

Shi'a Political Identity in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.
Oil boom and the Iranian Revolution
leading up to the *Arab Spring*

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Introduction

Recent events mark the escalation of identity politics in the Middle East. The Syrian civil war began as a local issue that coincided with the fervor of the Arab Spring. Five years later, the country has become a battle ground for proxy wars. Yemen is following a similar path as Saudi Arabia's bombing campaigns and perceived Iranian influence amongst the Houthis reflect a sectarian nature. With the start of 2016, Saudi and Iranian hostilities further escalated with the Kingdom's execution of prominent Shi'a figure, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr¹. As events transpire, the detente that began in the 1990s is far from stable and it does not appear that the Gulf regimes and Iran will come to any sort of rapprochement.

This research will be a case study of the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Since the Arab Spring, much of the literature about Shi'a identity tend to focus on the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These events were prolific in the politicization amongst the Gulf Shi'a. However, I argue that one has to go earlier in the respective country's history to gain a more comprehensive understanding of sectarianism and Shi'a identity in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

The first part of the paper will focus on the oil boom that took place during the 1930s to the 1960s. Overt political discrimination began in tandem with economic growth as the Gulf regimes brings to mind the richness in petroleum. I will discuss the history of political movements that took place during the oil boom - specifically, the secular labor movements and possible sectarian overtones that were present during this time. Toby Matthiesen (2015) and Laurence Louer (2012) offers an extensive survey of the events that took place within ARAMCO and

¹ NYTimes, "Saudi Executions Seen as Sending Message to all Dissenters," January 5, 2016.

BAPCO employees. Needless to say, democratization did not flourish in both countries. Political dilemmas that took place during this time are still unresolved.

The second part of the paper will focus on the domestic context within Saudi Arabia and Bahrain during the era of religious revivalism that took place in the 1970s. After the oil boom, the promises of secular ideologies failed allowing for religious figures to take the forefront in mobilizing the Shi'a communities. Sectarian politics were further implemented and institutionalized by the regimes. A study of this time period will certainly refer to the regional shock that occurred with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Whether Iran had any explicit influence or connection with the Gulf Shi'a will be discussed.

For both time frames, I will cite research conducted by Yitzhak Nakash (2006), Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke (1999), and Jacob Goldberg (1986). Their works are directly related to the Shi'a population of the Gulf - highlighting how regime policies were implemented to directly marginalize the Shi'a population as well as analyzing Shi'a response and mobilization against their respective regimes.

One of the aims of this research is to view the conflict between Shi'a figures and the ruling regimes beyond the simple sense of religious dogma; that is, beyond the hallow view of the issue solely being a Sunni versus Shi'a conflict. Scholars have stressed this point ad nauseam. Yet the misconception that doctrinal differences drive Shi'a opposition persists. In analyzing 'unsecular mobilization,' Stathis N. Kalyvas (2003) stresses the need to focus on state institutions and the actions of political actors. Referring strictly to religious doctrine or theological related verbatim does nothing productive as it involves "flexible and malleable statements [with]

ambiguous political intent².” With that, the main questions I seek to answer in this case study are the following:

“*What regime policies have heightened identity politics?*” Both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are ruled by Sunni regimes and both countries are known for petroleum. Shi’a agitation towards the state can be traced back to early state repression that occurred during the oil boom. The promise of modernization and Shi’a agitation towards the regime can be connected to Mancur Olsen Jr’s (1963) concept of ‘revolution of rising expectations.’ I would like to see if there are any similarities in regards to patterns that can be used to predict the level of identity politics with political crisis.

“*How influential is Iran with the Shi’a population?*” The external threat of Iranian influence has been a constant fixture in policies implemented by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Scholars such as Frederic M. Wehrey (2014) caution against this problematic analysis that explains Shi’a dissent as “a relatively recent and largely artificial import to the region.³” Such analysis negates the organic and autonomous feature of sectarian politics within the region. Iran’s role as a Shi’a Islamic state cannot be downplayed. However, their influence does not just come in a vacuum and domestic condition of both countries should be accounted for in the heightening of Shi’a identity.

