

Still invisible – the stigmatization of Shi’a and other religious minorities in Saudi Arabia

Key findings

- Despite some efforts to reduce sectarian division in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks, when many commentators drew links between homegrown extremism and international terrorism, Saudi Arabia remains one of the most restrictive countries in the world with regard to religious freedom. Shi’a and other religious minorities continue to face official discrimination, social exclusion and state persecution, with little evidence of positive change since the accession of King Salman in January 2015.
- Shi’a in Saudi Arabia have recently been subjected to an unprecedented wave of violence by militants apparently linked to Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS), with at least five major attacks in the last year that have killed dozens and injured many more. Though these incidents have attracted official condemnation, concrete measures to address the underlying problems of sectarianism – such as a proposed policy to strengthen national unity, rejected by the Saudi Shura Council in June 2015 – have yet to be implemented to protect those at risk.
- Though the state has frequently emphasized the importance of national unity, its response to demands from Shi’a for greater religious freedom and equality have further alienated many communities, with hundreds of activists killed, injured or imprisoned since 2011. This includes death sentences against a prominent Shi’a activist, Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr, and his nephew, Ali Mohammed Baqir Al-Nimr, who faces execution despite being only 17 years old at the time of his alleged offences. Without urgent intervention, both are likely to be executed imminently.
- While the authorities treat civil protests and targeted violence against Shi’a and other groups in narrow terms of security, Saudi Arabia will likely continue to experience popular protests and the threat of militant violence. Securing a long-term solution will therefore depend on the ability and commitment of the state to enable its religious minorities to participate as free and equal citizens, ending decades of discrimination against them.

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1 Introduction

Recent developments in the Middle East, including the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS), have led many commentators to investigate the link between violent religious extremism and ultra-conservative Islamic teachings sponsored for decades by leading Saudi families and the Saudi state, not only within its own territory but also across the region and beyond. However, the situation of religious minorities within Saudi Arabia has recently attracted renewed attention, especially following a series of targeted attacks in the last 12 months against Shi'a places of worship. At least five major attacks have taken place between November 2014 and October 2015, signaling a further deterioration in security for the long-stigmatized community.

While these attacks have been condemned by the authorities, discrimination in Saudi Arabia towards Shi'a and other religious minorities has been a central part of state policy for decades, and it is widely recognized as one of the most restrictive countries in the world with regard to religious freedom. Legally, politically and economically, the Saudi government has long promoted an exclusionary form of Sunni Islam while disenfranchising many other religious communities in its diverse population, including not only Shi'a Muslims but also certain branches of Sunni Islam that differ from the officially prescribed interpretation. To this day, freedom of religion is not guaranteed by law in Saudi Arabia and all Saudi citizens are required to follow Islam. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, adherents of other religions as well as atheists and agnostics, who together number around 2 million people, are forbidden from publicly expressing their beliefs.

This briefing outlines the key areas of discrimination experienced by Shi'a and other religious minorities, as well as the role that official policies have played in perpetuating inequalities within Saudi Arabia. In particular, the government's harsh response to popular protests in Eastern

Province, beginning in 2011 and involving many Shi'a demonstrators, has effectively silenced any discussion on possible alternative steps to improve national cohesion and end the country's deeply entrenched tradition of religious discrimination. Saudi Arabia's sectarian climate has been further reinforced by its military engagement in other countries in the region, notably Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and its long-standing rivalry with Shi'a-majority Iran.

Though certain limited reforms have been credited to the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, their scope and effectiveness were constrained by conservative forces within the country. Since his death in January 2015 and the accession of his half-brother King Salman to the throne, there has been little sign of positive progress, with continued repression and restrictions for religious minorities, women and other marginalized groups. This includes the recent upholding of death sentences against a prominent Shi'a activist, Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, on charges that include 'disobeying the ruler' and 'inciting sectarian strife', and his nephew, Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, who was only 17 years old at the time his offences were alleged to have taken place. Despite widespread criticism from human rights groups, international leaders and the United Nations (UN), at the time of writing both sentences appear to be scheduled to take place in the absence of an official intervention.

This briefing highlights the need for a sustained strategy from the Saudi government to end all forms of religious discrimination and reach out to the country's religious minorities, particularly the Shi'a population, to strengthen their rights and security. As outlined in the conclusion and recommendations, these steps are essential for the future peace and stability of the country. While the issues highlighted are experienced by a range of religious groups, the primary focus of this briefing is the Shi'a population.

2 General background

Historical context

The intersection of politics and religion, specifically Wahhabism, in Saudi Arabia can be traced back hundreds of years. Considered by its adherents as a return to the purity of *tawhid*, the monotheistic faith of Islam, the movement first took shape in the eighteenth century under the leadership of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, though it also drew on earlier religious teachings. The movement was consolidated following al-Wahhab's pact with Mohammed bin Saud, a local emir, who proceeded to establish what would subsequently be described as the First Saudi State. Following his death in 1765 his son took power, maintaining a close alliance with the Wahhabi mission.

Strongly inspired by Wahhabi doctrine, including its belief that any deviations from their own belief system were heretical, the Saudis rapidly extended their territory, with the aim of combating supposedly 'polytheistic' practices such as local pilgrimages and shrines. This ideological underpinning drove their expansion. The First Saudi State eventually reached as far as Mecca and Medina, both cities long under the control of the Ottoman Empire, before Ottoman forces brought its territory under their control in 1818.

