

# The Shi'a Spring: Shi'a Resistance and the Arab Spring Movement in the GCC States

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## **Abstract**

This paper asks the question: Are the GCC Shi'a engaged in their own "Shi'a Spring movement", and, if so, what does this mean for the future of Shi'a communities in the Arabian Gulf? While the "Arab Spring" is a movement that is shared among an entire ethno-linguistic group, Shi'a protesters belong to a group that have been both politically and religiously marginalized in the modern GCC states. Shi'a protesters face discrimination not only from GCC political authorities, but from GCC citizens, some of whom are fellow Arabs. In addition, this paper examines both the overt and more subtle forms of discrimination imposed on the GCC Shi'a community during the first phases of the Arab Spring movement (2011-2013).

## **Keywords**

Shi'a, Arab Spring, Arabian Gulf, Human Rights, Islam, Sectarianism

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## Short Title

The Shi'a Spring

## Abstract

This paper asks the question: Are the GCC Shi'a engaged in their own "Shi'a Spring movement", and, if so, what does this mean for the future of Shi'a communities in the Arabian Gulf? While the "Arab Spring" is a movement that is shared among an entire ethno-linguistic group, Shi'a protesters belong to a group that have be both politically and religiously marginalized in the modern GCC states. Shi'a protesters face discrimination not only from GCC political authorities, but from GCC citizens, some of whom are fellow Arabs. In addition, this paper examines both the overt and more subtle forms of discrimination imposed on the GCC Shi'a community during the first phases of the Arab Spring movement (2011-2013).

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## Introduction

Whereas the Arab Spring movement itself was a reaction against the general lack of opportunity for civil engagement in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, recent Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) protests have shed light on the disproportionately high levels of discrimination imposed on Gulf Shi'a communities both living at home and abroad. While modern Gulf Shi'a currently face political and social disenfranchisement, the status of Arabia's Shi'a communities has not always been in such jeopardy. The Gulf Shi'a enjoyed periods of political ascendancy, especially during the Būyid (945–1055), Fā'imid (909-1171), and Ḥafavid (1502–1736) eras. The collapse of Sunni-Shi'a relations in the Arabian Gulf States is not simply the result of longstanding theological differences between two different articulations of Islam. Rather, certain unambiguous twentieth-century benchmarks directly lead to the current breakdown of Sunni-Shi'a relations during the Arab Spring movement. Some of these benchmarks include: the legacy of European colonial rule and the establishment of the GCC itself, the sectarian division created by the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and international energy policies focusing on both oil and nuclear power in the Gulf.

Arabian Gulf Shi'a lost significant political authority under European imperial rule, and the subsequent consolidation of authoritarian Sunni regimes in the Gulf. As MENA people worked to throw off the yoke of European colonialism, many imperialist writers fought back by highlighting the sectarian differences between Sunni and Shi'a communities. In a letter to her father on August 23, 1920, Oriental Secretary to the British High Commissioner Gertrude Bell described the status of Shi'a clerics in a strongly Shi'a region of Iraq, saying: "It's as though you had a number of alien popes permanently settled at Canterbury and issuing edicts which take precedence of the law of the land. The Turks were always at loggerheads with them and the Arab govt. of the future will find itself in the same case."<sup>1</sup> Bell's branding of local MENA Shi'a as

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Bell. "Letters 23/8/1920." *Newcastle University Gertrude Bell Archive*. [http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter\\_details.php?letter\\_id=41](http://www.gerty.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=41). (Accessed 12/11/2013).

“alien”, completely discounted their right to the governance of their own community in favor of either Arab or Turkish rule. This type of anti-Shi‘a rhetoric has repercussions in the modern Arab Spring movement. Bell forgot that most Iraqi Shi‘a are in fact Arabs, and have strong historical and cultural ties to their homeland.<sup>2</sup> This potent rhetorical convention of alienating Shi‘a Muslims from their own historical homelands has had profound impact on the Arab Spring movement itself. It is a form of discrimination that is practiced both in the West and in many Shi‘a-populated regions of the contemporary MENA world. The pervasive depiction of Shi‘a Muslims as “alien” is evident in the GCC Arab uprisings. The Shi‘a of the GCC are victimized by their own governments, as well as by fellow GCC citizens. This paper focuses on the GCC region as a whole because of the shared cultural and religious history of Shi‘a Islam within this important part of the MENA world.

The issues of human and civil rights are at the forefront of the Arab Spring movement and the Shi‘a of the GCC are but one of many communities calling for new civil society in the Middle East. The response of governments across the GCC is to silence opposition in any form. The Shi‘a struggle in GCC countries is essentially a political, not a religious, struggle. All GCC protesters share the common goal of seeking political agency, but what differentiates the Shi‘a protests from the general Arab Spring movement is that the sectarian identity of Shi‘a protesters is being used against them, often taking the shape of state-sanctioned attacks on religious expression. The line between “Arab Spring” and “Shi‘a Spring” protesters is not a clear one, (many GCC Shi‘a are Arabs and participate in “Arab Spring” demonstrations), but GCC Shi‘a have an increased vulnerability because they follow an expression of Islam that is not part of the dominant religious paradigm in the Gulf. For example, in the wake of Shi‘a solidarity protests in Eastern Saudi Arabia in 2009, Saudi authorities closed several Shi‘a mosques and arrested Shi‘a religious leaders in the province of Khobar.<sup>3</sup> While religious self-determination is not at the forefront of protesters’ demands, Shi‘a sectarian identity is currently exploited by the ruling parties of the GCC for the purpose of silencing political dissent. Shi‘a minority communities throughout the MENA region feel the legacy of European imperialism and its toxic repercussions in the modern age.

The term “Arab Spring” is flawed, and deserves closer analysis. The false equivalency, equating “modernity” with “Western-style democracy” is a common logical fallacy that is echoed in many Western media sources. In February of 2012, Mumbai-born Time magazine editor Fareed Zakaria, wrote that “Democracy might be messy. It’s certainly complicated. It takes a while to consolidate. But for the first time in perhaps a millennium, the Arab people are taking charge of their own affairs.”<sup>4</sup> Statements such as this deprive Arabs of all religious backgrounds, of any semblance of political agency, and map a false, ahistorical interpretation onto the last hundred years of Arab tradition. Beginning in 2005, the moniker “Arab Spring” began emerging, mostly in Western media sources, in reference to supposed pro-Western-style democratic movements emerging from places like Beirut, Baghdad, Ramallah, Cairo and

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Sullivan. “Who are the Shia?” *George Mason University History News Network*. <http://hnn.us/article/1455>. (Accessed 5/9/2014).

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Wilcke. “Denied dignity: Systematic discrimination and hostility towards Saudi Shia citizens.” *Human Rights Watch*. [http://books.google.com/books/about/Denied\\_Dignity.html?id=YwDpXOIWBMQC](http://books.google.com/books/about/Denied_Dignity.html?id=YwDpXOIWBMQC). (Accessed 5/11/2012). P. 9.

<sup>4</sup>Fareed Zakaria. “Democracy Takes Time.” *CNN News Wire*. <https://cnnnewswire.wordpress.com/author/cnnnewswire/page/2/>. (Accessed 5/1/14).

Riyadh.<sup>5</sup> However, as massive political protests spread through the MENA region beginning in 2011, it became increasingly obvious that those protests were in the process of transcending the confines of Western-style nationalism and its associated constructs of cultural and ethnic identities. It is overly simplistic to define the goal of the Arab Spring movement as simply pro-Western or pro-democratic. Rather, there are many diverse voices, including those of the GCC Shi'a, who are currently seeking to define what the MENA protest movements of 2011-2015 mean to them and the future of their own countries. Shi'a Muslims, like all people, hold staggeringly diverse social, religious, and political views.