² Stathis N. Kalyvas, *Unsecular Politics and Religious Mobilization. Beyond Christian Democracy*, p 297

³ Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf. From The Iraq War to the Arab Spring*, p x

The findings to these questions will be discussed in the concluding remarks of this research. Scholars such Hazem Beblawi (1987)⁴ and Michael L. Ross (2001⁵/2011⁶) refer to the rentier theory so as to explain the strength of authoritarian rule. The theory has many valid points specifically with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Yet, I argue that the theory is not sufficient in explaining the political crisis in the region for it negates the heightened issue of sectarianism and identity politics that are pertinent in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Shi'a Identity

Before I begin discussing the oil boom that took place in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, note should be made regarding Shi'a identity. In the context of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the exact definition of what is a Shi'a is problematic due to the group's diversity. Religion is a key characteristic. The foundation of being a Shi'a is clearly connected to Islam and the historical break that highlights Sunni-Shi'a differences in religious doctrine and belief. Nevertheless, the Shi'a community varies with each country and does not represent a "monolithic bloc."⁷ They vary in regards to socio economic status, level of religiosity, and political outlooks. The Shi'a of Bahrain are known to be more militant in comparison to the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, there are prominent Shi'a figures who take on a more moderate stance while there are some who take on a more extremist view.

⁴ *"The Rentier State in the Arab World."*

⁵ *"Does Oil Hinder Democracy."*

⁶ *"Oil, Islam, and Woman."*

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9

Regardless, the Shi'a communities of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain can both refer to the sense of national exclusion and the belief that there is a national attempt to subdue their culture and contributions to the state. Discounting religion per say, the national dialogue regarding the founding of the countries neglect the indigenous population's contributions.

In Bahrain, Yitzhak Nakash (2006) refers to a book that was published in 1983 to celebrate 200 years of al-Khalifa rule. The official narrative spoke of al-Khalifa's nobility and reflected the country's founding as a battle between Arabs and Persians - further heightening Shi'a distrust⁸. The al-Khalifa regime is glorified for centralizing the economy⁹. The national rhetoric of Saudi Arabia follows a similar path in which the al-Saud regime is directly linked with the stability and growth of the modern Saudi state. David B. Ottaway (2011) also took note of the national rhetoric that augments al-Saud rule during his trip to the Kingdom shortly after the 2011 uprisings. In particular, he also notes the use of Islam to legitimize the monarchy. As stated:

The most recent iteration of this Saudi narrative came while I was visiting the kingdom in March [2011] in a speech given by Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh. Speaking at Islamic University in the holy city of Medina, Salman made the claim that the 18th century Saudi kingdom was basically a revival of the original Islamic state founded by the Prophet Mohammed. The present Saudi state was thus a direct descendent of the Prophet's¹⁰.

⁸ Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power. The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, p.17

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹⁰ David. B. Ottaway, *Saudi Arabia in the Shadow of the Arab Revolt*, p. 4

Societal exclusion is further fomented by national policies that tend to reflect ambiguity with Shi'a loyalty to the State. The topic of Shi'a loyalty has been a constant source of fear for both regimes¹¹. The same pattern of regime response was seen with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to the Arab Spring of 2011. Consequently, this does nothing for nation building and only creates a pathological cycle of "self-fulfilling prophesy"¹². Regimes can easily point the finger to external influences while easily neglecting the domestic cause of the uprisings. This further heightens sectarianism as the regimes' condemnation of Iran stokes Sunni anxieties over Shi'a loyalty.

By studying the historical political crises that took place during the oil boom and era of religious revivalism, I hope to show that Shi'a dissent is a local phenomenon. The heightening of identity begins within local contexts. For clarity with this case study, religion will not be completely discounted. Rather, Shi'a affiliation in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will entail a shared concept of identity that R.K. Ramazani (1986) refers to as "both an ideological and sociopolitical movement."¹³

Oil Boom

Saudi Arabia

Oil was discovered in the Kingdom in 1938¹⁴ and exportation began in 1946 under the then American owned company, ARAMCO¹⁵. At the time, ARAMCO was unique in its hiring

¹¹ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, p. 41

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹³ R.K. Ramazani, *Shi'ism in the Persian Gulf*, p. 32

¹⁴ William J. Spencer, *Saudi Arabia Country Report*, p. 148

¹⁵ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 40

practices and exceptional treatment towards its employees. Expatriates were hired and Arab workers from the Middle East made up a part of the company's labor force. However, the company did focus on local hiring and was rather successful in this early phase. Opportunities once unthinkable were now available as some Saudis were even able to travel abroad to attain vocational training¹⁶. Further, the company provided basic social needs for workers' families. Services such as housing loans and healthcare were available¹⁷.