Though its power fluctuated over the ensuing decades, the House of Saud maintained its close association with the Wahhabi mission. Consequently, the partnership between the two groups remained in place after the fall of the Second Saudi State in 1891 and in the years that followed until the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. In the decades that followed, Wahhabi religious leaders were able to exert considerable influence over many institutions within the Saudi state, including education and the judiciary, enabling them to shape many aspects of the country's legislation and social norms. This has had very significant and wide-ranging implications for the country's religious minorities – impacts that are felt to this day.

Despite the modernization plan pursued by King Faisal after he came to power in 1964, Wahhabi influence within the Saudi Kingdom continued to grow, fuelled by the state's efforts to counter the spread of communism and the vast revenues derived from its oil industry. Billions of dollars were channelled into the promotion of Wahhabi doctrine both within Saudi Arabia and outside the country, entrenching its influence internationally. This trend only intensified in the wake of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, pushing Saudi sponsors to increase their support of Wahhabism to counter any further growth of Shi'a Islam in the Middle East.

These issues were also felt acutely within Saudi Arabia following unrest towards the end of 1979 in Qatif, when Shi'a worshippers defied the public ban on the celebration

of an important religious festival, the Day of Ashura, prompting the National Guard to launch a violent crackdown. Protests spread to other cities in the Eastern Province with large Shi'a populations, resulting in similar responses from security forces. At least 21 people were reportedly killed in these clashes. In the aftermath, while channelling more resources into the underdeveloped eastern region of the country, authorities intensified their surveillance of the Shi'a population.¹

The government's response to another uprising that occurred in 1979, led by the Islamic radical Juhayman al-Otaybi, was markedly different. Increasing resentment of the government's corruption and close relationship with the US as a betrayal of Islamic principles culminated in an attempted coup towards the end of the year, with hundreds of militants calling for an end to Saudi rule. However, though the uprising itself was suppressed and its leaders executed, King Khaled subsequently took steps to increase rather than diminish the influence of racial Islamic ideology over the country's political and social life. This was manifested in almost every aspect of life, including media censorship, cultural restrictions and increased gender segregation. The ensuing years also saw the expansion of religious universities, Islamic centres and the religious police, as well as the entrenchment of extremist perspectives in educational materials and curricula. According to Robert Lacey, now that 'the House of Saud had executed Juhayman ... they were making his program government policy'.²

The relationship between Wahhabism and the Saudi government has fluctuated since then, particularly during the First Gulf War in 1990–91, when the stationing of large numbers of US troops on Saudi soil was highly controversial for many followers. This and other developments, such as the protracted *mujahideen* insurgency against Russian forces in Afghanistan during the 1980s, served to consolidate networks among religious militants as well as their resistance towards the Saudi monarchy. This animosity has been credited as a major driving force behind the subsequent attacks on US soil on 11 September 2001, with Saudi nationals comprising a large proportion of those involved.

In the wake of 9/11, Saudi authorities have taken steps to shift some power away from Wahhabi clergy and other religious bodies, particularly as attacks by militants against security forces, foreigners and other targets within Saudi Arabia escalated. This has included efforts to promote greater inclusion for religious minorities and other marginalized groups, such as women, in the country. While the implications of these shifting policies have affected all Saudi citizens, the effects have been particularly acute for its religious minorities, who have been routinely

marginalized within Wahhabist doctrine. As this briefing outlines, their situation remains precarious and, as recent events have demonstrated, their exposure to discrimination and violence remains acute.

Saudi Arabia's religious groups

While Saudi Arabia is sometimes thought of as religiously homogeneous, given the dominance of Wahhabism within the country, Saudi society in fact spans a wide range of religious affiliations, though their presence is often rendered invisible. Though the population overwhelmingly subscribe to Islam, mainly Sunni Islam, this includes many variants. Some estimates put the Sunni population at around 85–90 per cent,³ though the lack of religious-based censuses means that only estimates of their numbers by different researchers are available. According to some sources, however, the true extent of the country's Shi'a population may be severely under-represented, with one estimate putting the proportion at almost 25 per cent.⁴

Whatever the exact proportion of the total population, Saudi Sunnis comprise several different strands with varying levels of acceptance within Saudi Arabia. The majority follow the *Hanbali* school of jurisprudence. Although it derives in large part from the Hanbali school and is enshrined as the official version of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism itself has been estimated to have only around 4 million adherents in total – a little over a fifth of the population – using 'cultural not confessional criteria',⁵ though other figures put the total somewhat higher. There are also three other distinct Sunni groups – *Hanafi*, *Maliki* and *Shafi'i* – with some members, mainly based in the western province of Hejaz, subscribing to Sufism. Members of non-Hanbali Sunni groups face varying levels of discrimination, including restricted religious freedoms, due to the prescriptive official definition of Sunni Islam along Wahhabist lines. This is especially evident in the western region of Hejaz, where many Maliki and Shafi'i worshippers reside, particularly over differences between Hijazi communities and the majority over the celebration of religious ceremonies such as *mawlid*.⁶ Numerous Sunni Sufi shrines in Mecca, for example, have been destroyed repeatedly by the authorities to accommodate shopping malls and luxury hotels around the Holy Mosque.⁷

Saudi Arabia also contains three Shi'a Muslim minorities: *Isma'ilis*, *Twelvers* and *Zaidis*. Twelvers make up the most sizeable Shi'a minority in the country, with large numbers residing in the Eastern Province, as well as others in the west of the country, including around Mecca and Medina. Isma'ilis, believed to comprise around 700,000 adherents,⁸ are concentrated in the south of the country in Najran and other areas near the border with Yemen. The same is true of the Zaidi population, a smaller religious minority who may number around 50,000 people⁹ and are also situated in large numbers close to Yemen. According to one expert researcher interviewed for this briefing, however, their numbers may be gradually dwindling. Despite forming as much as a third of the population in Najran, they are reportedly allowed to pray in only one mosque in Najran, and are not permitted to build more mosques.¹⁰

These communities have distinct geographical concentrations in different parts of the country, which in important ways has reinforced certain hierarchies and patterns of discrimination. Of Saudi Arabia's five main regions, which are culturally and religiously diversified, the central region of Najd has historically harboured the Wahhabi movement and also served as the political centre of the Saud regime. Historically, most of the senior government and religious establishment positions have been held by Najdis. This elite continues to form the cornerstone of the state's educational, judicial and religious power.

