

Saudi Arabia's Sectarian Ambivalence

By Toby Craig Jones

IN THE MIDST of a highly publicized campaign by Saudi Arabia to promote religious tolerance as a means to counter religious extremism around the world, Riyadh has once again been confronted with the uncomfortable reality that the most pressing challenge in this regard remains at home. On the eve of 2008's major conferences on religious tolerance in Mecca and Madrid, several of the kingdom's most visible religious figures made clear that they are not only opposed to religious dialogue, but are openly fomenting divisiveness, most notably by further inciting the sectarian enmity that has gripped the region in recent years.

Unlike in the 1980s when Saudi leaders openly embraced sectarian antipathy as a means of rolling back the challenge posed by Iran's revolutionary regime, today the kingdom is not openly pursuing a sectarian agenda. Since 2003, the government has taken several quiet although mostly ineffective steps to defuse sectarian prejudices domestically, including inviting prominent Shi'a to participate in the Saudi National Dialogue meetings and encouraging Sunni clerics to visit Shi'a communities.¹ King Abdullah even invited the Shi'a Iranian political figure and one-time bitter rival Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to participate in the Mecca conference on religious tolerance held in June.² Yet, in spite of the king's declarations, the symbolic gestures, and the argument that tolerance is a priority, Saudi leaders have been far from bold in attempting to stamp out the specter of sectarian conflict. This has been most notable inside the kingdom itself.

In the worst case, Riyadh appears not only willing to allow sectarian acrimony to linger beneath the surface, but it also appears to be condoning anti-Shi'ism

in spite of its official policy to respect "the other." From the state's handling of some of the sectarian fulmination pouring out of the kingdom, it seems that Saudi Arabia is more interested in harnessing intolerance than eliminating it. Yet, even if Saudi Arabia's leaders do not truly support the escalation of sectarianism, their current management of such sentiment seems only to be producing precisely this result.

Regional and Domestic Challenges to Unity

Saudi Arabia's uncertain position on sectarianism is the result of several regional and domestic challenges. The most important regional challenges have been the ascendance of Shi'a Iran and the rise to power of the Shi'is in Iraq, both of which are alarming trends for Riyadh. Iran's influence stretches well beyond the Gulf, from Iraq to Lebanon, where Hizb Allah not only remains a powerful obstacle to Saudi Arabia's interests, but also attracts widespread

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support for its confrontational stance against Israel. While the Saudis have not openly played the sectarian card, they understand that the passions invoked by sectarian prejudices are a potentially powerful political tool. There are also key domestic factors involved in Saudi Arabia's sectarian posture. In fact, it is the convergence of the kingdom's regional interests and domestic vulnerabilities that will likely ensure that sectarianism remains a powerful force on the regional stage for the foreseeable future.

While the Saudi government has been quick to arrest and imprison human rights and political reform activists—such as Abdullah al-Hamid and Matruk al-Falah—it has done little to publicly check the excesses of some of its most intolerant religious figures. With the recent performances on religious

tolerance at Mecca and Madrid, this paradox is startling. Just days before Saudi Arabia convened the Mecca conference in early June 2008, a group of 22 Saudi religious scholars signed a vicious anti-Shi'a declaration warning Sunnis to “know them and be aware of them” and accusing the Shi'a of destabilizing Muslim countries and humiliating Sunnis.³ The letter was published on the personal website of Nasir al-Umar, a controversial and prominent Saudi scholar with a long history of purveying anti-Shi'a hatred.⁴ Other signatories included Abd al-Rahman bin Nasir al-Barak and Abdullah bin Abd al-Rahman bin Jibreen, the latter having served on the official Higher Council of Ulama in Saudi Arabia as well as being an advocate of violence against the Shi'a.

The June 2008 letter was only the most recent missive circulated by the devotees of sectarianism inside Saudi Arabia. In Istanbul in December 2006, 38 Saudi scholars joined up with prominent Iraqis—including Adnan al-Dulaymi, Harith al-Dari, and the Islamic Army in Iraq—in expressing their support for the anti-occupation and anti-Shi'a jihad in Iraq. It appears that while the sectarian war in Iraq has quelled for the time being, and that the Sunni support expressed in 2006 for the jihad has ebbed, the June 2008 declaration signals that there continues to be significant support for an escalation of sectarian tensions inside Saudi Arabia.

The tone and timing of the June letter indicate that the signatories were directly challenging and seeking to embarrass King Abdullah on the eve of his initiative to promote religious tolerance. In spite of this, the official Saudi response has been muted. An unnamed Saudi official cited by the Associated Press stated simply that the clerics did not represent the government, hardly a serious rebuke.⁵

1 Toby Jones, “The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Report* Winter (2005); Toby Jones, “Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism,” *Middle East Report* Spring (2007).