This "quasi-welfare state¹⁸" scenario within ARAMCO was one of the main reasons Saudis were primarily absent from the early strikes¹⁹. Saudi workers were primarily focused on stable employment. Regardless of sectarian allegiance, Saudi workers were faced with new economic and social opportunities amidst industrialization. ARAMCO salaries were noted to be higher than regional contemporaries such as the Bahrain's BAPCO²⁰. Specifically with the Saudi Shi'a, ARAMCO's presence was a momentous event as a majority of the Saudi Shi'a actually resided in the oil rich eastern province.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁹ The first major strike took place in 1945 and was part of a wider political movement regarding socialism and pan-arabism. Unskilled Saudi workers (both Sunni and Shi'a) were initially not too familiar with the ideology regarding worker's rights and it was the semi-skilled expatriates that imported and familiarized the local Saudi workers with such demands.

As stated by Matthiesen (2015), expatriates during this time were mostly "Palestinians, Syrians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Italians, [and] Indians."

The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism, p. 70

²⁰ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 40

Saudi workers eventually became politicized and took part in the oil strikes. Active participation amongst the Shi'a occurred during the 1950s. The National Reform Front was founded in 1953 and was organized by both Arab expatriates and Saudi locals. Clandestine groups also emerged in the eastern region which were influenced by communist ideologies and communist use of propaganda. Such was the Knowledge Society for the Struggle, founded in the late 1940s by "a number of educated Shia notables."²¹

Clandestine journals were circulated throughout the oil producing countries and articles from Saudi ARAMCO workers were included. Such articles reflected anti-monarchy sentiments as it was believed that the monarchy was unjustly profiting from oil revenues while neglecting the national interest of the country. Furthermore, ARAMCO became a symbol of United States imperialism and was seen by the workers as way to maintain al-Saud dominance over the country²².

More significant was how pan-arabism introduced the collective political belief that workers have a say in how oil revenue should be allocated and spent within the country. This connects directly with the Shi'a communities of the eastern provinces. Cities such as Dharan and Dammam were being developed and given primary attention. All the while, Shi'a towns were absent from the regime's plan of development. Shi'a towns were not allocated "basic public services — schools, hospitals, clinics, paved roads, and so on."²³

²¹ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 72

²² Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power. The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, p. 48

²³ Jacob Goldberg, *The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia*, p. 238

Additionally, the collapse of the dates market further fueled Shi'a agitation towards the regime. Prior to industrialization, the economy of Saudi Arabia concentrated primarily on agriculture. This soon changed with the presence of ARAMCO as oil became the vital commodity as opposed to traditional products²⁴. Dissent in the eastern provinces fit perfectly to what would be Mancur Olson Jr (1963) analysis of how rapid modernization destabilizes countries. As stated, "in periods of rapid economic growth there are often several forces that work towards a concentration of most of the gains in a relatively small number of hands and to a widespread diffusion of the losses."²⁵

Regime response to worker demands were not conciliatory and discrimination against the Shi'a communities became institutionalized after this period. Although ARAMCO did offer Shi'a workers new opportunities for economic growth, they were still absent from managerial and higher up positions. A significant number of Saudi workers were eventually let go within ARAMCO, and many of them were Saudi Shi'a²⁶.

With the collapse of the date market and newfound suspicion regarding state loyalty, the Shi'a had little economic opportunities. The Shi'a were also excluded from key state positions such as the army and national guard - further impeding any sense of profound inclusivity and a national Saudi identity²⁷.

