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THE NEW SECTARIANISM:
THE ARAB UPRISINGS AND THE
REBIRTH OF THE SHI'A-SUNNI
DIVIDE

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BROOKINGS

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INTRODUCTION: THE NEW SECTARIANISM

When the Arab uprisings began in the winter of 2011, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was quick to express his glee: one of the long-awaited objectives of the 1979 Islamic revolution would now be realized. Khamenei praised what he called the "Islamic awakening" in the Arab world and claimed vindication for Iran's long-running efforts to overcome the West's regional hegemony.

The realization of a pan-Islamic Middle East was on the horizon, in what Khamenei declared was a great defeat for the United States and Israel. In a speech on March 2, 2011, to celebrate the Persian New Year, he expressed strong support for the recent regional uprisings, and insisted that Iran supported both its fellow Shi'a and the Sunni who make up the majority of the world's Muslims. "We do not distinguish among Gaza, Palestine, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen. We have supported Palestine for thirty-two years, and they are not Shi'a. It is not an issue of Shi'a or Sunni. It is the protest of a nation against oppression," Khamenei said.¹

Yet Khamenei's rhetoric fails to take into account one of the most important facets of the Arab uprisings: domestic politics now has more sway over the

future of these societies than the actions, policies, or intentions of external actors. Tehran may well believe it can meddle as it pleases and bend events to its purposes—and Washington and its western allies may well agree. However, a close inspection of facts on the ground in two potential regional flashpoints—Bahrain and Lebanon—reveals that this is simply not the case. Tehran's tendency to see the Arab uprisings in its own terms is more strategic spin rather than an accurate reading of events, and it is particularly vulnerable to overestimating its own influence and the degree to which the Arabs are prepared to look to Persian Iran for leadership or guidance.

In fact, the Arab uprisings and their knock-on effects across the region are the very definition of local, "retail" politics and represent a significant break with a past largely dictated by outside forces, foreign policy considerations, and proxy contests between rival regional and global forces. As a result, the United States must continue to take into account domestic political players across the Arab world in order to protect and advance its geopolitical and economic interests. In other words, it is domestic politics that now drives foreign policy—not the other way around.

¹ 1390 Ayatollah Khamenei Nowruz Message," YouTube video, posted by IranFree1390, March 20, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44GvFGTLQZw>.

Although external actors played some role in the uprisings in Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, it is local figures who instigated the uprisings and who are likely to play significant roles in the future. As a result of this shift in the power dynamics in Arab states, the United States must now also take religion into account in policy formation. Many local actors who are influencing events are either sheikhs, clerics, or pious Muslims who believe Islam should play a central role in their lives.

The coming of the Arab uprisings has left the United States in a position where it has to deal not only with Islamist parties, groups, and factions but also with those more traditional religious figures who have emerged as political players. Simply put, the rise of the new sectarianism within the Arab world has greatly complicated the diplomatic and geopolitical challenges facing the United States by demanding that serious consideration be given to religious difference in its own right, and not simply as an epiphenomenon stemming from social, economic, or political contestation.

More than two years after the Arab uprisings began, the benefits for Iran are clearly more limited, and the picture is more complicated, than Khamenei had foreseen. Any dream that the uprisings would spawn a new era of pan-Islamism has been dashed by the Syrian war, which has revived the central narrative of Shi'a-Sunni conflict that has raged off and on for centuries across the Middle East. Each new turn in Syria, whether facts on the ground or merely perceptions of new threats and new alignments that may emerge, reverberates throughout the Levant and the Persian Gulf. In this way, the Syrian war has provided a mechanism for amplifying traditional sectarian conflict, effectively elevating it to a transnational affair.

The Sunni in Lebanon believe that by confronting Hizbullah they are fighting for all Sunni, especially their persecuted co-religionists in Syria who are being slaughtered at the hands of President Bashar al-Asad's Alawite-dominated regime.² Likewise, the Shi'a in Bahrain believe their uprising is for the benefit of all Shi'a in the region, particularly their long-oppressed brethren across the border in Saudi Arabia. In Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, sectarianism has become so pronounced that Sunni clerics now warn of the "Shiitization" of the Middle East and exploit the brutality committed by Asad's regime to spur calls for outright Sunni ascendancy.

In this way, the wave of Arab uprisings has deepened ethnic and religious tensions between Sunni and Shi'a, which had been largely contained in recent years, and pushed them once again to the fore. The U.S. invasion of Iraq and the accompanying overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which allowed the Shi'a to attain power in one of the region's leading states, has now been eclipsed by a growing Sunni bid for ascendancy in both the religious and political realms.

As a result, a strong argument can be made that the Shi'a-Sunni divide is well on its way to displacing the broader conflict between Muslims and the West as the primary challenge facing the Islamic societies of the Middle East for the foreseeable future. Such sectarian conflict is also likely to supplant the Palestinian occupation as the central mobilizing factor for Arab political life. As Arab societies become more politically active and aware at home in the aftermath of the uprisings, fighting Israel is less of a priority, especially because there are so many domestic crises. And with this inward perspective comes an intensification of identities. Religion, gender, and ethnicity play a far more prominent

² The place of the Alawites in the Muslim world is a complex and controversial one. A mystical sect with ties to the beliefs and practices of Iran's majority Twelver Shi'ism, the Alawites have long been the subject of suspicion within orthodox Sunni Muslim circles, a number of whom do not consider them true Muslims. The Twelver Shi'a, for their part, accept the Alawites. In order to understand today's religious politics, one must recognize that, whatever their doctrinal and practical differences, a natural affinity between the Alawites and the Shi'a is generally assumed by both laymen and religious scholars in the region.

role in determining social and political interaction than in the past.

The observation of the prominent scholar Michael Hudson 45 years ago is more apt today than ever: The “reason that communal identities remain so strong, reinforced rather than obliterated by the communication explosion, is the result of historic doctrinal differences and memories of oppression, both antique and recent.”³

This monograph will document how and why sectarianism is on the rise in Arab states, with particular focus on social, religious, and political upheaval in Bahrain and Lebanon. I will also explore the prospects for greater Iranian influence, as the sectarian conflict escalates and western policy continues to dismiss or even ignore outright the grievances of people in the region as they battle one another and their existing governments.

One caveat is in order at the outset: this monograph should not be viewed as a generalization of all Shi'a views toward Sunni or vice versa. The extent and degree to which each sect takes hostile positions toward the other differs greatly from one country to another. Still, the findings presented below demonstrate the degree to which, in today's Arab world, all politics is local. While external actors may still influence events, in the majority of Arab states, it is local actors that matter most.

Several key questions will be addressed in the course of this study. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, how is the conflict between Shi'a and Sunni reflected on the ground? How is Iran trying to influence this conflict? Is there receptivity to Iran's overtures, especially now that the region is undergoing an unprecedented upheaval? As one prominent Shi'a cleric remarked, the matter is not as straightforward as it may appear to many in the West: “Iran is

trying to regain power over the Shi'a, but the Shi'a are not working for Iran,” said Ayatollah Ali Fadlallah, the son of the recently-deceased Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, the former spiritual guide of millions of Shi'a who opposed the Iranian practice of *velayat-e-faqih*, or rule by a supreme religious figure.⁴

Other questions the monograph will address include: Can Iran influence the Arab Shi'a, many of whom have an historic Arab identity, not a Persian one, in order to realize the Islamic republic's stated agenda of pan-Islamism in the Middle East? Or, is Iran being sidelined by forces outside its control?

To date, Iranian influence has operated mostly in the background, ever-present—and, to some, even foreboding—largely as a function of Iran's geo-political weight, its radical vision of Shi'ite clerical power, and its revolutionary heritage. As such, the Iranian role is best viewed within the context of specific events on the ground, and it is for this reason that I have generally integrated my discussion of the policies, actions, and aspirations of the Islamic republic into the relevant sections on Bahrain and Lebanon. A brief review of the “Iran factor” then concludes the main section of the text.

The research questions outlined above will be addressed in light of approximately 200 substantive interviews with key players, analysts, and policymakers in the Middle East, and another two dozen interviews in the United States and Europe, conducted from March 2012 to January 2013, as well as current literature and media reports in Persian, Arabic, and English. I will then conclude with some analysis and recommendations for U.S. policymakers struggling with the challenges posed by the reemergence of sectarian discourse in the politics of the Muslim Middle East.

³ Hudson, Michael. *The Precarious Republic: Political Mobilization in Lebanon*. New York: Random House, 1968. 25.

⁴ Fadlallah, Ali. Interviewed by Genevieve Abdo. Beirut, June 25, 2012.

The rise of sectarianism is being driven today primarily by three factors. First, a Sunni Islamist ascendancy in Tunisia and, particularly, in Egypt has reignited the sectarian flame that has historically hovered over the Middle East. The Islamist nature of these two governments is a source of empowerment for Sunnis and a thorn in the side of the Shi'a. Some Shi'a see the new Sunni Islamist governments in both of these countries as a beginning to what could become a Sunni-dominated region if Asad falls to a Sunni-led government in Syria and Hizballah in turn loses power in Lebanon. And with uprisings and widespread opposition to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's government in Iraq, the Shi'a could be in trouble there as well. As the Sunnis feel increasingly empowered by the recent challenges to authoritarian Arab regimes, the Shi'a feel all the more threatened.

Second, the civil war in Syria has sparked renewed conflict over Arab and Islamic identity in neighboring countries—especially in Lebanon—and even in those states untouched directly by the war, such as Bahrain and Kuwait. Not only is Asad's likely fall a blow to a potential Shi'a ascendancy which began in Iraq with Shi'a leader Nuri Al Maliki becoming prime minister, but the atrocities being committed against the Sunni in Syria are a glaring blight on all Shi'a in the region.

And third, popular perceptions of outside intervention and interference have created a virtual proxy war with Iran, Syria, and Hizballah on one side and Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Turkey on the other.

The Shi'a had hoped that after al Maliki came to power a regional alliance could be formed among their co-religionists in Iran, Iraq, and Syria. If at one time the Shi'a believed the United States would not obstruct their rise to prominence, as a result

of the invasion of Iraq and overthrow of its Sunni-dominated Baathist regime, many Shi'a are now convinced the United States is behind the Sunni bid for regional power. This view has been strengthened in their eyes by Washington's engagement with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and its support for the Syrian uprising. For the Arab Shi'a, the brief period in 2006-2007, which prompted King Abdullah II of Jordan to warn his fellow Sunni of a coming "Shi'a Crescent" across the region, now seems a distant memory.⁵

In the eyes of many Sunni, the Arab uprisings have provided an opportunity to undercut the Iran-Hizballah-Syria axis. Yet, they still see Iran's skilled and often mendacious hands behind every twist and turn, in particular in Tehran's deep involvement in helping Asad cling to power. To listen to many Sunni in Arab states, particularly in the Persian Gulf, is to perceive all Shi'a as iron-clad Iranian loyalists. This association serves many purposes. First, it is an instrument with which to demonize the Shi'a and to portray them as being in cahoots with the regional culprit, Iran, which is at odds with many Sunni governments. No matter how much Khamenei has tried to convince the world of a coming pan-Islamic awakening, many Sunni states are seeking to further distance themselves from Tehran. Meanwhile, the Muslim street remains conflicted. In religious terms, the assertion of an Iranian connection is also an effective Sunni tactic for casting doubt on the Muslim credentials of the Shi'a.

Some Arab intellectuals believe that the uprisings have created the conditions for rising sectarianism by undermining the authoritarian regimes that once kept them in check. "When states are weak, sectarianism rises," the renowned Lebanese religious scholar Hani Fahs told the author in June of 2012. "People return to their primary identities. And the more religiosity in a society, the more the state is weak."⁶

⁵ Wright, Robin, and Peter Baker, "Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran." *Washington Post*, December 8, 2004.

⁶ Fahs, Hani. Interviewed by Genevieve Abdo. Beirut, June 26, 2012.

While it is common in Washington circles to overestimate Iran's regional influence and capabilities, it would be naïve not to assume that Iran is seeking to turn the Shi'a uprising in Bahrain to its advantage, and strengthen Hizballah in Lebanon, as strife between Sunni and Shi'a increases, and meddle in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, in order to inspire the minority Shi'a populations in these two countries to seize upon the spirit of the uprisings and assert themselves. "If five years from now, Bahraini society is extremely polarized and there is still no resolution to the current crisis, the Iranians will be the greatest beneficiaries," said one high-ranking U.S. official.⁷

THE ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY SECTARIANISM

While Shi'a-Sunni animosity is not new, today it displays some characteristics that differ from historical sectarianism in the Middle East. Traditionally, sectarianism can be understood as an institutional set of arrangements determining familial, local, regional, and even broader kinds of loyalty and affiliation.⁷ Today, however, the increase in sectarian conflict is primarily the result of the collapse of authoritarian rule and a struggle for political and economic power and over which interpretation of Islam will influence societies and new leaderships.

In states such as Bahrain and Lebanon, where the Shi'ite comprise approximately 70 and 40 percent of the population, respectively, the prospects of democratic governance alarm the Sunni. As a result, democracy is viewed as part of a subversive Shi'a agenda, "rather than as a universal principle which would advance modernity and development in those countries."⁸ Even though the underlying goal of the Arab uprisings was to move toward more of a democratic-style of governance, the Shi'a "threat"

may provide those Sunni-dominated governments still standing with powerful justification to retain authoritarian rule.

The Shi'a have long been a reminder to Sunni Muslims of the unresolved differences within Islam since the death of the Prophet Mohammad more than 1,400 years ago. Over the centuries, the differences between these two major sects has crystallized around the question of the rightful succession to the Prophet as head of the early religious and political community: should the new leader be chosen from among Mohammad's closest companions, or only from his direct bloodline? The Shi'a telling of this story—encapsulated in the death of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet and the champion of the future Shi'a, by the Umayyads in a battle near Karbala in 680 CE—has created the narrative most Shi'a have lived by ever since.

It is a narrative of defeat, martyrdom and dispossession and lies at the core of Shi'a identity, so much so that the martyrdom of Hussein in the hopelessly one-sided battle at Karbala is re-enacted each year by the Shi'a during the solemn religious commemoration of "Ashura." Shi'ism as a distinct doctrine only emerged in the ninth century. It took on greater political significance with the rise of Fatamids in Egypt, and then with the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion of Iran under the Safavid dynasty in the early sixteenth century. Now, the Shi'a comprise about 10 to 15 percent of the Muslim population in the Arab world. The mere existence of these and other, smaller sects and factions is a slap in the face to the proclaimed concept of unity among the *ummah*, the collective community of believers which lies at the heart of the Islamic faith.

It is difficult in the cases of Bahrain and Lebanon to separate doctrinal difference from calculated struggle

⁷ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington, DC, January 3, 2013.

⁸ Weiss, Max. *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 12.

⁹ Fuller, Graham, and Rend Rahim Francke. *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 55.

for political and economic power. Although this religious difference is often the central issue discussed in the mosques and the media, the Arab uprisings, which unleashed ethnic, religious and gender conflicts, highlighted both sects' determination to demand full civic rights and political empowerment. Where possible, I will attempt to decouple religion from sectarianism in order to analyze which aspects of the conflict are due to a struggle for political power and which stem from religious differences and how each cause fuels the other.

Over the last three decades, as Sunni Islamist movements gained widespread popular support, the Shi'a also began to mobilize, despite restraints imposed by their respective governments. According to Max Weiss, as the Shi'a of Lebanon became better capable of articulating their political demands, they transformed themselves from a "sect-in-itself" to a "sect-for-itself."¹⁰ Broadly speaking, the Shi'a, once a seemingly weak and alienated sect within Arab Islam, are now demanding their rights and reaching for greater political influence, from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain and Kuwait.

Just how profound are the challenges still facing the Shi'a was recently documented in an opinion survey conducted by the Pew Forum, a Washington-based research institute. The study showed a widespread belief in most Arab countries that Shi'a are not real Muslims.¹¹ This was true particularly in countries where Shi'a represent only a small minority. According to the survey, at least 40 percent of Sunni do not accept the Shi'a as fellow Muslims. In many cases, even greater percentages do not believe that some practices common among Shi'a, such as visiting holy shrines and praying to dead religious figures, are legitimate Islamic traditions.¹²

This anti-Shi'a sentiment has been exacerbated by the emergence on the political scene of the so-called Salafi movement, whose idealized notion of Islam predates any of the religious and social tensions that first produced the major sectarian split within Islam and ultimately gave birth to the various Shi'a groups. The origins of Salfism lie in the nineteenth century, and the Salafi school of thought has been adopted by Muslims who seek to apply literalist interpretations of scripture based upon the teachings of the Prophet and his immediate circle. The Arabic word *salaf* means "predecessors," in this case referring to the closest companions of the Prophet. Salafists generally seek a return to their vision of the seventh century, when they believe Islam was practiced in direct keeping with the teachings of Mohammad. Before the Arab uprisings, attention focused on two primary trends among the Salafists: those who proselytized through *dawa*, or the religious call, and were neither violent nor politically active, and the *jihadists*, who practiced violence to achieve their aims.

Although Salafi trends are varied across the region and even within each country, from the 1920s until the late 1970s the Salafists generally preferred quietism. They frowned upon participation in electoral politics because they believed that the only law-giver was God, and that man-made government was by definition illegitimate. In this way, they were very close to the traditional Shi'a clerics of Iran, before Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's attempt at a radical reworking of religious teachings to allow for direct and on-going intervention into temporal affairs.¹³

But in the early 1980s, some Salafists became politically active and steadily more radical. Some of this

¹⁰ Weiss, 187.

¹¹ In this context it is worth noting that the rhetoric of militant Sunni movements, such as al-Qa'ida, reserve at least as much venom for the Shi'a as they do for America and its allies.

¹² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," [PewForum.org](http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary.aspx). (August 9, 2012). <http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary.aspx>.

¹³ Abdo, Geneive, and Jonathan Lyons. *Answering Only to God: Faith & Freedom in Twenty-First Century Iran*. New York: Henry Holt, 2003. 90-122.

radicalism stems from their assumed roles as the moral guardians of the *ummah*, which promote not only campaigns against immodesty but also declarations over whether minority sects are *real* Muslims. In this way, the modern Salafist movement has accelerated sectarian tensions because many do not accept the Shi'a as Muslims.

While analysts, scholars and decision-makers are quick to observe that the Shi'a-Sunni conflict is a battle within Islam, the broader geo-political implications from the rise in sectarianism should be of great concern to the United States as it seeks to preserve its interests in the Middle East. In Bahrain, for example, the lack of reconciliation between the Shi'a-dominated opposition and the U.S.-backed Sunni government is radicalizing both sides.

The Shi'a in Bahrain have made an effort to convince the world that they do not want to be aligned with Iran. However, attitudes there are beginning to change as more radical Bahraini Shi'a turn to Iran or its proxies for help. In the long-term, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states which support the Sunni Al Khalifa tribe will undercut their security objectives if they do not take measures to assist the opposition or penalize the Al Khalifa government for its repressive policies that have led to well-documented human rights violations. "What the Saudis don't see is that they are driving the Shi'a into the arms of Iran," said Professor Cherif Bassiouni, a legal scholar who led the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, after the 2011 uprising began.¹⁴

Despite Iran's political strategy of seizing upon the opportunities and exploiting the instability created by the Arab uprisings, Tehran faces the added

challenge from a new sense of self-determination within these same societies. Even if the Arab Shi'a religious leadership in Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon do not directly challenge the clerical establishment in Iran, it is likely such a challenge will come from the bottom up—from the street—a process that is already taking shape in Lebanon and Bahrain.

It is likely, too, that the Arab Shi'a street over time will take issue with Iran's theological claim to Shi'ism and seek independence through their locally-based *maraji*, or religious and moral sources of emulation. In Shi'ism, believers routinely seek advice from *mujtahids* (religious scholars who interpret the holy text for their followers) regarding all aspects of their lives. As a result, the Arab Shi'a *maraji* may soon be faced with a difficult choice: subservience to the clerics in Qom or self-assertion to accommodate their proverbial street.

This latter course has been the case in Egypt, where al Azhar, the seat of learning for Sunni Muslims, began asserting its independence from official religious interpretations under former President Hosni Mubarak and hopes the Islamist government led by President Mohammad Morsi will aid its desire for greater independence. However, an Islamist-led government could prove to be a competitor for al Azhar's religious legitimacy within society.¹⁵ The role of the clergy among the Shi'a, however, is more important than it is for the Sunni. "This doctrine (*Usuliyya*) gave the living *mujtahids* a power beyond anything claimed by the Sunni *ulema* and gave to their ruling a sanction beyond anything merely decreed."¹⁶

The Twelver Shi'a in Lebanon have a long history of religious classical education. Jabal Amil, an area in

¹⁴ Bassiouni, Cherif. Interview by Geneive Abdo. Chicago, September 13, 2012.

¹⁵ Abdo, Geneive. *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 41-70. For a slightly different interpretation see: Brown, Nathan. "Post-Revolutionary Al-Azhar," *The Carnegie Papers* (2011): 1-24. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/10/03/post-revolutionary-al-azhar/8kit>

¹⁶ Keddie, Nikki R. "The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran," in ed. Nikki R. Keddie, *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972. 223.

the south, is home to the oldest and most renowned Twelver Shi'a community in the region. From the Middle Ages, it has been considered a seat of Shi'a learning; many of its *mujtahids* migrated to Iran in order to institutionalize Iran's seminaries during the sixteenth century, when Shi'ism became the official doctrine of the Safavid dynasty.

Yet, despite this illustrious history, the Shi'a of Lebanon historically were considered "the forgotten Muslims." As the Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi wrote: "While the achievements of the Jabal Amil scholars in the field were held in high esteem for a long time throughout the Shi'ite Muslim world, and most of all in Iran, they naturally had no impact on the Lebanese scene outside strictly Shi'ite circles. No effort of imagination could convincingly depict them as part of a general Lebanese heritage."¹⁷

Across the region, the Arab uprisings have upset—or threatened to do so—the often uneasy accommodations reached between Shi'a and Sunni. The case of Bahrain, where the Shi'a constitute about 70 percent of the population but have been effectively excluded from power for centuries, illustrates this phenomenon. Under the Sunni Al Khalifas, who first took control in the 1700s, a certain level of social integration, including some intermarriage, was the historical norm.