### Sources and Demography

The Arab Spring movement is a rapidly changing phenomenon. Scholars do not yet have the luxury of long-ranging historical insight in the interpretation of Arab Spring events. By necessity, unless one is on the ground in the midst of the protests, information is gleaned primarily from media outlets, reports from human rights agencies, and secondary sources. In order to elucidate the role of the GCC Shi'a in recent MENA protests, this article uses a broad survey of both Western and MENA media sources, including many local papers from across the region. The author pays close attention to diverse GCC Shi'a voices, especially those who are working towards the goal of building civil society in the Arabian Gulf. In a recent statement to the United Nations, the humanitarian organization Shi'a Rights Watch criticized the government of Bahrain for both the political and religious suppression of Shi'a citizens.

The Bahraini Authority has imported security forces on a sectarian basis to repress the citizens demanding democratic transition. This has produced regional polarization through categorizing victims on each side by their sect... The systematic religious persecution practiced against Shia citizens, and non-Shia dissidents demanding reform, is a serious threat to regional peace and security and fuels sectarian conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Human rights reports emanating from organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) catalogued the systematic discrimination suffered by Shi'a political protesters during the early phase of the Arab Spring movement. Traditional academic sources are used to provide historical context for more recent events.

The specific demographics of Arabian Gulf Shi'ism are difficult to gauge, as Shi'ism is not always practiced openly, and statistics are sometimes skewed for political purposes.<sup>7</sup> Approximately 70% of the Muslim population of the Gulf practices Shi'a Islam, a statistic that includes primarily Shi'a Iran. Many, although certainly not all, GCC Shi'a follow the path of Twelver Shi'ism. On the Arabian side of the Gulf, the statistics are less clear:

One only has estimates coming from various sources that sometimes greatly differ in their assessments. Recently in 2006, a Riyadh-based think tank, the Saudi National Security Assessment Project (SNSAP), gave a general overview of the Shi'a and Sunni population of the Middle East, concerning the Gulf countries, the study mentioned that

<sup>5</sup>Joshua Keating. "Who first used the term "Arab Spring"?" *Foreign Policy*. November 4, 2011. [http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/04/who\\_first\\_used\\_the\\_term\\_arab\\_spring](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/04/who_first_used_the_term_arab_spring). (Accessed 3/10/2013).

<sup>6</sup>Catherine Shakdam. "Activists in Bahrain Denounce Anti-Shia Policies." *International Policy Digest*. <http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/2014/05/14/activists-bahrain-denounce-anti-shia/>. (Accessed 7/15/14)

<sup>7</sup>Laurence Louër. *Transnational Shia politics: Religious and political networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. PP. 6-7.

the Shia constituted 70% of the Bahraini population, 7% for the Saudi population, and 35% of the Kuwaiti population.<sup>8</sup>

*Taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation) was historically practiced by Twelver Shi'a communities in heavily Sunni areas for the purpose of avoiding conflict; therefore the GCC Shi'a population may be somewhat higher. Scholars of both classical and modern Shi'ism are often forced to rely on hostile sources because of the issue of *Taqiyya*.

### **The Early History of Shi'ism in the Gulf**

Although the historical relationship between Arabia's Sunni and Shi'a communities has traditionally been quite mutable, the pre-modern Gulf Shi'a often had higher levels of political autonomy than their modern counterparts. One reason for this is that most Arabian Peninsula Shi'a, including the primarily Shi'a population of Bahrain, moved away from the controversial Carmathian-style Ismailism that was practiced in the Gulf from the 9<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> centuries to a much more quietist Twelver style of Shi'ism, which the Arabian Sunni tolerated to a far greater extent.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, it is this very link to Twelver Shi'ism that has given rise to political concerns by some GCC state leaders in recent years, largely due to the fact that Twelver Shi'ism is widely practiced in Iran.

During the Abbasid era (750-1258), the Shi'a exercised appreciable political control over both Eastern Arabia and the Hijaz. The economic prosperity and geographic isolation of Eastern Arabia allowed for Shi'a independence from Abbasid political authority. The Shi'a, particularly those of Bahrain, enjoyed economic and political sovereignty under their own leadership structure. Scholars such as Werner Ende have suggested that the political reach of the early Abbasid era Shi'a Emirs extended well into the cities of Mecca and Medina.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, most of the Arabian Shi'a elites of this era traced their lineage to the family of the Prophet Muhammad through the lines of either Hassan or Hussein, enjoying the social status provided by their genealogy. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Shi'a members of the *ahl al-bayt* were organized in formal corporations in the major cities of Islam, including Cairo, Fustat, and Baghdad.<sup>11</sup>

Shi'a political authority in the Gulf continued during the era of the Būyids, a confederation of Zaydi Shi'a Emirs from the Persian province of Dailimān. As Abbasid power began to wane in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Būyids exercised de facto control over many parts of the Muslim world, including upper Mesopotamia, Eastern Arabia, and portions of Persia. Although the Abbasid Caliphs remained the nominal rulers of the Islamic world, the Būyids handled many of the Empire's administrative duties. During this transitional phase in MENA history, both the Sunni Abbassids and the Shi'a Būyids experienced a shift their political and religious alliances. As the function of the Abbasid Caliphate became less authoritative and more ceremonial under Būyid influence, the Būyids themselves moved away from their Zaydi origins and cultivated links with the Twelver Shi'ism. The Būyids may have chosen to follow the Twelver path because the figure of the "Hidden Imam" would pose no threat on the legitimacy of

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Juan Cole. "Rival empires of trade and Imami Shiism in Eastern Arabia, 1300-1800." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1987): 177-204. P. 178.

<sup>10</sup>Werner Ende. "The Nakhawila, a Shiite community in Medina past and present." *Die Welt des Islam* (1997): 263-348. P. 267.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

Būyids leadership.<sup>12</sup> The mid-11<sup>th</sup> century saw the Būyids cede control of the Empire to the superior military strength of Turkic Ghaznavid and Seljuqs dynasties.

Although Būyid authority in the Gulf was short-lived, the influence of Shi'a Islam was felt once again under the Fatimid Caliphs (909-1171). The Fatimids practiced a different articulation of Shi'a Islam than their Būyid predecessors. They followed the Ismaili Imamah which, along with a variant succession of the Imamate, held a strong belief in the *batin* or hidden meaning of the Holy *Qur'an*. Through both missionary work and revolutionary activities, the Fatimids spread their message throughout Mesopotamia and North Africa, and ultimately into Yemen and the Hijaz.<sup>13</sup> Even though most of the Fatimids eschewed the strongly antinomian tendencies of the Carmathians, their adherence to the *batin* placed them at odds with their non-Ismaili Muslim compatriots.<sup>14</sup> The Fatimids believed that the Imam was the only individual who had the authority to interoperate and transmit the true meaning of revelation to the community.<sup>15</sup> The idea of the *batin* excluded all but the Ismaili religious élite from the implementation of religious dogma, and thus prevented many Muslims from full participation in the activities of the Empire. This theological issue, combined with the Crusades and Berber uprisings contributed to the fall of the Fatimid Dynasty. Nonetheless, the legacy of Fatimid rule on the Arabian Peninsula is still felt, especially by the Arabic speaking Shi'a of Yemen and the Hijaz, some of whom still practice Ismailism.<sup>16</sup>