Bahrain

²⁴ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 73

²⁵ Mancur Olson Jr., *Rapid Growth as a Destabilizing Force*, p. 303

²⁶ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, p. 185

²⁷ Jacob Goldberg, *The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia*, p. 237

Unlike Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a of Bahrain are the majority²⁸. Yet, their political and social influence within the country are negligible. Sectarian crises coincides with existing social cleavages that date back to the founding of the country. As stated in the introduction of this paper, the narrative of al-Khalifa's conquest is a constant fixation amongst Bahraini activists. Sunni tribal groups that migrated to the country were given priority over the indigenous inhabitants. Even the notion of being a Bahraini is viewed as being an invention of the al-Khalifa regime so as to impose a false sense of national unity and identity²⁹. The commercialization of oil in the 1930s³⁰ exacerbated these societal cleavages and intensified the politicization of Shi'a identity.

BAPCO's arrival and the commercialization of oil certainly disrupted the way of life for Bahrainis as it did for the Saudis. However, the situation in Bahrain was starkly different as the discovery of oil came right after the economy suffered major hits with the global depression and collapse of the pearl industry in the 1930s³¹. The regime did try to ease the local tension and tried

²⁸ According to William J. Spencer (2007), adherents to Shi'a Islam make up 70% of the population while adherents of Sunni Islam make up 15%.

Saudi Arabia Country Report, p. 37

²⁹ Shi'a activist of Bahrain often refer to themselves as being a Bahrani as opposed to being a Bahraini. This is part of the nativist rhetoric in which being a Bahrani means that your ancestors were the original inhabitants of the country by contrast with those who came later on [Sunni bedouins / al-khalifa regime]. Religion in regards to Sunni versus Shi'a is not the prime focus of being a Bahrani. Rather, its focus is on land entitlement and ownership.

As Laurence Louer (2008) notes, "In that respect, the myth of Ancient Bahrain is typical of the tales that sustain ideologies of national liberation. Although the religious dimension is an important element of the discourse, it is only secondary by comparison to the omnipresence of the nativist element."

Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf, p. 24

³⁰ Oil was discovered in 1932. Commercialization was led by what was then an American owned company, BAPCO.

William J. Spencer, *Saudi Arabia Country Report*, p. 38

³¹ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 34

to negotiate concessions with BAPCO for local hiring. Concessions were inadequate as the structure of BAPCO's employment became highly stratified along ethnic lines - profoundly more so than ARAMCOs. This practice of hiring was a crucial source of discontent amongst BAPCO workers³².

Shi'a mobilization coincided with pan-Arabism and initially did not have a sectarian agenda. The early strike of 1938 revolved around the issues of improved working conditions that were being expressed with other labor workers in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The al-Khalifa regime was attacked for corruption and pocketing most of the oil revenues. As noted by Nakash (2006), "The sheikh took one-third of the oil revenue for the privy purse and used part of it to pay the allowances of his innumerable relatives.³³" Most significant in Bahrain was the added emphasis on local hiring within BAPCO³⁴.

As time would reveal, Bahrain's oil reserves were small in comparison to Saudi Arabia. The al-Khalifa regime did undergo economic changes in anticipation of the post oil economy. However, the plan did not envision a democratic society in which the Shi'a population would

³² In regards to the minority status of Bahrainis within BAPCO, "Some sources even estimate that a significant part of those officially registered as Bahrainis were actually Iranian migrants or were born from Iranian parents."

Ibid., p. 35

³³ Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power. The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, p. 61

³⁴ This early period of dissent actually incited what could have been a stable Bahraini identity that was collective of all Bahraini citizens regardless of religion.

Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 37

Nevertheless, this sense of national unity did not persist as would be seen during the era of religious revival shortly after the strikes of pan-Arabism.

gain social mobility. The marginalization of the Shi'a population persisted and was further institutionalized within the country shortly after the oil boom.

Fuller and Francke (1999) note an interesting contradiction in which the Shi'a of Bahrain are highly literate with both "Shi'ite men and women rank[ing] high among the top graduates of high schools and universities."³⁵ Regardless, Shi'a occupation is largely constricted to manual labor. Rarely have they attained higher managerial positions. As in Saudi Arabia, the plummeting of oil prices in addition to political dissent led to massive layoffs within BAPCO. No other economic opportunities were available to the Shi'a. As stated:

Large workforces were reduced by as much as 50 percent, in which the brunt of the pain was felt by the Shi'a. The government had been a key employer and had developed huge personnel cadres as a means of full employment and redistribution of income. . . . With near total government ownership of everything, there was no significant private sector to take up the slack³⁶.

