

# Saudi Elections in Regional Perspective: The Shiite 'Threat' Theory

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

The most significant area of Saudi Arabia affected by the March 3 municipal elections was the enormous Eastern Province, which contains most of the kingdom's vast oil wealth and serves as home to its minority Shiite population. Unsurprisingly, local Shiites triumphed in several towns, winning nearly all of the seats open for election, though half of each council is still appointed by the central government. This outcome is likely to encourage Shiites elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, particularly the majority-Shiite island state of Bahrain. When viewed alongside the new Shiite-dominated national assembly in Iraq, however, the results no doubt generate consternation in Riyadh.

### Background: Saudi Shiites

The Saudi Shiite population is variously estimated at 1 to 2.5 million. According to the government, the kingdom's total population is 17 million citizens and 7 million foreigners. Saudi population data is less than accurate, however. The royal family insists on inflating the figure for nationals, which may be as low as 12 million. If that is true, the Shiites could constitute 20 percent of the citizenry instead of the usually reported 5 to 15 percent. Historically marginalized because of antipathy from the kingdom's dominant form of Sunni Islam -- known to Westerners as Wahhabism, though its followers prefer the term Salafism -- the Shiites form a local majority in the Eastern Province.

Religiously, there is little love lost between the kingdom's Sunnis and Shiites. Just before the ten-day election campaign in the Eastern Province, Shiites openly commemorated the death in battle of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, whom Shiites view as his legitimate successor. Normally, such ceremonies are held furtively due to opposition from the Saudi religious establishment. Senior Sunni clerics have periodically accused Shiites of apostasy, a transgression technically punishable by execution. The effects of such antipathy are readily apparent in Saudi society. As a recent New York Times story described it, "There has been no Shiite cabinet minister, and only one Shiite ambassador -- to Iran. Shiites are kept out of critical jobs in the armed forces and the security services. There are no Shiite mayors or police chiefs, and not one of the 300 Shiite girls' schools in the Eastern Province has a Shiite principal."

## The Municipal Elections

Saudi newspapers report that losing candidates in the Eastern Province poll have filed complaints, but there seems little prospect of the results being declared invalid. Speaking last week while on a trip to London, the election commissioner, Prince Mansour bin Mitab (son of the local government minister), clearly viewed the polls as experimental, with improvements -- including participation by women -- to be made in the future. Prince Nayef, the powerful interior minister, dismissed the controversy, stating that all the candidates were Muslims and nationals. In general, the official Saudi response to the elections has been low key.

Shiite candidates were prevented from sweeping the polls in certain parts of the Eastern Province (e.g., in cities like Damman, the regional capital, which has a Sunni majority). In a sign of a possible widening of the Sunni-Shiite divide, some Sunni candidates reportedly won with backing from hardline Sunni clerics even though more motivated Shiites had registered to vote in large numbers.

The elections are supposed to be nonpartisan; candidates stand and campaign as individuals. Yet, during the February municipal elections for Riyadh and its eponymous province, Islamist candidates formed a bloc and swept the polls in the capital. One senior Wahhabi cleric, Sheikh Abdullah bin Jabreen, reportedly granted the bloc a religious blessing, calling on voters to choose candidates "who fear Allah" and dismissing other candidates because they were running "for worldly and personal reasons." In recent years, this same sheikh has called for Shiites to be put to death and spoken out in support of the Taliban following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

### Saudi Views of Shiite Power

From the perspective of the Saudi ruling family, regional changes in recent years have represented a series of setbacks for Sunni Islam, the religion's majority denomination. Currently, the perceived strength of Shiite Iran and the suspicions of its nuclear weapon aspirations are of considerable concern to Saudis, if for no other reason than because Tehran has periodically challenged the kingdom's custodianship of Islam's two holiest places, Mecca and Medina (a role that Saudis cherish as much as their oil wealth). Of additional concern has been the emergence of a Shiite-led government in Iraq, with which the kingdom shares a long border. Riyadh may not have liked Saddam Hussein, but at least he was a Sunni, protecting one of the kingdom's flanks from any threat by Iran. As for Syria, many Saudis regard the country's Alawite minority, which dominates the government, as an extremist form of Shia. Lebanon has a substantial Shiite population as well, making Riyadh apprehensive about democratic developments there. Indeed, many Saudis are convinced that there is a grand Shiite conspiracy to form a contiguous Shiite bloc extending through Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This supposed bloc would extend even into the Gulf peninsula, through Kuwait (whose population is reportedly one-fourth Shiite), Saudi Arabia's own Eastern Province, and Bahrain.

Regarding the latter country, recent events there spurred particular concern in Saudi Arabia. Bahrain, which is joined to the kingdom by a causeway and which hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, has an overwhelmingly Shiite population. Yet, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and his uncle, Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman, are Sunni. Last week, three writers for the website Bahrainonline.org were arrested, and three political activists protesting unemployment were detained. The week ended with the imposition (in absentia) of a prison sentence and fine for a human rights activist who had left the country the day before to attend the annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights. In addition to such incidents, the local democratic reforms promised in recent years remain limited. Hence, despite Saudi support for the al-Khalifas, Riyadh is reportedly concerned by the ruling family's less-than-deft touch; instead of dampening Shiite concerns, the Bahraini government's actions have enflamed them.

To the north, Iraq's tottering steps toward democracy are an even bigger headache for the Saudi royal family. Riyadh

wants neither chaos nor a strong Shiite regime on its border. Its ambivalence has in turn discouraged Iraqi Sunnis from participating in the political process and allowed some firebrand Saudi youths to join the insurgency against the U.S.-supported Baghdad government. By at least one calculation, Saudis form the largest national contingent of foreign fighters in Iraq.

#### Implications for U.S.-Saudi Relations

The Saudi mindset on political developments in the Middle East is almost certainly at odds with Washington's. From Riyadh's perspective, the United States, historically the kingdom's security guarantor, appears to be encouraging increased Shiite power by emphasizing democratic reforms. Despite these differences and concerns, the two countries continue to cooperate on Gulf stability and the steady flow of oil exports, which remain common priorities.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute. ❖

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