Despite the location of much of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves in the Eastern Province, where a large proportion of Twelver Shi'a reside, this part of the country has long suffered from chronic underdevelopment – a reflection in part of the many religious minority members living there. This lack of investment and political neglect has helped fuel continued outbreaks of unrest, with major protests and civil disobedience during 2011–12 in particular. The country's southern regions, where the population is very religiously and tribally diverse, has also witnessed violent repression of minorities, in particular the Ismai'ili community, who have been subjected to increasing political exclusion, limited opportunities, restricted religious freedoms and public vilification. Following clashes between Ismai'ili protesters and police in April 2000, the authorities launched a violent crackdown with hundreds of Ismai'ilis detained, abused and convicted, leaving a legacy of resentment and marginalization in the region.¹¹

3 Key areas of discrimination

Recent media coverage of Saudi Arabia has focused on the apparent surge in targeted attacks against the Shi'a population, outlined in more detail later in this briefing. However, while these attacks have been closely associated with ISIS and officially condemned by the Saudi authorities, they have taken place against a broader backdrop of discrimination that has arguably contributed to the current sectarian climate. In addition, through a continuous policy of intimidation, detentions and convictions, including numerous executions of leaders and activists, the Saudi government has itself waged a campaign of violent repression against the Shi'a community. These dynamics are outlined in greater detail in this section.

Restrictions on religious freedom

Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record is well known, with the country regularly ranked among the most restrictive in the world with regard to civil liberties. Freedom House's most recent score, for instance, continues to place it at the far end of the spectrum of its 'freedom rating'.¹² Central to this repression are the state's restrictive policies on religious freedom – a situation that undermines the most fundamental rights for Shi'a Muslims and other religious minorities. This is reflected in the wording of the 1992 Basic Law: 'Consolidation of the national unity is a duty. The State shall forbid all activities that may lead to division, disorder and partition.'¹³

According to the Basic Law, Islam is the religion of Saudi Arabia, though in practice this is defined more narrowly in line with the government-sponsored version based on the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence. There is no separation between the country's official religion and the state, and the royal family derives a great part of its legitimacy from upholding the principles of Sunni Islam. Conversion away from Islam is considered apostasy and can be punishable by death. Although the Saudi national population is almost exclusively Muslim, an estimated 8–10 million expatriate workers live in the kingdom, of whom at least 2 million are non-Muslim.¹⁴ The naturalization law requires all those wishing to become Saudi citizens to convert to Islam.

The public practice of all religions other than Islam is forbidden. There are no houses of worship, such as churches, temples or synagogues, other than mosques in Saudi Arabia. Although the government claims to respect the right of non-Muslims to worship in private, there have been instances of raids on gatherings for private worship. For example, in

February 2014, police stormed an apartment in Dammam and arrested 12 Ethiopian nationals as they were holding a Christian worship service, later deporting all of them.¹⁵ Two months later, authorities dispersed a Good Friday service attended by 3,000 Catholic expatriates on a farm in the Eastern Province and the organizers subsequently cancelled their remaining Easter services. In July 2014, members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) – a separate government agency that effectively serves as a 'religious police' in the country – attempted to raid a Catholic gathering at a home in Riyadh by climbing over the wall.¹⁶ In September 2014, police raided another Christian gathering in Khafji in the Eastern Province, arresting 27 expatriates and confiscating Bibles and musical instruments.¹⁷

Shi'a Muslims also face restrictions on their religious practices. For example, the public observance of Ashura, one of the most important religious occasions in Shi'a Islam, is permitted in Al-Qatif but is banned in Al-Ahsa, an area which also hosts a large Shi'a population. A Shi'a resident of Al-Khobar, who hosts Friday prayers in his home due to the fact that the government has not granted the Shi'a community permission to build a mosque in the area, reported to media that he had already served three jail sentences for these activities and in 2015 was again sentenced to two months in jail and 60 lashes.¹⁸

The government places restrictions on the ability of Shi'a citizens to build mosques, and does not provide any funding for Shi'a mosques as it does for Sunni mosques. Moreover, the government limits the presence of Shi'a mosques, to areas of the group itself. Isma'ilis, for example, are prohibited from building mosques for their communities outside Najran. The Isma'ili website, Al-Ukhdood, published in 2009 a copy of an official confidential telegram, which referred to orders by the Minister of the Interior not to allow the construction of Isma'ili mosques outside of Najran.¹⁹ Similar challenges confront the Zaidi community, who have only one mosque in Najran and are unable to secure permission to build another. They are also reportedly prevented from performing their call to prayer.²⁰ Shi'a residents in Al-Khobar have also petitioned authorities for decades, without success, to issue a permit for them to build their own mosques.