This has changed dramatically since the uprising began in the spring of 2011, when the Shi'a-dominated opposition challenged the government and most Sunni intellectuals and activists, who at first joined the Shi'a, backed out of the protest movement.¹⁸ Through an orchestrated state-media campaign claiming Iran was behind the uprising in order to create a religious state based upon supreme clerical rule, the government managed to create deep suspicion among the Sunnis toward the Shi'a. Given Bahrain's long history of sectarian tension and a Gulf-wide obsession with Iran's potential influence, the government's strategy had little difficulty succeeding among the Bahraini elite. It also played well across the Gulf, particularly in the regional power Saudi Arabia, and found sympathetic ears in the West.

"The Sunnis treat the Shi'a in the region like second-class citizens," said Ayatollah Sayed Ali al Hakim, a Shi'ite cleric in Lebanon who comes from a powerful clerical family whose teachings have left their footprints on the seminaries of Qom, Najaf and Beirut. "In some Sunni states, they don't treat us as humans ... We would never go to a place and kill people like they [the Sunnis] did on 9/11."¹⁹

¹⁷ Salibi, Kamal. *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 208.

¹⁸ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, March 2012.

¹⁹ al Hakim, Sayed Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 25, 2012.

PART ONE: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN

Ethnic and religious identity has increasingly come to define a number of modern Arab states. Such is the case with Bahrain. The underlying causes for the uprising in 2011 have festered and affected how the Sunni and Shi'a perceive one another, not only at home but in other Arab states as well. The Shi'a-dominated uprising in Bahrain is now a struggle, not just for the Bahrainis, but for the standing of the collective Shi'a in the Middle East.

For months into the uprising, which began in February 2011, some Bahrainis, western scholars, and analysts continued to argue that, unlike a war-torn country such as Lebanon, Bahrain did not suffer from deep sectarian divisions. Clearly, this assessment was misguided. Although Bahrain did not endure a protracted civil war, as was the case in Lebanon, the country has a long history of dealing with institutionalized discrimination against the majority Shi'a population.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Among the nation states in the Persian Gulf that developed in the twentieth century on a foundation of oil wealth, Bahrain stood out with its particularly

rich and ancient heritage, along with a long history of Shi'ism. The Shi'a of Bahrain were strengthened by Iran's adoption of Shi'ism as the state religion in the early sixteenth century, and then by Iran's direct control over Bahraini territory beginning in 1602.²⁰ At the time, Bahrain was an important center for the Arab Shi'a, along with Jabal Amil in Lebanon and Kufa and Najaf in Iraq. All of these places became centers of learning for the newly-formed Safavid state in Iran, which needed to educate its Shi'a clerics. In fact, the first Safavid Shah cleared his rulings with clerics in Najaf and Bahrain to ensure their theological validity.²¹ It is this history which the Sunni government and its loyalists use today when they brand the Shi'a opposition as "Safavid loyalists of Iran."

The Shi'a domination of Bahrain came to end with the conquest by the Al Khalifa tribe in 1782. The invasion came from the east from Qatar, and many Shi'a living in that part of the island were killed or expelled; others fled north and west, which remain Shi'a strongholds today. In a precursor of things to come, nearly three-hundred years later, the Al Khalifas in the 1820s called upon the Dawasir tribes in Saudi Arabia to send troops to Bahrain to further displace the Shi'a.²² The Bahraini Shi'a had adopted

²⁰ Fuller and Franke, 121.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Shi'ism from the early days of the split within Islam and consider themselves to be the real natives of the land. They called themselves "Baharna." A minority of Shi'a at the time of Persian descent were known as "Ajam."

Grievances within the Bahraini population are not new: the modern demand for greater political power in Bahrain can be traced to 1938, when groups of Sunnis and Shi'a presented demands for local autonomy to the British governor.²³ The British had sought to bring an end to the prosecution and killing of the Shi'a. The movement, however, was not successful. During the pan-Arabist period in the 1950s and 1960s, as in many other Arab states, Bahrain's opposition groups tended to be left-leaning and nationalistic. Their goals were to end the British occupation of Bahrain and the Gulf. Compared with today, religion had a far less a role to play in articulating the grievances of the opposition to the state.

The country has undergone rebellions since the 1920s, with significant protests occurring every ten years or so. However, the current protests are arguably being taken more seriously by all sides for a number of reasons. First, the successful uprisings that have occurred in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia have fueled fears within the Al Khalifa government that they may not be able to control the opposition much longer. Second, there is an intensified fear among Gulf monarchies of Iran's attempts to exploit the Arab uprisings, sensitivities heightened by Iranian state propaganda as well as its direct intervention in Syria.²⁴ Third, the Shi'a of Bahrain are no longer willing to wait patiently for reforms that may never be implemented. Even the moderate al Wefaq, the official Shi'a opposition

political society, has begun defying government bans on protests, beginning in September 2012.

Fears of Iran's potential for interference are supported, at least to some degree, by historical precedence. The 1979 Islamic revolution made a significant mark on the Shi'a in Bahrain and in other Gulf states. Radical Shi'a groups emerged in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Iranian clerics came to preach in Bahrain and members of a Bahraini Shi'a movement, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), visited Tehran.

In 1981, the Bahraini government announced it had uncovered a plot to stage a coup, directed by the IFLB. The Bahraini government said the conspirators were trained in Tehran, and even moderate Shi'a were suspected by the government as part of an alleged fifth column.²⁵ The complaint of the opposition was to address the discriminatory practices against the Shi'a, although different groups had different aims. The Islamic Freedom Movement, another opposition group based in London, for example, did not advocate an Islamic state in Bahrain but rather a more equitable distribution of wealth. One leader of the group was the cleric Sheikh Abdel Amir al Jamri, a renowned religious scholar, whose son by the same name is now a moderate leader in the opposition and the editor of the newspaper, Al Wasat.

Until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the Bahraini opposition was dominated by secular-minded Bahrainis—both Shi'a and Sunni. But after the revolution, Islamist movements began leading the opposition.²⁶ Contributing to this new religious character was the fact that slowly more Shi'a began attending seminaries in Qom, Iran's holy city and home to

²³ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 26.

²⁴ George, Marcus. "Iran's Revolutionary Guards commander says its troops in Syria." *Reuters*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/16/us-iran-syria-presence-idUSBRE88F04C20120916>.

²⁵ Fuller and Francke, 126-127.

²⁶ International Crisis Group. "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," [Crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2005/mena/bahrain-s-sectarian-challenge.aspx). May 6, 2005, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2005/mena/bahrain-s-sectarian-challenge.aspx>.

much of the Shi'a clerical establishment. For the first time, Friday prayer sermons in Bahrain were used in the mosque to discuss the grievances among Bahrainis, such as unemployment and social justice.²⁷

Despite the fact that a majority of Shi'a in Bahrain subscribe to the Ja'fari School of Islamic jurisprudence, they follow a range of spiritual leaders which, as explained above, is permitted in Shi'a Islam. In political terms, this means their allegiances are divided; some Bahrainis consider Ayatollah Khamenei their religious guide, others follow Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, while others remain admirers of the late Ayatollah Fadlallah, who spent a great deal of his life in Lebanon. It is extremely difficult to determine the exact numbers of Shi'a who follow a particular ayatollah, but it is widely believed that most Shi'a in Bahrain follow Sistani. Just as these spiritual guides hold differing views on the issue of *velayat-e faqih*, so do their followers. Sistani and Fadlallah oppose direct clerical intervention in politics and are considered quietest clerics. Khamenei, of course, favors supreme clerical rule.

Much is made of the fact that the Bahraini Shi'a are attached to their Arab identity, and thus, less inclined to be lured into Iran's embrace. This argument has more credibility when assessing whether Bahrainis would want to be ruled by the Islamic republic or a similar theocracy, but has less validity when discussing Iran's religious influence over the Shi'a in Arab countries. When it comes to choosing a *marja*, for example, the teachings of a particular religious scholar—Arab or Persian—seem to trump ethnicity.

In the 1990s, the Shi'a in Bahrain began to unify more than in the past. Between 1994 and 1998,

a series of clashes and street protests broke out in Bahrain's Shi'a villages. The root causes behind the unrest were said to include state authoritarianism, the absence of civil and political rights, a stagnant economy, and extensive anti-Shi'a discrimination.²⁸ The Bahraini government was largely viewed by the Shi'a community as a corrupt regime that favored the loyal factions close to it and utterly ignored the impoverished Shi'a areas of the country.

While the Shi'a formed the majority of the protestors, a number of Sunni sought a return to relatively liberal 1973 constitution and helped the cause by collecting pro-reform petitions, signed by thousands.²⁹ The uprising also brought about a rare union among leftist, liberals, and Islamist factions, who joined forces to demand democratic reforms.

For four years, large demonstrations and street clashes became the norm. This period of unrest in Bahrain is referred to as the 1994-1998 Intifada. And as a result of this uprising, "religious symbolism as a political tool" became one of the characteristics of the protest movement.³⁰ The government's response to the street protests was brutal. Thousands of demonstrators and activists were arrested and some of the opposition leaders were exiled.³¹

In 1996, the Bahraini government accused Iran of funding an organization called the Bahraini Hizballah, which had allegedly carried out a number of violent attacks inside the kingdom. In June of that year, 51 Bahrainis were arrested and charged with plotting against the government.³² Some Shi'a have questioned whether this plot ever existed and accuse the government of greatly exaggerating any threat.

²⁷ Bahri, Luayy. "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Volume 11 (Summer 2000): 131.

²⁸ International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt," *Middle East/North Africa Report* 105 (2011): 2.

²⁹ International Crisis Group (2011): 2.

³⁰ Bahri (2000): 131.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, "Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain," [HRW.org](http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/07/01/routine-abuse-routine-denial). (1997). <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1997/07/01/routine-abuse-routine-denial>

³² Fuller and Francke, 135.

The most recent drive among the Shi'a for political and social reform began when Sheikh Hamad Al Khalifa, Bahrain's current king, took the helm. He released hundreds of prisoners who had been put in jail, including Sheikh Jamri. He announced a pledge in December 1999 to hold municipal elections, when for the first time women would be allowed to vote. In 2000, he issued a decree revising the composition of the Majlis al Shura, a consultative council, increasing the number of Shi'a members. Perhaps his most significant reform was to appoint a committee to create a National Action Charter that would ring in constitutional, judicial, and political reform.

The National Action Charter was approved in a referendum but trouble followed. In 2002, King Hamad's revision of the constitution unilaterally without putting the revisions to a popular referendum caused opposition from Shi'a and Sunni. The amendments gave great power to the executive branch over the legislature. For example, legislation could not be passed without the approval of the Majlis al Shura, a special advisory council whose members were appointed by the king.

The broad demands of today's mainstream opposition were outlined in a proposed plan which emerged in July 2011. It is unclear whether the main stream Shi'a opposition will continue to make the demands that it had in the past. These include the following:

- An elected parliament with expanded powers, including the power to confirm or reject a nominated cabinet.
- Direct election of the Prime Minister by the largest coalition within the elected parliament.
- The monitoring of elections by an independent electoral commission.
- "Fairly" demarcated electoral boundaries to prevent the government from gerrymandering to ensure a Sunni majority in the lower house.

- The reworking of laws on naturalization and citizenship.
- Efforts to reduce sectarian divisions.
- New mechanisms to provide food subsidies to the most needy citizens, many of whom are Shi'a.

THE SECTARIAN DIVIDE DEEPENS

When the current uprising began as part of the wave of revolutions in the Arab world, the majority of young protestors marching to the Pearl Roundabout, a landmark in downtown Manama that served as the proverbial square for revolution, were Shi'a. It was three days after former President Hosni Mubarak had been driven from power and the Bahrainis chose a symbolic day, February 14. On this day ten years earlier, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa had declared that his National Action Charter, the major reform project, would be enforced, and proclaimed Bahrain as a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral parliament and an elected lower chamber.

Yet, a decade on, power still remains primarily in the hands of the king and the appointed prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who is the king's uncle and has been in the post for more than 40 years. The king has the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, appoint and dismiss half of the legislative assembly represented by a Shura Council, to appoint judges to the Constitutional Court, and the right to impose marshal law, which he did shortly after the uprising began. The protesters were demanding the removal of the prime minister, who is widely unpopular even within governmental circles, new elections, and a new constitution.

The Bahraini government was determined not to go the way of Egypt and Tunisia. On March 14, the government welcomed 1,200 troops from Saudi Arabia and 800 from the United Arab Emirates,

operating under the aegis of the Gulf Cooperation Council. King Hamad wrote that his government was forced to use the military option and enforce a crackdown because “the legitimate demands of the opposition were hijacked by extremists with ties to foreign governments in the region,” a clear and direct reference to Iran.³³

The troop deployment, called “Peninsular Shield,” was the first time the GCC used collective military action to suppress a popular revolt.³⁴ Iran’s government and even moderate clerics expressed outrage over the Saudi military presence in Bahrain.

The uprising was not instigated by Iran. However, Iranian officials complicated the picture by handing the Bahraini and Saudi governments the chance to assert that Tehran was behind the revolt. As soon as the uprising began, Supreme Leader Khamenei referred to it with elation, and he offered public and moral support for the Shi’a against the repressive Sunni government.

Khamenei has continued to express his enthusiasm. At a meeting of the “Islamic Awakening and Youth Conference,” on January 30, 2012, he told the audience: “What you did in Egypt, what you did in Tunisia, what you did in Libya, what you are doing in Yemen, what you are doing in Bahrain ... is part of a battle against this dangerous and harmful dictatorship that has been pressuring humanity for two centuries.”³⁵

Grand Ayatollah Saafi Gulpaygani, based in Qom, took up the Bahrain uprising as a personal cause.

In staunch defense of the Shi’a in Bahrain, he admonished in harsh terms the Saudi government for sending troops to crush the uprising. As the guardians of the two holiest shrines in Islam, he declared, Saudis owed an explanation of their behavior to the entire Muslim world.

“It is unfortunate that the Muslims’ revolutions against American domination and influence causes the ruler of the two holy mosques anger. ... It is questionable for every Muslim that the rulers of the two holy mosques, who should make no a distinction [between Shi’a and Sunni] yet in Bahrain supports subjugation, dictatorship, [and] vice. ... No Muslim expects anything like this from of the rulers of the two holy mosques.”³⁶

Factions within the Kuwaiti government, convinced that the Bahraini uprising would provide an opening for Iran, considered sending forces to join the troop deployment. But Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber al Mubarak Al Sabah overruled the idea, fearing such a move could prompt an uprising among Kuwait’s Shi’a, who comprise about 20 to 30 percent of the population. In a bid to appease calls from anti-Iranian forces within his government while also attempting not to incite the local Shi’a population, the prime minister instead sent a naval force to protect the waters around Bahrain.³⁷ Sunni MPs in the Kuwaiti parliament still criticize the prime minister for not sending ground troops. King Hamad, welcoming the Peninsula Shield force and the Kuwaiti naval presence, declared in March 2011 that “a foreign plot” had been foiled, a direct reference to Iran.³⁸

³³ Al Khalifa, King Hamad bin Isa. “Stability is a prerequisite for progress.” *Washington Times*, February 8, 2011. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/19/stability-is-prerequisite-for-progress/>.

³⁴ Bronner, Ethan, and Michael Slackman. “Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest.” *New York Times*, March 14, 2011.

³⁵ The Center for the Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei. “Supreme Leader’s Speech to Participants of ‘Islamic Awakening and Youth Conference.’” [English.khamenei.ir](http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1580&Itemid=16). January 30, 2012. http://english.khamenei.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1580&Itemid=16

³⁶ Gulpaygani, Ayatollah Saafi. “A warning letter from Ayatollah Gulpaygani to King Abdullah.” *Shia Post*, March 30, 2012. <http://en.Shi'apost.com/2012/03/30/a-warning-letter-from-ayatollah-gulpaygani-to-king-abdullah/>.

³⁷ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Kuwait, December 2012.

³⁸ “Kuwait Naval Units Join Bahraini Mission—Plot Foiled.” *Arab Times*, March 21, 2011. <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smId/414/ArticleID/167009/refTab/36/Default.aspx>.

At the start of the Bahraini uprising, Sunnis joined Shi'a protestors in Manama's Pearl Roundabout. Moderate Sunnis generally supported the uprising in the interest of all Bahrainis. Protestors wore badges with the slogan, "No Sunni, No Shi'a, Just Bahraini." But cross-sectarian cooperation against the government failed to materialize in the long term, as the Sunnis became increasingly reluctant to work with Shi'a oppositionist factions.

Instead, the uprising soon put the Shi'a and the Sunni at loggerheads. Even those Sunni who were critical of the government's policies, when forced to choose, sided with the state over the Shi'a. This gave credence to the government's claims that the uprising stemmed from a strictly sectarian conflict, and it became more visible once the uprising gained momentum. There are some exceptions to the deepening Shi'a-Sunni divide: The National Democratic Action Society, or Wa'ad, which is the largest leftist political faction in Bahrain and critical of the government, claims to include an equal number of Shi'a and Sunni in its ranks. According to one Wa'ad leader, 50 percent of the society's Central Committee is comprised of Shi'a and the other half Sunni.³⁹

The views of one woman rights activist who went to the Pearl Roundabout reflects the skepticism of many Bahrainis toward al Wefaq, even among those who oppose government policies. "I was in the roundabout along with all the protestors. And when I listened to them [al Wefaq], I felt some wanted to create an Islamic state," said Maryam, a middle-aged Sunni women's rights leader who lives in Manama on the edge of the Shi'a villages, where rioting frequently breaks out at night. "Many women came to the roundabout because the *maraji* told them to. We all agree the government is corrupt,

but we are afraid of their [al Wefaq's] religious thinking."⁴⁰

Throughout the early weeks of the uprising, the government skillfully pushed its own narrative of the tumultuous events and effectively shaped public opinion among the ruling minority Sunni: this was, it asserted, the long-expected Shi'a revolt, backed by Iran. "Since 1979, when the Islamic revolution occurred in Iran, the Bahraini intelligence has always known there is a Shi'a ideology. ... After Saddam went, sectarianism rose in Iraq. They [the Shi'a] were targeting scientists, religious leaders. ... Then, all of a sudden, this happened in Bahrain," said Saqer Al Khalifa, a former media advisor for the Bahraini embassy in Washington. Al Khalifa explains that the government had anticipated the uprising for years and had developed a well-trained security apparatus to fight any unrest. "If the Shi'a opposition had weapons, they would have used them," he said.⁴¹

Soon, the political divide in the street spilled over into all aspects of everyday life. Ali Fakhro, a former education minister who tried to form a national dialogue among groups in the opposition and the government, noted an upsurge in identity politics which continues to this day. "People started boycotting restaurants. If a Shi'a merchant owns one place, the Sunni won't go there. School children are not getting along. For the first time, they identify themselves as Shi'a or Sunni. With the Saudis swearing at the Shi'a all day, I have no doubt the Saudis are playing a role to fuel propaganda against the Shi'a."⁴²

Some Bahrainis have boycotted convenience stores owned by prominent Bahraini businessman Faisal Jawad, who is accused of giving free food to the

³⁹ Anonymous leader. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo's researcher. Manama, February, 2013.

⁴⁰ Maryam. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, March 2012.

⁴¹ Al Khalifa, Saqer. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, December 15, 2012.

⁴² Fakhro, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, March 2012.

protestors during the height of the uprising. Jawad has denied the allegations. Nonetheless, he has been forced to close some of his stores and restaurants due to a Sunni-led boycott.

A young Bahraini whose mother is Sunni and father is Shi'a started a loosely-formed debate forum, with the specific aim of addressing the rise of sectarianism. "My parents never had a problem, and growing up I was never cognizant of the differences in the sects. Today, things are very different," the young man said over coffee in a Manama hotel.⁴³

Ali Al Khalifa, a young Bahraini who worked in the foreign ministry after graduating from American University in Washington, recalls how the Sunni-Shi'a relationship has changed since he was a boy. "In the 1990s, I was seven or eight years old. I knew there was animosity, but not hatred. I attended public school and there were some Shi'a, but not many. I went to an Islamic school which was Salafist and there were no Shi'a. Since last year, we are not on speaking terms with a lot of Shi'a. They will say it is my fault, even though I am trying to bridge the gap."

"In the 1940s, my grandmother ate with the Shi'a until 1979, when the Islamic revolution in Iran broke out. With Khomeini and the religious revival in Saudi Arabia at the same time, both sides became more fundamentalist," said Al Khalifa, who is a member of the royal family.⁴⁴

As the government capitalized on escalating unease between Shi'a and Sunni, its sectarian narrative took hold: a protest movement which was inspired by other Arab uprisings and a desire for political and economic reform for all Bahrainis quickly pitted Sunni against Shi'a. Even though the opposition, which in the early days included a sizeable number

of Sunnis, set out to fight for political and economic reforms that would benefit all Bahrainis, the nature of the revolt was being driven by the Shi'a majority, who were optimistic, however fleetingly, about the potential to address their long-standing grievances of social, political, and economic inequality.

Iran seized upon the moment and unleashed its media machine in both Persian and Arabic, loudly championing the Shi'a cause. With Iran supporting the uprising and Saudi-led troops intervening in support of the Sunni Al Khalifa tribe, the Bahraini protest movement was swiftly transformed into a proxy battle between the leading regional powers. And it provided fertile ground for the notion that political opposition in Bahrain was tantamount to a Shi'a revolt to wrest power from the minority Sunni. To date, there is no hard evidence to indicate that Iran has given material support to factions within the Bahraini opposition. However, one U.S. official, who wished to remain anonymous, stated in an interview that the U.S. was beginning to see signs of Iranian connections to opposition groups.

