

Islamic Politics in Saudi Arabia

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Brief Analysis

Although Saudi Arabia faces opposition from its Shi'i minority, the threat from its mainstream Sunni population is far more serious. While the Shi'i opposition is a problem, it also serves to divert attention from the more serious danger posed by discontented members of the Sunni majority, whose opposition threatens the legitimacy of the Saudi royal family.

The growth of Saudi discontent has been the product of several underlying societal shifts. The Saudi population is growing faster than most and, more importantly, faster than its economy. An increasing number of Saudis are pursuing university degrees in Islamic studies rather than science or engineering. This trend has produced a discontented Saudi youth who lack the requisite skills to earn a living in current Saudi society. Oil prices have declined drastically since the 1970s, and as a result, Saudis are not able to live in the style to which they have grown accustomed. It has been reported that average income in Saudi Arabia is now \$4,300, compared to ten years ago when it was around \$12,000.

This unrest led to the emergence of a violent opposition to continued Al-Sa'ud rule, and resulted in terror attacks such as the 1995 bombing of the headquarters of the U.S. advisory mission to the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and last year's al-Khobar Towers bombing. Both attacks were executed by young Saudis: one a Shi'ah and one a Sunni. To understand why these young Saudis resort to such extreme measures, it is important to keep in mind their social, political, and economic circumstances.

Profile of a Shi'i Dissident: Hani al-Sayigh, currently in custody in the United States for participating in the al-Khobar bombing, is a Saudi Shi'ah which means that he grew up in a society which largely discriminated against him, his family, and his community. Shi'is are outcasts in Saudi society. They are labeled as dirty, and are faced with bureaucratic and economic discrimination. Sayigh was educated in Saudi schools whose textbooks preach the killing of Shi'is. This pervasive discrimination led to al-Sayigh's involvement in politics. His older brother was politically active and al-Sayigh joined in the effort to mobilize people in favor of Shi'i rights. Al-Sayigh participated in activities such as organizing demonstrations and writing a "wall journal" which was posted on the walls of mosques. These activities attracted the attention of the Saudi authorities, who tried to crack down on al-Sayigh and his compatriots. Al-Sayigh claims he then fled to Syria for refuge; however, documentary evidence demonstrates that he was not in Syria, but remained in the Kingdom as a member of Hizbollah al-Hijazi, and was a direct participant in the al-Khobar bombing.

Profile of a Sunni Dissident: Muslih al-Shamrani was beheaded last year in connection with the bombing of the U.S.-run headquarters of the Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard, in which five Americans were killed. Muslih was a Sunni Muslim and a follower of Ibn Jibrin, a senior member of the Saudi Ulema, known for the fatwa he issued in 1991 which called for the killing of all Shi'ah. Muslih's father was a career army officer, and Muslih followed in his footsteps at the age of sixteen. While in the Saudi army, he was sent to fight in Afghanistan and Bosnia, but when he returned the army would not take him back and he was reduced to selling dates. Like many Saudis who fought in Afghanistan, Muslih came to see the Saudi government as an apostate regime due to its

alliance with non-Muslim states, particularly the United States.

Conclusion: Hani al-Sayigh and Muslih al-Shamrani are representative of today's Saudi youth. They are disillusioned and consequently open to radicalism. Moreover, because many of these radical ideas come from the Saudi Ulema, the Royal Family is caught in a serious dilemma: the Ulema have traditionally been key supporters of the regime, which bases its legitimacy on its Islamic credentials, and therefore is loathe to muzzle the clergy. This is a very serious problem for Saudi Arabia and will likely continue to be in the foreseeable future. Although the Saudi government is firmly aligned with the United States and supports the Middle East peace process, the increasingly radical Ulema object to any central authority deciding on religious matters, and do not hesitate to publicly criticize the government on anything they believe falls within their purview, including foreign affairs. On two separate occasions, radical Ulema have prevented Saudi participation in international conferences on population and women's rights, after government officials had agreed to attend. However, it would also be a mistake to overstate the power of the Ulema over Riyadh's decision-making. Thus, for example, if Iran were found to be behind the al-Khobar bombing and Washington were to decide to retaliate militarily, the Saudis probably will not like the idea of the United States, a non-Muslim country, protecting and acting on their behalf, but they will not oppose a hard-hitting attack on Iran.

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Saudi Arabia is experiencing a crisis, however it is a creeping crisis posing no immediate threat. Nothing happens quickly in Saudi Arabia. The struggle within the Ulema has been going on since 1967. The younger (more radical) Ulema always want to wield more power. They are not saying anything new. The part of the equation which has changed is not what is being said, but who is listening.

Modernization vs. Islam: For many years Saudi Arabia has attempted to modernize while trying to avoid the secularization of society. This has resulted in a kind of swinging pendulum. Between modernization and secularism on the one hand, and traditionalism and religious devotion on the other. The cycle has continued for many years, and the overall success of state-sponsored modernization has caused the gap to widen. It remains to be seen whether the Saudi government will be able to keep the pendulum from swinging out of control because modernization and Islamic society are simply incompatible.

The Implications of Demographics: Saudi Arabia is plagued with an ever-increasing population of marginalized young people with expectations which likely will never be realized. The population in Saudi Arabia is doubling with every generation. Unless the work ethic improves and the birth-rate declines, this group will become the next generation of dissatisfied Ulema. Again, the problem isn't what is being said, but who is listening. Today, with over half of the population under the age of seventeen, the number of people listening to radical messages is increasing. While there is nothing like the tension that existed in Iran on the eve of the revolution, over time, this will pose a threat to the government.

Al-Khobar: The U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia creates resentment at all levels of Saudi society. The United States needs to lower its profile. Moreover, when Americans go into Saudi Arabia to help out—for example, in the al-Khobar investigation—they need to do so with an understanding of Saudi culture and pride. The FBI could have avoided a lot of tension if it had cooperated and worked with the Saudi Ministry of Interior rather than try to take over the investigation.

As far as Iran is concerned, it's difficult to believe that Iran isn't providing financial and logistical support to domestic Saudi terrorists. However, this is not enough to base a retaliatory action on. In order to hold Iran responsible for the bombing, there would need to be evidence that Iran had operational control over the al-Khobar attack, and it is highly unlikely that this evidence will ever be found. In fact, it is doubtful that Iran had such control.

True operational control is when someone is ordered to carry out something they don't want to do, not when they're ordered to do something they would do anyway. So while there is probably overwhelming evidence that Iran provided support, and most likely training, for the attack, it is unlikely that any evidence will prove that Iran had operational control.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Hillary Ebenstein.

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