The government monopolizes all religiously related issues via different ministries, agencies and organizations. One of the main enforcers of these religious restrictions, the CPVPV, reports directly to the king and is not subject to judicial review. In some cases, the Ministry of Interior also plays a key role in making or rejecting decisions related to minorities' religious affairs, such as construction of

places of worship. Informal discrimination is widely practised and there is no public agency that receives or reviews discrimination cases.

Among other restrictions, the CPVPV and police in the Two Holy Mosques routinely confiscate religious books from Shi'a pilgrims, and in many cases subject them to official investigations. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported numerous instances between 2001 and 2009 of Shi'a citizens being arrested and sometimes extra-judicially sentenced to prison for activities which included hosting communal prayers, being found in possession of Shi'a prayer books or selling items used in Shi'a rituals.²¹ Though in recent years there has been some relaxation of these restrictions, with the Ministry of Information and Culture granting permission for some Shi'a-authored books on general Islamic issues to be printed and published locally, Shi'a publishing and literature continues to be regularly suppressed.²² One recent case in al-Ahsa reportedly involved a mother of seven children, who was arrested in Medina and sentenced to three months and 120 lashes for reading a Shi'a religious book.²³

Curtailed civil liberties

Given the close intersection of Sunni Islam as the official religion with every aspect of Saudi Arabia's legal and governance framework, this marginalization also translates into important civil areas such as the judiciary. The country's 20-person Council of Religious Scholars – the *ulema* – responsible for guiding judicial decisions in line with religious teachings, is composed exclusively of Sunni Muslims. Of these, the overwhelming majority (17) adhere to the Hanbali school, with just one representative each from the three remaining Sunni schools.²⁴ Shi'a Muslims, however, are not represented at all.

Meanwhile, in most areas of life, Saudi law continues to be guided by Sharia, defined along Hanbali lines.²⁵ The dominance of Hanbali-educated judges and chiefs of courts at all levels of the judicial system makes it relatively inaccessible for religious minorities. For example, the testimony of non-Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities may be discounted in court, particularly if set against that of a Sunni Muslim.²⁶ While Shi'a in the Eastern Province, both in Al-Ahsa and Qatif, have had separate endowment and inheritance courts, headed by Shi'a judges, since the establishment of the Saudi kingdom, in recent years their authority has been reduced to personal and family matters such as inheritance and marriage issues.²⁷

In many situations and due to the lack of legal protection, followers of other religious groups may become susceptible to police abuse and other forms of mistreatment, including travel bans or prohibitions on speakers from giving lectures, limiting their freedom of speech. Another issue is the limitation imposed on establishing and operating civil society organizations. The

continued absence of an associations law to allow the formation of non-governmental organizations in Saudi Arabia means that citizens, particularly members of religious minorities, still lack a legal path to establish civil society groups.²⁸

Limited economic opportunities

One clear impact of religious discrimination within Saudi Arabia, and a major source of discontent among religious minorities, is economic inequality. As mentioned earlier, the areas in which Saudi Shi'a are primarily located, namely the Eastern Province and southern areas of the kingdom, have historically been underdeveloped in contrast to the Najd heartlands and the western Hijaz province. Although this has improved over the years, many Shi'a still complain that their areas of residence suffer from marginalization and neglect. Residents of Qatif, for example, claim that the government favours Sunni-majority areas for the construction of hospitals and universities, while Shi'a areas of equal population size are underserved.²⁹

Another key grievance of Saudi Shi'a revolves around high unemployment levels. Although this is a nationwide phenomenon, the problem is particularly acute for Shi'a because of the discrimination they face in both public and private employment. Many Shi'a have recounted facing discrimination in the recruitment process once a potential employer discovers their religious identity or their town of origin.³⁰ Shi'a also complain of a 'glass ceiling', which prevents them from reaching high-level positions of employment, and claim that their Sunni colleagues are often favoured for promotions, even when they are less qualified.³¹ In terms of public sector employment, Shi'a are excluded from key roles in the government, judiciary, military and education sectors. This is especially true of security-related positions in the Ministry of Defence, the National Guard and the Ministry of the Interior.

Appointment to senior positions in the public and private sectors typically depends on religious affiliation. Generally, no Shi'a have been appointed as ministers or deputy ministers, and most security, religious and diplomatic jobs remain out of reach: the only notable exception here is the appointment of Major General Mohammed Abu Saq, an Isma'ili Shi'a, as a Minister of State in July 2014. Besides being under-represented in local and national government, as well as other areas of the public sector such as security, Shi'a are also widely excluded in the private sector, including the oil industry.³² Besides Shi'a, other religious groups are also similarly sidelined by sectarian discrimination.³³

Lack of opportunity can be reinforced by everyday ostracization, sometimes encouraged by extremist clerics. Some Wahhabi preachers urge their followers not to answer greetings from Shi'a, sell them real estate or donate money, even in an emergency. Sheikh Abdullah bin Abdurrahman

Ibn Jebreen, a prominent ultra-conservative scholar, repeatedly called on his followers to avoid any interaction, including commercial exchange, with Shi'a: 'It is not permissible to encourage them or to congratulate them on their religious occasions, or to purchase their goods or buy from their shops; likewise it is not permissible to initiate an exchange of greetings with them or stand up for them, or to give them precedence in social gatherings.'³⁴ Such fatwas (rulings) are widely used as tools to segregate the Shi'a community and further weaken their economic position.