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, there was a resurgence of Shi'a dominance on the Persian side of the Gulf under the influence of the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1737). Although the Safavids began as Sufis, they quickly adopted the practice of the Twelver Shi'ism of their Būyid predecessors. In the early years of Safavid rule, the Shi'a *'Ulama* suppressed both Sunni and Sufi forms of religious expression, driving out opponents of Twelver Shi'ism.<sup>17</sup> The Safavid's attempt to expunge Sunni and Sufi Islam from their territories may have been a thinly veiled attempt to wrest political power from the Sunni Ottoman Empire (1453-1922). The Ottomans retaliated by insisting that members of the Shi'a community under Ottoman rule, including the Arabian Gulf Shi'a, follow strict sumptuary and liturgical regulations.<sup>18</sup> Under Ottoman authority, there were occasions when Maliki judges forced some Shi'a judges in Bahrain to convert to Sunni Islam.<sup>19</sup> The approach of Safavid authorities in Iran towards differing forms of Islamic expression softened as their relationship with the Ottoman Caliphs improved. There is little evidence that Sunnis were singled out for persecution in the later years of Safavid rule, as the necessity of conflating political conflict with religious polemic was diminished.<sup>20</sup> While the relationship between the Safavids and the Ottomans remained mercurial, an additional threat to continued

<sup>12</sup>Jonathan Berkey. *The formation of Islam: Religion and society in the Near East, 600-1800*. London: Cambridge University Press, (2002). P. 135.

<sup>13</sup>Farhad Daftary. *A short history of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim community*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. P. 66.

<sup>14</sup>Berkey. P. 138.

<sup>15</sup>Michael Brett. "The rise of the Fatimids: The world of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the fourth century of the Hijra." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 59 (3), 431-449. P. 443.

<sup>16</sup>Wilcke. P. 15.

<sup>17</sup>Ira Lapidus. *A history of Islamic society*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. P. 445.

<sup>18</sup>Ende. P. 320.

<sup>19</sup>Cole. P. 181.

<sup>20</sup>V.B. Moreen. "The status of religious minorities in Safavid Iran 1617-61." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, (1981): 119-34. P. 121.

Shi'a security in the Gulf was soon to come in the form of the European Imperialism under the auspices of the English and Dutch East India Companies.

The establishment and resulting political structure of the GCC itself was strongly influenced by both Ottoman and the European colonialism. The Ottoman Empire played an important role in the establishment of the modern Saudi State, and the State's subsequent policies regarding the treatment of religious minority populations. In heavily Shi'a Bahrain, the British, in association with the Sunni Arab al-Khalifa regime, ruled the region as an increasingly British-dominated protectorate from the 19<sup>th</sup> through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Under the al-Khalifa protectorate, Twelver Shi'a religious expression was suppressed, and Shi'a communities in Bahrain were subject to tight state control due to the administration's concern over Shi'a revolutionary activity.<sup>21</sup>

### Shi'ism and the Saudi State

The establishment of Wahhabi Islam in Arabia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a direct response to Arab perceptions of Ottoman excess, corruption, and spiritual malaise. The development of a volatile power-sharing dynamic between the Wahhabi 'ulama (religious establishment) and the Saudi royal family contributed to an increase in anti-Shi'a rhetoric within the region that became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Saudi Shi'a depended on the protection of the Saudi royal family from the 'ulama, who subscribed to Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Wahhab's belief that the Shi'a are apostates, dangerous heretics whose veneration of the Imamate is a form of *shirk* (polytheism).<sup>22</sup> Wahhab summed up this approach towards Shi'ism in a short book called *al-Radd 'ala al-rafida* (The Refutation of the Rejectionists) based on the ideas mapped out by the Abbasid era legal scholar Ahmad bin Hanbal (780-855).<sup>23</sup>

In addition to theological challenges imposed by Wahhabi Islam, Shi'a communities in Saudi Arabia were vulnerable because of their strategic location within the Kingdom, and their links to both food and energy security. The heavily Shi'a regions of al-Hasa and Qatif were historically the Najd's major outlet for food production.<sup>24</sup> The chiefly Twelver Shi'a population of this important agricultural region was the target of strict state regulation first under the Ottoman and then under Saudi rule.<sup>25</sup> The precarious position of Saudi Arabian al-Hasa and Qatifi Shi'a was compounded when oil was discovered in these areas in the late 1940's. Traditionally farmers, the al-Hasa and Qatifi Shi'a soon took low-level jobs in the Saudi oilfields. Although they were not permitted to serve in the Saudi army or accepted into other national institutions, as of the Arab Spring protests of 2012 the al-Hasa and Qatifi Shi'a held about 60% of the jobs in the ARAMCO Oil company.<sup>26</sup>

In the late 1940's and early 1950's, the Saudi government discovered evidence of Shi'a insurgency in Qatif in the shape of a secret society, aimed at secession from the Saudi State. While the Qatifi Shi'a revolt was quickly suppressed, Saudi Arabia experienced large-scale Shi'a

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<sup>21</sup>Louër. PP. 20-21.

<sup>22</sup>Bengio and Litvak, Eds. *The Sunni and Shi'a in history: Division and ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011. P. 165.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Bengio and Litvak. P. 167.

<sup>25</sup>Louër. P. 16.

<sup>26</sup>Ferran Brichs. *Political regimes in the Arab World: Society and the exercise of power*. New York: Routledge, 2012. P.170.



uprisings in Qatif again in 1979, coinciding with the Iranian revolution. This time, the revolutionaries were not so easily stopped:

The concurrence of these episodes in the wake of the Iranian revolution seemed ominous to the Saudis. Indeed, to the 440,000 Shiites of the Eastern Province the call of Ayatollah Khomeini constituted an invitation to rebellion. On November 19, the National Guard returned to crush Shi'a resistance, although violence broke out in al-Qatif again in February 1980 and in spring of 1982 reflecting the pervasive sectarian antagonism engendered by the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>27</sup>

It is this legacy of insurgency that has led Saudi authorities to suppress diverse Shi'a voices so quickly over the last decade, even though the current political goals of the Saudi Shi'a are far different from those of the past.

While it is clear that GCC Shi'a face discrimination, the civil rights of the Saudi Shi'a have not been entirely dismantled, despite the potential threat that a Shi'a insurrection would have towards the food and energy security of the Kingdom. One possible reason the Saudi royal family have been willing to protect certain Shi'a interests is the Shi'a community would provide a buffer against an over-reach of power by the *'ulama*. The Saudi government has given priority to its economic and security interests, and fearing a Shi'a revolution, has encouraged Wahhabi followers to exercise restraint towards the Shi'a.<sup>28</sup> The concern of Iranian support for a Shi'a insurrection in the Gulf has led the Saudi Government to suppress Shi'a voices by imprisoning activists and closing Shi'a places of worship on the one hand, while protecting them from Wahhabi hard-liners with the other.

### **Gulf Shi'ism and the Iranian Connection**

The MENA revolutions of the late 1970s and early 1980s were profound turning points in the history of the post-colonial world. Shi'ism was an important demographic component of these struggles, particularly in Iran and Lebanon.

