



Home » Jerusalem Issue Briefs » Sunni vs. Shiite in Saudi Arabia

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Sunni vs. Shiite in [Saudi Arabia](#)

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- On December 16, the Saudi city of Medina witnessed severe clashes between Sunnis and Shiites at the time of the annual Ashura gathering, when Shiites commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.
- Wahhabism, the leading stream of Islam in Sunni Saudi Arabia, is extremely anti-Shiite, since certain Shiite practices conflict with Wahhabi Islamic practice. Shiites, who constitute 10-15 percent of the Saudi population, have suffered greatly under Saudi rule. Depredations have included killings, arbitrary arrests, job discrimination, and forbidding of their religious ceremonies.
- With Shiite [Iran](#) on the cusp of nuclear arms, and with demonstrated victories by Iran's proxies in [Iraq](#), [Lebanon](#), and the [Gaza](#) Strip, the Saudi rulers cannot afford to be seen coddling local Shiites. Saudi Sunnis expect their leaders to defend the honor and position of the Sunni majority within and without Saudi Arabia, lest Shiite victories generate a sea change and reverse the age-old dominance of the Sunni sect of Islam.
- The Shiites are not numerous enough to constitute a threat to the regime, but they do constitute an actual and potential arm of Iranian influence.
- The sense is that if King Abdullah had his way, he would end discrimination and fully integrate the Saudi Shiites. But the king faces an ongoing dilemma: if he appeases the Shiites, he risks the wrath of Wahhabi extremists and the religious establishment; if he doesn't, the Shiites will remain a thorn in his side.

On December 16, the Saudi city of Medina witnessed severe clashes between Sunnis and Shiites. The clashes occurred at the time of the annual Ashura gathering, when Shiites commemorate the martyrdom of Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Although the local press referred only to anonymous mobs, it was clear from international reporting and Saudi Shiite websites that this was a sectarian riot.

Sunni Wahhabism and Shiism in Saudi Arabia

Wahhabism, the leading stream of Islam in Sunni Saudi Arabia, is extremely anti-Shiite, since certain Shiite practices conflict with Wahhabi Islamic practice. These include grave visitation and inordinate reverence for the Prophet and his family. Shiites constitute the ultimate "other" for Wahhabis, whose strict idea of the unity of God, a doctrine known as tawhid, is diametrically opposed to Shiite practices that include pleading for the intercession of saint-like mortals on behalf of humans. For this reason, Wahhabis call Shiites mushrikin, often translated as "polytheists." Shiites constitute 10-15 percent of the Saudi population and are concentrated in the

oil-rich Eastern Province along the Persian Gulf littoral. There is also a small population in Medina.

Shiites have suffered greatly under Saudi rule. Depredations have included killings, arbitrary arrests, job discrimination, and forbidding of their religious ceremonies. According to the latest State Department human rights report on Saudi Arabia, testimony by Shiites is not valid in courts, Shiite prayer services are regularly disrupted, and Shiite social forums in the Eastern Province have been banned.¹

That said, matters have improved somewhat in the past several years under the leadership of Crown Prince and now King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz. But the Shiites want matters to change at a much faster pace. Although there have been gains, in Shiite eyes there is still a very long way to go.

As in other fields, Abdullah has moved slowly toward reforming the Wahhabi view of Shiites. He has met publicly with Shiite figures and in 2003 presided over a high-profile national dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites. But the pace of this reform is hampered by the need to appease the religious establishment, upon which the Saudi family relies for legitimacy. Moreover, with Shiite Iran on the cusp of nuclear arms, and with demonstrated victories by Iran's proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip, the Saudi rulers cannot afford to be seen coddling local Shiites. Saudi Sunnis expect their leaders to defend the honor and position of the Sunni majority within and without Saudi Arabia, lest Shiite victories generate a sea change and reverse the age-old dominance of the Sunni sect of Islam.²

Over the years, the country's Shiites have been divided between those seeking recognition and integration and those who support the idea of "the rule of the jurisconsult" (wilayat al-faqih), following the religious guidance of Ayatollah Khamene'i, the Supreme Leader of Iran. Members of the second trend have been widely blamed for the Khobar Towers bombing of June 1996, which killed 19 American servicemen.³

The Medina Clashes

Shiites revere the Prophet, his family, and his companions to a greater extent than mainstream Sunnis and most certainly Wahhabis. Medina is host to the Prophet's Mosque and Tomb. Many Shiite-revered imams (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali), as well as his two wives, are buried in Medina's al-Baqi cemetery, which is often off-limits to pilgrimage since Wahhabism frowns on grave visitation.