Moreover, the Saudis view the Shi'a-dominated uprising as a direct threat to their own domestic security; a victory for the Shi'a of Bahrain would certainly inspire Saudi Arabia's own disaffected Shi'a population in the eastern provinces, home to much of the kingdom's great oil wealth, to mobilize behind similar demands for economic, political, and social equality. In fact, the Bahrain uprising has sparked protests among the Saudi Shi'a, who expressed solidarity with their co-religionists across the Causeway, a bridge which unites the two countries. These protests continued throughout 2012.⁴⁵

The direct involvement of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's powerful neighbor, ensured that calls for negotiation

⁴³ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

⁴⁴ Al Khalifa, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

⁴⁵ "Saudi Women Rally in support of Bahrain Revolution Leaders." *Pakistan Today*, September 9 2012. <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2012/09/09/news/foreign/saudi-women-rally-in-support-of-bahrain-revolution-leaders/>.

or dialogue with the protesters from moderate voices within the Bahraini government were marginalized. Instead, the Saudis were able to bolster hard-line elements in Manama to support their harsh approach to suppressing the uprising. Bahrain's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia certainly was a factor. A treaty between the two countries states that Saudi Arabia is the operator of the shared offshore oil field Abu Safah, which produces nearly 70 percent of Bahrain's oil revenue and 80 percent of its total oil production.⁴⁶

The Bahraini hardliners did not have to overreach to build its case that Iran was behind the uprising. Iran has stated for years that it considers part of Bahrain its rightful territory, and Tehran is believed to be behind at least two attempted coups to unseat the government in Bahrain, in 1981 and 1996. The Bahraini government alleged that the 1996 plot was carried out by Hizballah and masterminded by Isa Qassem, now the leading cleric in Bahrain's Shi'a opposition, who spent many years in Qom.⁴⁷ Some U.S. officials also warned of the Iran factor in the uprising. Former Defense Secretary Gates said in an interview with the Arabic network al Arabiya on March 24, 2011, that while he believed Iran did not instigate the protest, there was no doubt Tehran was starting to spread its influence.⁴⁸

Even if Iran were not directly intervening in the uprising, its extensive Arabic-language media outlet, al Alam, Hizballah's al Manar TV, and the Iraq-based Ahl al Beit television were hard at work to convince the Shi'a, not only in Bahrain, but more importantly throughout the region, that the conflict was about a fight to resolve long-standing political and religious differences between the sects. In an al Manar broadcast of March 21, 2011, Supreme

Leader Khamenei emphasized his support for the revolution in Bahrain.

Such broadcasts have continued. On May 17, 2012, a report on al Manar described a meeting of the Union of Muslim Ulema in Lebanon, an organization established by Iran and Lebanese Shi'a clerics shortly after the 1979 Islamic revolution. The report states that the Union was concerned about Bahraini people who are "victims of the politics of sectarian conflict and the provocation of hate as is the case in many countries in the Arab and Islamic world." The report quotes the Union's leader, Judge Ahmed Shaikh Ahmed al Zain, as blaming the United States and Israel for rising sectarianism: "The Zionist enemy and its American ally have succeeded in spreading hatred between the sons and daughters of Islam." Through its tactics, Iran gave credence to the Bahraini government's claims that the Islamic republic was the driving force behind the uprising.

Just days before the GCC troops entered Bahrain, former Secretary of Defense Gates and his team were in Manama trying to find a compromise between the government and al Wefaq. But the day after the Gates delegation left, a huge protest occurred and the government and the Saudis used this as a pretext to send in the troops, according to U.S. officials. The Saudis discouraged the Bahraini government from making a deal with the opposition, according to U.S. and Bahraini sources. They argued that Iran was backing the opposition and, therefore, it must be crushed. When the talks ended without resolution, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her frustration with the Saudis and said the United States had only limited leverage.⁴⁹ The Saudi position was, and still remains, that no

⁴⁶ Galani, Un. "Saudis wouldn't gain much from a union with Bahrain." *Reuters*, May 2, 2012.

⁴⁷ Louer, Laurence. *Transnational Shi'a Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 206.

⁴⁸ "Gates accuses Iran of complicating things in Bahrain." *Al Arabiya English*, March 24, 2011. <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/24/142891.html>.

⁴⁹ Clinton, Hillary. Closed meeting at the U.S. State Department attended by Geneive Abdo. March 2011.

steps should be taken to weaken Bahrain's Sunni monarchy.

Stability in Bahrain is of great importance to the United States. Manama is the home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, whose presence in the Gulf ensures the flow of oil and other energy exports through the Strait of Hormuz, the waterway connecting the Gulf to the Arabia Sea and the Indian Ocean. Iran periodically threatens to block the Strait of Hormuz, which would severely disrupt oil supplies, although to date it has shown no real sign of making good on its bellicose rhetoric.

Because of significant U.S. strategic and economic interests in a stable Bahrain, the Obama administration has declined to adopt a hard line on the Bahraini government's human rights abuses and institutionalized discrimination. Yet, some U.S. officials believe the administration's criticism is clear—a view Bahraini opposition figures do not share. The general feeling among many factions within the Shi'a opposition is that the United States is unwilling to jeopardize its own security interests to try to extract necessary compromises from the Bahraini government.⁵⁰

In mid-March 2011, the protest movement intensified among the Shi'a in the Pearl Roundabout. Even more worrying to the government, protestors began a strategy of disrupting daily life in Manama by venturing out from the Pearl to set up barricades in the financial district, hindering business and traffic. In response, the government heightened its rhetorical denunciation of the protests, in particular its charges of Iranian meddling. Some within the government argued that the protestors' tactics indicated they had been schooled in Hizballah training camps in Lebanon. "The stands and statements of

the Iranian officials, the remarks of the secretary general of the Lebanese Hizballah, the meddling in Bahraini affairs by their satellite [TV] channels, ... the incidents that took place in Pearl Square—expose the training techniques of Hizballah," Staff Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, the Bahraini commander-in-chief, was quoted as saying in *Asharq Alawsat*, on June 1, 2011.⁵¹

While the running proxy contest between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran fed sectarian tensions, political events on the ground in Bahrain further enhanced the Shi'a-versus-Sunni narrative. On February 21, one week after a large Shi'a mobilization in the streets, a reported 120,000 Sunni assembled in the Al Fateh mosque, the largest Sunni mosque in Bahrain, though this number is disputed as being inflated.

There, a university professor announced the birth of *Tajamma al-Wibdat al Watani*, which came to be known as the National Unity Gathering, *TGONU*, a pan-Sunni bloc supporting the ruling family—at least initially—and designed to curb Shi'a-dominated protest. Sunni Islamist political societies including the Muslim Brotherhood, Minbar, and the Salafist faction, Asala al Islamiya, joined the group. This development served to reaffirm the government's narrative that Iran and its proxies were behind the uprising.⁵²

TGONU never succeeded in articulating a clear agenda for this new coalition. The central demand was simply that the government make no concessions to al Wefaq, which they demanded be banned outright. Interviews carried out in Bahrain reveal that the central Sunni struggle is not based upon a desire for religious domination over the Shi'a. Rather, the minority Sunni fear that Shi'a protests could

⁵⁰ Anonymous U.S. official. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington, DC, January 3, 2013.

⁵¹ International Crisis Group. "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform." Middle East/North Report N 111-28, July, 2001. 3.

⁵² International Crisis Group. July, 2001. 9.

topple the existing government and lead to the creation of an Iranian-style theocracy.

The Bahraini government gave a stamp of approval to TGONU. But what the government failed to foresee in giving a role to the TGONU and its constituents was that the more the national drumbeat warned of the Shi'a-Iranian threat, the more pressure came to bear on the government to take harsher action against the opposition, even the peaceful al Wafaq. Soon, the "loyal citizens" of Bahrain, as the government commonly refers to its Sunni supporters, were criticizing the government for not doing enough to protect them and crackdown on the Shi'a-dominated opposition.

As the anti-Shi'a—and anti-Iran—rhetoric ramped up among the Sunni population, the Unity Gathering gave birth to a radical splinter group, al Fatiḥ Youth Union, whose Friday rallies regularly attracted thousands of supports. This development made it even more difficult for reformist-minded figures within the government, including the Crown Prince and even King Hamad, to extend any significant concessions to the Shi'a opposition. Heightened sectarianism both altered the dynamics of popular mobilization and gave hardliners within the government, chiefly the prime minister and his faction, a cover for dismissing any calls for reform.

In such an atmosphere, the government unleashed a brutal campaign, which continues today, to crush the uprising. The ensuing human rights violations, including the torture and even the deaths of activists in detention, the dismissal of Shi'a from government positions, the suspension of Shi'a students from universities, and the discriminatory treatment of injured protestors in the hospitals, has been documented extensively in Bassiouni's Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.⁵³ It is not the pur-

pose of this paper to focus on these issues. Suffice it to say, that the government's response to the uprising has exacerbated the Shi'a feeling of persecution and widened the sectarian divide.

By the spring of 2012, King Hamad, who had commissioned the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry and who appeared to be interested in reform in 2011, decided it was too politically costly to implement many of the BICI's recommendations. "I told the king in March 2012 what I had previously said in 2011," said Bassiouni in an interview with the author. "You have a choice between the unity of the country and the unity of the family." Bassiouni added: "Many in the [Bahraini] cabinet fell back on the Saudis as a justification for not carrying out the needed social, political and economic reforms."⁵⁴

The Commission, headed by Bassiouni, had issued its 503-page report on November 23, 2011. The report was critical of the government's response to the unrest and documented in great detail extensive human rights violations committed against the demonstrators and activists, most of whom were Shi'a. At the time, amid great fanfare of the report's release, the king promised to implement many of the recommendations Bassiouni and his team had drafted. But to date, this has not happened. As a result, many factions involved in the conflict have become more radicalized. Bassiouni said he had feared the crisis would produce a hardening of positions on all sides, and now this concern has been realized.

At the time of this writing, in January 2013, only three of the BICI's 26 recommendations have been fully implemented by the government. These include training security forces in human rights regulations during the detention and interrogation of suspects and a ban on torture. The government has

⁵³ Bassiouni, Mahmoud Cherif, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch, and Mahnoush H. Arsanjani. "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry." Manama, Bahrain, November 23, 2011. <http://www.bici.org/bh/BICReportEN.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Bassiouni, Cherif. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Via email, January 8, 2013.

also trained members of the judiciary and prosecutors on how to eradicate torture and illegal treatment.⁵⁵

On December 8, 2012, Bahrain's Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, who been the major advocate of reforms in 2011 but appeared to lose out to government hardliners, called for a meeting among representatives from all sides of the conflict. His announcement came in an address before an annual conference in Manama organized by the London-based think tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

However, this call should be viewed with considerable skepticism. Bahraini sources say the Crown Prince has less influence now than he had in 2011, when the hardliners pressured King Hamad to end dialogue with the opposition. More importantly, there is no evidence the government plans to get directly involved in the dialogue. Sheikh Ali Salman, the secretary-general of al Wefaq, said the government's idea is for al Wefaq to have dialogue with Sunni groups but has no intention of participating. "This is just an excuse. The government is not ready to have a dialogue. This is the first time the government has announced this to the international media. The hardliners are playing a game with time. Until now there is no dialogue."⁵⁶

As soon as the crown prince made his announcement, media reports quoted Bahrainis who questioned why he did not make such an important announcement to a more domestic audience.⁵⁷ Commentators on social media unleashed harsh criticism against the Shi'a, saying they should not be allowed to participate in a national dialogue.⁵⁸

More important for the future of any such talks, the government has declined to offer specifics, including whether Bahraini government officials would be involved and which opposition demands would be addressed. "What is surprising to me is that the conversation is still in the realm of the hypothetical," said a high-ranking U.S. official with intimate knowledge of Bahrain, referring to the crown prince's call for renewed dialogue. "They need to start with the specifics, such as how do you create jobs. And the government has to lead and be part of the process of dialogue," said the official, who wished to remain unidentified.⁵⁹

SHI'A AND SUNNI RADICALIZATION

To listen to young Shi'a university students is to understand that, while the protest movement might no longer pose an immediate threat to the state's survival, the status quo is not viable over the long-term. Many such students, who demonstrate when they can, have pledged not to give up until their demands are met. Few have been deterred by a government crackdown, which includes financial and other institutional pressures as well as physical punishment.

"My sister was called in by the university dean and he asked her, 'Were you in the protests? Do you support the government?' Then they showed her photos of her demonstrating and they suspended her scholarship to study abroad," said one student. Another student explained, "Sixty-three students in our university were suspended because they were accused of being loyal to Iran."⁶⁰

⁵⁵ For an extensive review of the government's implementation of the BICI, see Project on Middle East Democracy. "One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report." [Pomed.org](http://pomed.org). November 23, 2012. http://pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/POMED_BahrainReport_web-FINAL.pdf.

⁵⁶ Salman, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington DC, January 8, 2013.

⁵⁷ McDowell, Angus. "Bahrain Crown Prince calls for talks with opposition." *Reuters*, December 8, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/08/us-bahrain-politics-idUSBRE8B704H20121208>.

⁵⁸ Specific examples appear later in this paper.

⁵⁹ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington DC, January 3, 2013.

⁶⁰ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, in its review of Bahrain Polytechnic University and the University of Bahrain, concluded: “The expulsions by the University of Bahrain and Bahrain Polytechnic as related to the events of the February/March 2011 were of such an extreme nature that some of the students are ostensibly prevented from ever again attending an institution of higher education in Bahrain.”⁶¹

Among some university students, there are also feelings of isolation. “We are alone,” said one young man. “The U.S. is doing nothing, and anyway they are busy with Iran. The U.S. might pay attention to us at times because of the Fifth Fleet, but we don’t need the Fleet. We need to find our own solutions.”⁶²

Even before the uprising began, young Bahraini Shi’a were turning away from al Wefaq, established in November 2001 and today the country’s largest and most influential Shi’a political society. Al Wefaq has frequently engaged in negotiations with the government and is recognized by the United States as a legitimate opposition group.⁶³ Al Wefaq leaders also meet regularly with U.S. officials at the embassy in Manama.

However, one significant result of the uprising is that unofficial Shi’a factions have gone their own way, believing that the latest events demand more extreme measures than the moderate al Wefaq is willing to take. For example, some al Wefaq leaders are quick to downplay any sectarian polarization in Bahraini society. “The whole issue is political, not sectarian,” one leader said. But in the course of the same conversation he says the Salafists in Bahrain think the Shi’a are “*kafir*,” or infidels.⁶⁴

Since the creation of al Wefaq, some Bahraini Shi’a have moved well beyond the group’s call for reforms that would turn Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy. Shortly after the 2006 parliamentary elections in which al Wefaq ran candidates, a number of Shi’a activists dismissed participation in the polls as a sellout to the state and founded al Haqq, a movement which favored an electoral boycott. In March 2011, al Haqq then joined other Shi’a groups to form the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic. The coalition rejects any political resolution to the conflict and calls for the toppling of the Al Khalifa family.

In a statement issued in March 2011, the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic stated:

The regime has failed to end the revolution through violence and brutal crackdown. It is trying now to destroy it by twisting its demands by playing its devious political games, shuffling cards around, and embedding discord, to gain through its political game what it has failed to gain through violence. It is paramount for people in this country to ... protect the revolution, and not to let our martyrs’ blood and sacrifices go in vain, and not to give the opportunity to the regime to sabotage the revolution’s demands.

The Coalition believes that the main demand of the popular revolution is the downfall of the current oppressive regime and the establishment of a democratic republic that expresses the desires of the people and protects its dignity, interests, and rights. For the revolution to achieve

⁶¹ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 365.

⁶² Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

⁶³ Obama, Barack. “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly.” Address, United Nations, New York, NY, September 21, 2011.

⁶⁴ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

this demand, all people ... need to awaken, (and) become aware. ... They must be independent in making crucial decision and not to be shy when telling the truth to anyone for this comes at the expense of the rights and interests of citizens.⁶⁵

Such a Bahraini republic obviously would not have a role for the Al Khalifa dynasty. Nor would it be a constitutional monarchy, which al Wefaq still favors. The leader of the Coalition of a Bahraini Republic is Hasan Mushaima, who has been accused by the government of being an Iranian operative. He was arrested in June 2011 and is now serving a life sentence in prison.

A more significant faction spawned by the uprising is the Coalition of February 14 Youth, which is composed of young activists who took to the streets and continue to do so to demand nothing short of regime change. They, too, are critical of al Wefaq, and dismiss all notions of settling for a constitutional monarchy. Some within the movement adhere to more religiously conservative school of thought within Shi'ism Islam.

The February 14 Coalition is named not only for the start date of the uprising in 2011, but also for promises by King Hamad to create a constitutional monarchy stated in the National Action Charter, which was passed in national referendum in 2001. When he first came to power, the king did initiate reforms, including the reinstatement of the suspended parliament. But he also unilaterally revised the constitution to install the so-called Shura Council under his direct command, which had more power than the democratically-elected parliament. This allowed him to control the workings of the state, even though there were outward appearances of reform. Some Shi'a and Sunni alike

gave up on the King ever delivering on his promised reforms.

The February 14 coalition has no identifiable leadership, does not speak with one voice, and appears to reject conventional political formations, such as the al Wefaq political society. Unlike al Wefaq, which is committed to peaceful protest, February 14's activists are known for burning tires at night in the Shi'a villages on the island and for battling with the police.

The movement, which articulates the desires of many young Bahrainis, particularly the Shi'a, has weakened al Wefaq in several respects. This movement appears to lend credibility to the government's claims that there is no point in making concessions to al Wefaq because the society does not control the street and has little authority to stop the violence carried out by February 14. Similarly, the government uses the presence of the February 14 Coalition to claim that Iran is behind the protests. In fact, there is evidence that some radical youth are now seeking help from Hizballah in Beirut. They have opened offices there and appear to be conducting their operations in Bahrain from Lebanon.⁶⁶

An activist from February 14, who wished to remain anonymous for security reasons, offered this explanation of the group in an interview in December 2012:

It's very important to understand that most of the February 14 youth are very critical of al Wefaq's political party. Most of the young people who represent this movement have had long-term frustration with al Wefaq even before February 14, 2011. For some, the frustration came after Wefaq decided to run for the elections in 2006. Many felt

⁶⁵ "Bahrain 'Coalition for a Republic' issues first statement." *Jadaliyya*, March 9, 2011. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/839/bahraini-coalition-for-a-republic-issues-first-statement>.

⁶⁶ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, September 2012.

betrayed as they sensed that Wefaq was ... willing to cooperate with the regime which they despise. For others, the frustration goes way back to the establishment of al Wefaq as a party in the early 2000s. This party originally included several schools of thoughts and ideologies. Later, most of these groups split from al Wefaq, leaving it in the hands of the dominant Shi'a group headed by Sheikh Isa Qassem. Most of the groups who left al Wefaq were always very critical of its positions and especially issues like participating in the elections.

Now ... the main differences between the youth of February 14 and al Wefaq are concentrated around the issue of a dialogue with the regime. While al Wefaq stated many times that they are open to dialogue, the youth of February 14 believe that this regime is not trustworthy and any dialogue with it is a betrayal to the people. ... The Feb 14 youth believe that there is a need to escalate things to put pressure on the government, which is why they are supportive of burning tires and throwing Molotov cocktails. They genuinely believe that these acts put pressure on the government and change the rules of the game. They believe those actions are defense mechanisms rather than attacks. In the Middle East, you have to use a little violence to change a regime. Pure nonviolent actions do not work in this region, and our actions are not purely violent. By using those actions, we aim to stop the regime from attacking our villages, not to kill anybody, and it works.⁶⁷

One Sunni activist, who has worked to establish dialogue between the Sunni and Shi'a, expressed

frustration with February 14 in his efforts to bring about national unity: "The February 14 movement controls the street. Some of their leaders are from the villages. The young kids in the movement burn tires and provide the regime with an excuse to say the entire opposition is violent, which is not the case. And February 14 is also damaging for al Wefaq, which cannot control the young kids. The government asks al Wefaq, 'If you cannot stop the tires from burning, why should we negotiate with you?'"⁶⁸ Sheikh Ali Salman of al Wefaq said the United Nations should get involved to investigate the government's human rights violations. "It is not good for the United States and it is not good for the opposition for the hardliners in the government and the hardliners in the opposition to control the situation."⁶⁹

Since the February 14 movement began its activity, burning tires by night in the Shi'a villages and clashing with police and staging protests by day have become their hallmarks. Their mobilization efforts are organized through online sites and Twitter. Fuelling the radicalization at least among some in the February 14 movement is a perception that the United States ignores the opposition and the human rights violations. One leader in the February 14 movement had this to say about the United States and western governments:

We do not need the West and we know they are never going to help us in our struggle. We know that we do not look good in the western media, but we know that will never be a game changer. The strength of the youth of Bahrain is what was keeping this movement going all these months, not the support of the West. We are facing an enemy which has no honor, and we have been fighting with honor for many months

⁶⁷ Anonymous. Interviewed by author's researcher. Via Skype, December 2012.