Abortive revolutions in Afghanistan and Lebanon, and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the subsequent expulsion of the PLO from Beirut were soon to completely reshape the Middle Eastern political context... In a twinkling, Third World nationalism was finished, along with the Marxist critique of imperialist thought.<sup>29</sup>

Post-colonial geopolitics clearly played a central role in shaping change in the MENA region, however anti-Shi'a factions often cite revolutionary politics in Iran as a reason for Shi'a suppression in the modern age. In some cases, GCC Shi'a were blamed by their own governments for presumed complicity in an Iranian power-grab in the Gulf while simultaneously refused the right to assert their own sovereignty. Some analysts have called this deadlock between Iran and the GCC the "Cold War in the Gulf". As one senior Saudi official told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2011: "The Cold War is a reality, Iran is looking to expand its influence. This instability over the last few months means that we don't have the luxury of sitting back and watching events unfold".<sup>30</sup> While this kind of rhetoric makes dramatic headlines, it does not

<sup>27</sup>R. Hrair Dekmejian. *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995. P. 138.

<sup>28</sup>Bengio and Litvak. P. 168.

<sup>29</sup>Burke and Prochaska, Eds. *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, and Politics*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Nebraska Board of Regents, 2008. P. 19.

<sup>30</sup>Spindle and Coker. "The new Cold War." *The Wall Street Journal*. April 16, 2011.

fully address the role of the GCC governing bodies and their overseas allies in the escalation of tensions with Iran. In addition, it feeds right into the divisiveness that has colored modern Sunni-Shi'a relations on the Arabian Peninsula ever since the Twelver Shi'a Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

For the Sunni leaders of Arabian Gulf countries, the long and bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) posed a serious threat to GCC security for more than just domestic reasons. It exposed the United States and the USSR as unreliable political allies, more interested in fighting proxy wars with one another instead of helping their economic allies in the Gulf.<sup>31</sup> Some of the most economically powerful members of the GCC, such as Saudi Arabia, joined the United States in funding Sadaam Hussein's anti-Shi'a forces during the Iran-Iraq War. These U.S. allies were understandably concerned about retaliation from Iranian Shi'a factions, as well as anger and resentment from local Shi'a groups in Arabian Peninsula countries.

All of these events led to a further disenfranchisement of already marginalized Shi'a populations in the GCC, many of whom were ghettoized and denied access to educational and job opportunities. Still others were exiled completely from their homelands during the Iran-Iraq war. Although the Saudi government subsequently invited many of these exiled Shi'a back home, the Saudi Shi'a minority continue to face many challenges in seeking inclusion in the political process. For example, although the Saudi municipality of Qatif is nearly 100 percent Shi'a, all of the top positions the city are held by Sunni Muslims.<sup>32</sup>

The Iranian Revolution, and the following Iran-Iraq War contributed an environment in the GCC states that was plagued by lasting division, not only along sectarian, but also socio-economic lines. Saudi Arabia in the 1980s saw the release of many anti-Shi'a, pro-Salafi publications. During the Iran-Iraq War, Ibrahim Sulayman al-Jabhan wrote a sweeping condemnation of Shi'a Islam entitled *Removing the Darkness and Awakening to the Danger of Shi'ism to Muslims and Islam* (1980). Al-Jabhan's anti-Shi'a propaganda was officially licensed by the office of the highest religious authority in Saudi Arabia.<sup>33</sup> While many of the anti-Shi'a publications of the 1980s focused on blunting the ideological appeal of the Iranian Revolution, they caused lasting damage to the safety and economic stability of Shi'a populations across the GCC region.<sup>34</sup>

The repercussion of this sectarian divisiveness spread across the Arabian Peninsula in the 1980's, masking the very real issue of rising Islamism in the region.<sup>35</sup> The Kuwaiti government's concern over the rise of Shi'a factionalism produced the unintended consequence of increased domestic Islamism, comprised primarily of two specific groups, the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Social Reform Society and the Salafiyin of the Islamic Heritage Society. "As a result, the Sunni fundamentalist movements, with some official blessing, had an almost free hand in

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<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704116404576262744106483816.html>. (Accessed 1/7/2013).

<sup>31</sup>Turki Al-Hamad. "Will the Gulf monarchies work together?" *Middle East Quarterly*, 4 (1), 47-53.

<http://www.meforum.org/340/will-the-gulf-monarchies-work-together>. (Accessed 5/9/14).

<sup>32</sup> Caryle Murphy. "With Shiites rising across the region, Saudi Arabia's grow impatient." *Christian Science Monitor*. April 27, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0427/p06s04-wome.html>. (Accessed 5/7/2014).

<sup>33</sup>Toby Jones. "The Iraq effect in Saudi Arabia." *The Middle East Research and Information Project*. Winter 2005. <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer237/iraq-effect-saudi-arabia>. (Accessed 2/2/2013).

<sup>34</sup> Fredrick Wehrey, et al. *Saudi-Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam: Rivalry, cooperation, and implications for U.S. policy*. Santa Monica California: RAND Corporation, 2009. P. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Abdul-Reda Assiri. *Kuwait's foreign policy*. London: Westview Press, (1990). P. 74.

conducting a campaign of influence, 'brainwashing,' and intimidation among the population".<sup>36</sup> Because of the animosity between the Sunni elite and their Shi'a citizenry, even an imagined Shi'a rebellion in the Arabian Gulf States has the potential to dissolve the political power that has been in the hands of many of the same GCC families since before the colonial era.

Despite accusations of collusion with Iranian interests, most GCC Shi'a have made it very clear that they don't want Iran to meddle in their domestic affairs. Ali Salman, the leader of Bahrain's Shi'a opposition party, cautioned against the danger of his people being placed in the line of fire in a proxy war between Iran and the GCC. He was particularly concerned about the role of Saudi Arabia in a potential GCC showdown with Iran. On March 30<sup>th</sup> of 2011, Salman told the Saudi-owned *Al-Arabiya* news service: "We urge Iran not to meddle in Bahraini affairs. We demand Saudi Arabia withdraw the Peninsula Shield forces. We do not want Bahrain to turn into a battlefield for Saudi Arabia and Iran."<sup>37</sup> As tensions continued to rise between the GCC superpowers and Iran, it became increasingly difficult for Shi'a citizens to voice their dissatisfaction due to the lack of representation they have in the process of political decision-making.

Joining Shi'a voices, many human rights watchdog organizations such as the International Crisis Group (ICG) have expressed their concern over Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's recent suppression of their Shi'a citizenry's civil liberties. "Bahrain's harsh crackdown and Saudi military intervention are fanning the flames Manama and Riyadh say they want to extinguish", explains Joost Hiltermann, ICG's MENA deputy program director. "The most effective response to the perceived threat of a Shiite takeover and greater Iranian influence is not the violent suppression of peaceful street protests, but the equal treatment of all citizens and steps toward a constitutional monarchy and an inclusive parliament with real powers".<sup>38</sup> Hiltermann's statement clearly mirrors the appeals of Shi'a protesters and activists in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and many other regions of the Gulf. Indeed, some of the challenges that GCC Twelver Shi'a communities face today are reminiscent of the political events that took place in the Persian Gulf during Shi'a uprisings in Saudi Arabia of the 1970s and 1980s. Other GCC countries were concerned that the Shi'a insurrection would spread throughout the Gulf. In Kuwait, during the period of the Iran-Iraq War, instances of forced conversion from Shi'a to Sunni Islam were not uncommon.<sup>39</sup>

### **GCC Shi'a and the Arab Spring**

Despite its apparent inclusiveness, it is unlikely that the Arab Spring movement will reject the trap of sectarianism within the Muslim community itself. While the GCC Shi'a are but one of the many groups seeking to define their role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century MENA world, they experience some specific challenges that set them apart from other Arab Spring activists. One of the major

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<sup>36</sup>Jill Crystal, J. *Oil and politics in the Gulf: Rulers and merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. P.103.