Education

For decades, religious textbooks used in schools across the kingdom have perpetuated the idea that followers of all religions other than the Wahhabi version of Islam are infidels who must be condemned, resisted or even killed. This includes certain Islamic sects such as Shi'a and Sufis, as well as Christians, Hindus, Jews and other faiths. Students at primary and secondary school have historically been obliged to use educational materials which denounce popular practices among many Muslims, such as visiting holy shrines and celebrating historical religious occasions.

Following the 9/11 attacks, and in the face of mounting international pressure, the Saudi authorities began revising their textbooks and removing much of this hateful content. However, this process is as yet incomplete, and 'in practice hostile or misinformed representations of Shi'a and other religious groups remain in place.'³⁵ According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the government's stated commitment to remove inflammatory content about Shi'a and other religious minorities from official textbooks has achieved welcome progress, though as of April 2015 revisions were still reportedly ongoing.³⁶

The negative representation of religious minorities persists at the level of higher education, too. The Saudi Scientific Society for Religions, Groups and Sects, for example, which is affiliated with the Islamic University of Medina, lists on its website 414 graduate theses on Islamic sects. Among them, there are 139 dissertations on

Shi'a, described as *Rafidis* – an offensive term that translates as 'rejectionists' – 75 on Sufism and nine on Zaidis.³⁷ The focus of these studies is frequently negative: some examples of dissertation titles include 'The danger of the Houthis, intellectually and in terms of security', 'The Imami Shi'a in Indonesia, and Sunni efforts to combat them', 'Rebutting the *Rafidis* through the [main six] Sunni books', 'The *Rafidis*' propagation of their doctrine through satellite channels, and a proposed strategy for warding off the danger they pose' and 'Ali ibn Ahmed Al-Hiti's "The trenchant sword on the necks of the Shi'a *Rafidi* infidels" (1029 AH/1620 CE): An investigation'.³⁸ These and other similar studies provide fertile ground for anti-Shi'a hate speech.

Universities do not allow students to write objectively about the faith, culture, history and even society of other sects. A graduate student stated:

*'I submitted my proposal for a Master's degree dissertation on a Shi'a poet. The proposal was initially accepted by my adviser and the dean, however, a few months later it was rejected without me being informed. Although I was an honours student during my coursework, this was not enough to get me back on my programme.'*³⁹

Discrimination against Shi'a is also reinforced by their limited representation among teaching staff, particularly at a senior level. Shi'a cannot teach religious lessons in schools, for example, and face barriers to becoming school principals. In the Al-Ahsa area, home to a large Shi'a population, none of the 200 girls' schools has a Shi'a principal and only 15 out of the 200 boys' schools have Shi'a principals.⁴⁰ These shortfalls are also evident at the level of higher education. At a prominent university in Al-Ahsa, for instance, Shi'a made up 5 per cent of faculty members in 2013 despite the fact that the area is at least 50 per cent Shi'a.⁴¹ There are several Shi'a institutions for religious education in the Eastern Province, but the government does not recognize the certificates they grant nor provide employment opportunities for their graduates, as it does for Sunni religious institutions.⁴²

4 Current security challenges

Hate speech

For years, prominent Sunni clerics have denigrated Shi'a in sermons and public interviews. One of the most prominent examples occurred in 2009, when Sheikh Adel Al-Kalbani, who was then Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca (the largest mosque in the world and considered the holiest place on Earth for Muslims), stated live on BBC Arabic television that he considered Shi'a to be heretics,⁴³ also saying in the same interview that the expulsion of Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula was a religious duty. Opinions such as these are shared by many prominent clerics with huge followings.

In recent years, the Saudi government has attempted to crack down on clerics who promulgate sectarian rhetoric at the pulpit. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs monitors all government-paid clerics and receives complaints from the public; it has apparently dismissed 3,550 imams since 2003 for propagating 'extremist ideologies'.⁴⁴ However, there is no law in Saudi Arabia that specifically criminalizes hate speech, and countless clerics who preach sectarian hate continue to go unpunished, and often hold prominent social positions. The cleric Saad bin Ateeq al-Ateeq, who is notorious for sectarian hate speech and has repeatedly called on God to destroy Shi'a, Alawites, Christians and Jews (including on at least one occasion in 2015), serves as 'supervisor for Islamic awareness' at the Ministry of Education and is often invited by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to give public lectures at a variety of educational and charitable events.⁴⁵

Religious preachers use mosques and sermons to repeatedly stir up their followers to take a more aggressive stand against other religious groups. As a recent example, Shaikh Fareed Al-Ghamdi, a preacher and a professor in Umm Al-Qura University, delivered a sermon in March 2015 on the expansion of Shi'a influence in the region, declaring them enemies who could not be trusted and demanding his audience not to be deceived.⁴⁶

Sectarian language against Shi'a also continues to be widespread in the media, both online and offline. Shi'a are regularly referred to as *rafidi* and *safawi* (a reference to the Safavid dynasty of Persia, which suggests that all Shi'a are Iranian agents). Since the royal family controls all media outlets in the kingdom, and the government closely monitors online activity, when material like this goes uncensored it can be safely assumed that this happens with the knowledge and approval of authorities. The television channel Al-Wesal, which regularly highlights 'the accords and speeches of the turbaned Shi'ites and scholars, which exposes them and uncovers their falsehood', has openly

broadcast sectarian hate for years. Though its offices in Riyadh were shut down on orders from the Minister of Information in 2014,⁴⁷ it was reported in 2015 that the channel was still broadcasting in the kingdom through its international offices.⁴⁸

