The Saudi Ulema and the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT: The Sunni ulema (clerics) of Saudi Arabia have been known for their anti-Shi'a rhetoric since the establishment of the first Saudi state under the patronage of Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. To this day, they shape attitudes towards the Shi'a and influence how the Shi'a are perceived within the kingdom. Although it is well known that the ulema address the Shi'a in negative terms, there is a gap in the literature discussing the nature of the polemics directed at the Shi'a. This article examines the attitudes of the Saudi ulema towards the Saudi Shi'a in political and social terms through the analysis of fatawa, sermons, lectures, and publications issued by the Saudi religious authorities.

KEYWORDS: Saudi Arabia; ulema; Shi'a; Qatif; al-Ahsa'; Najran; Medina.

Introduction

The Sunni clerics of Saudi Arabia – the ulema – have had much to say about the country's Shi'a populations. The persecution and discrimination that the Shi'a have faced at the hands of Saudi rulers is reasonably well documented; the extent of the anti-Shi'a rhetoric produced by the country's clerics is not. Much of that rhetoric is targeted not just at Shi'a beliefs and practices, but at particular Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia.

The attitudes of modern day clerics can be traced back to Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, who was appalled by the theological practices of the Shi'a community when he first visited Basra. He saw the veneration of the shrine of 'Ali in al-Najaf, and of Husayn's tomb in Karbala, as excessive, prompting him to call for the reformation of the Muslim world which he deemed corrupt and declining.

The first Saudi state (1744-1818) was founded on a partnership between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud, the state's first ruler. That partnership has continued as a wider partnership between the Sunni ulema and the House of Saud, under which the clerics, or at least those willing to do so, provide the House of Saud with the religious legitimacy to rule. The nature of this relationship has of course changed over time, especially during the period of modernisation under the third Saudi state, Saudi Arabia. The rule of King 'Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (r. 1926-1953) saw the ulema relegated within the power structure of the kingdom.[1] The ulema were confined to regulating issues concerning public morality, interpreting the shari'ah, and designing Saudi Arabia's religious education. They were not allowed to criticise the ruling family, especially on political matters. Clerics who defied this unwritten rule have until today quickly found themselves in the country's prisons.[2]

However, when it comes to Shi'ism, the Sunni ulema of Saudi Arabia have been nearly unrestrained in their capacity to publicly discuss Shi'a theology and matters pertaining to the country's Shi'a populations. While the extent of the direct influence of the ulema on Saudi government policy today, if any, is debatable, the ulema retain the capacity to indirectly influence state affairs. That is because of the esteem in which they are held by much of the Sunni public as authorities on religious matters, and their ability to communicate with the public on a mass basis, whether through traditional means such as sermons before Friday prayers or through the electronic media. Their anti-Shi'a rhetoric, as transmitted to the Saudi public and indeed a global audience, is essentially unchallenged by the Saudi government. Given their authoritative voice and reach into Saudi society, it is crucial to understand that rhetoric, especially insofar as it concerns the Shi'a minorities of Saudi Arabia.

The events of 1979 illustrate the kind of role that the Sunni ulema play in the sectarian dynamics of Saudi Arabia. The ideals of the Iranian revolution took hold in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Dissident Shi'a clerics such as Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar, the leader of the Islamic Revolution Organisation (IRO), hoped that events in Iran would provide an impetus for the Saudi Shi'a to defy the House of Saud. In November 1979, many Shi'a in the Eastern Province took to the streets to demonstrate against the regime; deadly clashes with the national guard followed.[3]

The Saudi ulema quickly came to the aid of the ruling family, endorsing the government's crackdown on the Shi'a protesters. Similarly, the ulema started issuing anti-Shi'a materials targeted at Iran, the Saudi Shi'a, and Shi'a religious doctrines, especially those of the Twelvers who inhabit the Eastern Province. In the words of Guido Steinberg, 'it seems as if the Saudi state gave Wahhabi scholars the green light for a religious campaign' against Iran and the Shi'a.[4] While there have been changes in Saudi Arabia's domestic sectarian politics since 1979, including numerous efforts at rapprochement between the ruling family and Shi'a leaders, the rhetoric of the country's Sunni ulema against the Shi'a remains strongly adversarial. This article discusses the attitudes of the Saudi ulema towards the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, demonstrating both the theological and political tones that such rhetoric takes.