<sup>37</sup>Manama Agencies. "Bahrain's Shiite opposition asks Iran not to "meddle"." *Al-Arabiya*. March 30, 2011. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/30/143598.html>. (Accessed 3/26/2012).

<sup>38</sup>International Crisis Group (ICG) Staff. "The Bahrain Revolt". *International Crisis Group*. April 6, 2011. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/mena/the-bahrain-revolt.aspx>. (Accessed 5/9/2014).

<sup>39</sup>Immigration and Review Board of Canada Staff. "Kuwait: Information on relations between Sunni and Shiite Muslims." January 1, 1997. <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,QUERYRESPONSE,KWT,4562d8cf2,,30.html>. (Accessed 12/3/2012).

stumbling blocks that Shi'a protesters in the Gulf face is the often-erroneous perception that they are not Arab, but rather Iranian, and as such Shi'a populations in the Gulf suffer from xenophobia. While some, although certainly not all, GCC Shi'a have historical roots in Iran, most are Arabic speakers who have lived in the Gulf region for many generations. The GCC Shi'a are inspired by the Arab Spring movement, but they are also threatened by a strong backlash from political and religious authorities. Reports from organizations such as HRW have documented institutionalized discrimination against Shi'a by GCC authorities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia from the beginning of the Arab Spring movement through the current calendar year (2015).

Authorities in most Gulf countries oppose the protestors on political grounds, both at home and abroad, seeking to preserve the status quo. The GCC Shi'a are currently working to align the multinational interests of GCC governing bodies with the domestic goals of Arabian Peninsula Shi'a communities. Traditionally adherents to the construct of political and religious quietism, the GCC Shi'a have broken their silence to lobby for constitutional reform in the Arabian Peninsula. Many GCC Shi'a are demanding greater representation for Shi'a interests in GCC parliamentary bodies. For example, Bahrain's main Shi'a opposition group is refusing to concede their demands for a government led by a parliamentary majority. On July 13 of 2011, Egypt's *Al-Ahram* newspaper reported that the Shi'a Islamic National Accord Association (*Al-Wefaq*), the largest political society in Bahrain was insisting on increased parliamentary representation for Shi'a nationals. *Al-Wefaq* argued that "[t]he solution to the political crisis is through the acceptance of (its) demands," and that "any other option would only deepen the crisis".<sup>40</sup> However, mounting tension between Shi'a Iran and the predominantly Sunni members of the GCC governing council places the cause of Shi'a protesters throughout the region in serious jeopardy. As political events continue to unfold, it is becoming clear that local GCC Shi'a communities are in an increasingly vulnerable situation. Shi'a populations across the Gulf region are becoming the target of state-sanctioned street violence, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, and torture.<sup>41</sup>

One example of state-sanction anti-Shi'a discrimination took place in Bahrain's capital city of Manama in the spring of 2011 targeting the first wave of protests:

Authorities have held secret trials where protesters have been sentenced to death, arrested prominent mainstream opposition politicians, jailed nurses and doctors who treated injured protesters, seized the health care system that had been run primarily by Shiites, fired 1,000 Shiite professionals and cancelled their pensions, detained students and teachers who took part in the protests, beat and arrested journalists, and forced the closure of the only opposition newspaper.<sup>42</sup>

Stripped of their political and human rights, the Arabian Peninsula Shi'a risk becoming pawns in a stand-off between Iran and the GCC elite, as their original demands for political representation and social equality are ignored by the politically powerful on all sides. The demands of GCC

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<sup>40</sup>AFP Agency. "Bahrain Shiite bloc reiterates call for majority-led government." *Al-Ahram*. July 13, 2011. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/16320/World/Region/Bahrain-Shiite-bloc-reiterates-call-for-majorityle.aspx>. (Accessed 9/21/2012).

<sup>41</sup>Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Watch World Report 2012." *Human Rights Watch*. 2012. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012>. (Accessed 4/9/13).

<sup>42</sup>Michael Sells. "Shrine destruction in Bahrain." *The University of Chicago, The Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion*. June 9, 2011. <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/shrine-destruction-bahrain-michael-sells>. (Accessed 7/12/2013). P. 1.

Shi'a are made both as members of the GCC community, and as an often marginalized religious minority community.

As anti-Shi'a rhetoric increased across the MENA region as a result of the Arab Spring, the spring of 2011 saw a rash of attacks against members of the GCC Shi'a communities, as well as the destruction of local Shi'a places of worship. Following a long historical trend whereby government institutions destroy religious sites for the purpose of silencing and marginalizing entire communities, the government of Bahrain undertook a campaign of demolishing Shi'a sacred spaces, such as the four-centuries-old Amir Mohammed Barbaghi mosque, and the Momen mosque.<sup>43</sup>

The hand of religious intolerance has also touched modern public spaces throughout the GCC region. The large sculpture at the center of Bahrain's Lulu (Pearl) roundabout was destroyed in March of 2011 by the government after it became the focal point of Shi'a protests. Invectives against members of the Shi'a community appeared on buildings, engineered to terrify both the Shi'a, and members of the GCC population in general. On May 13, 2011, abusive graffiti appeared on the walls of Kuwait University's College stating: "Iran is invading us" and "God curses those who have woken up the sedition".<sup>44</sup> These statements reveal the notion that religious identity, even one that is Islamic, somehow transcends the dictates of pan-Arab nationalism, becoming essentially foreign. Again, this is extremely problematic historically, as it completely ignores the fact that many GCC Shi'a are ethnically Arab, speaking the Arabic language as their mother tongue, while a significant minority of GCC Sunni Muslims are of Persian origin.<sup>45</sup>

Bahrain, with its majority Shi'a population, was at the epicenter of the Shi'a political movement in the GCC region, as well as the backlash against it. According to a May 30, 2011 article by BBC News referencing the Bahrain Shi'a protests:

It is clear that most reformers are modest in their demands, by western standards. They don't want the ruling family kicked out or strung up (although the prime minister who has been in power, unchallenged, for 41 years is the focus for special dislike, even hatred) and argue for a constitutional monarchy. They say it would be a natural development of the Gulf tradition.<sup>46</sup>

The subject of political activism in Bahrain during 2011 is of great importance, and deserves its own thorough examination, especially considering the Bahraini Archipelago's uneasy relationship with Iran over the last century. In 1957, the Iranian parliament unsuccessfully claimed that Bahrain was the fourteenth province of Iran. Proving ideological, in addition to national, independence from Iran is posing a difficult issue for the Shi'a of Bahrain.

Political and social violence against Bahrain's Shi'a community was extreme in recent years. Amnesty International reported that in the build-up to the October 23, 2011, elections 23 Shi'a protestors were detained and subsequently tortured: "[A]ll 23 men are charged with 'forming an illegal organization' aiming to 'overthrow the government and dissolve the constitution', inciting people to 'overthrow and change the political system of the country',

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Mona Karim. "Shia phobia hits Kuwait." *Jadaliyya*. May 17, 2011  
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1603/shiaphobia-hits-kuwait-> (Accessed 4/20/2013).

<sup>45</sup>Lindsey Stephenson. "Ahistorical Kuwaiti sectarianism." *Foreign Policy*. April 29, 2011  
[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/04/29/ahistorical\\_kuwaiti\\_sectarianism](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/04/29/ahistorical_kuwaiti_sectarianism) (Accessed 6/28/2012).

