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ANALYSIS

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BAD MOON NOT RISING: THE MYTH OF THE GULF SHI'A CRESCENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shi'a political ascendancy in Iraq, Hizbullah's gains in Lebanon and the increasing assertiveness of Iran within the Persian Gulf region have given rise to fears amongst some Sunni leaders of the emergence of a so-called 'Shi'a crescent 'challenging the established political order in the Middle East. These concerns are particularly strong in a number of oil-rich Gulf states. A closer examination of the political situation in which the Shi'a of Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia find themselves, however, reveals that such fears are exaggerated.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 had sparked similar fears and while the 1980s were marked by tensions, and sometimes by violent confrontations, between Shi'a and Sunni in a number of Gulf countries, the trend since then has been for most Arab Gulf Shi'a to seek political change through conciliation rather than confrontation. In addition, the socio-economic and political situations that the Gulf Shi'a find themselves in differs markedly between states. They are well integrated into the system in Kuwait, achieving greater recognition in Saudi Arabia but are politically marginalised in Bahrain despite constituting a majority of the population. Rather than looking for the rise of any Shi'a 'crescent', it is far more instructive in terms of future regional Sunni/Shi'a relations to examine how individual states have responded to Shi'a demands for an improvement in their political and economic rights.

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BAD MOON NOT RISING: THE MYTH OF THE GULF SHI'A CRESCENT

In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, a number of Arab leader expressed fears that America's toppling of the Sunni-led regime of Saddam Hussein and its political empowerment of that country's Shi'a majority has facilitated a Shi'a challenge to the regional status quo. Ironically, it was public statements by two Arab leaders, neither of whom have significant Shi'a populations in their countries, that gave voice to such concerns.

In 2004 King Abdullah of Jordan warned of a Shi'a 'domino effect' that would follow the rise to power of Iraqi Shi'a and of the emergence of a 'Shi'a crescent',[1] extending Iranian influence from Tehran, through several Gulf states, to Beirut. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak was even more forthright. Playing on traditional Sunni concerns about the requirement for observant Shi'a to follow the religious opinions of one of the learned sources of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid),* Mubarak claimed during a 2006 interview on al-Arabiyyah television that 'Most of them (Shi'a) have allegiance to Iran and not to their states.'

Despite the fact that there is a greater concentration of *marja'* in Iraq (largely in Najaf) rather than Iran (largely in Qum), Mubarak's claim was an oft-repeated refrain from some elements in the Sunni Arab world. These elements sought to justify the limitations placed on Shi'a political rights by encouraging a view that Shi'a loyalties ultimately lay with Iran. The inference was that the Shi'a were in some manner not 'true Arabs'.

President Mubarak's comments need to be seen in the context of the 2005 election of an Iraqi government led by a Shi'a prime minister, as well as Hizbullah's military performance during its 2006 war with Israel. The Iraqi election was perhaps the more worrying event of the two for some Sunni Arab regimes, given the role played by Saddam Hussein's regime as a buffer against Iranian influence. The Shi'a political ascendancy in Iraq has re-awoken the fears generated by the Iranian revolution in 1979 that the Ayatollahs' brand of revolutionary fervour would see Shi'a communities rise up against their governments and increase Iranian influence in the region.

The notion of a Shi'a crescent assumes, however, that the Shi'a in Arab countries are homogenous and capable of exhibiting a unity of purpose. The truth is that the Gulf Arab Shi'a, like communal groups the world over, operate within discrete environments and react to their own political stimuli. Their histories, modes of political expression and places within their own societies differ from each other. As a consequence, their willingness to challenge the political *status quo* varies considerably between countries, as does the means by which they have sought to do it. That is not to say that

there are not tensions evident amongst Shi'a populations of the Gulf. This Analysis will examine those tensions, as well as the political status of the Shi'a populations in three Gulf countries; Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, in order to illustrate the differing political circumstances that each of the populations find themselves in, the impact of external events on them, and the modes of political action that they have adopted to advance their sectarian interests.

Kuwait

Of all the Gulf Shi'a those of Kuwait have been afforded the most political freedom, and have had the closest relationship with the ruling family, of any of the regional communities. That is not to say that the relationship has been without its tensions, or that the Shi'a community has been given unfettered access to positions of influence commensurate with their demographic strength. Like many Shi'a communities in the Gulf, the Kuwaitis are a heterogeneous group, mixing those of Iranian descent ('Ajami) with Arab Shi'a originally from al-Hasa in modern-day Saudi Arabia (referred to as Hassawiyyah) and those of Bahraini descent (Baharna). In all, Shi'a make up approximately 30% of the Kuwaiti population.