Saudi ulema: early and contemporary approaches towards the Shi'a

There are many examples of anti-Shi'a rhetoric among the clerics of the early Saudi states and the first decades of the current state of Saudi Arabia. Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman (1779-1868) and his son Shaykh 'Abd al-Latif (1810-1876) were prominent clerics of the second Saudi state. Both urged the Saudi rulers to interfere and remove 'deviant' practices from the regions of al-Ahsa' and Qatif, which now form part of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.[5] Al-Latif for example called for Saudi rulers to rid what he saw as the corrupt practices of idolatry prevalent within the Shi'a communities of these regions.[6]

In 1927, the ulema directed a fatwa at the Shi'a of al-Ahsa' and Qatif. According to Fouad Ibrahim, the fatwa was implemented by Ibn Saud, and stated that:

> The *Rafidah* of the Hasa [al-Ahsa'] be obliged to surrender to true Islam and should abandon all their defective religious rites. We asked the Imam, Ibn Saud, to order his viceroy in al-Hasa, Ibn Jiluwi, to summon the Shi'is to Shaikh ibn Bishr, before whom they should undertake to follow the religion of God and his Prophet and to cease the invocation of the saintly members of Ahl al-Bayt, and to abandon other innovations in their public assemblies, and to conform to the rule of prayer five times daily in the mosque. Prayer callers

> (*muaddhin*) are to be sent. The people are also to study the three principles of the Wahhabi tenets; their houses of worship are to be destroyed and those that object to this will be exiled.
>
> With regard to the Shi'is of Qatif, we have advised the Imam to send missionaries and preachers to certain districts and villagers, which have come under the control of the true Muslims and in which *Shari'ah* laws should be put in effect.[7]

According to Ibrahim, the 1927 fatwa was designed to pacify the leaders of the *Ikhwan*, the religious militia who had by that stage started to turn against Ibn Saud, and clerics were dispatched to al-Ahsa' to enforce Wahhabi teachings.[8] This illustrates that in these early periods, the Saudi ulema mainly addressed the Shi'a as a deviant but passive group in need of intervention and guidance to the right path.

The literature of the early Saudi ulema suggests that the Shi'a were not a major political concern as the ulema addressed the Shi'a only in religious terms, rather than as a threat to the rule of the House of Saud. This can be explained by examining the positions of the early ulema and the early Saudi states. Both faced greater and stronger enemies than the Shi'a. Although the Shi'a were seen by the Saudi ulema as religiously corrupt, they were weak and did not pose a significant threat to the propagation of Wahhabi theology. The Shi'a accepted the rule of the House of Saud during the first, second and early third Saudi states, and yielded whenever threatened.[9] During the first, second and early third Saudi states, the strongest opponents to the spread of the teachings of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab were the Ottomans, the Egyptian ulema, and non-Wahhabis in other parts of Arabia.

On the other hand, the anti-Shi'a materials published by contemporary Saudi ulema have a much stronger focus on Shi'a political activities and affiliations; since 1979, the Sunni clerics have gone well beyond mere theological subject matter. Although most Saudi Shi'a leaders have, since the 1990s, abandoned their open hostility towards the Saudi government and have often worked to promote rapprochement and reconciliation, the Saudi ulema have remained suspicious and apprehensive of the Saudi Shi'a population, particularly those residing in the Eastern Province.

While the Shi'a of the east have been the subject of much attention, few ulema have addressed the activities of the Shi'a in other parts of Saudi Arabia like Najran and Medina. The Shi'a in Najran are mostly of

the Isma'ili branch of Shi'ism, while the Shi'a in Medina, the largest community of which is known as the 'Nakhawilah', are mostly Twelvers. However, these Shi'a communities are largely apolitical and did not join their co-religionists in al-Ahsa' and Qatif in their revolts against the Saudi government in and after 1979. Compared to the Shi'a of the Eastern Province, these communities are insignificant in population and not politically organised. Those ulema who explore the activities and history of the Nakhawilah and the Isma'ilis of Najran are those who specialise in the study of 'deviant' sects, such as Shaykh Mamduh al-Harbi and Shaykh Abu 'Abd Allah al-Athari. The lack of visibility of these communities has perhaps shielded them from the kind of attention that the Shi'a of the Eastern Province have received from the Sunni ulema.