<sup>46</sup>James Naughtie. "Will Bahrain's Arab Spring bear fruit?" *BBC News*. May 30, 2011.  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid\\_9499000/9499462.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9499000/9499462.stm). (Accessed 9/28/2013).

fundraising and planning terrorist acts, and other offences under Bahrain's 2006 anti-terrorism law".<sup>47</sup> The Shi'a of Bahrain are in a unique situation in comparison with other Arabian Peninsula Shi'a populations. Bahraini Shi'a are a demographic majority, albeit one with few rights.

Repressive tactics by Bahrain's government pose a clear challenge to Sunni-Shi'a solidarity. In a recent report on popular protest movements in North Africa and the Middle East, the ICG cautioned that sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain are at historically high levels:

...many Shiites have a family member or friend killed or in jail. By oppressing Shiites as a group, the regime is erecting communal boundaries; by closing off any avenue of political participation and targeting even moderate opposition groups such as Al-Wifaq, it is laying the groundwork for a potential future uprising.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, suppression of Shi'a rights in the Gulf could engender further demonstrations and even rebellion.

Political violence against Shi'a protestors is clearly documented in HRW's 2012 World Report, which covers, among other things, the events that took place in 2011 in Bahrain. "In April four people died in custody, apparently as a result of torture and medical neglect. The body of one—Ali Isa Ibrahim Saqer, arrested in connection with the deaths of two police officers—bore unmistakable signs of torture on his body."<sup>49</sup> Arrests of children and the denial of protestors to legal representation are contained in the same report.

Despite the magnitude of Bahrain's Shi'a activism, it is important to recognize that Shi'a communities in GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia (especially in the region of Qatif) and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait are facing similar challenges from both Sunni-led government organizations and the general Sunni population. Minority Shi'a communities in the GCC states such as Saudi Arabia are even more vulnerable to attacks because they lack the numbers for a massive protest movement. As the borders of current GCC member states are relatively new, (the GCC Charter wasn't signed until 1981), it is worth taking a holistic look at the different Shi'a political movements in the GCC states during the early phases of the Arab Spring. Many communities in the Gulf are historically extraterritorial to existing national boundaries, and Shi'a groups are found in every single GCC member country from Oman to Qatar. It is also essential to be aware that the geopolitical interests of GCC member states are often intertwined.

The transnational importance of the Arabian Gulf Shi'a activism was brought into sharp focus on March 11, 2011, demonstrating the strong connection between Saudi and Bahraini interests. Frustrated by a lack of open dialogue with the al-Khalifa regime, thousands of Bahraini Shi'a marched on the Sunni township of Rifa'a, a region containing several al-Khalifa palaces. Three days later, on March 14th, the Saudi government sent military forces to aid the al-Khalifa regime in driving out the Shi'a protesters. This action points to the complicity of GCC governing

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<sup>47</sup>Amnesty International. "United Arab Emirates - Amnesty International Report 2010."

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/uae/report-2010>. (Accessed 10/15/2012).

<sup>48</sup>International Crisis Group (ICG) Staff. "Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East(VIII): Bahrain." *International Crisis Group*. July 28, 2011.

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/111-%20Popular%20Protest%20in%20North%20Africa%20and%20the%20Middle%20East%20VII%20-%20%20Bahraains%20Rocky%20Road%20to%20Reform>. (Accessed 3/16/2014).

<sup>49</sup>Human Rights Watch. "Human Rights Watch World Report 2012: Bahrain." *Human Rights Watch*. 2012. <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012>. (Accessed 4/9/13).

bodies to silence Shi'a voices within the borders of the GCC - this despite calls from the Obama administration (a GCC ally) for increased dialogue and a protection for the peaceful protesters in the MENA region.<sup>50</sup>

Not once does the GCC Charter make mention of either Sunni or Shi'a designations, or indeed refer to any divisions at all within the Muslim community. According to the GCC Charter, one of the main goals of the organization is: "to channel their efforts to reinforce and serve Arab and Islamic causes". In fact, the opening statement of the charter reads. "Being fully aware of the ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam which bind them..."<sup>51</sup> The right of Islamic expression that is guaranteed in the GCC Charter is being curtailed, not only in Bahrain, but also in other GCC member countries.

While GCC leaders have expressed their concern over links between Arabian Peninsula Shi'a activism and Iran, they have also been worried for many years by links between the GCC Shi'a and Lebanon's Shi'a-led Hezbollah faction. This is especially true in recent years when Hezbollah has achieved greater political legitimacy within Lebanon itself. On March 30th of 2011, *Al-Arabiya* reported that Bahrain's interior Minister Rashed bin Abdullah Al-Khalifa held a press conference announcing that twenty-four people, four of them police, were killed in a month of unrest, linking the troubles to Lebanon's "Iran-backed" Shi'a group Hezbollah.<sup>52</sup> While it wouldn't necessarily preclude their involvement in Bahrani politics, statements such as this ignore the fact that Hezbollah has become increasingly involved with nationalist interests in Lebanon during the Arab Spring. Even though the GCC Shi'a protestors deny working with Hezbollah, the Bahraini government strategically used sectarianism as a political tool by making accusations of Hezbollah's complicity in the "Shi'a Spring" movement. "The militant group Hezbollah is actively plotting with the opposition in Bahrain to overthrow the country's ruling family", the government said in a confidential report to the United Nations. "Evidence confirms that Bahraini elements are being trained in Hezbollah camps specifically established to train assets from the Gulf".<sup>53</sup> Bahrain has long made claims that the Iranian government has guided Hezbollah to fuel instability in the kingdom.

Bahrain is not alone in their condemnation of suspected Hezbollah factionalism in the Gulf. In 2009, the UAE expelled dozens of long-term Shi'a residents over their presumed connection to Hezbollah. However, there was some dispute over the question of whether they were actual Hezbollah sympathizers or simply political protesters. "The common factor among all those expelled in the past three months is that they are all Shiites and as such are part of a community that supports the resistance," Hassan Alayan, (who heads a committee representing them), told the Associated Foreign Press on October 1, 2011.<sup>54</sup>

These expulsions were not an isolated event in recent years. In 2010 UAE authorities expelled hundreds of long-term foreign residents on the grounds that they posed a threat to national security. According to Amnesty International's 2010 International Report: those

<sup>50</sup> Simon Henderson. "Bahrain's crisis: Saudi forces intervene." *Islam Daily*. March 19, 2011.

<http://www.islamdaily.org/en/world-issues/middle-east/9525.article.htm>. (Accessed 2/22/2014).

<sup>51</sup> Secretary General of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. *The GCC Charter*. 1981.

<http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/indexfc7a.html?action=Sec-Show&ID=1>. (Accessed 4/3/2014).

<sup>52</sup> Manama Agencies. "Bahrain's Shiite opposition asks Iran not to "meddle"." *Al-Arabiya*. March 30, 2011.

<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/30/143598.html>. (Accessed 3/19/2014).

<sup>53</sup> Tayel and Benaziz. "Spying for Iran in Bahrain." *Al-Arabiya*. April 26, 2011.

<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/26/146768.html>. (Accessed 9/26/2013).