Social media platforms have also played a major role in the stigmatization of religious minorities. One recent YouTube video clip, entitled 'Malali', was circulated to a large audience and contained defamatory content about Shi'a beliefs and religious leaders.⁴⁹ Shi'a practices have also been attacked on Twitter. In March 2015, for instance, a member of the Muslim Scholars Association and a teacher at Umm Al-Qura University, Mohammed Al-Barak, used the website to call for the Shi'a population to be prevented from practising their religious rituals, stating that 'giving them the freedom to practice their rituals distorts Islam and Muslim scholars'.⁵⁰ In a similar line, on 5 February 2015, a member of the Human Rights Commission, Dr Abdulaziz Al-Fawzan, issued a statement on Twitter declaring Shi'a guilty of blasphemy.⁵¹ Al-Fawzan's tweet caused outrage among many users of the social network, who considered his statement incitement to hatred: in response, they launched a hashtag to stress the importance of confronting extremist ideologies that promote or instigate violence.

Many analysts and local community leaders consider that hate speech has contributed to the recent spate of attacks against Shi'a in Saudi Arabia – a situation that persists, despite official statements of sympathy from many government figures and religious bodies in the wake of the attacks. In particular, the Consultative Council voted against a 'national unity protection proposal' in June 2015, which was mainly drafted in the wake of the anti-Shi'a attacks with the aim of countering hate speech in Saudi Arabia.⁵²

The impact of regional conflict in Iraq, Syria and Yemen

Notwithstanding the major humanitarian impact of recent conflict across the region on their own populations, the participation of Saudi Arabia has also led to escalating sectarian tension within its own borders, sharpened by the long-standing hostility between the Saudi state and Shi'a-dominated Iran. In the case of Iraq and Syria, Saudi clerics regularly use religious rhetoric to justify their government's position in both conflicts, emphasizing the subjugation of the Sunni populations at the hands of 'deviant' Shi'a sects.⁵³ Moreover, Iraq and Syria both serve as stages on

which Saudi Arabia and Iran have played out their geopolitical rivalry. Increased animosity towards Iran in the public sphere has negative implications for Saudi Shi'a, because of the dominant view among the Saudi public that Shi'a in the Eastern Province owe their primary loyalty to Iran. Condemnations, often expressed in sectarian terms, of Iran and its 'agents' have become widespread since the escalation of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁴ There is a widespread idea that if Saudi Arabia does not intervene to support the Sunni rebels fighting against the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria, then there is a risk of the region falling under Iranian (and thereby Shi'a) influence.

It is also worth noting that at least 2,500 Saudi nationals⁵⁵ have joined ISIS, an extremist organization in both ideology and practice. This makes Saudi Arabia one of the top countries of origin for foreign fighters joining that organization. Many observers have pointed to the similarities between ISIS rhetoric and Wahhabi teachings that have been circulating internationally for decades. Also, the educational environment in which many Saudis were raised, replete as it is with condemnations of Shi'a and calls for faithful Muslims to fight against them, has undoubtedly played a role in influencing Saudis to join the movement.

Another significant development, in March 2015, is Saudi Arabia's launch of military operations against Houthi rebels in Yemen, in response to requests for military support from President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and backed by a coalition of other states. However, although the conflict in Yemen revolves around a variety of political and historical factors, many prominent Saudi voices have justified the intervention using religious rhetoric, portraying the campaign as a struggle for the sanctity of Islam and presenting the Houthis as a deviant and lawless sect. After the launching of the first strikes, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars declared that the military campaign was a war of religion and that all Saudis killed in the fighting would be martyrs.⁵⁶ Saudi Arabia also insists that the Houthis are backed and armed by Iran – a claim denied by Iran itself – and asserts that, if they are left unchecked, this will lead to Iranian dominance of the region. This type of sectarian rhetoric helps to secure the support of the Saudi Sunni majority for the campaign, and has led to a major escalation in sectarian rhetoric in the public sphere.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, the Saudi campaign in Yemen has resulted in retaliatory strikes in Najran, leading to deaths and injuries of civilians and damage to the city's infrastructure.⁵⁸ Some Shi'a activists in the Eastern Province reportedly called for protests against the Yemen campaign, but the government's zero-tolerance policy for dissent against the war has meant that there has been little public display of opposition. This has made it impossible to tell how much of the Saudi population actually supports the war.⁵⁹

The government's crackdown on Shi'a in the wake of the Arab Spring protests

Beginning in 2011, spurred by the wave of popular uprisings taking place all over the Arab region, activists began organizing protests in the Eastern Province. Shi'a citizens formed the bulk of the protest movement, although many of their demands were not sect-specific and called for the introduction of pro-democratic reforms in the kingdom, including an elected Shura council, an independent judiciary and a constitution.⁶⁰ They also called for the release of the 'forgotten nine', nine Shi'a activists who had been imprisoned since 1996 without trial.

In response, the Saudi authorities imposed a media blackout on the region to prevent news of the protests from spreading and arrested those found to be sharing information with foreign journalists. They also initiated a media campaign to portray the protest movement as driven by 'foreign interference' – meaning Iranian influence – emphasizing the Shi'a identity of the protesters and portraying them as disturbers of public order.⁶¹ Relations between the demonstrators and the government soured further in March 2011 when Saudi Arabia sent its military to crush protests in neighbouring Bahrain, where a Shi'a majority was demonstrating against the repressive policies of the country's Sunni minority government. Shi'a protesters in Saudi Arabia felt a great deal of solidarity with their Bahraini counterparts and saw them as fighting a similar struggle.⁶² The Saudi military's violent response in Bahrain was seen as proof of the regime's contempt for demands for greater freedoms, and the absence of any intention to address these grievances.