In the case of Kuwait, the Shi'a merchant class (who themselves were largely 'Ajami) had been traditional supporters of the ruling al-Sabah family, and were in effect the ruling class of the Shi'a minority. They had been of particular use to the al-Sabah family during the 1930s when it was under political pressure from elements of the Kuwaiti Sunni population and again during the 1960s at the height of revolutionary Arab nationalism inspired by Egypt's Gamal Abdul Nasser.[2] This *modus vivendi* established between the al-Sabah family and the Shi'a merchant class was fine so long as the mercantile leadership could maintain the discipline of their own community and loyalty of the same to the ruling family.

Traditional secular leadership amongst the Shi'a came under great pressure from the 1960s onwards as Najafi scholars began advocating social and political action as a means of securing political and socio-economic rights for Shi'a communities. The *ad-Da'wa* movement[3] and Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad al-Shirazi (who himself spent a period of exile in Kuwait) provided the intellectual challenge to the political *status quo*, while the Iranian revolution provided an exemplar for what mass action could accomplish. In particular, the Shirazists sought to mobilise the Shi'a community to achieve political reform by eschewing their traditional quietism in favour of popular mobilisation to change the political

system (although not along the Iranian lines). Across Gulf states with significant Shi'a populations, and in other parts of the Arab world where Shi'a communities exist, the success of the Iranians in installing a Shi'a religious government imbued the Shi'a with a sense of achievement, while the Kuwaiti government's support for the anti-Shi'a actions of Saddam Hussein both in invading Iran and subsequently proscribing the *ad-Da'wa* party in 1980 brought with it a sense of renewed injustice and competition for support amongst the Kuwaiti Shi'a. The consequences of these events were twofold; the Shi'a became more politically engaged outside the traditional merchant class, and the influx of ex-*ad-Da'wa* members from Iraq brought with it security issues that would impact on the community and its relations with its Sunni neighbours.

Some Kuwaiti Sunnis have tried to deligitimise their Shi'a countrymen by questioning their loyalty to the state. The 1980s proved to be hard times for the Kuwaiti Shi'a community as a consequence, as security incidents for the first time focused Kuwaiti concerns about the community. In December 1983 bomb attacks were conducted against the US and French embassies, Kuwait International Airport and the country's main oil refinery by members of *ad-Da'wa*. In 1985 Shi'a were allegedly behind a failed assassination attempt on the Emir, Sheikh Jabir as-Sabah. Although most of those connected with the attacks were non-Kuwaiti Shi'a, security forces initiated a crackdown on both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti Shi'a alike. Inter-communal tensions rose and relations between the Sunni and Shi'a communities were not fully restored until after the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi forces in 1991 when the Kuwaiti Shi'a were shown to have played a prominent role in resistance activities.[4]

Nevertheless, the strong familial and commercial links that many Kuwaiti Shi'a have with Iran, as well as the strength of Sunni Islamists in parliament who seek political advantage in continuing to question the loyalty of the Shi'a community, remain a potentially divisive issue. The public memorial ceremony held in February this year for the slain Lebanese Hizbullah leader Imad Mughniyyah, long considered by Kuwaiti authorities to have been behind the hijacking of a Kuwaiti Airways aircraft in April 1988 in which two Kuwaitis were killed, did not help the community's cause. The fact that the ceremony was attended by a number of prominent Kuwaiti Shi'a, including two parliamentarians (Adnan Abdulsamad and Ahmad Lari) exacerbated the issue.[5] Accusations (never substantiated) that a Kuwaiti Hizbullah had been formed, and the subsequent claim by a Shi'a newspaper columnist that 'If you're a Shiite in Kuwait, you have to swear five times a day after each prayer

that you hate Iran and love Israel"[6] illustrate the potential fragility of inter-communal relations.