<sup>54</sup> Lebanon Wire. <http://www.lebanonwire.com/0909MLN/09093031AF.asp>. (Accessed 5/9/2014)

affected were Palestinians, notably from Gaza, and Lebanese Shi'a Muslims. Some were said to have been residents in the UAE for up to 30 years. HRW interviewed one of these Lebanese deportees, a University of Sharjah professor. According to her 2010 HRW statement, she was called for an interview with UAE immigration officials on June 10 of 2009, just three days after Lebanon's parliamentary election. "During the four-hour interrogation, an officer accused her of belonging to a Hezbollah 'sleeper cell'." She said her interrogator also "mocked my [Shi'a] religious beliefs and practices in a very callous way that was quite painful and agonizing since I could not answer back or defend myself." The same reports states that she and the other deportees have not been permitted to appeal their cases to UAE immigration authorities. Many of the deportees have lost their homes and family businesses in the UAE.

Saudi Arabia has also called for Arab involvement in fighting against Hezbollah interests both at home and abroad. In a recent Arab league conference, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal compared Hassan Nasrallah (the secretary general of Hezbollah) to former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon: "They both invaded Beirut. The legitimate government in Lebanon is being subjected to an all-out war. We, the Arab world, cannot stand idly by as this happens".<sup>55</sup> By attacking the political agendas of foreign groups such as Hezbollah, and linking them to the "Shi'a Spring" movement, GCC leaders may be hoping to obscure their own role in creating their nation's current culture of political hostility and the subsequent anti-government protests. Extraterritorial political events such as Hezbollah activism, and even the Syrian uprising, have the potential to severely disrupt the Shi'a Spring movement. In addition, these events provide political cover for authoritarian crackdowns on Shi'a civil society.

### **The Geopolitics of Shi'a Activism in the Gulf**

While the scapegoating of MENA Shi'a communities is not a new phenomenon, the recent backlash against Shi'a protesters set a dangerous precedent. Casting an entire group of people in the role of "other" has the potential to further erode the human rights of the GCC Shi'a. One reason why their position in the GCC region has become increasingly unstable in recent years is due primarily to uncertainty over Iran's expanding nuclear program. Western think-tanks, such as the Brookings Institute, have perpetuated the notion of Iran's sponsorship of militant Shi'ism in statements such as the following: "Shi'a terrorists, unlike their Sunni counterparts, enjoy direct state support and for that reason are far more likely to originate from Iranian embassies, consulates and state-run businesses."<sup>56</sup> In the Gulf, the Arab Spring movement in general, and for the Shi'a specifically, such sweeping statements about the nature of Shi'a insurgency serve as a catalyst for sectarianism. The GCC Shi'a are convenient targets for local fear mongering over the issue of mounting nuclear tensions between Iran, the GCC, and allied countries. Claims of complicity between GCC Shi'a and outside Shi'a groups such as Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or other foreign groups like the Lebanese-based Hezbollah have been exaggerated for the purpose of political expediency. As Rami G. Khouri observed, "the popularity of the 'Arab Spring' term across the Western world quietly mirrors

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Toten. *The Road to Fatimah Gate: The Beirut Spring, the Rise of Hezbollah, and the Iranian War Against Israel*. New York: Encounter Books, (2012). P. 252.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Lynch. "Sunni and Shi'a Terrorism: Differences that Matter." The Brookings Institute. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2008/12/29-terrorism-lynch>. (Accessed 4/20/2014).



some subtle orientalism at work, lumping all Arabs as a single mass of people who all think and behave the same way.”<sup>57</sup> In the same way, lumping all Shi'a into a single monolithic “other” is a form of orientalism that exists in the West as well as the MENA region.

Much of the increasing anti-Shi'a political activity in the Gulf is the result of fear and mistrust. The GCC and its political and economic allies have been concerned about Iran's nuclear program for some time, but their fears over Iran's nuclear capability have escalated within the past ten years. In 2002 and 2003, the international community learned of clandestine research into fuel enrichment that demonstrated Iran's nuclear ambition went beyond that of peaceful energy production.<sup>58</sup> In 2006, the UN Security Council unanimously approved an amended European draft resolution that called for a ban on trade with Iran in goods related to its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which did little to discourage Iran's research into nuclear technology.<sup>59</sup> In May of 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency released a nine-page report that raised questions about Iran's investigation into nuclear technology. This report indicated that Iran had the technology to develop a type of atom bomb known as an implosion device.<sup>60</sup> The GCC is clearly concerned about Iran's capability to use shorter-range nuclear weapons in the Gulf region, while GCC allies such as the United States are more concerned about Iran striking out against Israel.

Mistrust of the United States' political and economic motivation in the Arabian Peninsula has been growing among GCC member countries, especially in the aftermath of George W. Bush's “weapons of mass destruction” scandal and the ensuing Second Gulf War. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other so-called *rentier* states on the Arabian Peninsula, have strong political and economic interests in preserving the status quo in the Gulf. As the oil economy on the Arabian side of the Gulf begins to flag, nuclear technology is one option that GCC states have discussed in great depth. According to a 2011 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Middle East Program:

In search of alternatives, some GCC states have considered investing in nuclear or solar energy for desalination and electricity production. But these solutions present their own complications... (such as) a uranium fuel shortage in the near future.<sup>61</sup>

Theoretically, nuclear competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran would include a struggle for raw materials. Should Iran continue its current nuclear program, an arms race with Saudi Arabia is almost inevitable. Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal disclosed to military personnel at a Royal Air Force base at Molesworth that “Iran (developing) a nuclear weapon would compel Saudi Arabia...to pursue policies which could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.” The prince was quoted as saying: “If they successfully pursue a military program, we will have to

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<sup>57</sup> Sarah Kendzior. “The Reverse Orientalism of Looking for the Arab Spring in Central Asia.” *The Atlantic*, Jan 20 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/the-reverse-orientalism-of-looking-for-an-arab-spring-in-central-asia/251663/>. (Accessed 10/5/2013).

<sup>58</sup> Greg Bruno. “Iran's nuclear program”. *Council On Foreign Relations*. March 10, 2010. <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811> (Accessed 5/6/2014).

<sup>59</sup> *Al-Jazeera* Staff. “UN votes for Iran nuclear sanctions.” *Al-Jazeera*. December 2, 2006 <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2006/12/2008525134753354210.html> (Accessed 2/28/2013).

<sup>60</sup> William Broad. “Inspectors pierce Iran's cloak of nuclear secrecy.” *New York Times*. May 30, 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/science/31nuke.html> (Accessed 1/5/2014).

<sup>61</sup> Jones and Woertz. “Scarcity and strategy in the GCC.” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. February 25, 2011 [http://csis.org/files/publication/110225\\_Summary\\_Jones\\_Woertz.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/110225_Summary_Jones_Woertz.pdf). (Accessed 4/12/13).

follow suit”.<sup>62</sup> Despite Saudi Arabia’s signature on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Saudi Arabia is rumored to have supplied nuclear support to both Pakistan and Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Potential casualties of these nuclear ambitions, the GCC Shi’a are targeted simply because of their historical religious connection with Iran, furthering the political divide between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Iran is not alone in pursuing its nuclear ambitions. Other GCC countries have expressed interest in developing nuclear technology. The UAE has signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States, which will test the resolve of the UAE to support its allies in the Gulf region. The UAE and Iran have had an inconsistent relationship in the past. On the one hand, the UAE and Iran have historically argued over land rights, such as the ownership of Al-Musa Island. At the same time, the UAE is one of Iran’s most powerful trading partners, with bilateral trade agreements reaching US\$12 billion according to a 2011 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report.<sup>64</sup> Of all the members of the GCC, the UAE has made the best use of diplomatic channels with Iran in the past, however in recent years communication between the two oil-rich countries has begun to break down.