⁶⁸ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

while we were watching the West siding with those who have no honor. We do not expect the West to help us in our fight.⁷⁰

Ali Salman, the secretary-general of al Wefaq, said the political society tries to encourage the youth to carry out peaceful protests, but the crisis encourages violence. “The youth believe they are alone. The police use violence against them and no one comes to protect them. The youth tell us, ‘the police come to our house and rape our sisters and beat people in the jails. You tell us not to use violence, but you cannot protect us.’”⁷¹

The violent factions within the opposition also provide Sunnis, who may oppose the government, with a reason not to support the opposition. “Our main difference with the opposition is the manner with which we believe political reform can be achieved,” said Abdul Hakim al Subhi, head of the political circle for the Gathering of National Unity. “We demand reform but we disagree with the opposition’s violent ways of achieving it. In fact, we agree with the opposition in all of their demands for political reform and democracy, minus of course the demands for the fall of the regime... We do not believe Bahrain should strive to become a constitutional democracy. However, we think that should be achieved gradually. To impose it right now is to impose the views of one sect over the other. Sectarianism should be resolved first. The constitutional monarchy can come later through the guidance of the royal family.”⁷²

The Bahraini-state run media is at least in part responsible for the radicalization of the Shi’a. Six of seven of the daily newspapers are pro-government and the broadcasting service is state-controlled. “It

is clear the media in Bahrain is biased toward the GoB [government of Bahrain],” the BICI report states.⁷³

“The lack of access to mainstream media creates frustration within opposition groups and results in these groups resorting to other media such as social media. This can have a destabilizing effect because social media outlets are both untraceable and unaccountable, characteristics which present problems when such media is used to promulgate hate speech and incitement to violence.”⁷⁴ The BICI also concluded that “there was a tendency in the Bahraini media to defame protestors, both during and after the events of February/March 2011.”⁷⁵

As some Shi’a become more radicalized with no hope of a political settlement or an end to religiously-based discrimination, the potential for Iran’s involvement grows. But even if ties between Iran and some domestic groups are developed, to date there is little evidence the outcome would be a push to create an Islamic state in Bahrain simply because there appears to be little support there for theocratic governance. Al Wefaq’s position is that society is opposed to an Islamic state and to the institution of the Iranian system of *velayat e-faqih*, according to Khalil Marzooq, a leader in al Wefaq who had participated in the failed National Dialogue in 2011.⁷⁶

A majority of Shi’a do appear to reject a religiously-based government, but this could change depending upon to what degree the Shi’a youth become radicalized and to what degree they are able to influence the broader Shi’a population. In a 2009 poll conducted by Justin Gengler, then a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan who has conducted authoritative research in Bahrain, of 435

⁷⁰ Anonymous. Interviewed by author’s researcher. Manama, December 2012.

⁷¹ Salman, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington DC, January 8, 2013.

⁷² al Subhi, Abdul Hakim. Interviewed by author’s researcher. Manama, December 2012.

⁷³ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 401.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 401.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 400.

⁷⁶ Marzooq, Khalil. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Manama, April 2012.

households, about a quarter of all Shi'a and Sunni respondents opposed a system of government based on religion. Only a quarter of the Shi'a interviewed said *sharia* was "a suitable" or "very suitable" form of governance, and 63 percent said it was "not at all suitable." According to Gengler, even those who said their political views were close to the radical al Haqq movement, were no more likely to support an Islamist-only parliamentary system or a *sharia*-based state than those who said their views were close to those of al Wefaq.⁷⁷

In response to the continuing protests, some Sunni have become far less inhibited to expose their discriminatory views of the Shi'a, some of which are driven by fears that the Shi'a want to turn Bahrain into a theocracy. For Sunni government loyalists, the state-run media has provided a formidable mechanism to express their views. They have also turned enthusiastically to Twitter.

Two of the topics dominating the state-media coverage are Iran's intentions in Bahrain and the Shi'a opposition. Appearing in the popular *Al Watan*, a newspaper reflecting the hardliners' views, Faisal Al Shaikh, a well-known columnist, wrote on September, 9, 2012: "Every time the revolutionary followers of Iran try to separate their religious and political affiliations from Iran and every time they respond to our fears concerning Iran's interests in Bahrain by shouting 'leave Iran out of this,' Iran comes in and publicly demonstrates how it considers the 'invasion of Bahrain' one of its top priorities."

An online discussion forum, simply called "Bahrain Forums," reflects the current animosity between Sunni and Shi'a. The forum is used to introduce ideas which are then spread through social media

networks. In a discussion thread begun in November 2012, titled, "Oh Sunni of Bahrain, call on the Shi'a that their days of Ashura be sad and black," the views of some indicated that they do not believe Shi'a are real Muslims.

The initial post reads: "Oh Sunni of Bahrain, we know that nothing of what they do is in any way related to Islam and that is full of pointless superstitions and myths that are inspired by their empty turbans. There is no Islamic basis to their actions," the author said. Referring to the time off during the Ashura holiday, the author claims that the Shi'a have taken a break from vandalism and types of "terrorism." He then writes: "This all means that we should pray that all the days of the Shi'a become like Ashura, full of darkness, sorrow, and grief. It is true that we still will be annoyed by their ugly voices but that is a small price to pay. Or, what do you think?"⁷⁸

In another titled, "They disrupt the economy to appease their Shi'a leaders but then ... demand an improvement in their standard of living," the author writes: "In the Name of God, at the same time that they flaunt disrupting the economy, holding up traffic, terrorizing people, and abusing security men to appease their Shi'a leaders, they still demand an improvement in their standard of living. Does this make sense?"⁷⁹

What is striking about the Bahrain Forums is that even those Sunni who criticize the government and might be expected to share common ground with some pro-reform Shi'a, are still anti-Shi'a in principle. In one post, "Please don't clap for the government," the writer complains about the economic conditions in Bahrain compared with

⁷⁷ Gengler, Justin. "How radical are Bahrain's Shi'a?" *Foreign Affairs*, May 15, 2011. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67855/justin-gengler/how-radical-are-bahrains-shi'a>.

⁷⁸ al-Ruh, Waleef. "Oh Sunni of Bahrain, call on the Shi'a that their days of Ashura be sad and black." *Bahrain Forums*, November 22, 2012. <https://bahraiforums.com/vb/%E5%E4%C7-%C7%E1%C8%CD%D1%ED%E4/1024398.htm>.

⁷⁹ al-Ghareeq, Ta'ir. "They disrupt the economy to appease their Shi'a leaders but then ... demand an improvement in their standard of living." *Bahrain Forums*, December 3, 2012. <https://bahraiforums.com/vb/%E5%E4%C7-%C7%E1%C8%CD%D1%ED%E4/1027323.htm>.

much wealthier Gulf states. “The Bahraini people are God’s people in comparison to the well-being of the nearby Gulf countries, especially when we look at our small population. We live in the worst conditions in the Arabian Gulf, in spite of our oil revenues. ... How long will the Bahraini people have to wait? And why do we have to wait until the opposition finishes what it is doing in the country and the streets? Why do the government supporters have to wait? ... We don’t deny that we are loyal to Bahrain and Al Khalifa. ... We now await change from the government.”⁸⁰

Although difficult to quantify empirically, the monitoring of Twitter feeds during major developments in the Bahraini uprising can nonetheless provide some insight into the ideas and attitudes coursing through society at a given time. An analysis of Twitter exchanges at the time of major developments, shows a startling degree of animosity among the Sunni toward their Shi’a countrymen. The commentaries indicate a few consistent trends:

- Those Sunnis who are vocally and vehemently anti-Shi’a are quite willing to voice their displeasure with the government when they come to believe security forces are not harsh enough in their treatment of the protest movement. For example, al Wefaq organized a rally in the village of Muqsha’a the weekend of December 1, 2012, despite a government ban on protest. Multiple Sunni commentators criticized the Interior Ministry for not cracking down on the protestors.
- Among the slurs used by Sunnis in referring to the Shi’a is “Safavid,” a reference to the powerful Persian dynasty that established Twelver Shi’ism as its official

religion of Iran. The term is directed at Shi’a in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq, and used to indicate an international conspiracy masterminded by Iran to take power in the region.

- Extremist Sunni do not appear to understand the dynamics of the Shi’a opposition. They lump all opposition factions into the same category and focus on al Wefaq, almost never distinguishing it from the February 14 movement, and fixate on the need for al Wefaq to renounce violence and “terrorism,” despite the fact that the society has virtually no control over the *shabab*, the young Bahrainis in the villages who burn tires and use Molotov cocktails.

A snapshot of Twitter feeds after the crown prince on December 8, 2012 called for a renewed national dialogue with the opposition, indicates that for both sides the scars from the recent uprising may pose too great of an obstacle, at least for now. Nor does this bode well for any future national reconciliation.

The following examples present are exchanges from what are assumed to be Sunni commentators:

“How is the government satisfied to engage in dialogue about its internal affairs with Iran! #Al Wefaq clients_Iran #Ali_Salman_serves them_obediently #Bahrain @boammar”⁸¹

“The honorable of the nation don’t welcome entry in dialogue with those who betrayed the nation!!!”⁸²

“No to dialogue with those who betrayed the home, no to dialogue with those who

⁸⁰ al Qalam, Samat. “Please don’t clap for the government.” *Bahrain Forums*, December 3, 2012. <https://bahrainforums.com/vb/%E5%E4%C7-%C7%E1%C8%CD%D1%ED%E4/1027234.htm>.

⁸¹ al-Bahrain, Shahen (@Shahen2009). Twitter post, December 8 2012, 1:48 p.m. <http://twitter.com/shahen2009>.

⁸² Al Khalifa, Khalifa R (@Bu_Daji70). Twitter post, December 8 2012, 1:39 p.m. http://twitter.com/Bu_Daji70.

wanted to hand over the home, no to dialogue because the people decision makers, no to dialogue with the shame and traitors circle #bahrain @alfarooo8”⁸³

“After they burned and they killed, they beg for dialogue! My dear Sunnis, are you okay with engaging in dialogue with those who stabbed and vandalized and killed your children and demolish your nation!? @boammar @alfarooo8 @Deertybhr”⁸⁴

Two Shi’a figures similarly criticize the idea of dialogue:

“I do not understand the contradiction! How unbelievable that those who call for reform through dialogue and national reconciliation, to pay tribute at the same time to those who were causing us to be in those conditions! #bahrain”⁸⁵

“All the delegations and organizations and international authorities call the regime to serious dialogue with the opposition, and that their claims that the door of dialogue was not closed is a windy mirage #Bahrain”⁸⁶

Comments among the Shi’a exchanged on the Shi’a-dominated “Bahrain Online,” meanwhile, criticize al Wafaq’s positive response to the crown prince’s call for dialogue and once again illustrated the divisions within the opposition movement. After the crown prince’s announcement, Sheikh Ali Salman, the influential Shi’a cleric, called upon members of the opposition to avoid the slogan,

“Down with [King] Hamad,” which has become common. One commentator wrote: “Every village believes in the slogan ‘Down with Hamad’ [*yasqut Hamad*], we must not welcome the marches of al Wafaq.”⁸⁷

“Your dialogue does not represent us because we decided not to dialogue with murderers

Your dialogue does not represent us because the people are the source of legitimacy

Your dialogue does not represent us because the regime has always betrayed us

Your dialogue does not represent us because they confiscate our views

Your dialogue does not represent us because the regime is still killing us

Your dialogue does not represent us because the regime fought our religion

Your dialogue does not represent us because the regime raped our women

Your dialogue does not represent us because the regime killed our loved ones”⁸⁸

Despite such extremism, there are signs that some elements among Bahrain’s Sunnis are seeking accommodation in order to focus on basic reforms aimed at helping all citizens. These include a democratic form of governance; increased economic opportunity; and adequate housing for all. In addition, some figures have emerged outside of the increasingly polarized extremes that make up the radical opposition and pro-government camps—those who claim loyalty but are also critical of all parties in the dispute.

⁸³ Khalid, Mohammed (@Boammar). Twitter post, December 8 2012, 11:07 a.m. <http://twitter.com/Boammar>.

⁸⁴ Anonymous (@H_caramela). Twitter post, December 8, 2012, 11:01 a.m. http://twitter.com/H_caramela.

⁸⁵ Mahfood Abbas Hassan (@AbbasMahfood). Twitter post, December 13 2012, 10:28 a.m. <http://twitter.com/AbbasMahfood>.

⁸⁶ Kadhém, Sayed Jameel (@Sjkadem). Twitter post, December 10 2012, 3:04 a.m. <http://twitter.com/SJkadhém>.

⁸⁷ Jaysi. “Every village believes in the slogan ‘down with Hamad,’ we must not welcome the marches of al Wafaq.” *Bahrain Online*, December 8, 2012. <http://bahrainonline.org/showthread.php?t=464625>.

⁸⁸ al Muqawim, Al ‘ilam. “Campaign: your dialogue does not represent us.” *Bahrain Online*, December 13, 2012. <http://bahrainonline.org/showthread.php?t=467460>.

One such figure is Abu Omar al Shaf'i, a prominent commentator on social media sites, including Twitter. The name al Shaf'i is a pseudonym, for the poster writes anonymously and only identifies himself as an "ordinary person and ordinary citizen," who "loves his nation of Bahrain." As a Sunni, he claims to have not been politically engaged until "the division was strong and extremism appeared clear to all," in the wake of events in February 2011.⁸⁹

Al Shaf'i has commented extensively on the crisis throughout 2012, by means of an active Twitter account, which he uses to engage in political dialogue, and through interviews and articles in the pro-government newspaper, *Al Watan*. He has carved out an independent position that is critical at times of both pro- and anti-government factions. His commentary has highlighted a number of different phenomena and aspects of the conflict with a level of thoughtfulness and analytical clarity that sets him apart from partisans on either side. Some examples of his political writings include:

- Pointing out how the government attempts to give the impression that reforms are underway, without every providing concrete details. "So in the literature of the state media we always find remarks focused on the continuing pursuit of reforms and the development of the democratic experience, and there is no ceiling for reform. These repeated elastic and resonant phrases are broadly optimistic, tapping into the reader's imagination and dreams, each individual interpreting it according to his

desire and needs, which is what may give the impression that the government has a degree of flexibility and is already looking for serious dialogue."⁹⁰

- Objectively discussing the reasons that the National Unity Dialogue initiative in 2011 failed, including the effective absence of some key parties, as well as the nature of the recommendations: "The national consensus dialogue resulted in many recommendations, but in the end, loose, general recommendations are subject to change and restructuring to suit the powerful, and in the end they remain non-binding recommendations, and as they say, things are measured by their results."⁹¹
- Calling for media reform and improvements in living conditions as necessary prerequisites to calm the charged sectarian atmosphere. He continually returns to the theme of Bahrain's living conditions, saying that "the foundation of the movement is living demands in the first place,"⁹² while also noting that the February 14 movement "tarred the Sunni street as silent and submissive, although it shares the same problems of living conditions as the opposition street." He calls for the "rationalization of the media space" in order to "remove the sectarian tensions that are eating away the hearts of some."⁹³

Through incisive political commentary that targets both the "extremist opposition parties" and the "militant loyalist parties,"⁹⁴ al Shaf'i has drawn an

⁸⁹ "Abu Omar al Shaf'i: my views represent me alone...the Sunni street is 'lost' and 'opposition' needs 'courage.'" *Al-Watan*, December 18, 2012. <http://www.alwasatnews.com/3755/news/read/723919/1.html>.

⁹⁰ al Shaf'i, Abu Omar. "Readings in the political landscape, exploring scenarios to solve the Bahraini crisis, part one." *ALSHAF3EE*, December 8, 2012. http://www.alshaf3ee.blogspot.com/2012/12/blog-post_7494.html.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Abu Omar al Shaf'i, analyst of the situation on 'Twitter': the Bahraini political crisis is similar to a chemical equation." *Al-Watan*, October 5, 2012. <http://www.alwasatnews.com/data/2012/3681/pdf/rs12.pdf>.

⁹⁴ al Shaf'i, Abu Omar. "Readings in the political landscape, exploring scenarios to solve the Bahraini crisis, part two." *ALSHAF3EE*, December 13, 2012. http://www.alshaf3ee.blogspot.com/2012/12/blog-post_13.html.

eager audience of more than 20,000 followers on Twitter, many of whom may welcome a political view outside of the increasingly fragmented camps.

SHI‘A MARGINALIZATION

As much as the uprising in Bahrain was a response to the anti-authoritarian revolts in the Arab world, it was also driven by a history of religious discrimination and socio-economic disparity between Shi‘a and Sunni. In other words, the marginalization of the Shi‘a in the public and economic spheres provoked political discontent at a time of great change in the Middle East.

For centuries, the Shi‘a in Bahrain have fought for their rights and have generally been rebuffed by the ruling family, which has interpreted these demands by the majority sect in the country as a threat to the established order. To preserve the power of the minority Sunni population, the Al Khalifa tribe has seen to it that the Shi‘a are under-represented in the most powerful positions in government ministries, and it excluded the Shi‘a for the most part from the security services, including the police. There is also well-documented discrimination in promotions in universities, in the medical profession, and in access to public housing.

The U.S. State Department July-December 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, published in September 2011, states: “Although there were exceptions, the Sunni Muslim citizens often received preference for employment, particularly in sensitive government positions such as the security forces and the military. Only a few Shi‘a citizens held significant posts in the defense and internal security forms. ... Although the police force reported

it did not record or consider religious belief when hiring employees, Shi‘a continued to assert they were unable to obtain government positions, especially in the security services, because of religious affiliation.”⁹⁵

The 2009 International Religious Freedom report, meanwhile, reports: “Shi‘a were underrepresented in the Ministry of Education in both the leadership and in the ranks of head teachers who teach Islamic studies and supervise and mentor other teachers. At the secondary school level, out of more than a dozen Islamic studies head teachers, only two were Shi‘a. Although there were many Islamic studies teachers who were Shi‘a, school authorities discouraged them from introducing content about Shi‘a traditions and practices and instructed them to follow the curriculum.”⁹⁶

It also stated: “Regional Sunni-Shi‘a tensions had an impact on intra-Muslim relations. In general the Sunni Muslim minority enjoyed favored status. The private sector tended to hire Shi‘a in lower paid, less skilled jobs. Educational, social, and municipal services in most Shi‘a neighborhoods were inferior to those found in Sunni communities.”⁹⁷

The intentions and strategies among some within the Bahraini government to marginalize the Shi‘a population were revealed in a startling document, which was leaked in 2006 and became known as the “Bandar Report.” According to this study, the objectives of these government figures included: controlling the outcome of the second set of municipal and parliamentary elections in 2006; minimizing the influence of opposition forces by mobilizing the Sunni street against perceived Shi‘a dominance; and manipulating the country’s demographic balance.

⁹⁵ U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report.” [State.gov](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168261.htm). Sept. 13, 2011 http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168261.htm

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report.” [State.gov](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127345.htm). October 26, 2009 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127345.htm>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The report was crafted by Salah al Bandar, a British-Sudanese citizen who was an adviser to the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs. Several government employees began to contact him in January 2006 about what they said was an organized campaign by elements within the state apparatus to raise sectarian tensions. Al Bandar spent most of 2006 investigating and acquiring financial documents that linked the various actors together. In September 2006, he presented his report, which was published under the auspices of the Gulf Center for Democratic Development, of which he was the Secretary General, to King Hamad, as well as to western diplomats and the media. Al Bandar was promptly deported and threatened with criminal charges if he returned to Bahrain.⁹⁸

The report alleges that this project was undertaken by a network led by Sheikh Ahmed bin Ateyalla Al Khalifa, the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, head of the Central Information Organization, and chairman of the executive committee overseeing the 2006 elections. The report claims that Sheikh Ahmed's network had been active since October 2004, and in the two years between then and the report's release in the summer of 2006, the conspirators had undertaken a number of efforts, which cost an estimated BD 165,000 per month, or BD 2 million over the two-year period.⁹⁹ The plot was designed to:

- Collect intelligence on the activities of Shi'a opposition groups.
- Coordinate advertisements, mosque sermons, and efforts to convert Shi'a to Sunni Islam.
- Monitor Shi'a internet forums in order to serve as agents to provoke animosity and participate under false identities.

- Prepare propaganda materials in the form of opinion pieces to be published in the newspaper *Al Watan*, a pro-government publication. *Al Watan* ostensibly served as the key vehicle for the anti-Shi'a propaganda created by this secret network.
- Create a number of civil society organizations and use them as fronts for the government. These included the Jurists Society, Bahrain First, Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, and Bahrain Political Society.

According to the report, *Al Watan's* role in the campaign began in 2005, from the very time that the newspaper was established. It identifies a number of key collaborators as holding high positions in the paper's leadership, including acting editor Jamal Yousif Muhammad al Asiri and Nasser Muhammad Yousif Laurie, who was a member of the newspaper's board of directors and held 10 percent of its shares. From its inception to this day, *Al Watan* has consistently published anti-Shi'a material, much of it originating from the conspirators unveiled by the Bandar Report. The campaign in *Al Watan* was instrumental in influencing Sunni public opinion during the height of the uprising in 2011, and appears to be ongoing.

In interpreting the 216-page report, the Gulf Center for Democratic Development said that the secret network was specifically intended to sabotage reform-minded figures within the government:

The future of the reform project is linked to mechanisms of renewing the blood of the political elite and the development of the bases it stands upon in ways that allow pluralism and opens opportunities for the development of the democratization

⁹⁸ Fattah, Hassan M. "Report cites bid by Sunnis in Bahrain to rig elections." *New York Times*, October 2, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/02/world/africa/02iht-web.1002bahrain.2997505.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

⁹⁹ al Bandar, Salah. "Bahrain: The Democratic Option & Exclusion Mechanisms." *Gulf Center for Democratic Development* (September 2006): 31. https://docs.google.com/file/d/18MyshDHDSi0x14bcJySRWWfxavOScMbPIYa2wPwBc1XYFLPsw0H_Kh_u_dX/edit?hl=en_US.

process in safe and healthy ways. Therefore, the attempt to control the composition of the political elite and dominate its direction and choices in accordance with a vision outside the framework of legal and constitutional legitimacy is considered a serious threat to the entire reform project of His Majesty the King and leads into a dark tunnel. The group that is exposed by this report has employed the project's mechanisms and groups of people associated with it (all Sunni, mostly sympathetic with a specific political direction and its overwhelming majority belongs to a single ethnic group) to the point where it has presented institutionalized divisions rather than overcoming them.¹⁰⁰

This state-sponsored project of political, social, and economic marginalization of the Shi'a, which the Bandar report revealed, has succeeded for the most part over a long period of time. There are no Bahraini government statistics available, but according to the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, an organization which is part of the opposition, 42.65 percent of the top positions in government are held by the royal family; 42.65 are held by other, non-royal Sunnis; and only 14.7 percent are held by the Shi'a. According to the same study, the Sunnis and the royal family comprise 98 percent of the positions in the Bahraini security apparatus. A 2009 survey conducted by Justin Gengler found that 13 percent of Sunni households reported at least one member employed by the police or the military. No Shi'a male who offered occupational data said he was employed in the police or military.¹⁰¹

In a study by the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Shi'a represented only 5 percent of those in ministerial cabinets in 2008, compared with 12 percent of Al Khalifas. According to the same study, there are no Shi'a represented in the Crown Prince's office, the Supreme National Council of Defense, the National Guard, the Bahrain Defense Forces, or the Ministry of Interior.¹⁰²

The nature of Bahrain's sectarianism poses serious obstacles to the development of a Shi'a middle class. Although there are no official economic statistics distinguishing the Sunni from the Shi'a, it is widely believed that the unemployment and underemployment are disproportionately higher among the Shi'a community compared with the national average.¹⁰³ Compounding the problem for the Shi'a is that they have competition from the Bahraini nationals from Asia and the subcontinent. The number of Bahraini nationals within the labor market by 2013 is expected to double that of 2003.¹⁰⁴

In addition, a report issued in December 2012 by the United States Department of Labor found that the Bahraini government's responses to the unrest were "inconsistent" with the Bahraini government's requirements under its Free Trade Agreement with the United States.¹⁰⁵ The report was a response to a complaint filed by the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) on April 21, 2011, which alleged that Bahrain's government was in violation of its commitments under its trade agreement with the United States. The United States Department of Labor stated:

¹⁰⁰ al Bandar, Salah. "Bahrain: The Democratic Option & Exclusion Mechanisms." *Gulf Center for Democratic Development* (September 2006): 7. https://docs.google.com/file/d/18MyshDHDSi0x14bcJySRWWfxavOScMbPIYa2wPwBc1XYFLPsw0H_Kh_u_dX/edit?hl=en_US.