In terms of political activity, the Kuwaiti Shi'a have found it difficult to turn their numerical strength into any form of political advantage. In part this reflects the nature of politics in many of the Gulf countries, including Kuwait, where proscriptions on the formation of political parties has led to the formation of looser 'alliances' or societies. These political societies have come to dominate the Shi'a political discourse at the expense of the traditional commercial elite which are no longer as politically visible as they were in the 1980s. Amongst the Shi'a, the National Islamic Alliance represents 'mainstream' Shi'a political activity, while other groups such as the Justice and Peace Alliance, and the Shi'ite Scholars Gathering are also politically active. Clerics remain participants in the political process and, if not running themselves, they are influential in the electoral process. An example of this was the way that one of the well-known commercial families with political aspirations and familial links to al-Hasa brought relatives who were Saudi Shi'a scholars to Kuwait in order to lobby the well-known Kuwaiti Shirazist scholar Sayyid Hussein al-Ghalaf to garner support for their candidacy at the last parliamentary elections.[7] Many Shi'a run as independents during the elections and join loose political blocs once in parliament.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Kuwait's rulers adopted a much more inclusive policy regarding its Shi'a minority, allowing them to enter parliament in 1962. It is instructive that even at the height of anti-Shi'a tensions in the country, the Shi'a political activists never felt it necessary to move abroad to organise themselves politically or to conduct their political activities. In addition, some Kuwaiti Shi'a have also been selected for senior cabinet positions, including Issa al-Mazidi as Oil Minister during the 1990s and in 2005 Kuwait's first female cabinet minister, Maasouma al-Mubarak, who filled the Planning and later the Health portfolios. There remain some limits to full political equality though. The US State Department has noted in its 2007 report on religious freedom that the 'Shi'a remain underrepresented in upper levels of government"[8] given that only four Shi'a had been elected to the 50-member National Assembly. While that figure rose to six in the 2008 elections, the presence of only two Shi'a in the 15-member cabinet announced in May this year[9] illustrates that there remain limits to full political equality for the Kuwaiti Shi'a.

More broadly, Kuwaiti Shi'a have not been denied economic opportunities and have equal access to lucrative state subsidies, including affordable housing and free healthcare. The Shi'a have, by and large, enjoyed freedom of association and of religious observance

(although the traditional *'ashura* commemoration was banned in 2005 on security grounds), and the past few years have also seen the establishment of a government-authorised Shi'a religious endowment (*waqf*), as well as the creation of a higher court of appeal to deal with personal status legal cases in accordance with the Shi'a Ja'fari school of law.[10] All of these measures have helped to preserve a high degree of social harmony. Here again though, there are lingering minor inequalities between the two branches of Islam in Kuwait. For example there is no course teaching Shi'a Ja'fari law in Kuwait, and in 2007 there were only 35 Shi'a mosques compared to over 1,000 Sunni mosques in the country.[11]

Nevertheless, despite these instances of underrepresentation and the sectarian tensions of the 1980s, the government has avoided the temptation to divide the communities. Access to economic opportunities, freedom of religious association and parliamentary representational opportunities have brought with them a degree of inter-sectarian coherence that is a lesson to the other Gulf states.

Bahrain

If Kuwait's experience demonstrates how an inclusive government policy can reduce, if not completely eliminate, sectarian tensions amongst its native population, Bahrain epitomises the dangers inherent in adopting an exclusionary approach to communal relations. Of course, the history of Sunni-Shi'a relations in Bahrain differs markedly from those of the Kuwaitis. Having variously been under Portuguese, Omani and Iranian ownership, the island came under Sunni Arab control in 1782 with the conquest by the al-Khalifa tribe from neighbouring Qatar. Under the tutelage of the al-Khalifas, the Shi'a were displaced from many areas of the island and Sunni Arab tribesmen from modern-day Saudi Arabia were moved in. The original Shi'a became rural workers for the new Sunni landowners in a system of serfdom that was not broken until an uprising in 1928.[12] More importantly, Bahrain, along with Iraq, are the only two Arab countries in which the Shi'a form the majority of the population. In Bahrain's case, the Shi'a are generally believed to constitute over 60% of the native Bahraini population.

Traditionally disadvantaged in socio-economic terms, the Shi'a majority lacked an organised means through which it could vent its frustrations. While the community was tolerated, it was locked out of positions of trust within the government, particularly the security services. The unwillingness of the al-Khalifa clan to undertake meaningful political reforms inevitably led to tension with its Shi'a

population. In the face of increasing political activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s from much of Bahraini society, the Emir sought to give some ground by agreeing to the promulgation of a constitution and the election of a national assembly in 1973. The Emir's subsequent decision to effectively abandon moves towards a constitutional democracy by issuing a draconian State Security Measures Law in 1975 and dissolving the elected assembly led to over a decade of social unrest.[13] Politically disenfranchised and socially and economically disadvantaged, the Shi'a were active supporters of Arab nationalist and communist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