Grievances about employment and local hiring persisted even as the regime sought to expand the country's banking and communications industry. Jobs were becoming available as foreign corporations needed workers to fill administrative positions. Nevertheless, these jobs were again being filled by foreign workers with the "Shi'is into the service and distribution sectors of the economy."³⁷ This corresponds to Mancur Olsen Jr's (1963) analysis of how the concept of unemployment is a new phenomenon in a newly industrialized country. Because of this, the

³⁵ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, p. 123

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124

³⁷ Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power. The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World*, p. 62

regime in power would not know how to deal with the situation³⁸. Unemployment was already an issue prior to the oil boom and was elevated to a higher degree after.

Religious Revival

The grievances that took place during the oil boom persisted well into the 1970s. The secular promises promoted by pan-Arabism did not improve Shi'a conditions. Marginalization continued as economic and social discrimination became institutionalized by the state. Religious revivalism was sweeping the Middle East and directly influenced the Shi'a communities of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

Traditionally, the Shi'a Ulama have been known for their quietist practice. Contrary to the common image as perpetuated by the Iranian state or Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, the Shi'a *Ulama* have often discouraged the mixing of religion and politics. Although it can be tricky and is certainly never black and white, this point of view is still practiced amongst Shi'a leadership³⁹. Nevertheless, the era of religious revivalism that consumed the Middle East in the 1970s altered Shi'a leadership. Many changed their practices and took on a more active approach in representing the Shi'a communities against the respective regimes. Consequently, they took on a more radical tone and religious figures took a prominent role in mobilizing the Shi'a communities.

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the Shirazi movement was at the forefront of Shi'a mobilization. The spiritual leader was Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi. He appealed specifically to the youth and was known to be more accessible to the Shi'a community in comparison to more traditional

³⁸ Mancur Olson Jr., *Rapid Growth as a Destabilizing Force*, p. 304

³⁹ An example would be Ayatollah al-Sistani of Iraq.

Shi'a leaders who practiced a quietest strand. As stated, "he revolutionized the landscape of organized religion in a country in which religionist was mainly expressed in prayer at the mosque and participation in religious rituals."⁴⁰

Though the movement was clearly founded on religion, the Shirazi movement also had a separate political organization called the Movement of Vanguard Missionaries (MVM). The movement was founded in 1968 — 11 years prior to the Iranian Revolution and was presided by al-Shirazi's nephew, Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi.

MVM's base was conducted under the *Hawza* in Kuwait. There, students were provided religious training that corresponded with al-Shirazi's beliefs. More significant was the political training that was also offered. As stated by Matthiessen (2015):

The first floor of the hawza was used for traditional religious lectures, while the second floor, under the guidance of Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, was dedicated to political education. It seems that the hawza was intended to do nothing less than revolutionize the whole hawza system of Shia learning⁴¹.

Within MVM were separate branches that focused on a specific country. The Saudi Branch was called the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula / OIRAP. Once students received their religious and political training, they were expected to return to their country to promote MVM doctrine.

MVM's activities in Saudi Arabia were all taking place prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Many of the same tactics that were used in the Iranian Revolution were previously used by

⁴⁰ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 121-124

⁴¹ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 97

the MVM. Before Khomeini's sermons were being smuggled from France into Iran, MVM was circulating taped sermons from Kuwait into the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia⁴².

Bahrain

The finite amount of oil prompted the al-Khalifa regime to diversify the country's economy. As mentioned, tourism, banking, and communications industries were developed. However, poverty increased throughout the country and the separation between the majority Shi'a and minority Sunni/al-Khalifa regime expanded.

Shi'a political identity in Bahrain was primarily influenced by *Hizb Al-Dawa Al-Islamiyya*/Islamic Call Party. Al-Da'wa was founded in 1958 in Iraq by S. Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr. It was similar to the Shirazi movement in that both sought to counter secular groups. Like al-Shirazi, al-Sadr also enacted new practices not primarily favored by the mainstream and more traditional Shi'a *Ulama*⁴³.