Even with powerful trading incentives, the UAE seems to be moving away from Iran, and aligning itself with its GCC partners. On July 6, 2010, Mr. al-Otaiba, the UAE Ambassador to the United States made the following statement to The Washington Times. “I think it’s a cost-benefit analysis,” Mr. Al-Otaiba said. “I think despite the large amount of trade we do with Iran, which is close to \$12 billion ... there will be consequences, there will be a backlash and there will be problems with people protesting and rioting and very unhappy that there is an outside force attacking a Muslim country; that is going to happen no matter what.” He continued, “If you are asking me, ‘Am I willing to live with that versus living with a nuclear Iran?’, my answer is still the same: ‘We cannot live with a nuclear Iran. I am willing to absorb what takes place at the expense of the security of the UAE.’”<sup>65</sup> Where this leaves the UAE’s Shi’a communities, comprising approximately 16% of the UAE total population, is unclear.

The global instability over oil prices has had an indelible effect on the political stability of Shi’a communities in the Gulf region. According to OPEC, Saudi Arabia controlled 22.2% of the OPEC’s crude oil reserves in 2010, second only after Venezuela at 24.8%.<sup>66</sup> Governments, such as that of Saudi Arabia, which rely heavily on petrochemical dollars, are very vulnerable to shifts in oil prices because of their lack of diversification. Any threat, either from internal protest movements or from an outward arms race with Iran, could damage Saudi Arabia’s economic stability.

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<sup>62</sup> Ray Moseley. “Saudi prince warns Iran on nuclear weapons.” *Al-Arabiya*. June 30, 2011. <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/06/30/155487.html>. (Accessed 8/28/2013).

<sup>63</sup> James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Staff. “Saudi Arabia: Nuclear.” *James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies*. November 2011. [http://www.nti.org/e\\_research/profiles/Saudi\\_Arabia/Nuclear/index.html](http://www.nti.org/e_research/profiles/Saudi_Arabia/Nuclear/index.html). (Accessed 7/30/2013).

<sup>64</sup> Karim Sadjadpour. “The battle of Dubai: The United Arab Emirates and the U.S.-Iran Cold War.” *Washington DC, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 2011 [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai\\_iran.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/dubai_iran.pdf) (Accessed 2/23/2014).

<sup>65</sup> Eli Lake. “U.A.E. Diplomat Mulls Strike on Iran’s Nukes.” *The Washington Times*. Tuesday, July 6, 2010. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/jul/6/uae-ambassador-endorses-bombing-irans-nuclear-prog/?page=all>. (Accessed 3/30/13).

<sup>66</sup> OPEC Staff. “OPEC share of world crude oil reserves 2010.” *OPEC*. 2010. [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/en/data\\_graphs/330.htm](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/data_graphs/330.htm). (Accessed 4/15/2013).

Saudi King Abdullah, in association with other Arab leaders, recognized the problem of Shi'a disenfranchisement, and worked to resolve the issue of sectarian discrimination in the MENA region. In 2003, King Abdullah underwent a number of high-level national dialogue sessions aimed at bridging sectarian differences in Saudi Arabia. King Abdullah's push towards the recognition of internal religious pluralism was one of the first of its kind in the kingdom.<sup>67</sup> Despite efforts to bridge the gap between various Muslim sectarian groups in the Gulf, the advent of the Second Gulf War and the subsequent rise in Iraqi sectarian violence did little to assuage tensions between Sunni and Shi'a communities in the Gulf. In response to rising sectarianism in the kingdom, human rights organizations such as the ICG have called for increased Shi'a representation in the Saudi government, a moratorium on bans on Shi'a religious rituals, and a condemnation of anti-Shi'a hate speech.<sup>68</sup>

The marginalization of the GCC Shi'a in national and local politics has far-ranging implications. Journalist Qassim Abdul-Zahra wrote in the March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011 Washington Post that Iraqi Prime Minister, and former Shi'a dissident under Sadaam Hussien, Nouri al-Maliki recently expressed his concern that violent clashes between Sunni and Shi'a groups in Iraq could potentially inflame sectarian violence in the entire MENA region, including the Gulf states. In August of 2011, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that a Gulf foreign minister made the statement that the GCC is now "ready to enter war with Iran and even with Iraq in defense of Bahrain", which he called a red line: "Every state of the Gulf Cooperation Council is a red line. All are the same and we are ready to enter war to defend ourselves."<sup>69</sup> Statements such as this raise serious security concerns for Shi'a communities in the entire MENA region.

The problem of both externalized and internalized anti-Shi'a discrimination is far from over in the modern world. "Today the United States peers at the Middle East through orientalist spectacles. Their special properties miraculously filter out historical context and complexity, the better to spotlight the supposedly essential cultural features of Middle Eastern culture that make 'them' hate 'us'".<sup>70</sup> The flames of anti-Shi'a rhetoric are fanned by the impossible to prove supposition that the greater political freedom given to Shi'a communities in the Gulf will ultimately lead to a rising tide of Shi'a Islamism. In a recent article, James Leigh and Predrag Vukovic attempt to argue just that:

In all of this we could expect to see a greater voice of political Islamism coming from the Shia populations of the Gulf States. When that begins to appear, it may herald a growing and accelerating influence of Iranian Islamism over Shia populations, in the Gulf States, to influence their countries' foreign oil policy. Iranian Islamism's influence may also extend to other Islamic Arab states, for example, across North Africa."<sup>71</sup>

The Arab Spring movement has caused both fear and hope among members of the GCC Shi'a community. The Arab Spring movement, and by extension, the Shi'a Spring movement, are currently in a transitional phase. On the one hand, the GCC autocrats feel threatened by Shi'a activism, while on the other hand, the international community is becoming increasingly aware

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<sup>67</sup>Wehrey. P. 26.

<sup>68</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG) Staff. "The Shiite question in Saudi Arabia." *International Crisis Group*. Septmeber 19, 2005 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle East North Africa/Iran Gulf/Saudi Arabia/The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia> (Accessed 6/30/2013).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Burke and Prochaska. P. 1.

<sup>71</sup>Leigh and Vukovic. "Potential Iranian Hegemony in Oil Producing Islamic Countries." P. 17. <http://www.doiserbia.nb.rs/img/doi/0025-8555/2010/0025-85551001007L.pdf>. (Accessed 4/17/2014).

of political corruption and the suppression of human rights by GCC leaders. Discrimination against religious minority groups is not a new historical phenomenon, but it is one that has potentially catastrophic ramifications.

### Conclusion

Currently, many MENA governments, including members of the GCC, fear political coups as a result of Arab Spring protests and political activism. By playing on the discourse of xenophobia, whether it concerns Iran or Lebanon, GCC leaders run the risk of inflaming sectarian violence across the entire MENA region. Historically, one way to shift the blame from your own failed regime is to pick a largely helpless and disenfranchised minority to accept the blame for you, and the GCC Shi'a are at risk of falling victim to increasing sectarian violence.

While finding their political voice will be difficult, there is still hope for the future of the GCC Shi'a. The international community is largely supportive of MENA protestors' efforts for political reform, and outraged by the human rights abuses levied on peaceful protestors. While the protests in Egypt are at the epicenter of the Arab Spring movement's media attention, there is increasing coverage of political affairs in the Gulf, including Shi'a protest movements. Political protest, especially when the protestors use non-violent methods, as most GCC Shi'a protestors have done, draws attention and sympathy for those disenfranchised by the dominant regime.

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