The regime also responded harshly to protesters in the Eastern Province, sometimes firing on unarmed protesters. As many as 21 activists were killed and many injured over the next three years.⁶³ Saudi security forces continued to conduct raids on homes in the Eastern Province, bringing the total of Shi'a citizens arrested in connection with the protests to over 1,000.⁶⁴ A large number of those arrested remain detained, while several key activists have been tried and handed excessively harsh sentences for their involvement in what was largely a peaceful movement.

Importantly, the main response of the Saudi authorities has been a sustained policy of intimidation and a series of criminal convictions for numerous Shi'a allegedly involved in the protests. Fadhil al-Manasif, who documented abuses against protesters, was sentenced to 15 years in prison, a 15-year travel ban and a fine on vague charges that included sowing discord and providing information to foreign news agencies. Shi'a cleric Tawfiq Al-Amer was sentenced to eight years in prison, a 10-year travel ban and a prohibition on giving sermons in connection to public speeches he had given in which he called for a move towards constitutional monarchy and better treatment of

Shi'a citizens.⁶⁵ HRW has criticized the trials of some of these activists, pointing to endemic due process violations, including denial of access to legal counsel during arrest and detention, and the use of coercion to secure testimony from the accused.⁶⁶

However, authorities have also sentenced numerous activists and leaders to death, frequently on spurious grounds with limited evidence to support the convictions. One of the leading figures of the protest movement, the Shi'a cleric and activist Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr, known for his moving speeches and criticism of the royal family, was sentenced to death in October 2014 on charges that included 'disobeying the ruler' and 'inciting sectarian strife.'⁶⁷ Al-Nimr's death sentence was upheld by a court in October 2015, in the face of widespread criticism from human rights groups. His nephew, Ali Mohammed Baqir Al-Nimr, has also been sentenced to death, despite the fact that he was only 17 years old at the time of his arrest and evidence suggests that his 'confession' was forcibly extracted through torture. Though the case has drawn condemnation from the UN and several world leaders, in September 2015 his appeal of the sentence was rejected, meaning that, as of the time of writing, authorities plan to carry out the sentence.

This situation has been exacerbated by the passing in 2014 of a new anti-terrorism law which now allows the government to legally prosecute a wide range of forms of peaceful dissent and criticism as acts of terrorism.⁶⁸ At the same time, it has done little to address the grievances behind the protests in the Eastern Province, while its brutal stance towards the activists involved has convinced many of the futility of trying to advocate for more rights with the government.

Recent attacks against the Shi'a population

While many of the issues discussed in this briefing have been evident in Saudi Arabia for decades, the spate of deadly attacks by extremists against Shi'a places of worship appears to be a new and troubling development. Over the past year alone, there have been at least five major attacks on Shi'a places of worship in the kingdom, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries among community members. ISIS claimed responsibility for these attacks on social media.

- *Al-Dalwa, Al-Ahsa province (3 November 2014)*: an attack on a mosque during Ashura observations killed at least seven people and injured dozens.⁶⁹ The

government subsequently apprehended 77 suspects in connection with the attack, all but four of whom were Saudi nationals.⁷⁰

- *Al-Qudaib, Qatif (22 May 2015)*: an attack on Ali Bin Abi Talib mosque during Friday prayers left at least 21 people dead and over 100 wounded.⁷¹ Up to half a million people were reported to have turned out for the funeral of the victims,⁷² while a protest against sectarianism drew an estimated 10,000 people.⁷³
- *Dammam (29 May 2015)*: an attempt by a suicide bomber to enter Al-Anoud mosque led to the deaths of four people who blocked his way.⁷⁴
- *Saihat, Eastern Province (16 October 2015)*: an assault by a man armed with an automatic weapon on worshippers at a Shi'a mosque during the first days of Ashura commemorations left five people dead and nine injured. Smaller attacks against Shi'a were reported the same day.⁷⁵ Residents of Saihat later held a protest against the attack.
- *Najran (26 October 2015)*: a suicide attack on the Isma'ili Al-Mashhad mosque killed two and wounded 19 others. The attacker was a Saudi national from Taif, who fought with ISIS for four years in Syria before re-entering the kingdom illegally.⁷⁶

The response of the Saudi authorities, as well as the public at large, in the aftermath of these attacks revealed mixed messages. On a positive note, the overwhelming response in the public sphere was one of condemnation of the attacks and solidarity with the victims. Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the Minister of the Interior, travelled to the Eastern Province to offer his condolences to the families of those killed in the 3 November attack and visited the injured in the hospital. King Salman referred to the young Shi'a men who had died on 29 May preventing the attacker from entering the mosque as 'martyrs' and 'heroes'.⁷⁷

However, this rhetoric has not been matched by any concrete measures to prevent such attacks from occurring in the future, nor to address the root causes. As mentioned earlier, although there was some discussion of a need to pass legislation to curtail the use of sectarian discourse, in June the Shura Council voted against a proposal to establish a national unity law, with members stating that it was not necessary.⁷⁸ The escalation of violent attacks against Saudi's Shi'a citizens over the past year, combined with the absence of any measures to deter such attacks in the future, has left many Shi'a feeling vulnerable. Reportedly, some Shi'a communities have formed self-defence units to protect themselves from future attacks.⁷⁹

5 Conclusion

The perpetrators and organizers of the recent attacks against Shi'a were overwhelmingly Saudi nationals, who were either members of ISIS affiliated groups in the kingdom or who had returned from fighting with ISIS in Iraq and Syria. At one level, then, these incidents can be attributed to the rise of ISIS across the region. However, the recent surge in violence cannot be separated from the broader context of religious discrimination in Saudi Arabia – the continued proliferation of hate speech, official restrictions on religious freedoms, the systematic exclusion of religious minorities from public life as well as the government's violent crackdown and repression of Shi'a activists, including many leaders issued with death sentences. While authorities have tended to present the attacks primarily in terms of security, with an emphasis on the role of international terrorism, the violence is also rooted in the continued failure of the government to respect the rights and freedoms of Shi'a and other religious minorities.