The December 16 confrontation is best viewed within the context of increasing disappointment with the Saudi royal family's treatment of the Shiites. Change is not coming fast enough, according to Shiite leaders.

This is not the first time in recent history that Sunnis and Shiites have clashed in Medina. In February 2009 Shiites attempting to perform visitation rites at the al-Baqi cemetery on the anniversary of the Prophet's death were set upon by members of the Wahhabi Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, often termed the "religious police" in the West. A Saudi official put the blame on the Shiite pilgrims, saying they triggered the dispute by practicing rituals deemed to be "religious infractions," such as the practice of Shiites to grab a handful of dust as a blessing and pray at the graves of the imams.⁴ Apparently, the authorities were disturbed at the gathering, which was made up of over 1,500 people. The religious police fired in the air to disperse the crowd, which led to a stampede and the death of three pilgrims. Many others were injured and several arrests were made. In late February and early March, security officers arrested more than 50 Shiite citizens, including children, in the Eastern Province for engaging in a peaceful demonstration in solidarity with Shiites arrested in the Medina clashes. Authorities held more than 24 individuals until July 1, when the king granted a pardon.⁵

In the lead-up to the December events, Shiites endured increasing harassment. In July, the Shiite website Rasid reported, the religious police attacked a ceremony in Medina celebrating the birth of the Imam Mahdi, the last of the Twelve Imams.⁶ Several Shiite activists received threatening visits from the authorities, and others were arrested.⁷ Human Rights Watch published an appeal in March for the release of Munir Jassas, who had been arrested for his online protests of the 2009 attack on Shiite pilgrims in Medina.⁸

Just a few days before the December 2010 clashes, Sunni extremists had bombed several processions in Iraq in the lead-up to Ashura.⁹ This must surely have been on the minds of Medina's Shiites. The December riots occurred near the al-Quba mosque in Medina, which is said to be the world's first mosque. According to Rasid, Sunni extremists attacked the Shiite gathering with poles and stones.¹⁰ The police deployed ten teams of special task force units, 40 security patrols, and several water trucks. The crowd was dispersed by security forces who fired in the air.¹¹ The Saudi daily al-Madina wrote that 38 people were arrested, 3 people injured, and 36 cars damaged.¹²

Greater detail is hard to come by. It was not clear if the Shiites were actually carrying out an Ashura procession or just gathering and "threatening," in the eyes of the Sunnis, to do so. It is likely, though, that any Shiite crowd on that day would have drawn the ire of Wahhabi zealots. It also appears from various reports that the clashes were much like a "rumble" between young toughs from Sunni and Shiite neighborhoods.

Looking toward the Future

With King Abdullah indisposed while recovering from an operation in New York, reconciliatory meetings were held on the local level in Medina. On December 22, the governor of Medina Province, Prince Abd al-Aziz bin Majid, called Sunni and Shiite leaders to a meeting at his palace. According to a report, Prince Abd al-Aziz stressed in his remarks that Islam was a religion that did not foster discord between its sects. He suggested that the leaders hold a seminar and further meetings to ease tensions.¹³ At a meeting on December 25, Shiite and Sunni leaders signed a document promising "to live as one family." Apparently the first document of its kind, it was signed by four leaders from each side.¹⁴

In general, over the years there has been some improvement in the lot of the Shiites of Saudi Arabia. They are allowed to hold Ashura commemorations in some locations, publish Shiite works, and open Shiite mosques and Shiite schools, albeit all in a very slow and highly scrutinized manner.¹⁵ Even so, Saudi Shiites never stop worrying that their hard-won gains may evaporate one day, and they do not have faith in the government. Paradoxically, the gains of their Iraqi brethren might cause them to lose what they have achieved in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Sunnis accuse Saudi Shiites of funding terrorism against Sunnis in Iraq,¹⁶ while Saudi Shiites accuse Saudi Sunnis of funneling funds to Sunni terrorists in Iraq. Saudi Shiites are also worried about extremists in their midst. In the village of Awwamiya, some residents were reported to be carrying automatic weapons and wearing necklaces with a picture of [Hizbullah](#) Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah.¹⁷