With its historical links to Iran, the 1979 revolution was to have as significant an impact on the Bahraini Shi'a as it did on other Gulf communities. Ayatollah Khomeini sent two representatives (*wakil*) to Bahrain shortly after the revolution. While they were subsequently expelled, one of them, Hadi al-Mudarrisi, went on to establish a Bahraini Shi'a opposition group based in Tehran called the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). Some of its members were arrested in Bahrain, accused of plotting to establish an Islamic republic in Bahrain in 1982 and the group later scattered (largely moving to Lebanon) after losing Iranian support.[14] The Islamic Action Society is the successor to the IFLB but now owes its allegiance more to the Shirazist line of thought.[15] Other Shi'a political groups such as the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM) emerged independently of Iranian activity, but by the 1990s unrealised expectations on the part of the Shi'a community erupted into confrontation between Shi'a groups and the (largely expatriate Sunni) security forces. Between 1994 and 1999 a low-level campaign of violence on the part of the Shi'a erupted and was met with a government campaign of repression, large-scale arbitrary arrests and alleged torture. Leading clerics such as Sheikh Abdulamir al-Jamri were arrested while younger activist clerics such as 'Ali Salman and others were expelled to Dubai (from where they, along with many others, sought refuge in Britain).

A significant feature of Bahraini Shi'a politics has been the prominent role played by clerics, due in part to the nature of their scholarly training, their community status and also as a result of the absence of a significant leadership 'class' of merchants. Clerics such as Sheikhs Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, Isa Qasim and Ali Salman have been at the forefront of Bahraini Shi'a politics. Bahrain has no *marja'* of its own, which in some ways plays to Sunni suspicions about the issue of loyalty on the part of the Shi'a. Certainly the external *marja'* are very influential, and *al-Wifaq* (the main Shi'a political association) admitted that Shi'a opposition members consulted Ayatollahs

Sistani and Fadlallah as to whether they should participate in the 2006 elections.[16] The sensitivity of external *marja'* to accusations of interference in Bahraini politics was evident in their refusal to issue a *fatwa* on the issue, preferring instead to 'suggest' that they join the elections.[17] Bahraini scholars have felt no such need to remain outside politics.

Although the accession of Sheikh Hamad al-Khalifa in 1999 promised much in the way of political reform, there is a continuing sense of dissatisfaction with the process and a feeling that the government has been adopting a strategy of promising political equality without delivering the same. The failure of the much-vaunted 2001 National Action Charter to better the lot of the Shi'a community has probably been the hardest issue to handle for the opposition movements. Although exiled Bahraini opposition figures (including Sheikh Ali Salman) were allowed to return and some of the more draconian security laws were repealed as a result of the Charter, the cause of the political strife, lack of political reform, has not been addressed. Rather than amending the 1973 constitution, it was largely rewritten without reference to opposition groups, with a two-thirds majority of both chambers necessary for amendments. The bicameral parliament was created with a large appointed chamber, as well as an elected assembly, although with limited powers to legislate.[18]

The Bahraini Shi'a opposition groups are faced with challenges unlike those confronted by their co-religionists in the other Gulf states. In particular, they have to decide whether to take part in a political process that is fundamentally flawed and discriminatory, while at the same time trying to fight against what they see as government attempts to alter the sectarian makeup of the country. This has itself caused ructions within the Shi'a opposition. In 2002 the 'mainstream' Shi'a opposition group *al-Wifaq* boycotted the parliamentary elections in protest at the cosmetic nature of King Hamad's reforms, continued sectarian discrimination and the alleged attempts by the government to naturalise Sunnis from other Arab countries.[19] Yet in 2006, despite the government's promulgation of a very restrictive Political Societies Law,[20] *al-Wifaq* made a strategic political decision to participate in the parliamentary elections. The decision was controversial, but was in line with Sheikh Ali Salman's view that change would be incremental, and must also avoid notions that the Shi'a sought political dominance. As he said in a 1997 interview while still in exile, 'We are proposing gradual change, which we hope will eventually lead to the development of the political system. I am not calling for a Shiite state in Bahrain. I am calling for an Arab Islamic state.'[21]