Saudi Shi'a: the enemy within

In 1993, Shaykh Nasir Sulayman al-'Umar [Sheikh Nasser al-'Omar] wrote a treatise entitled *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid* (The Reality of the *Rafidah* in the Land of *Tawhid*). The shaykh is often quoted by other ulema, particularly with respect to this particular publication on the Shi'a.[10] The shaykh argued that the Shi'a have made the exaggerated claim that they make up 25 per cent of Saudi Arabia's population (about double the actual percentage). He went on to brand the Shi'a as liars and untrustworthy for making such exaggerations, which he said signified their intentions to plot against the Sunnis of the country.[11] Similar claims have been made by many other Saudi ulema, among them Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, a young but active and prominent cleric based at the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad ibn Sa'ud who gives lectures on 'deviant' religions and religious sects.[12]

While clerics such as al-'Umar are keen to refute any over-statement of the Shi'a population, lest that population be conferred any legitimacy within the kingdom, they regularly talk up the threat that the population poses to the country's Sunnis. One example of the ulema stoking fears of an internal Shi'a threat is their response to the 2009 Baqi' cemetery incident in Medina. The incident occurred during the *hajj*. A confrontation occurred between Shi'a pilgrims and the Saudi police at the Baqi' cemetery, which 'is believed to be the final resting place for the four men revered by Shi'a Muslims as imams or successors to the Prophet: Hasan ibn 'Ali, 'Ali ibn Husayn, Muhammad ibn 'Ali and Ja'far ibn Muhammad'.[13] The clash resulted in arrests of Shi'a

pilgrims and, according to Human Rights Watch, violence perpetrated by the Saudi security forces against Shiʿa men, women and children.[14]

Prince Nayif, then the crown prince and interior minister, responded to the incident by blaming the Shiʿa for not respecting the beliefs of the Sunnis as the majority sect, not just in Saudi Arabia but in the Muslim world in general. These events reignited secessionist ideas within Shiʿa communities. Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, a hardline Shiʿa cleric, was furious with the government's treatment of the Shiʿa and in a fiery sermon preceding a Friday prayer, condemned the regime and spoke of the prospect of an independent Shiʿa state. However, some Shiʿa leaders explicitly refused to back al-Nimr; Toby Matthiesen cites Jaʿfar al-Shayib as stating that al-Nimr 'did not express the view of the majority of the Shiʿa in the Eastern Province'.[15]

Following the Baqiʿ incident, al-Nimr wrote a treatise directed to the deputy governor of the Eastern Province, outlining a demand for freedom for the Shiʿa community in the kingdom. He also demanded that the government pursue policies to bring an end to all attacks on Shiʿa religious beliefs.[16] The treatise was attacked by Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, a high profile Sunni cleric. Al-Hawali expressed outraged at the demands, which he considered unreasonable, and questioned the loyalty of the Shiʿa in Saudi Arabia. Al-Hawali argued that the Shiʿa were already afforded the freedom to believe in their convictions, stating that 'Shiʿa are not denied the liberty to be born a Shiʿa and die a Shiʿa.' He argued that, on the other hand, the majority of the Saudi people were Sunnis, and had both the right to retain their own convictions about the Shiʿa and preach, educate and protect the faith of their children and the Sunni community. Moreover, he argued that the government did not have the jurisdiction or authority to deny the Sunnis their rights to expose illegitimate aspects of the Shiʿa faith, particularly as the Shiʿa were a minority. He said that by complying with al-Nimr's demand, the government would contradict the founding principles of the Saudi state. The shaykh drew an analogy between the Shiʿa of Saudi Arabia and the Mormon community in the United States, which had long battled against intervention by state authorities. He argued that the United States authorities did not give in to the Mormons just to pacify their demands, particularly on issues such as the legality of polygamy.[17] Al-Hawali's article was applauded and endorsed by many Saudi ulema, including Shaykh Saʿd ibn ʿAbd Allah al-Hamid, a student of Shaykh Ibn Jibrin, Shaykh Ibn Baz, and Shaykh ʿUthaymin.