2 For more on this conference, see Alex Vatanka, “Iran's Shi'a Reach Out to Mainstream Salafists,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:7 (2008).

3 A copy of the statement can be accessed at www.almoslim.net/node/94296.

4 Al-Umar wrote a long anti-Shi'a treatise in the early 1990s entitled, “The Rafida in the Land of Tawhid.” For more, see Jones, “The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia.”

5 “Shias Destabilizing Muslim Countries, say Saudi Clerics,” Associated Press, June 2, 2008.

Shi`a Rhetoric Fits into Saudi Foreign Policy

Why the muted response? While the declaration ran counter to the messages being promoted in Mecca and Medina, it was entirely supportive of Saudi Arabia's Middle East foreign policy more generally. In addition to outlining the general heresy of Shi'ism historically, the letter also warned specifically that "many learned Muslims have been fooled by the Rafidah's [Shi'is] claims to be championing Islam and confronting the Jews and Americans as is happening with the deceptions

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of Hizb Allah in Lebanon.” During the last several years, Nasir al-Umar has tirelessly warned against the existential threat posed by Iran in the region and by Shi`a in Iraq and Lebanon. Since the 2006 war between Hizb Allah and Israel, Saudi leaders have made clear their displeasure with the Lebanese Shi`a militia. Saudi frustration with Hizb Allah stems partly from its opposition to Riyadh's support for Lebanese Sunnis, but also because Hizb Allah's success in confronting Israel in 2006 undermined Saudi claims that the kingdom remained most committed to the cause of the Palestinians and Israeli aggression in the region.

Although the official Saudi line has been to avoid inflammatory sectarian language, it has not moved to check those who do so with its interests in mind. Furthermore, while al-Umar's sectarianism does not match up rhetorically with the official Saudi line, it does reflect a similar set of concerns, namely that Iran and Hizb Allah threaten Saudi interests and prominence in the region. It is entirely plausible that the convergence of al-Umar's sectarian agenda with Saudi regional foreign policy interests is coincidental. What is troubling, however, is that Riyadh has exerted little or no effort to restrain such invective.

The Domestic Shi`a Response

It is difficult to measure the impact of al-Umar and the other signatories' anti-Shi'ism on Sunni sentiment inside and outside the kingdom. Among Shi`a inside Saudi Arabia, the response has been an anxious one. On July 2, one month after the Sunni declaration, a group of Saudi Shi`a issued a statement condemning the escalation of sectarian rhetoric. Eighty-five clerics and activists signed on to a statement that warned, "it is this voice that is responsible for the bloody scenes and incidents that have shaken this country," referring to the bloody campaign of terror waged by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula. The statement also read, "we ask our brothers who have wronged us with their fatwas branding Muslims as infidels to reconsider and re-read the contemporary Shi'ite reality in a responsible manner."⁶

In addition to the diplomatic response by the 85 activists, there has also been a surge of hostility in some circles. The Shi`a cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who has long rejected the willingness of figures such as Hassan al-Saffar and Jaafar al-Shayib to work within the political system for the amelioration of Shi`a grievances, recently stated publicly that "we stand with Iran, heart and soul, and with all our resources."⁷ While al-Nimr's harangue was directed at the United States and American hostility toward Iran, it should also be read as a response to the unwillingness of the Saudi regime to address the endemic sectarianism inside the kingdom as well as a signal that the moderation that has dominated Saudi Shi`a politics since the early 1990s is under fire from within the community. Al-Nimr declared that "we fear no one, be they regimes, arrogant powers, or mercenary pens."

Considering the lingering tension from Iraq's civil war, and the potential that it may re-erupt, alongside the struggle between Riyadh and Tehran, Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to silence the likes of Nasir al-Umar does not bode well for Shi`a-Sunni relations. There remain ominous signs that sectarian violence will continue to be a serious threat in

Iraq, Lebanon and Pakistan—all places where Saudi Arabia has an interest. In spite of its claims to be a champion of religious tolerance and dedicated to drying up support for radicalism, the effect of Saudi Arabia's management of sectarianism on the ground is to encourage exactly the opposite. Radicals in the region who are already inclined to use violence to play upon sectarian trepidations will only take succor from Saudi Arabia's sectarian ambivalence.

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⁶ Andrew Hammond, "Saudi Shi'ites Hit Back at Sunni Critics," Reuters, July 2, 2008.

⁷ "A Saudi Shiite Cleric: We Stand with Iran; Iran has a Right to Strike US Interests and Destroy Israel," United Press International, July 15, 2008.