Saudi Shiites continue to be divided between those who favor continued dialogue and those who want a more confrontational approach, while all Shiites perceive a lack of momentum regarding reform. Leaders such as Ja'afar al-Shayib, Muhammad Mahfuz, and Hasan al-Saffar support continued engagement with the regime and the conservative Sunni elements of Saudi society, while others, such as the cleric Nimr al-Nimr, pursue a more militant line. Some leaders have even proposed the establishment of a Saudi Shiite marja' al-taqlid (source of religious emulation) in order to allay Sunni fears that the Saudi Shiites were influenced by Shiite clerics in Iran and Iraq.¹⁸

In order to preserve their gains, the Shiites seem to believe that it is necessary for King Abdullah to speak out against anti-Shiite fatwas (religious rulings), which are quite common; indeed, they argue that such fatwas should be criminalized.¹⁹ But it is likely they will be disappointed. Relations between the regime and the Shiite population are fraught with difficulty. Given the reliance of the regime on the Sunni Wahhabi clerics, it is unlikely that the Al Saud will rein them in. The situation in Iraq has made it much harder to do so. The royal family feels keenly its role as a leader of the Sunni world, and local Sunnis are pressuring the regime to support the Sunnis in Iraq. In the face of the regional Shiite ascendancy marked by Hizbullah's performance against Israel, a possible Shiite state in Iraq, and a powerful Iran, it is likely that Saudi Shiites will continue to pay the price of being the ultimate "other," sacrificed on the altar of the Wahhabi legitimacy on which the regime is so dependent.

The Shiites are not numerous enough to constitute a threat to the regime, but they do constitute an actual and potential arm of Iranian influence. The sense is that if King Abdullah had his way, he would end discrimination

and fully integrate the Saudi Shiites. But the king faces an ongoing dilemma that presents no immediate solution: if he appeases the Shiites, he risks the wrath of Wahhabi extremists and the religious establishment; if he doesn't, the Shiites will remain a thorn in his side.

The exponential growth in Iranian influence in the region makes Abdullah's task that much harder. Beyond the struggle for regional hegemony between Tehran and Riyadh, Abdullah's Shiite problem has grown because Iran is contesting the leadership of world Islam. And within the kingdom, Iran pushes Saudi Shiites toward confrontation. No wonder Abdullah urged the U.S. to "cut off the head of the snake."²⁰

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Notes

1. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136079.htm>.
2. See Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Shiites of Saudi Arabia," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 10 (2010), online at <http://www.currenttrends.org/research/detail/the-shiites-of-saudi-arabia>.
3. While some have argued that al-Qaeda was responsible for Khobar Towers, most evidence points to extremist Shiite groups supported by Iran. See Thomas Hegghammer, "Deconstructing the Myth about al-Qa'ida and Khobar," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (February 2008), online at http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_AQ_and_Khobar_-_Sentinel.pdf.
4. AP, February 24, 2009.
5. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/nea/136079.htm>.
6. <http://rasid.com/english/?act=artc&id=282>.
7. See, for example, <http://rasid.com/english/?act=artc&id=288>.
8. <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/03/23/saudi-arabia-free-advocate-shia-rights>.
9. <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/906631--roadside-bombs-target-shiite-pilgrims-in-iraq>.
10. <http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=41881>; AP, December 18, 2010.
11. Arab News, December 18, 2010.
12. AP, December 18, 2010.
13. <http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=41973>.
14. <http://abna.ir/data.asp?lang=3&id=218486>; see <http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=42011> for more details and pictures of the gathering.
15. AP, January 30, 2007; Los Angeles Times, April 26, 2006; New York Times, February 5, 2007. Department of State, Saudi Arabia: Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2006, March 6, 2007.
16. FBIS OSC Report on terrorist websites, February 12, 2007.
17. AP, February 3, 2007.
18. Fred Wehrey, "Shi'a Pessimistic About Reform, But Seek Reconciliation," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, August 19,

2008.

19. Christian Science Monitor, January 18, 2007.

20. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150519>.

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