Bahrainis that trained in Najaf, Iraq promoted the al-Da'wa ideology back home: "They transported al-Da'wa to Bahrain by giving a precise ideological framework to a group of twenty young religious activist in their twenties."⁴⁴ What differentiated al-Da'wa with the Shirazi movement was that the latter sought to enact an Islamic country/Islamic State via clandestine means. Al-Da'wa on the other hand was an actual political party with a religious bases.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 100

⁴³ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 85

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104

Thus, Shi'a demands in Bahrain centered around political participation and a demand for better representation in parliament. Political repression and the state security law were specifically abhorred by the Shi'a communities. As noted by Wehrey (2015):

Poor economic conditions were compounded by increased political repression, culminating in the deceleration in 1974 of a state security law that gave the regime the right to arbitrarily arrest and imprison for three years anyone deemed a threat to the state⁴⁵.

The suspension of parliament in 1975 was also a particular event that rallied the Shi'a to mobilize⁴⁶. As with Saudi Arabia, these grievances and events took place prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and included a religious element.

Shirazi currents were also present in Bahrain. The MVM branch was called the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain / IFLB and it was headed by al-Mudarrisi himself⁴⁷. However, their influence amongst the Bahraini Shi'a were minimal. Attesting to the lack of popularity was the personal disputes that existed with notable figures/*marja* among the Shi'a *Ulama* in Iraq. The religious authority and event in which al-Shirazi proclaimed himself as a *marja*/spiritual leader was highly controversial. Many of the Najaf *Ulama* discounted his proclamation as *marja*. While al-Sadr was innovative and ruffled the feathers of much of the traditional members, al-

⁴⁵ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 22

⁴⁶ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, p. 125

⁴⁷ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 102

Da'wa was primarily associated with the Najaf *Ulama*⁴⁸. Nevertheless, this personal strife undeniably impacted the respective movement's operations in Bahrain. As stated, "one can surmise that [the Shirazi] attempts to establish themselves as religious scholars was impeded by the well anchored networks of the Najafi marja'iyya and al-Da'wa."⁴⁹

1979 Uprisings & the Iranian Revolution

With the rising tension and heightened Shi'a political identity, it was only a matter of time before protests would erupt in violence. In Saudi Arabia, these events culminated in the 1979 *Intifada* that was primarily led by the Shirazi movement. Leftist and secular groups did participate. However, there was little coordination and unity amongst the groups. The OIRAP branch of MVM viewed the ideological differences between them and leftist groups as being too great for any sense of coordination and compromise⁵⁰.

Unlike the protests that erupted during the oil boom, the *Intifada* clearly included religious overtones as the Saudi Shi'a openly partook in the *Ashura* procession. The public practice of *Ashura* is extremely taboo within Saudi society. Prior, the regime allowed Shi'a practice with-

⁴⁸ "The marja'iyya provided by al-Da'wa cadres not only with a religious legitimacy but also with an infrastructure within which to circulate as well as means to sustain oneself outside of Iraq. The transnational networks of al-Da'wa and the marja'iyya were so tightly intermingled that it was often impossible to separate the religious and the political rationales accounting for the physical mobility of al-Da'wa members."

Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 117

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 126

⁵⁰ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis. Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, p. 108

in the confines of one's home. This public action of the 1979 *Intifada* clearly broke with the quietist strand⁵¹.

In Bahrain, the uprisings were a result of the security law that was enacted by the al-Khalifa regime. As a political party, al-Da'wa initiated most of the organized demonstrations and there were unity and coordination with the secular leftist groups. Religious symbolism was less pertinent. As stated by Louer (2012), "The progressives and the religious factions put aside their ideological differences and joined forces to demand that the law be submitted to the parliament's approval before implementation."⁵²

This unity and organization of Bahraini opposition can be attributed to many factors. However, it must be reiterated that the Shi'a of Bahrain make up a majority of the population in comparison to the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia who make up a minority. Fuller and Francke (1999) point to the different context in both countries. Though imperfect and far from democratic, Bahraini Shi'a have an avenue and have the opportunity to participate in politics. In Saudi Arabia, such access to government is not available⁵³.