¹⁰¹ Gengler, Justin. "Bahrain's Sunni Awakening." *Middle East Research and Information Project*, January 17, 2012. <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712>.

¹⁰² Bahrain Center for Human Rights. "Discrimination in Bahrain: The Unwritten Law." September 2003. <http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/BCHRreportonDiscrimination.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Wright, Steven. "Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain." *Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University* (April 20, 2008): 10.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ "Public Report of Review of U.S. Submission 2011-01 (Bahrain)." [Dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/otla/20121220Bahrain.pdf). December 20, 2012. <http://www.dol.gov/ilab/programs/otla/20121220Bahrain.pdf>.

The report concludes that the Government of Bahrain, in particular the Minister of Labor, has made significant efforts to ensure reinstatement of dismissed workers. All but a few hundred of the workers dismissed following the March 2011 general strike have now been reinstated. However, the report also concludes that important components of the government's response to the unrest that began in February 2011 appear to be inconsistent with Bahrain's labor commitments under the FTA related to freedom of association and non-discrimination. The report also notes the deterioration in the labor rights environment in Bahrain, marked by restrictions on trade union freedoms and political and sectarian-based discrimination against Shi'a workers.

The report also noted that many of those people back to work have been assigned to inferior jobs and have not always received restitution for lost wages they were owed. The report found that the Bahraini government "has taken no steps to directly ban discrimination in employment and occupation in its laws."¹⁰⁶

BAHRAIN'S CLERICS: RELIGIOUS GUIDES OR POLITICAL FIGURES?

Two key figures within the Bahraini opposition movement—which is predominately composed of Twelver Shi'a—are the clerics Sheikh Isa Qassem and Sheikh Ali Salman. Whereas Salman serves a formal role as the Secretary-General of al Wefaq, Qassem's stature and connection to the movement derives from his status as the senior Shi'a figure in Bahrain.

Isa Qassem was born in the village of Diraz in 1940, the son of a fisherman. In the early 1960s,

he went to the Iraqi shrine city of Najaf to further his religious studies, staying there for four years. He came back to Bahrain to teach for two years before returning to Najaf for further study under Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al Sadr.¹⁰⁷ After Bahrain's independence in 1971, Qassem was elected to the short-lived 1973 Parliament, and was considered one of the six members of the so-called "religious bloc," which regularly clashed with the government over social measures.

In the early 1990s, he went to the Iranian city of Qom to deepen his studies in Islamic jurisprudence. Though more closely affiliated with Shi'a thought and figures in Iraq, this choice was partially dictated by geopolitical circumstance, given how Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime suppressed the Shi'a during the Iran-Iraq war and thereafter.

Qassem's move to Qom coincided with the beginning of the period of troubles in Bahrain that lasted until the death of King Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1999. Qassem returned in March 2001 after the beginning of King Hamad's reform project, announcing that he would be stepping away from politics. In 2004, he founded the Ulema Council, which is broadly viewed as an extension of Najaf. Qassem has never held a formal position in al Wefaq, instead maintaining informal influence through weekly sermons in the village of Diraz, and the activities of the Ulama Council.

Ali Salman, now the political head of al Wefaq, originally studied mathematics in Saudi Arabia before spending nearly five years between 1987 and 1992 studying at a seminary in Qom. When Qassem left Bahrain for Iran, he chose Salman to become the Friday prayer leader at his primary mosques. Salman became a national figure during the protests of the 1990s, and was jailed from December 1993 until January 1995. Thereafter he moved to London,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ al Saba'a, Wasam. "Displaced people from the countryside... 'the religious bloc' in the Parliament of 1973." *Al Wasat*, October 22, 2010. <http://www.alwasatnews.com/2968/news/read/493809/1.html>.

where he worked with the Bahrain Freedom Movement until being permitted to return to Bahrain after the start of the reform project.

One of the largest concerns among western governments and analysts has been the possibility that the political end goal of al Wefaq and more radical Shi'a factions is to institute *velayat e-faqih*—a concern exacerbated by the fact that these two key figures in the opposition movement are clerics who spent substantial time in Iran. Despite this, there is little meaningful evidence to suggest that this is the aim of the Bahraini opposition, though there may be outliers with more extreme ideologies. Nor do either Qassem or Salman appear to subscribe to the concept of *velayat e-faqih*. This is a typical statement of Salman: “We have national demands that have nothing to do with Iran. We are proud of being a sensible, mature, and progressive political movement that doesn't need to take instructions from Iran or any other country.”¹⁰⁸

Yet, at times, Qassem has verged on expressing support for supreme clerical rule. In a sermon on June 8, 2007, Qassem, speaking about Ayatollah Khomeini and the Iranian Revolution, said: “If all Islamists, regardless of their sects, gathered around this man, this revolution, this state and the peoples of this nation followed them, Islam would have been on a fast track to total victory.”¹⁰⁹

A review of Qassem's sermons from 2010 to 2012 posted on al Wefaq's website—which is a pre-selected collection of his public statements—indicates that his discourse on the role of religion and the state has shifted slightly and become more liberal. For example, on October 15, 2010, Qassem stated directly that Islam should influence the political

process. “Islam should influence politics and not politics influence Islam and whoever demonstrates a different interpretation to this truth is a liar.”¹¹⁰

But after the Bahraini uprising began and Qassem used his pulpit in the mosque to inspire the Shia-dominated opposition, he became an avid supporter of democracy. On December 23, 2011, he said: “We have to insist on our religious and national unity and let our insistence aggravate whoever it aggravates. When our united people demand the democracy that allows it to change the constitution, its laws, government, and destiny, it is not demanding a Shiite or Sunni democracy. Democracy does not discriminate by sect and does not befriend a certain school of thought and reject another. Democracy, in a political sense, does not discuss sects and does not touch them. Democracy exists to bring fairness to the people and not to bring tyranny.”¹¹¹

If Qassem's sermons indicate his true beliefs, he is distancing himself from Iranian-style governance. The Islamic republic has advanced clerical involvement in politics, which seemed to provide inspiration to the Arabs after the 1979 revolution, but is now more of a liability, given Iran's track record thirty-three years later. Fuller and Rend Francke wrote in 1999: “...The historical phenomenon of the Iranian revolution has been important not only as the first state controlled by the Shi'ite clergy, but also as the first Islamist state, that is committed to the implementation of political Islam. ... Thus the world's Islamists, whether they wish to or not, are also compelled to have an opinion on the Iranian experiment, because the character of Islamic governance will be partly judged by what happens in Iran.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Hammond, Andrew. “Interview-Bahrain Shi'ite leader says backs royal family.” *Reuters*, May 29, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/05/29/bahrain-shiite-idAFLDE74S0C720110529?sp=true>.

¹⁰⁹ Husain, Ed. “Iran's Man in Bahrain.” Council on Foreign Relations. April 27, 2012, <http://blogs.cfr.org/husain/2012/04/27/irans-man-in-bahrain/>.

¹¹⁰ Israel is Mocking the Arab Regimes: <http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=4109>

¹¹¹ Al Waefaq. “What freedom is left for the people?” *Alwefaq.net*. <http://alwefaq.net/cms/?p=6085>

¹¹² Fuller and Francke, 83.

It is impossible to quantify the influence clerics in Iran or Iraq have on the Shi'a in Bahrain. Nonetheless, some degree of clerical influence should be assumed. The Shi'a in Bahrain make regular trips to Qom, Najaf, and Karbala to visit the holy sites. The clerical networks in Iran clearly directly and indirectly influence the Shi'a in Bahrain and Iraq. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Shi'a have staged street protests, many times inspired or instigated by clerics who were educated in Iran.

Therefore, warnings by experts and U.S. officials alike of greater Iranian involvement in the Bahraini opposition in the near future cannot be dismissed. The Iranians are in a position to fund the more

radical youth who are in the opposition and who advocate regime change, which is in Iran's interest. Iran could provide the opposition with technical training and expertise in nearby Lebanon through Hizballah. Iran could also exploit the clerical networks that exist between the two countries; clerics in Bahrain, as in most countries, use the mosques as a platform for disseminating their political views. Such Iranian influence and intervention is likely if no serious steps toward reconciliation are taken. And it may not even have to be Iran which initiates the intervention. It is likely that when the Shi'a youth do not feel empowered to change the status quo, they will look for other means to do so.

PART TWO: THE CASE OF LEBANON

While Bahrain labors under the legacy of centuries of contestation between Shi'a and Sunni, Lebanon's unique standing as a "house of many mansions" serves to multiply exponentially the complexities of its own confessional and sectarian politics. It is also particularly vulnerable to cross-currents issuing forth from local and regional players and to its uneasy, but still binding, history as a once-integral part of Greater Syria, to which its own fate remains so closely intertwined.

Before Lebanon was established as a nation-state in 1920, sectarianism there had a long and sordid history, with a consistent narrative of the Shi'a as backward, no matter their accomplishments. The Shi'a more recently have no doubt become part of Lebanese heritage, but I will argue that the Shi'a rise in Lebanon is at risk for the first time in many decades because the Syrian war has placed the Shi'a leadership in an untenable position by supporting the Asad regime and provided the motivation for more radical Sunni religious movements to challenge the Shi'a's hard-earned place within Lebanon's historiographical landscape.

THE HISTORY OF SECTARIANISM TAKES A NEW TURN

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the political system has been structured formally by proportional representation among the main religious groups. In contrast to other Arab nation-states, such as Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Shi'a of Lebanon were the first in the Arab world to achieve a recognized identity. This came about first when the Ottomans imposed a proportional confessional system in 1843. The French later carved out Jabal Amil in the north and the Beqaa Valley in the south as formal Shi'a districts, even though they had been unofficially Shi'a for centuries.

Under the French mandate, the Ja'fari school of law was accorded official state recognition, allowing Shi'a clerics and scholars to issue rulings on religious practices particular to the Shi'a, including a heavy reliance on independent religious interpretation, or *ijtihad*, and such rituals as self-flagellation during Ashura.¹¹³ The Ja'fari courts were also empowered to adjudicate matters of personal status, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other

¹¹³ The Ja'fari school of law is followed by most Shi'a. It takes its name from Ja'far al-Sadeq, the sect's Sixth Imam.

property issues. This allowed the courts to become the “official face” of the Lebanese Shi’a community. “The court’s power to integrate Lebanese Shi’a was significant. ... The Shi’a community was increasingly inclined to consider itself a key player in Lebanon’s fledgling sectarian democracy.”¹¹⁴

While the Ja’fari courts institutionalized a recognizable Shi’a identity, the National Pact, agreed upon in 1943 to grant Lebanon independence from French colonial rule, failed to recognize the Shi’a, even though the 1932 census had recorded them as the third largest communal group.¹¹⁵ The pact gave the presidency and the post of army commander to the Maronite Christians, and the premiership to the Sunni.

In twentieth-century Lebanon, the Shi’a were the most economically disadvantaged of all major Lebanese sects. In Jabal Amil and the Beqaa, the Shi’a paid more taxes but received little in the way of government services. Jabal Amil had few paved roads and most of its three hundred predominantly Shi’a villages had no electricity.¹¹⁶ Until the 1960s, the Shi’a in Lebanon were mostly peasants and there was no sizeable middle class. The Shi’a constituted about 80 to 90 percent of the workforce in Beirut’s factories, and 50 to 60 percent of the service workers in predominantly Christian eastern section of Beirut.¹¹⁷

Real improvement in the standing of the Lebanese Shi’a can be traced in large measure to the emergence of Imam Musa al Sadr, an Iranian cleric born in the holy city of Qom, who arrived in Lebanon in 1960 to shepherd the Shi’a community. He founded the movement called Battalions of the

Resistance, which became known by the acronym AMAL, which also means hope in Arabic.¹¹⁸

Much like Hizballah, which came onto the Lebanese scene twenty-three years later, Sadr’s AMAL was able to bring unity to the community and to increase social and political cohesion by building schools and hospitals and by providing other services. But unlike Hizballah, Sadr relied upon local resources to support the movement, not Iranian funding. At the time, Sadr’s presence was welcomed by the small but wealthy Shi’a merchant elite, who had made vast sums in Africa before returning to Lebanon.¹¹⁹

Iran, however, was dissatisfied with Sadr’s moderate political stance. It is believed that Ayatollah Khomeini was at odds with the Lebanese cleric over Sadr’s opposition to the *vilayat-e faqih*, which Khomeini radicalized by making the supreme leader both the head of the state and supreme religious authority, and therefore beyond all reproach.

With the revolution victorious and Khomeini in power, Iran’s answer to Sadr was the creation of Hizballah, in 1982. Making it easy for Iran to start a rival movement, Sadr disappeared in August 1978 along with his two companions and a journalist. They had departed for Libya to meet with government officials. The three were never heard from again. It is widely believed that the former Libyan leader Muammar al Gaddafi ordered Sadr’s killing, but differing motivations existed from other corners as well. Unlike AMAL, Hizballah was driven thoroughly by religion and a radical ideology.

By the time of the signing in October 1989 of the Taif Accord among the warring Lebanese factions,

¹¹⁴ Weiss, 187.

¹¹⁵ Given the sensitivities in Lebanon to identity politics, it is little wonder that no official census that would define citizens by sect or religion has been carried out since the 1932 survey.

¹¹⁶ Nakash, Yitzak. *Reaching for Power; the Shi’a in the Modern Arab World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 105.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 114.

¹¹⁸ Fuller and Francke, 204.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 209.

the Shi'a had gained enough power to codify their place within the Lebanese confessional system. For the first time since independence from the French, which had given Christian Maronites power disproportionate to their actual numbers, the Taif agreement established overall Muslims population at parity with Christians, who had previously enjoyed an elevated status. Despite these gains, the political influence of Lebanon's Shi'a community still lagged its true demographic strength.

Before Taif, the Sunni Muslim prime minister was appointed by the Maronite president. Now, the prime minister answered directly to the elected legislature. The agreement increased the power of the Sunni and changed the power-sharing arrangement, and thus the political dynamic, among Lebanon's competing sects and faiths. This redistribution of power also benefited the Shi'a.

Most importantly for Hizballah, Taif called for the demilitarization of the Lebanese militias but exempted Hizballah on the grounds that it was fighting Israel's presence in southern Lebanon. This was effective recognition that Hizballah, with its organizational strength, ideological discipline, and unmatched military skills represented the single most powerful political actor on the Lebanese stage.

In Lebanon, a country where sectarianism has defined the modern state, bouts of conflict since independence were traditionally centered on a Christian-Muslim divide. But between the signing of the Taif Accord and the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who is believed to have been killed in a plot backed by Hizballah and Syria, Lebanon experienced the rise in power of the Shi'a, led by Hizballah. As a result, the historical divide between Muslims and Christians has been largely supplanted by a Sunni-Shi'a cleavage.

The nature of sectarianism in Lebanon has changed because the political context changed. Four events in particular have increased tensions between Lebanon's Sunni and Shi'a, even before the start of the Syrian uprising. One is Hariri's assassination and the subsequent findings of the Lebanon Special Tribunal in July 2011, which issued arrest warrants for four members of Hizballah. To this day, no arrests have been made and Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's leader, has vowed that no one will find the men. When the tribunal told the Lebanese government the men must be arrested, Nasrallah responded: "They cannot find them or arrest them in thirty days, or sixty days, or in a year, two years, thirty years, or three hundred years."¹²⁰ The rulings implicating Hizballah are a reaffirmation for many Sunnis that this faction is determined to triumph over all sects in Lebanon.

Also fueling renewed sectarianism was the 33-day war in 2006 between Hizballah and Israel, which most Lebanese, whatever their religious affiliation, see as a triumph for the Shi'a militia. Hizballah's ability to rain hundreds of rockets a day into Israel's north as far as Haifa had huge political repercussions back home in Lebanon: It not only showed the military strength of Hizballah, but it also cast the armed Shi'a movement as the only Lebanese force able to stand up to the Israeli army—something Arab governments had failed to do for the last sixty years. As a result, Hizballah emerged heroic in the eyes of many Lebanese. This view was strengthened by the way it quickly rebuilt parts of the country badly damaged by Israeli bombing, particularly in south Beirut.

Over time, however, triumphalism began to give way to old suspicions. After the Lebanese army relieved Hizballah positions south of the Litani river in the aftermath of the war, many began to question

¹²⁰ Nasrallah, Hassan. Quoted by BBC World News, July 3, 2011.

why Hizballah should remain an armed faction, as provided for in the Taif Accord. A pro-Hariri MP from Tripoli, Ahmad Fatfat voiced fear that Hizballah's goals would shift from fighting Israel to controlling Lebanon and "transforming it into a forward base on the Mediterranean for Iran."¹²¹

The war also enhanced Hizballah's self-confidence to such heights that in 2008, when Prime Minister Fouad Siniora shut down the militia's private telecommunications network—seen as vital to its command and control infrastructure—Nasrallah called the move "a declaration of war." Hizballah, joined by AMAL and the Syrian Nationalist Party, moved through the streets of West Beirut, a Sunni stronghold, fighting and overwhelming the government-supported forces. The fact that Hizballah fought against fellow Lebanese—something the party said it would never do, vowing instead to restrict its armed struggle to fighting Israel—caused many in Lebanon to accuse Hizballah of the "Persianization" of Beirut.

The success story of the Shi'a in Lebanon is exceptional and could not be applied to other Arab states because the conditions are unique. Chief among them are:

- External arms and funding from Iran and Syria (before the uprising began in 2011) for the Shi'a is unrivaled, aside from its direct involvement in Iraq.
- A legally-brokered accord, the Taif agreement, institutionalized Shi'a political power, backed by an armed militia in the form of Hizballah.
- A clearly-defined enemy, Israel, unites the Shi'a and provides a reason for its existence as a political bloc and a militia.

- Lebanon has a recent history of highly effective Shi'a leaders: Sadr; Nabi Berri, the parliament speaker and leader of Amal; and Hassan Nasrallah.

Given the Shi'a's long and arduous history of acquiring power in Lebanon, the likely fall of President Bashar al-Asad and the Alawite minority terrifies Hizballah, according to sources close to the movement. Hizballah representatives declined to be interviewed for this paper.¹²² Aside from statements made by Hizballah's leadership at rallies and other public events, for the most part the movement has gone quiet since the Syrian uprising began.

A future Sunni-dominated government in Syria—even one not hostile to Iran—is highly unlikely to extend support to Hizballah to the same degree which Asad has provided. Already, Hizballah's popularity in Lebanon has suffered, particularly among the Sunni who had supported the party since its 2006 war with Israel. The Sunni now are quick to denounce Hizballah for its continued public support for Asad, whose government has killed tens of thousands of civilians, chiefly Sunni, in cold blood. Although no statistics are available, anecdotally there is little doubt Hizballah has lost support from other communal groups in Lebanon.¹²³

An imam in the Beqaa, who describes himself as a Salafist, reflects the views of many Sunni whose favorable attitudes towards Hizballah's fight against Israel have now been overshadowed by disapproval over the party's position on Syria. He rejects Hizballah's explanation that it backs Asad because he supports the "resistance" against Israel.

"If a Sunni were committing these massacres in Syria, we would call for him to be killed, even if he

¹²¹ Khashan, Hilal. "Will Syria's Strife Rip Lebanon Apart?" *The Middle East Quarterly* 20 (2013). <http://www.meforum.org/3462/syria-civil-war-lebanon>

¹²² Hizballah officials. E-mail message to Geneive Abdo's researcher. Beirut, June 2012.

¹²³ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Lebanon, June 2012.

were killing Alawites, Christians, and Shi'a. We are not against Shi'a as Shi'a, but we are against political Shi'ism. ... Nobody supports the Syrian regime except the Shi'a of Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon," Sheikh Adnan Imama said. "If the Syrian regime considers itself secular, then why has it become sectarian in the eyes of political Shi'ism and Hizballah?"¹²⁴

Political Shi'ism, as Imama calls it, is an apt description for the support Shi'a have expressed for Asad and his loyalists. According to mainstream Muslim opinion, the Alawites represent a heterodox trend of Shi'ism, and some leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest Sunni Islamist movement in the region, has even denounced the Alawites as pagans.

After the Alawite leader Hafez al Asad came to power in Syria in 1970, he moved to secure for his sect recognized status within the world of Islam. In 1973, he asked Musa al Sadr, then the leading religious figure among the Lebanese Shi'a, for a *fatwa*, or religious decree, confirming that that the Alawites were in fact Shi'a Muslims.¹²⁵

Today, Shi'a support for Asad's son and successor, and for Alawite rule in general, is based primarily on politics, rather than religion, and the fear that a Sunni-led government in Damascus would be a threat to all Shi'a in the region. As a result of the Syrian conflict, "for the Lebanese Sunnis, the Shi'a have replaced Israel as the number one enemy," said a newspaper editor and founder whose publication reflects the views of Hizballah.¹²⁶

The Syrian civil war accelerated sectarian conflict in Lebanon, but tensions had been on the rise since May 2008, when Hizballah turned its arms on the Lebanese people for the first time since the 1975-1990 civil. In January 2011, a new government

was announced, dominated by Hizballah and its allies. Najib Mikati, a Hizballah-backed billionaire businessman, was tapped to replace Saad Hariri as prime minister. Since Hizballah effectively won control over the government, Lebanese society has become increasingly torn along the Shi'a-Sunni divide.