There have been some efforts by key players in Saudi society to overcome religious divisions in the country, with the aim of improving national unity through greater tolerance of diversity – an important step forward from the prescriptive and exclusionary 'consolidation' of the 1992 Basic Law. Moderates have worked to generate public support and initiate inter-communal dialogue through seminars, cultural forums and other platforms. There are

around 120 forums in the country serving as a bridge for intellectuals from different regions to interact.⁸⁰ Various organizations have also advocated for more inclusion, such as the Aafaq Center for Research and Studies, which has published a series of joint studies on different national issues by a diverse range of writers from various regions and backgrounds.⁸¹ In recent years, various petitions calling for strengthened rights and freedoms for the Shi'a community have also been presented to authorities.

Nevertheless, until the Saudi government commits to ensuring the full protection of all religious minorities, with concrete measures to promote social, political and economic equality for these communities as well, the effectiveness of such measures will be limited. As outlined in this briefing, the situation of Shi'a and other religious minorities in Saudi Arabia has long been characterized by exclusion, marginalization and public vilification. While some steps have been taken in recent years, particularly in response to 9/11 and the intensification of extremist activities across the region, such as the removal of defamatory content from school textbooks, these efforts have been limited and incomplete. In particular, the ongoing crackdown against Shi'a community members and activists, supported by the country's draconian legislation on civil dissent, only serves to undermine national unity – and sends out the message that Shi'a and other minorities are still second-class citizens in Saudi Arabia.

6 Recommendations

To the government of Saudi Arabia:

- **Guarantee the right to freedom of religion or belief for all communities in Saudi Arabia, in line with international law:** Shi'a and non-Muslim groups including Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and other groups, as well as atheists, should be free to express their beliefs publicly and without fear of reprisal. As part of this process, the Saudi government should ratify the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religious Belief and other international legal instruments guaranteeing religious freedom.
- **Lift all remaining restrictions on religious beliefs and practices:** Among other steps, Saudi authorities should relax current restrictions on public worship, the construction of places of worship and the production, printing and circulation of religious materials by Shi'a and other religious communities.
- **Promote the full participation of Shi'a and other religious minorities in public life:** The Saudi government should actively promote greater political representation for Shi'a and other religious minorities within public institutions, including national and local government, through proportional quotas and other anti-discrimination measures.
- **Address social division through a comprehensive strategy to end sectarianism:** Besides the full removal of hateful content from educational materials, Saudi authorities should take adequate steps to identify and penalize the use of hate speech in mosques, schools, national media and online. To counter negative representations, authorities should also communicate messages of tolerance and inter-communal unity.
- **Engage positively with the demands of protesters for greater freedoms:** Instead of repressing calls for equality and recognition, the authorities should undertake a range of reforms to promote increased economic opportunities, reduce social discrimination and curb religious intolerance. Measures should include improved political participation, more investment in public services such as education and a transparent judicial system.
- **Ensure the protection of Shi'a and other groups from targeted attacks:** Preventing further violence against religious minorities in Saudi Arabia should be an urgent priority. Besides official condemnation of extremist violence, the authorities should undertake to address the underlying problems of discrimination and stigmatization that have contributed to the current climate of sectarianism within the country.
- **Urgently quash the convictions and death sentences of Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr and his nephew, Ali Mohammed Baqir Al-Nimr:** Authorities should ensure that they are retried in accordance with international norms and without recourse to the death penalty.

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Still invisible – the stigmatization of Shi'a and other religious minorities in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia remains one of the most restrictive countries in the world with regard to religious freedom, particularly for Shi'a and other religious minorities who continue to face official discrimination, social exclusion and state persecution. *Still invisible – the stigmatization of Shi'a and other religious minorities in Saudi Arabia* highlights how, though the state has frequently emphasized the importance of national unity, its recent response to demands from Shi'a for greater religious freedom and equality have further alienated many communities.

This was especially evident in the crackdown on protests in the Eastern Province, beginning in 2011, with hundreds of activists killed, injured or imprisoned since then. This includes death sentences against a prominent Shi'a activist, Sheikh Nimr Baqir Al-Nimr, and his nephew, Ali Mohammed Baqir Al-Nimr, despite him being only 17 years old at the time of his alleged offences.

Shi'a in Saudi Arabia have also been subjected to an unprecedented wave of violence by militants apparently linked to Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Shams (ISIS), with at least five major attacks between November 2014 and October 2015 that have killed dozens and injured many more. Though these incidents have attracted official condemnation, concrete measures to address the underlying problems of sectarianism have yet to be implemented to protect those at risk.

While the authorities treat civil protests and targeted violence against Shi'a and other groups in narrow terms of security, Saudi Arabia will likely continue to experience popular protests and the threat of militant violence. Securing a long-term solution will therefore depend on the ability and commitment of the state to enable its religious minorities to participate as free and equal citizens, ending decades of discrimination against them.

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