The Shi'a communities in both countries were undeniably receptive to the Iranian Revolution. The rhetoric of the Revolution as espoused by Khomeini was initially nonsectarian and coincided with the pan-Islamic movement that was in existence during the era of religious revivalism. Rather than harkening Sunni and Shi'a divisions, Khomeini emphasized the gap be-

⁵¹ Jacob Goldberg, *The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia*, p. 41

⁵² Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 157

⁵³ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a. The Forgotten Muslims*, p. 68

tween the ruling regimes and the people of the country - the rich and the poor. As recorded in his thoughts on Islamic Government / *Hukumat-i Islami* Khomeini stated:

In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples, we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people⁵⁴.

The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain were clearly able to relate to Khomeini's message. Likewise, Khomeini's message was also received by the al-Saud and al-Khalifa regimes.

Findings

“What Regimes policies have heightened identity politics?”

The oil boom and ARAMCO's presence in the eastern province was extremely significant for the Saudi Shi'a. The 'quasi welfare state' as characterized by Louer was profoundly different to the current welfare establishment of the state. During the oil boom, the Saudi Shi'a did have earned income and had available employment. The importance of social and economic opportunities during this time can be attested to the absence of Saudis during the early strikes. What exactly changed?

The ideology of pan-Arabism and the threat its ideology posed led to regime distrust towards the Shi'a. Even as the welfare state was being entrenched in the political structure, there was a notable divide amongst Sunni and Shi'a communities. In comparison to major cities, Shi'a communities are said to lack hospitals and schools. Cultural discrimination has further persisted

⁵⁴ Peter Mandaville, *Global Political Islam*, p. 183

as Saudi textbooks are reported to speak of the Shi'a people and Shi'a doctrine in extremely debasing terms⁵⁵.

The strength of the welfare state is further being tested with the persistent problem of unemployment. Ottaway (2011) noted the uprisings of the Arab Spring and discontent with the middle class. He found that state subsidies and welfare programs were no longer substantial. He cautioned that the country's public sector would no longer be able to accommodate the growing number of college graduates: "Each year, the 24 Saudi state universities alone churn out 80,000 to 90,000 graduates—not counting the graduates of myriad private colleges and training centers."⁵⁶

The case study of Bahrain points to a more distressing scenario. The early conditions for national unity and a collective Bahraini identity were present. Further the opportunities for political participation and the availability of legal channels to air grievances were also available for the Bahraini Shi'a. As stated, the missed opportunity for the island of Bahrain took place in the early phase of the oil boom.

Despite the accessibility of political channels, the dilemma of local hiring is still a source of political discontent. From the oil boom to the Arab Spring, foreign workers are still imported for manual labor. The country's banking and telecommunications industries have only further expanded since the oil boom. Yet, administrative, manual, and service labor are usually filled by Filipinos, Indians, and Pakistani workers.

⁵⁵ For more on this, one can refer to Bayan Perazzo's policy brief for the Institute of Gulf Affairs posted on October 26, 2012.

On Being Shia in Saudi Arabia.

⁵⁶ David. B. Ottaway, *Saudi Arabia in the Shadow of the Arab Revolt*, p. 5

From the oil boom to the era of religious revival, the al-Saud and al-Khalifa regimes did try to address Shi'a grievances. As would be seen with the Arab Spring, political reforms remained largely cosmetic. The Shi'a of both countries continue to face glass ceilings and there was very little done to successfully integrate the Shi'a within the national frame of identity. Profound changes in parliament have yet to occur in Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, the sermons of particular Salafi clerics contain anti-Shi'a edicts. Nevertheless, they are free to teach and are alleged to be prompted by the al-Saud regime.

The heightening of identity has further implications for the region's analysis as it fits with the rentier theory. The illusion of Saudi's infinite wealth in petroleum is currently being tested. Oil prices continue to decline amidst continued domestic and foreign spending. Saudi's deputy crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman spoke earlier this year of the country undergoing a "Thatcherite revolution⁵⁷." Such plan includes "a 5% value-added tax on nonessential goods" and an eventual eradication of state "subsidies on electricity, water and housing."⁵⁸

The situation in Bahrain is not too different. The fervor of protests in 2011 corresponded with growing political discontent towards the al-Khalifa regimes and local contempt towards on-going parliamentary gridlock. As a semi-rentier state, the island is directly impacted with the declining financial situation in Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring exposed the island's vulnerability in regards to its dependence on Saudi Arabia and protection under the Gulf Cooperation Council⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ The Economist (January 7, 2016), "*Saudi Arabia is considering an IPO of ARAMCO, probably the world's most valuable company.*"

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For more on this, please refer to Guido Sternberg's paper published for the Stiftung Wissenschaft and Politik German Institute for International and Security Affairs in June 2014.