The decision to participate in the elections was costly and led to a split in the group with the emergence of *al-Haqq*, who share *al-Wifaq*'s ideals but who wish to stay outside the formal political process until meaningful reforms are made. *Al-Wifaq* took part in the elections and won 17 out of the 40-member Chamber of Deputies. Six of the members are scholars, selected because their position gave them the discipline and status necessary to secure votes in what was the society's first election. *Al-Wifaq* are aware of how the appearance of too many scholars in parliament is regarded and there is no guarantee that this formula will be repeated in the future. Despite its apparent electoral success, the decision to participate in the election is still a topic of debate underlining the level of dissatisfaction with the current situation within the community. Al-Wifaq's parliamentary leadership believe that they have achieved some advances in economic and services issues, citing the increase in unemployment benefits, public sector wages and inflation adjustment for low-income earners as well as some lowering in the waiting time for public housing, all of which benefit the socially disadvantaged Shi'a. At the same time they acknowledge that there has been no advance in political reforms, but that perhaps the community's expectations regarding the timeframe in which they can be achieved are somewhat unrealistic.[22]

Despite the entry of the Shi'a into the political process, the failure to significantly advance the political interests of their community has meant that the *al-Wifaq* model is failing to satisfy the aspirations of the Shi'a community. At the same time, the community feels that the intransigence of the al-Khalifas regarding any meaningful reforms is designed to buy time for the Sunni rulers to alter the demographic balance of the island kingdom by nationalising Sunni expatriates, many of whom are members of the Bahraini security services (an area in which the Shi'a are very underrepresented).

Shi'a fears of systemic political discrimination have always been a feature of Bahraini politics, but in recent years they have been given greater prominence with the so-called 'Bandargate' scandal. Just prior to the 2006 elections a report written by a former government adviser, Salah al-Bandar, alleged a scheme initiated by the Head of the Central Information Organisation, Sheikh Ahmad al-Khalifa, to discredit the Shi'a population through planted media stories, Sunni counter-demonstrations in response to Shi'a activism and even attempts to proselytise amongst the Shi'a population.[23] Although the government denied the authenticity of the report and al-Bandar was subsequently deported to Britain, the allegations confirmed what many Shi'a believed.

At the same time, the report raised an issue of fundamental importance to the Shi'a – demographic balance. This was again highlighted in May 2008 when official statistics showed a 42% increase in the official Bahraini population.[24] With no transparency in the issuing of naturalisation statistics, such a significant jump in the population led the Shi'a to conclude that this increase was designed to reduce the Shi'a's numerical superiority.

Prospects for improved relations between the Shi'a and the Sunni rulers appear grim. For the Sunni rulers, the Iraqi experience has provided an unwelcome reminder of the perils of participatory democracy when communal majorities are given a chance to achieve government. As a consequence, there is little incentive for any political reform that would advantage the Shi'a majority. Participation in the political process has not achieved much for the Shi'a community, and the economically depressed and socially alienated youth in particular are impatient for political and economic reforms. *Al-Wifaq* has even hinted at the possibility of boycotting the 2010 elections.[25] With no substantive movement on political reform, and deep concern over what they see as government attempts to establish Sunni demographic superiority, there are fears that elements of the community may not be content with incremental advances. In an environment where the evolutionary approach to political reform is becoming increasingly discredited, both within political groups and amongst the population at large, tensions are rising. The fears of a return to the inter-communal violence of the mid-1990s were raised in April 2008 after the killing of a Bahraini police officer in a firebomb attack in a Shi'a village south of the capital Manama. Without substantive progress on political liberalisation the long-term future for communal relations in the island kingdom look bleak.

Saudi Arabia

The situation of the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia differs from the other communities examined in this Analysis for two reasons: unlike Bahraini Shi'a they are a minority (constituting approximately 10% of the population), and in contrast to the Kuwaiti Shi'a they have not traditionally enjoyed a close relationship with the Sunni rulers. The community is nevertheless important because it lives primarily in the strategically vital, oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. And of all the Arab Shi'a they exist in the most ideologically hostile environment given the historic antipathy of Saudi Arabia's Wahabist religious establishment to the Shi'a creed. While there have been significant tensions in the past between the Shi'a and the Saudi state, the Shi'a

have never represented a threat to the political status quo, given their size and the firmly-enforced limits on political expression in Saudi Arabia.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that historically, by and large the Saudi Shi'a have adopted an accommodatory strategy. The Shi'a of the eastern provinces have suffered from religious discrimination from the time of Ibn Saud's conquest of the region in 1913. Understanding that resistance against the Saudi forces would be futile, the Shi'a *'ulama* counseled submission which was subsequently accepted. The price for submission though, was a subordination to the Wahhabist forces and a realisation that they were in essence viewed as a form of 'lesser Muslim', with strictures placed on their freedom to commemorate Shi'a religious events such as *'ashura*, and to build *husseiniyyas*. There was also more overt discrimination such as the 1927 declaration by the senior Saudi Wahhabist *'ulama* that Shi'a were apostates, and the state education system's exclusive teaching of the Wahhabist interpretation of Islam.