"The day Hizballah took over the streets in Beirut in 2008 is now like Karbala for the Sunnis. We were humiliated. May 7 created a wall between the Shi'a and Sunni," said Mohammad Kabbani, a former Future Movement member of parliament who was close to former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.¹²⁷

As the civil war in Syria takes on a more religious and sectarian characteristics, so too does the conflict in Lebanon. "Sectarianism is worse than the bombings and the shellings," said Sheikh Afif Nabulsi, one of the founders of Hizballah. "A small child now learns to hate the other sect. I never needed bodyguards. I used to walk in the market alone. But now I need bodyguards. This sectarianism is a sin."¹²⁸

The events that have unfolded in Lebanon since the start of the Syrian war should be viewed in two different aspects: some are due to the indirect effects of that conflict, while others are a result of the immediate spillover of the violence into northern Lebanon. For example, the violent clashes in an area outside Tripoli between the Shi'a in Jabal Mohsen and the Sunnis in Bab al Tabbaneh district reflect tensions that go back generations. The Syrian conflict has merely inflamed old sectarian passions.

There is no doubt that, not only in Tripoli, but in other areas of Lebanon as well, this animosity has been exacerbated by Sunni sheikhs using the situation in Syria to secure new political and social

¹²⁴ Diab, Afif. "Bekaa Salafi Leader: Wishing to Build Bridges." *Al Akhbar*, October 12, 2012.

¹²⁵ Louer, Laurence. *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 196-197.

¹²⁶ Louer, Laurence. *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 196-197.

¹²⁷ Kabbani, Mohammad. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 27, 2012.

¹²⁸ Nabulsi, Afif. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 25, 2012.

power. Sunni Salafist imams now regularly use their Friday prayer sermons to condemn the Shi'a in the Friday prayers on political and theological grounds. For the first time in Lebanon's history, the Salafists, historically quietist and non-political, are openly joining the political fray.

"Lebanon has a history of Salafism, but the Salafists now are different from the old ones," said Hani Fahs, the Shi'a religious scholar in Beirut who urges the Shi'a to become involved in Arab societies where they live, instead of giving their loyalty to Iran. "The old ones developed as a result of colonialism. The ones now want Islamic *sharia*. There are differences among the Salafists, but all at some point will be in the *jihad*. The Salafist mentality starts like a rose and then it becomes a thorn."¹²⁹

SYRIAN WAR SPILLS OVER INTO LEBANON

Events in Tripoli have played an important role in advancing the Sunni position inside Lebanon throughout the uprising. Suspicion runs deep all around: the Alawites of the region suspect the Sunni are providing safe passage for Syrian rebels fighting against Asad's government, while the Sunni suspect the Shi'a of smuggling arms into Damascus to help Asad's army. The Alawites of Jabal Mohsen support Syria's Alawite government and are allies of Hizballah. The Sunnis of Bab al Tabbaneh support the Syrian opposition.

"Over the last six months, the on-going turmoil in the Syrian Arab Republic has further affected Lebanon, increasing political polarization and concern that the unrest in Syria could have negative consequences or Lebanon's stability," the United Nations secretary-general stated in his semi-annual report, issued on October 18, 2012. "In particular,

domestic tensions have significantly increased across Lebanon among groups with diverging positions vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis, leading to armed clashes that resulted in death and injury in the north of the country."¹³⁰

As clashes routinely erupt in Tripoli, they are echoed up the road in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al Tabbaneh—villages separated by a small road, evocatively known as Syria Street. Bab al Tabbaneh, home to many of the Sunni militias, is a neighborhood situated beneath the steep hill where Jabal Mohsen is located. Both districts are impoverished. The pictures of Bashar al-Asad in Jabal Mohsen and the flags of the Free Syrian Army in Bab al Tabbaneh replicate the story of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon.

The assassination on October 19, 2012, of Brig. General Wissam al Hassan, a respected Sunni security chief and Rafik Hariri loyalist who was aiding the Syrian opposition, made a lasting impression on Shi'a-Sunni relations in Lebanon. It is the most significant example to date of the spillover effects of the Syrian conflict. The assassination exposed the lawlessness and dysfunction of the Lebanese state to an embarrassing degree. It also showed that, if indeed Asad were behind the assassination, Syria still carries a big stick in Lebanon and has little regard for Lebanon's sovereignty. And it convinced many Sunni that Hizballah carried out the attack upon orders from Iran and the Asad regime.

Not only had al Hassan been highly successful in supporting the Syrian opposition, but he was instrumental in the investigation into the assassination of Rafik Hariri, which led to indictments of members of Hizballah. Some Lebanese also believe that Syrian support for the strike against Hassan was designed to exacerbate the sectarian conflict in general and to further destabilize Lebanon.

¹²⁹ Fahs, Hani. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, Sept. 22, 2012.

¹³⁰ "Sixteenth annual report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1559." Report, United Nations. 2004. http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2012/773.

Hassan's assassination is widely seen as direct retaliation for his part in the Hariri investigation and, more recently, for the uncovering of a pro-Syrian subversion campaign in August 2012. Lebanon's Internal Security Forces arrested a former cabinet minister, Michel Samaha, who is close to Bashar al-Asad, for transporting Syrian-assembled bombs in order to attack rival targets inside Lebanon.¹³¹ Samaha's arrest, along with that of two Syrian officers, was a major blow to the Syrian interests because it confirmed the Asad regime's determination to escalate sectarian divisions and revealed that Syrian officials would even use a high-ranking Lebanese politician to achieve their goals. On August 11, a Lebanese judge charged Samaha and the Syrian army officers with setting up an armed group to incite sectarian strife.

Immediately after Hassan's murder, deadly violence broke out in Tripoli, and in Jabal Mohsen and Bab al Tabbaneh along Syria Street, between pro and anti-Asad forces. Clashes also broke out in Beirut. "This time we began the fighting," said Abu Mohammad, a Sunni fighter from Bab al Tabbaneh. "Following the news of Wissam al Hassan's assassination, we fired toward Jabal Mohsen in anger. ... After the funeral (of Hassan) the clashes became really violent."¹³²

The political fallout from the assassination is likely to be felt for years to come. The March 14 movement, which was established as a Sunni, pro-Hariri bloc, demanded that the ruling Hizballah coalition, including Prime Minister Najib Mikati, step down. Hizballah blamed Israel for the assassination and Mikati declared he was staying in power.¹³³

Indeed for Lebanon, there is seemingly no way to avoid being drawn into the Syrian conflict. Mikati who is from Tripoli, warned the Lebanese "not to allow anyone to drag them into battles. We have frequently warned of the need for Lebanon not to slip into the smoldering around Lebanon, but it is clear that there are several parties who want to implicate Lebanon into this conflict."¹³⁴ However, the prime minister's words ring hollow when events on the ground are taken into account.

The worst clashes in the Tripoli area since the Syrian war began occurred in late November 2012. Several Islamists from Tripoli who had ventured into Syria to fight with the opposition were killed there, presumably by Asad forces. Within a few days, sectarian fighting broke out in Tripoli, killing at least 17 people.¹³⁵ During one week in August 2012, more than 100 people were wounded near Tripoli. Violence in Lebanon also breaks out routinely, such a wave of kidnappings of Syrians by a powerful Shi'ite clan in the Beqaa Valley near the Syrian border, which happened in the summer of 2012 in a bid to exchange the hostages for one of their relatives. Eleven Shi'a Lebanese pilgrims were abducted in May 2012 by Sunni Syrian rebels.

During the author's visits to Tripoli, Jabal Mohsen, and Bab al Tabbaneh, a fighter for the Alawites expressed the fear that members of the sect have toward the Sunni, both in Lebanon and in Syria. "They are calling for *jihad* against us in the mosques," the fighter said, while drinking coffee in a local cafe. "They want to kick out all the Alawites from here. They want to erect a barrier around us. "He then went on to chastise Sunni religious practices. "Their

¹³¹ Nakhoul, Samia. "Analysis: Killing of security chief raises fears for Lebanon." *Reuters*, October 21, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/21/us-lebanon-explosion-turmoil-idUSBRE89K0DV20121021>.

¹³² Elali, Nadine. "Nothing will be the same." *Now Lebanon*, October 25, 2012. https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/nothing_will_be_the_same

¹³³ "Hizballah denies responsibility for killing Hassan." *Ya Liban*, October 20, 2012. <http://www.yalibnan.com/2012/10/20/Hizballah-denies-responsibility-for-killing-hassan/>.

¹³⁴ "Tripoli death toll rises to 12." *Al Akbar*, August 21, 2012.

¹³⁵ Wood, Josh. "Sectarian Conflict Kills at Least 17 in Northern Lebanon in Spillover of Syrian Civil War." *New York Times*, December 12, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/10/world/middleeast/syria-conflict-spills-over-to-northern-lebanon.html?_r=0

[Sunni] religion is based upon sex. This is why every day they issue *fatwas* [religious decrees] that women cannot go to the beach or women cannot go to the malls. There is no reason for *fatwas*, we should just go by the word of God.”¹³⁶

The message from Shi'a circles which support Hizballah is that the violence is being instigated by the growing Salafist movement in the Tripoli area. The pro-Hizballah *Al Akbar* newspaper reported:

The equation is clear. The security in Tripoli depends on the security in Homs [Syria] and vice versa. For the 'revolutionaries' in Homs, Tripoli is the important city. It provides them with arms, supplies, and possibly even fighters. The Salafists and Islamists do not say so openly, but this can be deduced from what is being said in their circles. ... Transforming the city into a backyard for the fighters in Homs requires a lot of energy from the Salafis.¹³⁷

According to Ahmed Fatfat, the MP in the Lebanese parliament who has represented Tripoli for many years, Shi'a-Sunni conflict before 2000 was limited to Beirut. But after the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the Syrians left behind a militia in Jabal Mohsen, which then encouraged Lebanese Sunni militias to take up a presence nearby to defend their territory.¹³⁸

Conflict in this area no doubt has been exacerbated by the fact that tens of thousands of Syrian refugees are now in the Tripoli area. There are two hospitals in Tripoli for treating Syrians injured in the fighting across the border. The presence of the Syrian refugees, many of whom side with the Syrian opposition, is bound to unsettle the area's Alawite population.

Many interviews in Lebanon start off with declarations that the violence in and around Tripoli has nothing to do with sectarianism. But invariably the conversation comes down to criticism of the other sect.

Sitting in his men's clothing shop along a road separating Shi'a and Sunni neighborhoods, Ali Faddah, the spokesman for the only Alawite party in Lebanon, the Arab Democratic Party, did not hide his views of Sunni Islam. "We think the Wahhabis are the main causes for the problems in the Middle East," said Faddah. "They reject what other sects believe and they created a new religion far from Islam. This resulted in *takfir* [apostasy]."¹³⁹ He also said that Sunni sheikhs, particularly the Salafists, stir sectarian strife from their pulpits during Friday prayers. Like many Shi'a, Faddah associates all Sunnis with Wahhabism, the socially conservative form of Islam practiced primarily in Saudi Arabia.

But as much as the sectarian conflict represents a continuum within the history of Islam, Faddah also said the West was to blame. He said he believes the West benefits when Sunni are battling Shi'a. "The Sunnis are instruments of the West, and serve to eliminate the Shi'a," he said. Faddah also accused the United States on Iranian state Press TV of trying to set up a buffer zone in the Jabal Mohsen area to protect the Syrian Free Army.¹⁴⁰

THE SALAFISTS' ASCENDANCE IN THE WAKE OF THE SYRIAN WAR

The rise in activity of Salafists and their imams is another result of the Arab uprisings, and in particular of the war in Syria. Today, a number of Salafists have cast aside their traditional aversion to democratic politics and even founded political parties. Salafists have emerged as politically relevant in Libya,

¹³⁶ Anonymous. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Tripoli, June 2012.

¹³⁷ *Al Akbar*, May 21, 2012.

¹³⁸ Fatfat, Ahmed. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 2012.

¹³⁹ Faddah, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Jabal Mohsen, June 2012.

¹⁴⁰ "U.S. seeks buffer zone in north Lebanon: Arab Democratic Party spokesman." Press TV, July 29, 2012. <http://counterpsyops.com/2012/07/29/us-seeks-buffer-zone-in-north-lebanon-arab-democratic-party-spokesman/>.

Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Lebanon, although the movement in Lebanon has not received as much attention as in these other countries. As is evident from the Salafist participation in politics in Egypt, Salafists now are intimately involved in political debate and tend to force more centrist Sunni groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to compromise and move to the right in order to accommodate the Salafists' conservative religious stances. The fact that the Salafists are participating in elections is a dramatic shift in their doctrinal position.

The confessional nature of the conflict in Syria and in Lebanon has also worked to the advantage of these emerging Salafist activists. As the conflicts increasingly become fought along sectarian lines, the Salafists gain support in advancing the notion that a Shi'a-Alawite-Iran axis is the single greatest threat to the Sunni *ummah*, a claim that resonates with centrist Sunnis across the region. Just as the Shi'a have proclaimed Israel to be the primary threat in the region, now the Salafists are using a similar strategy in positioning their movement as one that will counter the Shi'a and their backers in Iran, which by implication is even more threatening to all Sunnis than the threats posed by Israel and the West.¹⁴¹

The Iran-Shi'a threat first rose to the top of the Salafist agenda in 2006, by which time the American invasion of Iraq had given way to a domestic sectarian conflict and Hizballah appeared to triumph over Israel in Southern Lebanon. Since then, prominent Sunni clerics have warned of Iranian-Shi'a ascendance in the region. For example, Yusuf al Qaradawi, an extremely influential Sunni cleric based in Qatar who is a regular commentator on al Jazeera and has a dominant presence on the Internet, gives legitimacy to these claims.¹⁴² Ever

since the Iraq war, the Sunni have feared that the Shi'a will tip the regional and religious balance in the region in their favor.

For al Qaradawi and others, the Syrian war is evidence of the Shi'a drive for power over the Sunnis, no matter the cost. During an interview with the BBC Arabic Service, the sheikh was asked if he believes there is a "Shi'a invasion" of Sunni communities. Al Qaradawi answered: "I have much evidence, such as Egypt. Egypt never had any Shi'a ... and there is not a single Shi'a person who existed. Today, there are Shi'a in Egypt who write in the press, and who write books, and who make appearances on television. Isn't that enough proof? This is also happening in other Arab countries where there was no previous presence for Shi'a at all. I am not fabricating this information."¹⁴³

Al Qaradawi then explains that there was an understanding between the two sects not to infiltrate each other's territories, but he says the Shi'a have broken this agreement. And he expresses concern that Sunni Muslims might be persuaded to follow the Shi'a school of thought. "We have talks about the Shi'a with the Sunni, because they are not immune to Shiitization. Today, we are asking them to stay away from this strife. We have not provided the Sunni community with an immune culture. That is why it is possible that they be affected by anyone who infiltrates them and convince them of ideas that do not coincide with the Sunni."¹⁴⁴ Some analysts see in Qaradawi's anti-Shi'a rhetoric a deep-set fear of rising Iranian influence, but such a view overlooks the degree to which sectarian tensions have now pervaded religious discourse throughout the Muslim world and displaced traditional political and geopolitical concerns.

¹⁴¹ International Crisis Group. "Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition." [CrisisGroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx), October 12, 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/131-tentative-jihad-syrias-fundamentalist-opposition.aspx>.

¹⁴² Interview, *BBC Arabic Service*, February 7, 2010.

¹⁴³ "Al Sameem." *BBC Arabic Service*, February 4, 2010.

¹⁴⁴ "Al-Sameem." *BBC Arabic Service*, 2010.

It is, however, important not to generalize about Salafism or over-dramatize the Salafists' potential for radicalization. The only idea that unites this fragmented movement is their belief in returning to practices of the Islamic community during the time of the Prophet Mohammad. In most countries, there are various trends within individual movements, and the reaction to them by established religious parties can affect the degree to which they become radicalized and pose a challenge to more centrist Sunni groups.

Like other trends that have emerged or been revived as a result of the Syrian war, Salafism in Lebanon has had a long history. The movement there dates to the 1950s and became more influential in the 1970s, when it was centered in Palestinian refugee camps. Generally, they are anti-American, opposed to the Syrian regime, and thus opposed to the Shi'a and Hizballah, and they de-emphasize the need to fight the so-called resistance, the terminology many in Lebanon use for Israel.

The Salafists' rise and direct involvement in politics are relevant for a number of reasons. One, they have introduced a sectarian discourse into the national debate on television and in other forms of the media that is far more confrontational than in the past. Two, they use the violence being committed by the Syrian government to generalize about the potential for anti-Sunni violence among all Shi'a, whether or not they are Alawite.¹⁴⁵

Three, they are trying to form transnational networks with other Salafist preachers, particularly those in Saudi Arabia, a country which already funds the efforts of some Sunni groups in Lebanon. Partaking in such regional network would expand their exposure and, therefore, their influence.

A timeline of the most significant events leading to their ascendance is helpful in understanding their role today in Lebanon:

- In 2003, Lebanese Salafists grew in numbers in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Dozens headed to Iraq, via Syria, to join the insurgency against the United States and allied forces. Shaker al Abssi, a Palestinian refugee from Lebanon was leading the campaign to send militants to Iraq. He founded the group, Fatah al-Sialm in Lebanon in 2006.
- In 2005, after the assassination of Hariri, many Salafists who had fled Lebanon returned to the Tripoli area in the wake of the Syrian withdrawal. The Salafists had been at odds with Asad's government and Hizballah. But they faced a new obstacle – the Lebanese Armed Forces. “After the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, the Syrians left an Alawite militia in Jabal Mohsen. The representative of this militia, Refiat Eid, says he is aligned with Syria's Asad and Hizballah,” said Ahmed Fatfat, the MP from Tripoli.¹⁴⁶
- In 2011, when the Syrian uprising began and Sunni refugees fled to Tripoli, the Salafists were uniquely positioned to provide shelter and use the uprising to enhance their influence in northern Lebanon. They aided the refugees along with the *Jamiya Islamiya*, which is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The Salafists' backing of the Syrians was a direct challenge to the Alawites in nearby Jabal Mohsen, who support Asad's government. The Syrian conflict had thus spilled over into Lebanon.

¹⁴⁵ The irony of this strategy is that some Salafists do not recognize the Alawites as Muslims, yet they use Alawite behavior in Syria to generalize about the latent intentions of all Shi'a Muslims.

¹⁴⁶ Fatfat, Ahmed. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 2012.

- The opening provided by the Syrian uprising has allowed other, more moderate Salafist imams to rise to prominence. It is this movement which is likely to have a significant effect on Lebanon's political and religious affairs in the future.

The leading Salafist imams now in Lebanon who are politically active but non-violent bear considerable resemblance to the street sheikhs who emerged in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s and who were instrumental in the religious transformation of Egyptian society.¹⁴⁷ Some are not schooled in classical religious teachings and were largely shaped by their personal experiences abroad, either in the Gulf or in the West. This generally had a radicalizing effect, and they use their pulpits in the mosque to gain support for their political positions and the media to enhance their following.

Among these rising Salafist stars is Imam Selim al Rafei. When I visited his Friday prayer one day in June 2012, he told his all-male worshippers: "The Syrian army is killing the people and is supported by Iran, China, and Russia, and the U.S. did not intervene to help the Syrian people. Why are they not supporting the Syrians? Because they are Muslims. The West and America are liars. Their lies are exposed and are a lesson to our people. The only thing that is helpful for Islam is *jihad*. *Jihad* will give us back our dignity."

At the end of his sermon, Rafei congratulated the newly-elected President Mohammad Morsi of Egypt and said, "He will spread Islam in Egypt and throughout the Arab world." Although there was no direct reference to Shi'a, it was clear that the Islam Morsi would advance is that of Sunni Muslims.

In September 2012, I spoke with Rafei at his sprawling home, overlooking the Tripoli hills. He

recounted his life, including twenty years in Germany until he was deported for his sermons in which he denounced the United States for "killing Iraqis," and the "Jews" for killing Palestinians. On the day I met him, Rafei announced that the Salafists in Lebanon, and especially those in the Tripoli area, would form a political party to run candidates in Lebanon's next parliamentary elections, scheduled for the summer of 2013. This marks an important new development in Lebanese and regional politics. Most Salafists in Lebanon historically focused on spreading the religious call. According to this doctrine they were prohibited from participating in electoral politics.

Rafei said the Syrian uprising created the opportunity for the Salafists to enter politics. Speaking generally about Salafists in the Middle East he said: "The group of Salafists who have wanted to be politically active have believed in elections. But until the Arab uprisings they were against electoral politics because they were not fair. They were corrupt. Now, things have changed. There is more freedom.

"The party will not be confined to Tripoli and will include Salafists from all over Lebanon, and it will make alliances with other political coalitions just like in any normal political process."¹⁴⁸

In addition to the Arab uprisings, other factors leading to the entrance of Lebanon's Salafists into politics include the absence of an established Sunni leadership. Former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the son of Rafik, has virtually withdrawn from politics and now lives in Paris, and no other figure from the March 14 movement has emerged to lead Lebanon's centrist Sunnis. Even when the younger Hariri was prime minister, his influence and command of Lebanese politics was dwarfed by that of his father, a towering billionaire who was perceived to be Lebanon's best hope of complete rehabilitation

¹⁴⁷ Abdo, Geneive. *No God but God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 41-70.

¹⁴⁸ al Rafei, Selim. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Tripoli, September 27, 2012.

after the 15-year-long civil war. To date, it seems unlikely that Saad Hariri will return to Lebanon because he fears his safety is at risk, particularly in light of the war in Syria.

