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Saudi Arabia's Shi'i Opposition: Background and Analysis

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With press reportage focusing on "Saudi Hezbollah" as the culprit of the al-Khobar Towers bombing, the challenge posed to the Saudi regime by the kingdom's minority Shi'i population has again drawn the world's attention. Historically, the Saudis have preferred to focus blame for internal problems on the Shi'is, rather than recognize any significant Sunni opposition; but if the Shi'i connection to al-Khobar proves accurate, then that June 25 terrorist attack -- which killed 19 U.S. Air Force personnel will mark only the most recent event in a turbulent history of Saudi-Shi'i tension.

Background: Shi'is constitute 12-15 percent of the Saudi population and reside mostly in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province, known as al-Hasa. For the Saudi religious and political establishment, Shi'ism is antithetical to its austere version of Islamic orthodoxy, which is based on the fundamentalist Wahhabi movement of the mid-eighteenth century. For Wahhabis, the Shi'i focus on human intercession with God, saint worship and other perceived syncretist practices are shirk, the attribution of supernatural traits to mortals that is anathema to traditional Sunni Muslims. In 1991, Shaykh `Abdallah Bin Jibrin, a high ranking Saudi `alim (religious scholar), ruled that Shi'is should be put to death as apostates.

Saudi-Shi'i animosity dates from April 1801, when Wahhabi tribesmen sacked the Shi'i holy city of Karbala and destroyed the dome of the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn. Retaliation came in 1803 with the assassination of Saudi ruler `Abd al-`Aziz by a Shi'i. Shi'is have often criticized Wahhabi neglect and at times deliberate destruction of saints' graves in Mecca and Medina, while Saudi Sunnis have traditionally accused Shi'is of a desire to defile the ka'ba. In 1943, a Shi'i was executed in Saudi Arabia for allegedly desecrating the Grand Mosque with excrement. Shi'i grievances against the Wahhabis have been the subject of many books and articles published in Iran. Of course, interests of state have at times submerged these tensions, but they have never been far beneath the surface. Since capturing al-Hasa in 1913, the Saudi state has neglected to promote the economic advancement of its Shi'i population. The consequent deprivation suffered by Saudi Shi'is has compounded the severe religious differences and left this population open to the various radical currents that have swept the Arab world, from socialism to the Islamic resurgence. For example, in 1953, Aramco workers, mostly Shi'is, staged a massive strike that forced the regime to bring in the National Guard.

Saudi Hezbollah and "The Hijazi `Ulama Group": The Islamic Revolution in Iran revived the Shi'i opposition. In late 1979, on the eve of the demonstrative Shi'i observance of `ashura, thousands of residents of al-Hasa rioted; several were killed, dozens wounded. Similar scenes were replayed in February 1980, and the Saudis pointed the finger at Iran. Since the Islamic Revolution, the annual hajj pilgrimage has been the scene of intense Iranian propaganda which has often led to confrontation.

> 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). Most of their communiques came from Beirut. In July 1989, two bombs exploded in the vicinity of Mecca's Grand Mosque. The following September, the Saudis executed 16 Kuwaiti Shi'is for their part in the explosions. During the 1980s, many Shi'is fled the country to escape the Saudi crackdown.

Some continued their protest by founding two periodicals, al-Thawrah al-Islamiyyah (The Islamic Revolution), which later changed its name to al-Jazirah al-'Arabiyyah (The Arabian Peninsula, published in London), and Arabian Monitor (published in Washington). Around this time, another journal appeared in London, a monthly called Risalat al-Haramayn (The Message of the Two Holy Shrines, Mecca and Medina). Risalat al-Haramayn was published by a group calling itself Tajammu' `Ulama al-Hijaz (The Hijazi `Ulama Group). The magazine was pro-Iranian and sought to play on regional feeling of exclusion that Hijazis (denizens of coastal cities like Jiddah) feel at the hands of Saudi Nejdīs (who originate from the desert interior of the country). At times, Radio Tehran has quoted statements from a group of the same name, alleging mistreatment of Saudi Islamists. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the sole voice of opposition was Shi'i.

> The year 1993 saw the emergence of the most vocal Sunni opposition movement in a long time, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights. This development may have been a catalyst for the Saudis to move quickly to quiet the Shi'is. In October 1993, Saudi authorities reached an accommodation with most of the Shi'i opposition. Details of the agreement were scarce, but al-Jazirah al-'Arabiyyah and Arabian Monitor ceased publication immediately. According to reports, the Saudis agreed to allow the return of Shi'i exiles, release Shi'i prisoners, and allow Shi'is to teach their religion freely. A minority of Shi'i leaders, however, reportedly opposed the agreement.

The al-Khobar Bombing: After the al-Khobar bombing, the search for culpability initially focused on the country's burgeoning Sunni opposition, several of whom had been executed for the bombing of a U.S. installation in Riyadh in November 1995. But before al-Khobar, in the spring of this year, the Saudis evidently discovered explosives in a car at the Jordanian border driven by members of Saudi Hezbollah. Their journey reportedly began in Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Bīqā' Valley. In the second week in August, press reports from unidentified sources stated that the Saudis had arrested Shi'is for the al-Khobar bombing. Later that month it was reported that some of the accused had carried Syrian passports. In early September, the Hijazi `Ulama Group made itself heard again, this time to protest the arrest of Shi'i cleric Hashim Muhammad al-Shakhs. It listed twenty-three other Shi'i `ulama held in detention. In mid-month, the international Arabic language press reported that Shi'is were now being detained for the al-Khobar attack and that they had confessed to bringing the explosives from Lebanon.

Although U.S. counter-terrorism officials told The Washington Times that Usama Bin Ladin, a Saudi (Sunni) fundamentalist financier, was their prime suspect, in late October Shi'i leaders in al-Hasa told The New York Times that scores of Saudi Hezbollah activists were being held for the al-Khobar bombing. According to the report, Saudi Hezbollah had rejected the October 1993 agreement, while others were dissatisfied with its implementation. U.S. officials finally confirmed that the Saudis were holding Shi'is for the bombing, but they evidently were not yet satisfied by the Saudi evidence. Saudi Arabia was reportedly convinced that Iran had had a hand in the attack. (The U.S. may have suspected an Iranian connection for some time, as evidenced by Secretary of Defense William Perry's remark to National Public Radio in August that Iran was "possibly" behind the bombing.)

It is worth remembering that the al-Khobar bombing followed a series of acts of violence in 1995, in addition to the explosion in Riyadh in November of that year. In April 1995, a bomb exploded in front of the residence of the Saudi Ambassador to Greece, killing one person who was not immediately identified. A bomb threat against a Saudi jet in Cairo in October led to twenty-seven injuries as passengers scrambled to get off the plane. It was also reported and denied by the Saudi government that there had been an attempt to bomb the Defense Ministry in November.

Between Sunni and Shi'i Opposition: So far, Saudi authorities have not yet commented officially on the arrest of Shi'i dissidents. Although the government would not hesitate to jail Sunni extremists, Shi'i culpability is far more palatable to the Saudis. Shi'is are not Wahhabis and their opposition (even if supported by Iran) may be a security problem but not a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime. In contrast, a well-organized and violent Sunni opposition would be a major threat, potentially capable of undermining the fundamentals of Saudi rule. Given the heightened anxiety about the future of Saudi Arabia, observers should

keep their attention focused on the long-term challenge from Sunni radicals as the Saudi leadership deals with the immediate security issues raised by its Shi`i opposition.

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