While much of the early period of Saudi rule was largely devoted to communal survival, by the 1960s there was a developing political consciousness amongst the Shi'a who, while loyal to the Saudi state, bridled at the continuing religious, social and economic discrimination. The presence of Saudi Aramco and its large Shi'a workforce meant that labour movements, including the Saudi Communist Party and the Socialist Labor Party in the Arabian Peninsula, enjoyed some success amongst the community. Over time though, these groups became involved in a more international socialist agenda, and Shi'a membership gradually drifted away to the growing sectarian opposition who were more concerned with local issues.[26]

As it did in other Gulf states, the teachings of the Iraqi *marja'* Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi al-Shirazi gained traction amongst the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia. His thoughts about the need for freedom of expression and political plurality inspired the growth of Shi'a movements in the Gulf. One such movement that was to gain a following amongst Shi'a from several Arab countries was the Movement of the Vanguards' Missionaries (MVM) that emerged under the tutelage of al-Shirazi in Karbala in 1968, and which was led by one of Shirazi's protégés Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi.[27]

The MVM's impact on the Saudi Shi'a community began with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the father of modern Saudi Shi'a political activism, and other leading figures such as Sheikh Fawzi al-Sayf, who joined the MVM in Kuwait where al-Shirazi resided

during much of the 1970s after his expulsion from Iraq. Al-Saffar's return to Qatif in 1977 heralded a renewed interest in the potential for sectarian socio-political reform driven by the clerical leadership, and came very much at the expense of the leftist movements whose influence gradually faded. The Saudi branch of the MVM emerged in 1975 as the Organisation of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIR)[28] and for a time, viewed the Saudi state as an illegitimate construct. The activist Shirazist *'ulama* were busy spreading a message of dissent amongst the Shi'a population of Qatif and al-Hasa, rectifying what they saw as a failure of the quietist Najafi *'ulama* under Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al Khoei to provide communal leadership.

As it had for co-religionists elsewhere, 1979 was to prove pivotal in the modern political history of the Saudi Shi'a. The Iranian revolution showed what could be achieved through popular mobilisation, and inspired the late November 1979 call by the OIR for the public performance of the *'ashura* commemorations, hitherto banned. A week before the *'ashura* marches however, Sunni militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Saudi authorities felt that the authority of the state was being challenged on a number of fronts. The Saudi National Guard moved into the Eastern Province and the subsequent clashes left more than 20 Shi'a dead, over a hundred wounded and hundreds more arrested.[29] The senior leadership fled Saudi Arabia shortly after the clashes, with more following as a result of subsequent arrests and imprisonment of Saudi Shi'a dissidents.

Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar initially sought refuge in Iran where the OIR based itself.[30] But the Iranian connection grew more distant over time. The Saudi Shi'a found little that was of relevance to their situation in Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *wilayat al-faqih* (Governorship of the Jurist, where only the most qualified Islamic jurist could lead the country, or countries, in accordance with God's will) a thesis with which Ayatollah Shirazi and others disagreed. The deaths of hundreds of Iranians as a result of demonstrations during the *hajj* in 1987 and the subsequent call by Ayatollah Khomeini for the overthrow of the Saudi rulers further estranged mainstream Saudi Shi'a from the Iranians. Iranian attempts to co-opt the OIR failed, although they were successful in convincing some Saudi students studying in Qum to form the nucleus of the pro-Iranian Hizbullah in the Hijaz.[31] The majority of the Shi'a political reform movement were much more interested in addressing local grievances rather than joining the Iranian's revolutionary program.

The events of November 1979 also taught the Shi'a some hard lessons. The tough response of

the Saudi authorities brought home the folly of mass protests by a minority and caused them to re-evaluate their strategy. But the lessons of 1979 were not lost on the Saudi authorities, either. Beginning in the 1980s, money began to be spent on infrastructure in the province (the first modern hospital in the province was completed there in 1987),[32] and a strong signal was sent with the appointment of one of the king's sons, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, as the provincial governor, replacing the unpopular Abdulmuhsin bin Jilwui.