Another factor in the Salafist turn toward public engagement lies with the emergence of a charismatic leader urging political activity on behalf of the movement, Sheikh Salam al Ouda. Al Ouda, who lives in Saudi Arabia, is steadily gaining influence across the Middle East with his support for the role of Salafism in politics. While at one time he did not believe Shi'a were within the Islamic tradition, which he stated openly on his website, he has removed the derogatory language and in the spring of 2012 invited Shi'a to participate in a youth conference he was having in Kuwait, which was canceled due to the controversy surrounding the sheikh.

RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AS A POLITICAL TOOL

Like other Salafist sheikhs in Lebanon and the region, Rafei uses his pulpit to concoct a potent message of religion and politics in the framework of the Syrian war. As has been true for Islamists over the last 20 years, the sermons are posted on the Internet and reach Muslims across the Arab world, beyond the few hundred worshippers attending the Friday sermons in Rafei's Tripoli mosque.

A thorough examination of the discourse in his Friday sermons from September 2011 to October 2012 reveals three primary messages: 1) The United States, the United Nations, and Arab governments supported by the West have done little to protect Sunni Muslims in Syria, and there has been no outside protection because the Sunni Muslims in Syria demonstrated their devotion to Islam; 2) The war in Syria is a plot by the Shi'a to kill as many Sunni as possible; and 3) The only solution to combat the violent campaign against the Sunnis is *jihad*, which

Rafei defines as a struggle against the Shi'a. In this way, Rafei engages in a religious and political discourse based upon fear to frighten the Sunnis into believing their extinction is possible if the Alawites remain in power in Syria.

On October 19, 2012 Rafei said: "We ask many youth and clerics for their opinion about what is taking place inside Syria and about the Syrian regime, and they do not dare to criticize [it]. Some Shi'a clerics go as far as to say that they support the Syrian regime, so that the enemies of *ahl al-bayt*¹⁴⁹ [that is, the Sunni] do not rise to power. They believe that the poor Syrian [Sunni] Muslims are enemies of the Prophet's family and that Bashar's regime are supporters of *ahl al-bayt*."

On August 17, 2012, Rafei recounted a story he said he had heard about Sunni pilgrims who were returning from the Syrian town of Omra to Tripoli, Lebanon. "I was informed ... [they] were stopped as they were on a bus on their way to Tripoli. Armed men forced them to lie on the ground. Among them were elderly men and women. They would mock their beards [a religious symbol for Salafists] and curse them and then curse Abu Bakr, Omar and Aisha," who are religious figures Sunnis revere.

"I don't understand these people's hatred towards the Sunnis, and how over time they have considered Sunnis their first and foremost enemies. They are ready to collaborate with the United States and the non-believers to kill Sunnis," he said.

At times, Rafei brings the conflict to the doorstep of his followers by discussing how Shi'a militias target Sunni-dominated Tripoli and its outskirts. On June 8, 2012, Rafei told his listeners: "Co-existence is encouraged in Islam, under the condition that our religion is not being abused and our security is not threatened. Take a look at how our neighbors are treating us today. Last week, the city (Tripoli) was

¹⁴⁹ A term in Arabic for the family of the Prophet Mohammad, and here a rhetorical reference meaning true Muslims.

shelled from the gangs of Jabal Mohsen, ... where in less than 24 hours, thirteen young men and one woman were killed and thirty were injured. This is a war! Tripoli is being punished for its support for the Syrian people. It is being punished by the men of the Syrian regime here in Lebanon.”

Rafei and other Salafist imams have found a mentor in Sheikh Adnan al Arour, a televangelist who lives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and who has used the Syrian conflict to expand his own influence in many Arab countries, from Lebanon to Tunisia. Al Arour supports the Free Syrian army and offers on-the-ground advice to its fighters. His extensive reach is through satellite channels, and he is known for criticizing the Shi'a based upon Salafi doctrine.

Adding to al Arour's credibility is the fact that he was born in Hama, the city razed by the late president Hafez al Asad—President Bashar al-Asad's father—in 1982 in order to quell an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood. An estimated 20,000 to 40,000 people were killed and it became a poignant reference point for the current uprising. Like many Salafists, al Arour frames the Syrian uprising as a battle with the Shi'a for Sunni dominance in the Middle East. His argument resonates with many, considering the Syrian regime's reliance on the violent *shabiha*, the pro-Asad mercenaries, and the help that Hizballah and Iran are giving the Syrian regime.

In his videos, he argues that the Sunni are more peaceful than the Shi'a. He also questions Shi'a beliefs, saying the Shi'a have distorted Koranic interpretations. In one video broadcast by satellite TV, the “Path of the Salif,” al Arour calls upon the Sunni in Algeria, Morocco, Sudan, and Egypt, and warns of the dangers of the Shi'a. “The Shi'a make people doubt their beliefs. ... The Shi'a reject people with feelings of revenge.”¹⁵⁰

In May 2012, al Arour posted a YouTube video as a message to Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah. “The Syrian people no longer respect you, because of your support of the Syrian regime that is based on sectarian interest only. Your stance from the Syrian uprising is sectarian. Your ... support for the Bahraini uprising is without a doubt sectarian. Your stance from the Syrian uprising is you are siding with the regime against the Syrian people. Why? Because you ... only abide by Iran's demands.”¹⁵¹

Using his newly-developed power, al Arour cleverly seeks to discredit Hizballah over the 2008 takeover of parts of Beirut, when Hizballah lost much of its general support within Lebanon. And he links the 2008 events with Hizballah's position and calls Nasrallah a “whore” for supporting the Syrian regime.¹⁵² In these videos and many others, al Arour frames the Syrian uprising as a struggle for all Sunni against Shi'a and—by extension—Iranian oppression and domination. And, he accuses Nasrallah of being a puppet of Iran.

Another one of al Arour's protégés making headlines in Lebanon is Sheikh Ahmad al Assir, the sheikh in a mosque in Sidon. Al Assir says he does not consider himself a Salafist, but he is widely viewed as one by others. A self-proclaimed religious authority with a long, bushy beard, al Assir is no stranger on the Lebanese scene—he has been the imam of the mosque since 1997.

But his new-found notoriety stems from his statements about the Syrian war. “For years, the Shi'a have been controlling and insulting us (the Sunni),” al Assir told me when I visited him at the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque. “They control the security, the government, and politics. They pay Sunni to back them to try to create fragmentation among us and they threaten us with a sectarian war. We support

¹⁵⁰ This video was broadcast on *Mustakila*, a channel in Tunisia. Available at: “Shi'a Deceptive Tactics: Shikh Adnan al-Arou,“ YouTube video, posted by “Muslim Knight,” July 8, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YUpM1GB3ik&feature=related>.

¹⁵¹ Available at: YouTube video posted by “Islamic Thoughts,” May 30, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DPEARLcjRv8&feature=related>.

¹⁵² Available at: YouTube video posted by “ShamNews24,” May 13, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GIE29pKA_8&feature=related.

the Syrian rebels. Here in the Sidon mosque, we raise money for those who come to pray for the Syrian rebels.”¹⁵³

In the time since the Syria uprising began, al Assir has become steadily more radical, and his rhetoric marks a new departure for Lebanon, where, after decades of conflict among the multiple sects, the Lebanese settled on speaking delicately in euphemisms, referring to sectarian feeling as *fitna*, Arabic for social disorder. But al Assir says the Syrian war has changed everything. “One of the features of the Arab spring was Sunni power and some Islamist forces feel that they don’t have to deal with Iran and Hizballah on an indirect level any longer. They can face them directly,” said Ali Amir, a reporter for the Lebanese newspaper, *al Balad*, who specializes in Sunni-Shi’a relations.¹⁵⁴

At first, al Assir was staging protests from Sidon to Beirut amid calls for Hizballah to disarm. Al Assir also led his followers in the summer of 2012 to close a 200-yard stretch of the main highway connecting Sidon to Beirut. Dozens of men, most with long beards—the signature of male Salafists—wandered along the highway. However, by November 2012 he was calling for a Lebanese uprising against Hizballah and vowing to form a Sunni militia to combat Hizballah’s vast arsenal. He claimed that the “Iran project” killed former Prime Minister Hariri.

Violent clashes erupted in Sidon on November 11, after al Assir tried to force Hizballah supporters in the town to remove all banners and posters supporting the Shi’a party. Two of al Assir’s bodyguards were killed in the violence between the supporters of Assir and Hizballah, according to foreign news reports.

A day later, al Assir claimed Hizballah supporters tried to assassinate him. Emergency meetings were called by Lebanese officials to declare Sidon “a military zone” in order to quash the unrest. And the Lebanese Sunni Mufti of Mount Lebanon, Sheikh Mohammad Ali Jouzo, said even the highest religious authority in Lebanon could not prevent Assir from arming his supporters. Thus, the radicalization of some Sunnis has gone beyond the control of the Lebanese security, political, and religious authorities.¹⁵⁵ Hizballah’s leaders charged Sunni Lebanese officials of supporting al Assir with the intent of diminishing the faction’s power.¹⁵⁶

In al Assir’s view, Iran is behind a regional strategy to dominate the Sunni and impose supreme clerical rule in countries with significant Shi’a populations. “The Shi’a believe the Sunni are dominating the region. This is what Iran is trying to do. They tell the Shi’a that Sunni are here to crush you. Just like here, in Bahrain they say no allegiance to the *vilayat-e faqih*, but it is not true. One year ago, Nassrallah said he wanted *vilayat-e faqih*.”¹⁵⁷

In June 2012, al Assir was splashed all over the media because he brandished, as a symbol of his grievances, a toy rifle, which he said a Shi’a businessman had mass produced in China and then distributed in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. There is an audio tape inside the toy: after sounds of gunfire—“rat-a-tat-tat”—a voice could be interpreted as saying, “Kill Saida Aisha.” Aisha was one of the wives of the prophet Muhammad. According to the Sunni, Aisha had an important role in early Islamic history, both during Muhammad’s life and after his death. Regarded by many as his favorite wife, she was an active figure who was involved in continuing his message. Al Assir accuses the Shi’a of taking revenge on the Sunnis for their electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia.

¹⁵³ al Assir, Ahmad. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Sidon, June 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Amir, Ali. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, June 2012.

¹⁵⁵ “Lebanese Mufti to NOW: We cannot prevent Assir from arming.” *NOW Lebanon*, November 14, 2012. https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/latestnews/lebanese_mufti_to_now_we_cannot_prevent_assir_from_arming.

¹⁵⁶ Zaatari, Mohammed. “Search warrants issued against Assir supporters.” *The Daily Star*, November 20, 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Nov-20/195600-search-warrants-issued-against-assir-supporters.ashx#axzz2CfzqlyHX>.

¹⁵⁷ al Assir, Ahmad. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Sidon, September 2012.

THE SUNNI AWAKENING

The new feeling of empowerment among the Sunni was evident in September in Lebanon, when Hizballah staged a demonstration, which police estimated was attended by 500,000 people, against the anti-Islam video that mocks the Prophet Mohammad, which was created in the United States. In a rare public appearance in South Beirut, Nasrallah on September 17, urged tens of thousands to keep up the campaign.¹⁵⁸

In Tripoli on September 14, protesters shouting, “No More Insults [to Islam],” attacked and set ablaze a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, viewed as a symbol of American culture. Days later, Sunnis in Tripoli accused Hizballah of being behind the attack, and making it appear that Sunni extremists carried it out.¹⁵⁹ One person reportedly died and about two dozen were injured.

The Salafists in Lebanon are completely at odds with Hizballah and Iran and believe that it is their duty to minimize Iran’s influence in the country. They are using the Syrian war to create a Sunni axis. In a Friday sermon on October 26, 2012, al Assir told worshippers that Iran and Hizballah deceive people and their aim is to establish *vilayat-e faqih* in the region:

We have been warning against the Iranian project in the region or years, ever since so many cheered for Palestine under grand slogans as resistance. We warned that this project means harm against the Sunnis more than it does for the Zionists. These slogans are all lies, all with the aim of executing the Iranian project. They have announced this: they tell us that they are more than honored to be soldiers in the army of the *vilyat*

e-faqih. They deceive the Muslims with slogans of support for Palestine and uniting the Muslims as they kill and slaughter our children and women and rape our women and destroy our mosques in Syria, and assassinate politicians in Lebanon.

In this one passage, al Assir managed to achieve several objectives of the Salafists: he linked Iran and Hizballah to the killings of Sunni in Syria; he made the argument that Hizballah-Iranian-Syrian support for the Palestinian cause is merely a pretext for the larger objective of creating an Islamic state; and he implicitly accused Iran and Hizballah of un-Islamic behavior through the violence in Syria.

His message bears much resemblance to the ideas that Rafei conveys through his mosque sermons. “What is taking place today is the extermination of the Syrian people and it is all managed and overseen by Iranian intelligence,” Rafei said at Friday prayers on February 24, 2012. “This means they have resentment for religion. Following the events in Syria, it is clear that these people’s [the Iranians’] hatred toward the [Sunni] *ummah* is even more than that of Israel.”

Such animosity has greatly complicated Iran’s strategy in Lebanon and other countries to influence, if not directly interfere in, the rise of Sunni movements in the region. With every major conflict that has erupted since the Arab uprisings began, Iran has looked for windows of opportunity to embrace Sunni populations, even at times when there was clearly no receptivity to Iran’s overtures.

The November 2012 conflict between Sunni Hamas and Israel is the perfect example. Iranian leaders and Hizballah claimed victory, declaring that Hamas, with the aid of Iranian-made Fajr-5

¹⁵⁸ “Hizballah leads massive anti-US protest in Lebanon.” *Associated Press*, September 17, 2012. <http://www.courierpress.com/news/2012/sep/17/Hizballah-leads-massive-anti-us-protest-lebanon/>.

¹⁵⁹ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Genevieve Abdo. Tripoli, September 2012.

missiles, had triumphed. In a rare telephone call, President Ahmadinejad congratulated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh and praised the Palestinian “resistance and perseverance” which is, in fact, also boosts Iran’s ideological foundation. “Zionists have reached the dead point and have no other alternative but officially recognizing and bowing to the absolute right of the Palestinian nation,” Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying in the state-news agency.¹⁶⁰

The Hamas-Israel conflict, which ultimately is likely to weaken the non-violent Palestinian Authority, indicated a tilt in the regional balance of power in Iran’s favor because it demonstrated Israel’s vulnerabilities. The Iran-Hizbullah-Syria axis, which had been on the outs with Hamas for supporting the Syrian uprising against Asad, welcomed Hamas back into the fold. Clearly, Hamas had Iran to thank for its strong showing against Israel’s military might. For the first time, Hamas was able to hit Israeli targets near Jerusalem and Tel Aviv with Iranian-made missiles. However, the conflict also secured for Hamas words of support from Sunni quarters; Qatar, Turkey and Egypt all supported Hamas in the conflict.

Nasrallah swiftly used Hamas’ strong military prowess to threaten Israel against any attack in Lebanon. The implication was that if Hamas, considered to be far less of a military power than Hizbullah, can challenge Israel, Hizbullah would pose a far greater challenge. “Israel, which was shaken by a handful of Fajr-5 rockets during eight days—how would it cope with thousands of rockets which would fall on Tel Aviv and other [cities] ... if it attacked Lebanon?” Nasrallah said.¹⁶¹

Iran’s attempted embrace of the Sunni began shortly after the Islamic revolution. In an early attempt

to influence the Sunni, Iran and its local allies created a network of preachers responsible for spreading a revolutionary version of Islam in the areas of Sidon. Sympathetic Lebanese and Palestinians were co-opted to form the Congregation of Muslim Ulema. The Congregation was set up in 1982 by the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon with multiple objectives: to weaken Lebanon’s traditional clerics, to give the clergy a direct say in political matters, and to unify the religious communities in order to reduce sectarianism.¹⁶²

Today, a few of the clerics who were involved in this effort still preach in Lebanon. Sheikh Maher Hammoud, a Sunni cleric who was one of founders of the Congregation of Muslim Ulema, routinely denounces the United States from his mosque in Sidon.

Hammoud, a white-haired cleric well-versed in Iranian politics, was suspicious at first upon meeting an American visitor. But he quickly became eager to convey his views. In keeping with Khomeini’s vision, Hammoud explained that the concept of *vilayat-e faqih* was designed to bring Shi’a and Sunni Muslims together because it abandoned the long-held Shi’a belief that no legitimate government could exist on earth until the return of the so-called Hidden Imam, who broke off all contact with the faithful in 941 CE. “Khomeini changed that and brought Sunni and Shi’a together,” said Hammoud, who supports Hezbollah.¹⁶³

Where does Hizbullah stand as the sectarian crisis in Syria and Lebanon deepens? Hizbullah has tried to balance its need for the Asad regime to stay in power with the sentiments of its constituents at home, some of whom are appalled at the regime’s willingness to its own citizens. Hence, Hizbullah is

¹⁶⁰ Aboudi, Sami. “Gaza conflict shows Israel must ‘bow’ to Palestinian rights.” *Reuters*, November 24, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/24/us-palestinian-israel-iran-idUSBRE8AN08V20121124>.

¹⁶¹ Evans, Dominic. “Hizbullah says it could hit all of Israel in future war.” *Reuters*, November 25, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/25/us-lebanon-israel-Hizbullah-idUSBRE8AO03W20121125>.

¹⁶² Rougier, Bernard. *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam Among Palestinians in Lebanon*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 31-32.

¹⁶³ Hammoud, Maher. Interviewed by Genevieve Abdo. Sidon, September 29, 2012.

torn between defending its military and strategic interests—keeping Assad in power, which also is in Iran’s interest—and maintaining the support of its Sunni and Shi’a base at home. The sectarian nature of the war in Syria has cost Hizballah the Sunni support it had received in Lebanon and the region.

Although no credible opinion polls have been conducted, many experts who have followed Hizballah for years believe the movement has lost significant Sunni support. And, although the Shi’a might still back the movement, many Sunni are ill at ease with Hizballah’s position, considering the estimated 60,000 deaths in the Syrian war. Therefore, Hizballah has now become a movement and a party almost exclusively for the Shi’a.

“After losing its Sunni popular base and its Sunni political allies, it has become clear to Hizballah that the Shi’a community is its only support,” said Ali al Amin, a journalist and analyst of Hizballah who

writes for *Al Balad* newspaper in Beirut.¹⁶⁴ “For that matter, it is necessary for Hizballah to maintain its position as the only supporter and defender of the Shi’a community ... and Hizballah continuously seeks to convince the Shi’a community that it is under threat and that it is targeted and that Hizballah is the only party capable of defending it.”¹⁶⁵

Aside from the powerful Salafists and other public figures who are not afraid to discuss Hizballah’s standing in Lebanon, most ordinary Lebanese are afraid to give a candid opinion. One vegetable vendor in south Beirut, Hizballah’s stronghold, reflected the views of many Shi’a: “You will not get a clear answer from anyone about how they really feel,” he said. “Here, everyone is under surveillance and they fear speaking the truth, they fear speaking otherwise of Hizballah because they believe that they have the power to do as they please, so they prefer either saying nothing or boldly supporting Hizballah so they can score with them.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ al Amin, Ali. Interviewed by author’s researcher. Beirut, December 2012.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Anonymous. Interviewed by author’s researcher. Beirut, December 2012.

PART THREE: THE IRAN FACTOR

Iran has never abandoned Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's vision of a pan-Islamic Middle East with Iran as its progenitor, reconciling centuries of political and religious conflict among Muslim sects. The establishment in 1979 of the Islamic republic, the only Shi'a state in the world, gave immediate encouragement to the region's Shi'a, particularly in Bahrain and Lebanon. Hizballah, for example, was founded in large part due to the Iranian revolution. Since the formation of the Islamic republic, Iran has historically exploited anti-Shi'a sentiment, portraying the Shi'a as victims, with Iran as their savior. More recently, under the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Iran has sought to improve ties with the Arab Shi'a.

If over the last three decades Iran ever seemed to be abandoning its objective of exporting its revolution, it was only because that goal at times seemed particularly elusive. Now, Iranian elites close to Khamenei believe their aims are within reach, even though for many in the region genuine pan-Islamism appears less of a possibility than ever.

Those with power in the small circle around Iran's supreme leader have retained a revolutionary mindset. Some are holdovers from the 1979 revolution,

like Khamenei himself. Others, like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are largely provincial zealots with a history of serving in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and only a limited world view. One of the main priorities for these regime insiders is a realignment of the region whereby the United States' foes, including Hizballah, are in ascendance and Iran is a major player, spreading its ideological and religious influence to minimize the power of Tehran's main rivals, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

"What has happened so far is significant," Khamenei said in a speech on January 30, 2012, to an audience at the "Islamic Awakening and Youth Conference" in Tehran, referring to the Arab uprisings. "For two hundred years, Westerners ruled the Islamic *ummah* by making use of their scientific advances. They occupied Islamic countries, some of them directly, some of them indirectly. ... They humiliated the Islamic *ummah* as much as they could. ... But the Islamic resolve of Muslim people and their presence wiped out all these impossible dreams and put an end to all these goals."¹⁶⁷

Iran's standing and significance in the world are both intricately linked to its power and influence in the Middle East and the surrounding region.

¹⁶⁷ Available at: "Speech of Imam Khamenei." YouTube video, posted by Mwali Alkhamenei, February 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCzkQVlIBEY>.

Therefore, Iran's attempts to have good relations with its Arab neighbors are not just about acquiring regional hegemony, but have the potential to give Iran leverage in its relations with the United States, the European Union, and other large powers.

