finally, the Saudi Shias recognize the inevitable presence of the Saudi state and have consistently tried to reconcile with that fact.

However, while there are numerous minorities in West Asia, the Saudi Shias present a more unique case. They are Muslims, but are not considered to be Muslims. They are Arabs, yet do not enjoy the same position in Saudi society, as do Sunni Arabs. They have

been more or less loyal to a regime that discriminates against them, yet have no tangible benefits to show for it. The pursuit of their faith has only rewarded them a bitter historical legacy.

Any discussion on the Arab Shia of Saudi Arabia is a delicate task. It addresses issues that have implications for the entire Kingdom, and all its constituents. The official Saudi interpretation of Islam, as Wahhabism, encourages intolerance towards those Muslims who do not accept it. The Shias particularly arouse indignation amongst the followers of Wahhabism. This 'intolerance' is a major issue not only for the Shias but also for Saudi Sunnis who follow other schools and interpretations of Islam, such as the Hanafis, Shafeys and Malikis.

Furthermore, the study of a minority such as the Shias of Saudi Arabia faces some unique challenges. One such challenge is the denial of their existence. Officially, if one looks at any Saudi official census (of which there are almost none as the authorities do not conduct regular census) there is no mention of the Shias. There is official silence on the issue most of the time. However, the government's backers, the religious Wahhabi *ulema*, have much to say about the Shias. The latter face a spate of vituperative attacks from the *ulema*. However, despite this, the Shias in Saudi Arabia are officially denied the status of being Muslims and are considered heretics and apostates.

A second problem with regard to the issue is that the Shias also suffer their fate due absence of reliable data and estimates about their numbers. This makes it difficult to understand their composition and, more importantly, their status as a minority. Thus, one will continue to question the category of minorities that the Saudi Shias fall under. The government officially underestimates their numbers, and the fact that the majority live in the country's oil-rich province, leads the government to constantly consider the Shias a threat to the existing political and economic set up.

Thirdly, the Shias, having little other option, look to Iran as the centre of their faith. Iran is the only Islamic country that officially follows Shiism. This makes the Shias suspect

and viewed as a security problem by the government. Also, the linkages of this community to Iran, and the latter's interest in Shia communities along the Persian Gulf region, has led the government to consider them as an ideological threat to the existing status quo. This again relates to an official denial of their existence, or if not so extreme a measure, little encouragement over any inquiry about the Shias.

The status of the Saudi Shias is an area that has seen limited scholarly interest, more so due to lack of concrete information on both the Kingdom and its policies, and the numbers, attitudes and concerns of the Shias, who do not like to draw attention to themselves. It is an issue that goes to the very heart of the region and its constituents' journey of evolution from empires to modern nation-states.

Though they face immense discrimination at the hands of the Saudi regime, the Shias consider the Al-Saud at the helm of affairs as a buffer against more radical Wahhabi elements, and so have adopted a policy of conciliation with the regime. Their awareness of the benefits of the Saudi regime vis-à-vis others is something they have to contend with. This is the reason that since the past few years, the Shia have taken the path of petitioning the government. However, this step and its demands coincide with the same of many liberal Sunnis who would like a relatively more open society, and not necessarily the removal of the Al-Saud from power. Yet, it is still a great irony that the Shias have to negotiate with those who have kept them down, and have to compromise on the issues that matter to them the most. This then is the biggest dilemma confronting the Shias of Saudi Arabia.

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