“How influential is Iran with the Shi’a populations?”

Undeniably, Iran did provide support and did have connection with the Saudi and Bahraini Shi’a during the era of religious revival. Specifically, Iran’s early foreign policy of exporting the revolution was directly connected with the Shirazi movement. Immediately after the Iranian Revolution, Shirazi headquarters moved from Kuwait to Iran.

However, Iran’s foreign policy changed in the 1980s with the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani. His presidency’s foreign policy shifted to a more pragmatic approach, and this directly impacted the Iranian state’s alliance with the Shirazi movement. Ties would significantly subside in the 1980s leading to what Louer (2011) believes is an ‘autonomization of the Gulf movements.’⁶⁰ Grievances are caused by local conditions and reflect nationalist tones. There is no formidable sense that there exists a pan Shi’a sentiment⁶¹.

Conclusion

The revolts in both countries were quickly silenced — from the oil, era or religious revival, and the Arab Spring. Shi’a participants in the uprisings were imprisoned, killed, or went in exile. What has changed is the overt use of sectarian politics and sectarian identity for both the Sunni regime and Shi’a opposition. As noted by Wehrey (2014), the Saudi Regime’s policy to counter Iranian influence was to play the sectarian card and promote Sunni identity⁶². Most significantly, it was after the revolution in which the Gulf Cooperation Council / GCC was formed.

⁶⁰ “*The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Utopias.*”

⁶¹ Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics. Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 33

⁶² Speech at the Baker Institute - March 10, 2015

As noted, the GCC's charter was never sectarian in nature even though five out of its six embers are Sunni regimes. Rather, the GCC's foundation lies on the shared multilateral security in which national security essentially equates regime security⁶³.

Much blame can be given to the evident shortcomings and authoritarian policies enacted by the al-Saud and al-Khalifa regimes. However, the Shi'a opposition of both countries have also taken actions that are perceived to contribute to sectarianism and disunity. The Shi'a in Bahrain are noted to be more militant in comparison to their Shi'a counterparts and this may be due being able to participate in Parliament. Nevertheless, the main Shi'a block, al-Wefaq, has boycotted Parliament on more than one occasion⁶⁴. During the Arab Spring, the spiritual and organizational leader of al-Wefaq⁶⁵ rejected the proposed dialogue with Crown Prince Salman — an action that some view to have been a missed opportunity. Unlike their counterparts in Bahrain, the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia are noted to be more concerned with freedom of religious practice. What is most striking is some within the Saudi Shi'a who call for a reform of their own religious institution/*marja'iyya*⁶⁶.

The politicization of identity in the Middle East only seems to be increasing as conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and the Gulf undeniably include a sectarian tone. From the oil boom of the 1930s

⁶³ Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf. From The Iraq War to the Arab Spring*, p 6

⁶⁴ Parliamentary election of 2002 and 2014

⁶⁵ Sheikh Isa Qassim and Sheikh Ali Salman

⁶⁶ This view believes that the institution of the *marja'iyya* does not fit with the realities of the modern nation state. Shi'a often receive religious guidance from a *marja* that is in another country (Iraq or Iran). The institution of *marja'iyya* is said to be the cause of distrust with Shi'a and Sunni regimes as their loyalty is seen to be with their *marja* as opposed to the ruler of their own country.

to the Arab Spring in 2011, nothing meaningful has been done for national integration and “political inclusivity⁶⁷.” Unless economic and social discrimination is addressed, the use of identity and sectarianism will not subside. Conflict will continue and the perpetual harkening of sectarian rhetoric will endure. The Sunnis will always discount the Shi’a as a fifth column of Iran and the Shi’a will always refer to their struggles against the ruling regimes in par with the battle of Karbala.

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⁶⁷ Frederic M. Wehrey, Speech at the Baker Institute, March 10, 2015

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