The 1990 invasion of Kuwait, and the consequent need for the Saudi royal family to agree to the stationing of large numbers of US troops in the country, drew criticism from many in the kingdom, but also provided an opportunity for reconciliation with the Shi'a community of which it took advantage. Rather than confrontation, the Shi'a opposition sought to establish a *modus vivendi* with the royal family by accepting their right to rule in exchange for religious and socio-economic reforms. Publicly Shi'a opposition leaders encouraged their community to join the military to defend Saudi Arabia in the face of the new threat from Iraq, and in early 1991 the OIR formally changed its name to the Reform Movement (*al-harakat al-islahiyya*). The changed stance regarding the legitimacy of the royal family is evident in this statement from the Reform Movement that noted 'The royal family is playing a crucial and necessary role in stabilising the situation in the kingdom and developing the political system, allowing the people to participate in bearing responsibility in that system.'[33]

By October 1993, the Saudi government (with the personal intervention of King Fahd) was ready for an Accord with the Shi'a opposition. In return for shutting down its anti-Saudi publications, opposition members were allowed to return from overseas and political prisoners were released in accordance with a Royal Decree. Since this change from confrontation to a degree of cooperation, the Shi'a have made some progress in their demands for equality. These centre around three key issues: an end to religious discrimination and freedom of expression for Shi'a rites, socio-economic equality evidenced by equality of opportunities in government employment and higher education, and political demands that allow for an end to arbitrary arrests and torture.[34] Not everything has progressed smoothly since the Accord, partially due to unrealistic expectations on the part of the Shi'a community and partially due to some entrenched opposition from sections of the Wahhabist religious establishment.

But signs of improvement in Shi'a relations continue, even if the pace of change has been slow. Some additional permits for the

construction of Shi'a mosques and *husseiniyyas* have been approved, commemoration of *'ashura* has been permitted within government-imposed limitations and access to university places has been opened.

Major political reforms have yet to be realised, however, despite the conduct of municipal elections in March 2005 that saw the Islamic Reform Movement perform very well. Shi'a candidates won 11 of the 12 seats available in the Qatif/al-Hasa areas. While this was certainly a welcome development, the Shi'a remain locked out of real federal power, having no ministerial representation and a mere four members of the 150-member *shura* (federal consultative) council.[35] They are denied substantive positions in the security services and are still not allowed to publish books on Shi'a subjects within the Kingdom.

Still, the confrontational atmosphere of the 1970s and 1980s has disappeared as a consequence of conciliatory gestures from the government, and a reorientation of the Shi'a political leadership's strategic direction. While the pace of political reform in Saudi Arabia is by nature slow, there appears nothing to indicate that the Shi'a community are considering any change to their current strategy of conciliation to effect reform.

Conclusion

While claims about the emergence of a Shi'a crescent following the democratic election of a Shi'a government in Iraq are exaggerated, they do serve to illustrate the concern amongst many of the Sunni Arab countries at the thought of a politically resurgent Shi'a community. The truth is, however, that while claims of a radical Shi'a internationalist movement sweeping the region may have held some water in the period leading up to and following the 1979 Iranian revolution, it does not today. Shi'a clerical intellectuals such as as-Sadr and Shirazi, as well as Khomeini, were advocating a change from political quietism to activism as a means of altering the low socio-economic status in so many of the countries in which the Shi'a form significant elements of the population. The 1979 revolution provided a practical example of what mass movements could accomplish, and the Iranians certainly sought to export their brand of revolutionary Shi'a political activism abroad.

The fact that Iran's attempts have achieved lasting success only in Lebanon shows how difficult it is to transpose political models from one environment to another, and why the notion of a Shi'a crescent is fanciful. To think that the Shi'a communities of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain exhibit enough similarities

to constitute elements of a Shi'a collective ignores the differences that separate them.

While external events such as the development of Shi'a political groups such as *ad-Da'wa* or the Shirazi movement, as well as the Iranian revolution and the rise to power of a Shi'a government in Iraq have had similar effects on the respective Shi'a communities in terms of enhancing a sectarian political consciousness, the practical consequences of this differ enormously, varying with the particular situation in which each community finds itself. Kuwait's reliance on the Shi'a merchant class for practical and political support for many years allowed for the establishment of a good relationship and, as a result, the capacity to share in the economic benefits that the oil wealth has produced. By sharing in the economic benefits, and living under a government that has allowed religious freedom and a good degree of political participation, the community has been tolerant of its underrepresentation. The cases of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are more complex. Neither of their Shi'a populations have enjoyed the close relations with the ruling family that Kuwaiti Shi'a have achieved and, while both groups have eschewed confrontation for political participation over the last decade, the similarities stop there.