Playing the "Islamic card" to develop this regional influence is a logical way to achieve these two goals. When Supreme Leader Khamenei routinely declares that the Arab uprisings will at last ring in an era of pan-Islamism, he is highlighting Iran's Islamic character, which he believes goes hand in hand with enhancing its strategic depth in the region and the world. Although the Middle East has changed drastically since the Islamic republic was first established, Khamenei's public stance on Iran's regional foreign policy in the wake of the Arab uprisings echoes that of Khomeini, whose long-term aims included the creation of a larger Islamic nation. "All Muslims shall be considered as one single nation and the Islamic republic of Iran shall make every endeavor to realize the political, economic and cultural unity of the world of Islam," reads Article 11 of the 1979 Islamic constitution established under Khomeini's leadership.¹⁶⁸

The challenges inherent to such a broad vision—that is, the tensions between the traditional Shi'a, quietist notions surrounding the Islamic *ummah* and the *Realpolitik* that may be required to realize it—are revealed on a regular basis by Iran's public alternation between declarations of peaceful intent and outright bellicosity. Not surprisingly, the relationship between Iran and the Arab world, too, has a long and contradictory history based on mutual mistrust, rivalry, and a recognition of the need to coexist. Numerous religious and political conflicts plague the perception of the Arab world towards Iran and vice versa.

Since the establishment of Shi'a Islam as the country's national religion by the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736), Iran has been viewed as the main defender of the region's Shi'a. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, century-old fears of Iran's Shi'a influence seemed to have come to the forefront. Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetorical support for the export of Iran's "Shi'a revolution" beyond its borders became one of the main concerns of the Sunni-dominated countries of the region.¹⁶⁹

Such fears partially led to the GCC's support for Saddam Hussein during his country's eight-year war with Iran. At the same time, there have also been numerous examples of diplomatic and economic partnerships between the Arab world and their Persian neighbor, which point to the pragmatic nature of Iran and the Arab countries' approach to foreign policy.

Mohammad Khatami, elected president in 1997 amid promises to regularize Iran's standing in the world, reached out to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia in May of 1999 as part of an eight-day tour of Arab states. Following this ground-breaking visit by the Iranian president, King Fahd was quoted as saying, "The door is wide open to develop and strengthen relations between the two countries in the interests of the two peoples and the Muslim world."¹⁷⁰ All signs pointed to Iran's realization that it had to change its behavior towards its Arab neighbors if it wanted to expand its regional influence.

But since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and in the absence of a strong Iraq, which had traditionally served as a counterbalance to Iran's regional aspirations, Saudi Arabia has pursued a policy of a balancing act against Iran.¹⁷¹ When possible, the Saudis attempt to hinder Iranian influence in the

¹⁶⁸ Peaslee, Amos J. *Constitutions of Nations: Volume II, Asia, Australia and Oceania*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985. 353.

¹⁶⁹ Hasan, Tariq Alhasan. "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain," *The Middle East Journal* 65 (2011): 603-617.

¹⁷⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation. "Middle East Khatami visit opens Saudi door." [BBC.co.uk](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/344918.stm), May 15, 1999. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/344918.stm (Accessed January 7, 2011).

¹⁷¹ Gause, F. Gregory III. "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 2011. <http://www.cfr.org/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east/p26663>

Arab world. The kingdom's involvement in Bahrain and its support for the opposition forces in Syria are perfect examples of this approach.

Today, it is more difficult for Iran to continue to pursue a policy of aggression and pragmatism at the same time. The author's long-running research in the region and numerous interviews support the notion that—contrary to much of the prevailing view—it is important to recognize that Iran today is largely incapable of driving its own policies in the Middle East. Just as the recent uprisings illustrated a new sense of Arab self-determination, the same principle is likely to apply when Arab states and societies are able to create their own foreign policy agendas.

So far, Iran has seen only limited benefit from the deepening Shi'a-Sunni divide, but this does not mean Tehran's prospects for regional hegemony have necessarily been reduced over the long run. This is the reason that Khamenei will continue to portray Iran as the great sponsor of these historic changes in the Arab world, hoping one day his declarations will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The actions of Egypt's President Morsi are a perfect example of the limitations now facing Iran. Its relentless efforts to reach out to the Sunni Islamist leader were evident from the outset. Fars News, a semi-official news agency close to the Revolutionary Guard Corps, went as far as to fabricate statements Morsi made after his election, according to Egyptian officials. They charge the Iranian news agency with reporting incorrectly that Morsi agreed to revise Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.¹⁷² Morsi's harsh reaction to the Iranian report and his reported hesitation to establish any type of significant

diplomatic relations with Iran are indicative of the new-found sense of self-determination in the Arab world and his appreciation for *realpolitik*.¹⁷³ Cozying up to Iran would alienate the United States and Saudi Arabia—allies Morsi needs.

In addition, other institutions within the state, particularly the rising Salafists and sheikhs at al Azhar, have made known their animosity toward Iran and the Shi'a. During a trip Ahmadinejad made to Egypt in February 2013, a man hurled a shoe at him—a major insult among Muslims. The assailant was believed to be Syrian and angry over Iran's support for Asad. More significantly, Ahmadinejad was scolded when he visited the al Azhar mosque and university, Egypt's seat of Sunni scholarship. During the visit, Ahmadinejad was publicly criticized at a news conference by his hosts, who accused the Shi'a of interfering in Arab countries, including Egypt and Bahrain, and of discriminating against the minority Sunnis in Iran.¹⁷⁴

As much as Khamenei may stake his claim as leader of the Islamic world, Arab societies have their own demands and interests, and the Iranian model will be judged by different standards than in the past, when the only alternatives to authoritarian rule appeared to be Islamist parties and Iranian-style theocracy. In the era ushered in by the Arab uprisings, Iran will find it increasingly difficult to influence Arab states and societies through religious and ideological means for the following reasons:

- The uprisings, particularly in the case of Egypt and to a lesser extent in Tunisia, have brought to power long-standing Islamist political factions with their own histories, traditions, established infrastructure, and

¹⁷² "Egypt's President-Elect To Sue Iranian Agency Over 'Fabricated' Interview." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, Jun 28, 2011. <http://www.rferl.org/content/egypt-president-elect-morsi-to-sue-iran-news-agency-over-fabricated-interview/24628677.html>

¹⁷³ Abdo, Geneive and Reza H. Akbari. "Morsi is just not that into Iran." *Foreign Policy*, August 30, 2012. http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/30/morsis_just_not_that_into_iran_0

¹⁷⁴ Fahim, Kareem and Mayy el Sheikh. "Ahmadinejad Visits Egypt, Signaling Realignment." *The New York Times*, Feb 5, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/world/middleeast/irans-president-visits-egypt-in-sign-of-thaw.html?_r=0

considered ideological views. The Muslim Brotherhood, the most venerable Islamic movement in the modern Middle East, was founded in Egypt 1928 by Hassan al-Banna. By this standard, Khamenei is a relative newcomer.

- As Sunni societies and governments become more empowered, interest in Iran wanes and animosity increases. The ideology of the “resistance” and the Palestinian occupation have far less currency as a mobilizing factor for Arab political life today than in the past. And this was the most appealing aspect of Iran for Arabs. In fact, Arab societies do not need an interpreter to express their anti-Zionist, anti-American, anti-globalization sentiments. They can now express their views directly and openly, as they do each day on the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Amman, and throughout the Arab world.
- The suppression of the 2009 protests in Iran demonstrated to the Arabs the brutality of the state, which claims its legitimacy as an Islamic republic. In the words of the late Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, reflecting on the regime’s response to the uprising, “Iran is not a republic and is not Islamic.”¹⁷⁵
- The restoration of the Iraqi city of Najaf as a theological center has elevated it over the Iranian center of Qom in the eyes of the Arab Shi’a. The Shi’a of Bahrain, for example, make frequent trips to visit the clerics in Najaf. This makes it more difficult for Iran to continue its claim to be exclusive guardians of Shi’ism.
- Although the Iranian revolution was a great inspiration to Shi’a and Sunni movements

across the Middle East, Iran has failed to export the revolution. No state with a similar form of governance has emerged.

Iran’s main hope for continued regional influence lies in the emergence of the Shi’a-dominated government in Iraq, which has so far proven to be of considerable benefit to the Islamic republic. The Iran-Iraq partnership over economic, cultural, and religious ties has been particularly appealing to the region’s Shi’a, who now find that they are no longer the “forgotten Muslims.” As the scholar Kayhan Barzegar, director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran, wrote when prospects for the Iranian approach appeared particularly hopeful: “With [the] changing [of] the traditional power structure [in post-invasion Iraq], which was based on the rule of Sunni minority, the Shi’a factions have found it momentous to establish close relations with friendly states and nations in the region such as Iran thereby withdrawing from their traditional marginalization.”

In his analysis of the “Shi’a factor” in regional affairs, Barzegar wrote:

Based on the strategic linkage, the Shi’a factor could be a base of creating opportunity in Iran’s foreign policy at the national, regional and international levels. At the national level, the Shi’as’ presence as the ruling power is an appropriate ground for bolstering bilateral economic, political and security cooperation. Since the new Shi’a government in Iraq has the executive power, unlike the past, the two countries can expand cooperation in such domains as mutual trade, cultural and social activities, media relations, religious tourism, academic and scientific exchanges, expansion

¹⁷⁵ Tait, Robert. “Funeral of Iranian Cleric Montazeri turns into political protest. *The Guardian*, December 21, 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/dec/21/iran-funeral-ayatollah-montazeri-protest>

of ties among religious seminaries, implementation of joint research projects.¹⁷⁶

Today, the picture is considerably less rosy for Iran's regional ambitions, particularly amid a backlash from the Sunni of Iraq and the overt threat posed by the uprising to continued Alawite rule in Syria. Moreover, the fact that a Shi'a-led government with close ties to Iran has come to power in Iraq does not sit well with many Arab states and Sunni-dominated societies, particularly in the Gulf. As is the case in Syria, though certainly not to the same degree, the Sunni-Shi'a power dynamic in Iraq feeds a narrative that affects Sunni-Shi'a relations throughout the Middle East.

As the respected scholar Henri Barkey wrote: "Change in Syria, given the porous borders between the two countries, especially in the Sunni-controlled provinces of Anbar and Nineveh, is likely to give further impetus for Sunnis to resist the Nuri al-Maliki government in Baghdad. . . . His policy is likely to earn even more enmity from Sunnis who see him acting on sectarian impulse."¹⁷⁷

For Iran, the dramatic changes in the Middle East are likely to cause Tehran to revise the blueprint for its regional policies, which was drafted in 2002. That year, the Expediency Council, chaired by former President Rafsanjani, drafted the "20-year vision" plan, which lays out a series of pragmatic foreign policy objectives.¹⁷⁸ The document is believed by many Iranian scholars and experts to be the blueprint that Iran follows to this day. Among the goals stated in this document are: the expansion of bilateral cooperation in the region and with the international community; the avoidance of tensions in relations with other countries (President Ahmadinejad has surely defied this objective); the strengthening of relations with non-hostile countries; better integration among Muslim countries; support for oppressed Muslims and oppressed nations, especially the Palestinians; and a campaign to rid of the region of any foreign military presence. This document reflects Iran's pragmatic face to the region, but it is likely a policy of pragmatism mixed with a drive for influence will continue.

¹⁷⁶ Barzegar, Kayhan. "The Shi'a Factor in Iran's Foreign Policy." Center for Strategic Research, Nov. 2008. <http://www.csr.ir/departments>.

¹⁷⁷ Barkey, Henri. "Spinoff: The Syrian Crisis and the Future of Iraq." *The American Interest*, December 26, 2012. <http://www.the-american-interest.com/article.cfm?piece=1365>

¹⁷⁸ The Government Information Center. "The final document of the Islamic Republic of Iran's 20-year vision." [Dolat.ir. http://www.dolat.ir/PDF/20years.pdf](http://www.dolat.ir/PDF/20years.pdf)

PART FOUR: WHAT CAN THE UNITED STATES DO?

In Bahrain, the impasse continues with only a glimmer of hope after the initiative from the crown prince and the king to restart national dialogue in February 2013. First and foremost, the United States should continue to press the crown prince, with whom Washington has close relations, to urge the king to move beyond theoretical initiatives and lead a dialogue based upon the specific underlying grievances of the opposition.

The time for simply calling for general reform and taking a passive approach to their implementation has long past. As we have seen, Bahraini society is becoming more polarized and political factions are becoming more radicalized as sectarianism tightens its grip. In addition, the opposition faction with which the United States has the best relationship—al Wafaq—is becoming more marginalized as a new generation of Shi'a activists threatens to leave it behind. Substantive dialogue must begin in order to preserve what power this important political society still has among its constituents.

For example, dialogue could begin with government proposals to implement some of the BICI recommendations which specifically address the sectarian divide: the integration of personnel from all communities in Bahrain into the security forces; the establishment of a more professional media with professional standards and an end to the hate speech in the state-run media; and the development

of a reconciliation program to address the political, social, and economic inequities that affect all Bahrainis, no matter their religious identities.

In addition, the United States should insist that the Bahraini government lead this dialogue and not leave it up to al Wafaq and the National Unity Gathering to conduct the dialogue without the government's strong hand. Government participation should include other figures in addition to the crown prince, who had planned to be the key government representative in 2011, to show that there is broad support across rival factions within the state.

The United States should again stress to Manama—as Washington has done since the uprising began—that reconciliation is in its best interest in order to ensure the long-term stability of the monarchy. It must not let residual fears of future Iranian influence deflect the pressing need to heal the sectarian divide before it tears the country apart and undercuts U.S. interests in a vital and volatile region. Bahrain has shown that the Gulf is not immune to the Arab uprisings, and there is no guarantee the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia will continue to refrain from mass protest. Over time, both Shi'a and Sunni are likely to question the government's legitimacy.

In fact, failure to press the Bahraini establishment for concessions to the Shi'a with effect will only

prolong the crisis, increasing the potential for Iran's direct intervention. Some factions within the opposition already believe the United States has either sided with the government or has no influence among hardliners within the state. Therefore, it is only logical that they would seek other benefactors.

Second, the United States should be more public about its conversations with al Wafaq and other Shi'a groups, who meet regularly with U.S. officials in Manama and Washington. This would counter-balance and minimize current and future dependence upon Iran as a last resort for Shi'a groups. U.S. support would also send a strong signal to Shi'a populations around the Arab world, some of which have developed a perception that the United States backs only Sunni groups, based upon its support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This would send a signal that the United States considers the Shi'a political factions important players.¹⁷⁹ In December 2012, al Wafaq members paid a visit to leading Shi'a figures in Kuwait to gain their support for the renewed call for national dialogue and the parties discussed the United States' role.

Third, officials from the Department of Defense should begin looking into a contingency plan for relocating the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet from Bahrain to another Gulf state, in case the instability reaches greater levels. This would send a signal to the Bahraini government and to Saudi Arabia—both parties want the Fleet to remain in Bahrain—that its presence there is not guaranteed and that U.S. concerns for a resolution to the current crisis cannot simply be taken lightly.

The presence of the Fifth Fleet sends a message, not only to the Bahraini government, but to Saudi Arabia, that no matter their actions, they have a friend in the U.S. military, said a former high-ranking

U.S. official who worked on the Bahrain file. And, given the possibility of a war with Iran, the Bahraini and Saudi governments are likely to assume the U.S. cannot afford to uproot the Fifth Fleet. "The U.S. could tell the Bahraini government, 'We don't want to leave, but if the situation becomes too unstable we will have to. So why don't you start a real dialogue with the opposition?'" said the former U.S. official. Yet the same official acknowledged that American leverage was limited. "As much as Bahrain values the base, they value their own survival more and they see the uprising as an existential threat."¹⁸⁰

Fourth, the United States should encourage its European allies, many of whom have remained relatively silent, to publicly criticize the Bahraini government over its human rights violations. While high-level U.S. officials, such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Assistant Secretary of State Michael Posner, routinely address the human rights situation, the Europeans do not. It was no accident that the crown prince, as part of his December call for dialogue, singled out Great Britain for its "support for Bahrain during its crisis" but seemed deliberately to exclude the United States.¹⁸¹ A unified international position would also prevent the Bahraini government from simply pretending that the crisis is over. Implicit in the government's statements, and in the crown prince's address, is that the government has successfully weathered the conflict, even as protests continue and society becomes more restive.

In Lebanon, the political dynamic continues to mirror the communal divisions in Syria based upon events in both countries. The Syrian war has complicated the country's ability to make a transition to a less sectarian form of governance. The divisions in Lebanese society will likely deepen as the conflict in

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Kuwait City, December 18-23, 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Anonymous former U.S. official. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Washington, D.C., January 2013.

¹⁸¹ McDowell, Angus. "Bahrain Crown Prince calls for talks with opposition." *Reuters*, December 8, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/08/us-bahrain-politics-idUSBRE8B704H20121208>

Syria continues. The Tripoli region, already a transit area for weapons and a microcosm of the sectarian conflict across the border, risks drawing Lebanon directly into the Syrian war. There have already been several events, as documented above, which could have provided the spark that would provoke both sides in the Syrian conflict—the rebels and the Asad regime—to expand the conflict into northern Lebanon, where each side has its own supporters.

There is little the United States can do to affect the sectarianism or the intra-Muslim debate inside Lebanon. Addressing U.S. policy in light of the Arab uprisings, Gregory Gause, one expert on the Gulf, wrote: “The United States has even less to contribute to the intra-Islamist debate among Brotherhood and Salafi trends on the appropriateness of democracy.”¹⁸² After the assassination of intelligence director al Hassan, the Obama administration encouraged all parties to negotiate a change in government until parliamentary elections are held in 2013. But this has not happened.

While it might be tempting to craft a policy toward Lebanon with the expectation of Hizballah’s diminished power after Asad’s likely fall, this would be misguided. Despite a loss of support from the Sunni community, experts with contacts in Hizballah say the party’s priority now is to chart a regional role for itself should Asad fall and to preserve its dominance over the Lebanese government by securing a parliamentary majority in upcoming elections in 2013.

In addition, given the current period of uncertainty over Asad’s fate and those of Syria’s ruling Alawite minority, all sides in the internal Lebanese political sphere are wrestling for power and could become even more reliant on external parties—chiefly

Iran and Saudi Arabia. This means that, ahead of parliamentary polls, Saudi Arabia is likely to increase its support across the Sunni political spectrum, from the Salafist preachers, many of whom are reportedly already receiving vast sums from the Saudis, to the March 14 movement. Similarly, Iran will likely step up its military assistance to Hizballah. Lebanon risks providing the ground for an all-out proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, even more so than Bahrain.

Yet, despite Hizballah’s relationship with Iran and its long history of militancy, the United States should revise its view of the movement as simply a “puppet” of Iran. As Hizballah’s strategic position with Syria is at risk, it is keeping its eye on the biggest prize—maintaining its strong position in Lebanon.¹⁸³ Unlike some of its European allies, the United States is unlikely to conduct direct talks with Hizballah. Therefore, it should work with its European allies to send a message to Hizballah that, despite the desires of some Sunni groups, which see the Syrian war as an opportunity for Hizballah’s demise, the United States does not intend to support or favor Sunni factions ahead of the 2013 parliamentary elections. Hizballah might take a cynical view, given the United States’ long history of opposition to the organization, but public statements of neutrality would still indicate to Hizballah that the United States is not working toward its demise.

In the same vein, the United States should not impose any further sanctions on Hizballah or its leaders for aiding Asad.¹⁸⁴ Washington should also abandon as counter-productive attempts to arrest those Hizballah members who the Special Tribunal identified and accused of being implicated in the Hariri assassination. As stated above, Nasrallah has vowed that Hizballah will never give them up.

¹⁸² Gause, Gregory III. “The year the Arab spring went bad.” The Brookings Institution, December 31, 2012. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2012/12/31-arab-spring-failure-gause>

¹⁸³ Anonymous sources. Interviewed by Geneive Abdo. Beirut, Sept. 2012.

¹⁸⁴ Solomon, Jay. “US Sanctions Hizballah leader for Aid to Syria.” *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2012. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444023704577649563440632098.html>

Therefore, it is futile to continue to raise the issue, which has had a significant polarizing effect in Lebanon.

Second, in order to preserve the stability in Lebanon, the United States should continue to support Lebanese institutions, such as the Lebanese Armed Forces.¹⁸⁵ A strong LAF would undermine Hizballah's argument that it needs to maintain an independent arsenal to protect the country against Israel. As the sectarian conflict in Lebanon intensifies, calls for Hizballah to disarm are increasing. Therefore, a strong LAF would add weight to the argument among Hizballah's foes that the movement does not need its own arsenal and should disarm. The coexistence of a national army, which is larger but weaker than Hizballah, and a stronger armed militia controlled by Hizballah places Lebanon's statehood at risk, particularly as the Syrian war worsens.

Third, the United States should resist the temptation of playing into Sunni triumphalism in Lebanon or elsewhere in the region. There is already a perception within Shi'a societies that the United States supports Sunni Islamist groups, based upon a perceived support for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian opposition. When the electoral campaign begins for Lebanon's parliamentary elections in 2013, the United States should maintain a neutral position. For the foreseeable future, Lebanon is likely to remain plagued by sectarian rivalry, paralysis in government, and insecurity internally and along its borders.

The growing sectarianism in Lebanon and Bahrain and many other countries in the Middle East should signal to the United States that religion is now an integral part of political life in the region. The battle over political and economic power is intertwined with a battle over doctrinal differences. In Bahrain, for example, it is difficult to determine cause and effect: Was it institutionalized discrimination against the Shi'a that led to the uprising, which then led to a sectarian conflict? Mostly likely the foundation had already existed for a heightened conflict over Islamic doctrine, which according to some Sunni in Bahrain, does not give equal footing to the Shi'a. In Lebanon, where a confessional system has existed for decades, the war in Syria became the latest spark pitting Sunni against Shi'a.

For decades, the United States has ignored the role religion plays in politics in the region—due to a lack of understanding and an exclusive reliance on state actors, who were secular, until unseated by the Arab uprisings. With the successful overthrow of secularist leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and the strong likelihood of the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, religion and the affiliated phenomenon of sectarianism are now emerging as powerful mobilizing forces in the region and as potent sources of regional instability and conflict. All this makes it necessary for the United States to now take all aspects of Islam, including its sectarian tendencies, seriously as a mechanism for attaining political and economic power.

¹⁸⁵ "US says aid to boost Lebanese army capability." *The Daily Star*. December 21, 2012. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2012/Dec-21/199417-us-says-aid-to-boost-lebanese-army-capability.ashx#axzz2NYQQz1B5>

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