Saudi Shi'a are a minority and concentrated in the Eastern Province so are of no 'threat' to the status quo. A brief flirtation with militancy in the 1980s has given way to an ongoing dialogue with the Saudi regime. Municipal elections and a relaxation in religious discrimination have been good confidence-building measures. While the Shi'a are massively underrepresented in national politics and sit virtually outside of the state security apparatus, they have begun to evince a degree of nationalism that had not existed previously.

Bahraini Shi'a, by contrast, remain the most disenfranchised of the groups examined. Despite having a political organisation that is well represented in parliament, they remain politically marginalised in a country where they are a demographic majority. Fearing efforts by the state to change the demographic balance and virtually locked out of the security services, they are a community that has yet to be convinced by a gradualist approach to securing their political and economic rights.

The idea of a Shi'a crescent, with its allusions to growing Iranian influence, hides an inconvenient truth: that Shi'a political activism most typically reflects political and economic discrimination suffered at the hands of Sunni ruling regimes. While the Shi'a communities examined in this Analysis have for many years now adopted a strategy of dialogue to advance

reform, without greater efforts to incorporate these communities and address their concerns, in Bahrain and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia these regimes risk a return to the confrontations of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Only this time it will not be possible to blame Iranian agitation for the consequences.

NOTES

[1] Robin Wright and Peter Baker, Iraq, Jordan see threat to election from Iran. *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2004.

[2] Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the forgotten Muslims*. New York, Palgrave, 1999, p 161.

[3] For more on ad-Da'wa see Rodger Shanahan, The Islamic Da'wa party: past developments and future prospects. *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8 (2) 2004.

[4] Moshe Ma'oz, *The "Shi'i crescent": myth and reality*. Analysis Paper No. 15. Washington, DC, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, November 2007, p 26.

[5] David Pollock. *Kuwait's new political political crisis: democracy trump sectarianism?* Washington Center for Near East Policy 25 March 2008: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2734.

[6] Shiite crackdown fuels sectarian tensions in Kuwait *Kuwait Times*, 14 March 2008.

[7] Rodger Shanahan, *Author's interview in Kuwait City 28 May 2008*,

[8] Bureau of Democracy US Department of State, Human Rights and Labor,. *Kuwait*. International Religious Freedom Report 15 September 2006: http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71425.htm.

[9] New Cabinet named with two women. *al-Watan*, 29 May 2008.

[10] David Pollock, *Kuwait: keystone of US Gulf policy*. Policy Focus No. 76. Washington, DC, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2007, p 18.

[11] US Department of State. *Kuwait*.

[12] Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the forgotten Muslims*, p 122.

[13] *Bahrain's sectarian challenge*. Middle East Report No. 40. Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2005

[14] Ibid, p 2.

[15] Ibid, p 15.

[16] Rodger Shanahan, *Author's interviews in Bahrain 26/27 May 2008*.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Bahrain's sectarian challenge*, p 5.

[19] Ma'oz, *The "Shi'i crescent": myth and reality*, p 28.

[20] Edward Burke, *Bahrain: reaching a threshold*. Working Paper No. 61. Madrid, Fundacion para las Relaciones Internationales y el Dialogo Exterior, June 2008, p 14.

[21] Louay Bahry, The socioeconomic foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain. *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11 (3) 2000, p 142.

[22] Shanahan, *Author's interviews in Bahrain 26/27 May 2008*.

[23] Hassan M. Fattah, Report cites bid by Sunnis in Bahrain to rig elections *New York Times*, 2 October 2006.

[24] Burke, *Bahrain: reaching a threshold*, p 4.

[25] Al Wefaq hints at boycott of 2010 polls. *Gulf News*, 24 March 2008.

[26] Shanahan, *Author's interviews in Bahrain 26/27 May 2008*.

[27] Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*. London, Saqi Books, 2006, pp 74-75.

[28] Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the forgotten Muslims*, p 187.

[29] *The Shiite question in Saudi Arabia*. Middle East Report No. 45. Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2005, p 4.

[30] Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, p 135.

[31] This group is charged by some with responsibility for the 1996 al-Khobar towers bombing in Dhahran that killed 19 US servicemen.

[32] Fuller and Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the forgotten Muslims*, p 187.

[33] Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, p 157.

[34] Ibid, p 188.

[35] *The Shiite question in Saudi Arabia*, p 9.

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