Rhetoric about Shiʻa disloyalty extends to allegations of loyalty to foreign leaders. Shaykh al-ʻArifi, a young cleric popular in Saudi Arabia and abroad for his appearances on religious television programmes, asserted that the Shiʻa in the Eastern Province display large posters of Hasan Nasrallah and Ayatollah Khameneʼi.[18] The shaykh expressed anger that he has not seen any posters of King ʻAbd Allah and Prince Nayif during his visits to Shiʻa neighbourhoods. He also said that the Shiʻa send *khums* (a Shiʻa tax) to ʻAli al-Sistani in Iraq. The shaykh concluded that the Shiʻa in Saudi Arabia obviously pledge allegiance to Shiʻa leaders in other countries and have a strong desire to be ruled by one of their faith.[19]

The Saudi military intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 exacerbated sectarian tensions in Saudi Arabia. Demonstrations in Qatif and al-Ahsaʼ designed to criticise Bahrain's crackdown on the mainly Shiʻa protesters there were quickly exploited by the Saudi ulema to express concerns about transnational Shiʻa solidarity. Hasan al-Saffar pleaded that although the Saudi Shiʻa urged the Saudi government to refrain from intervening in Bahrain, they did not espouse the overthrow of the Saudi government and retained loyalty to the kingdom.[20] However, this view was not supported by all Saudi Shiʻa. In early October 2011, al-Nimr gave a sermon discussing the plight of the Saudi Shiʻa in the kingdom, arguing that the Shiʻa had lived in fear throughout their lives and that it was time for them to be liberated.[21]

Shaykh al-ʻArifi expressed concern with Shiʻa transnational affiliations, of which he saw the demonstrations in the Eastern Province as evidence, and questioned the loyalty of the Saudi Shiʻa to the kingdom.[22] Regarding the reconciliatory claims of Shiʻa clerics like al-Saffar, al-ʻArifi pointed dismissively to *taqiyyah*, the practice of concealment of one's religious beliefs, employed by Shiʻa to avoid persecution. Many Saudi ulema point to the practice of *taqiyyah* to question the sincerity of conciliatory rhetoric and behaviour from Shiʻa clerics, arguing that such actions are in fact *taqiyyah*, designed to conceal their underlying treachery. Shaykh ʻAbd Allah al-Salafi, a former student of Shaykh Ibn Jibrin who specialises in studying Shiʻism, identifies al-Saffar as a cleric who practices *taqiyyah* and claims that his supposedly reconciliatory initiatives are lies founded on the practice.[23]

The Saudi Shiʻa are Arabs, speak the Arabic language and are physically indistinguishable from their Sunni counterparts. As we shall go on to see, the Saudi ulema deliberately try to overcome these

outward similarities to establish an 'us' and 'them' mentality by setting out as many differences as possible between the appearances, languages and cultures of the Saudi Shi'a and those of the Sunni population. They also seek to expose the Saudi Shi'a as political traitors, and not just religious deviants.

Shi'a of Qatif and al-Ahsa'

Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar argues that the Shi'a in the Eastern Province promote excessive breeding and polygamy, evidenced by the number of publicly displayed banners and posters in the region congratulating newlyweds. The shaykh claims to have witnessed group weddings in Qatif, including one in which he counted 26 couples married in one night. Similarly, in the other eastern city of Sayhat [Saihat], the shaykh claims to have seen four wedding ceremonies conducted in one night with 21 couples in the first ceremony, 27 couples in the second, 44 couples in the third and up to 100 brides and grooms in the fourth.[24]

Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris argues that the Shi'a encourage early marriages. He claims that men as young as fifteen are married with multiple children, which is uncommon among Sunnis.[25] He also claims that the Shi'a use *khums* to provide financial support for those who cannot otherwise afford to marry early. Similarly, monetary assistance is given to men who cannot afford to take more than one wife, suggesting that the Shi'a promote polygamy. The shaykh claims the Shi'a ban birth control to increase the Shi'a population, suggesting that Shi'a women use birth control devices only when necessary for health reasons.[26] It seems from the claims of al-'Umar and al-Faris to be taken as a given that an expanding Shi'a population is itself a threat. These claims are not inconsistent with those, also made by al-'Umar, that the Shi'a overstate their actual population. On the one hand, clerics such as al-'Umar seek to deny the legitimacy of the grievances of the Shi'a population by downplaying their number; on the other hand, fears are stoked that the Shi'a actively seek to increase their number in order to pursue their deleterious objectives.

Similarly, Shaykh al-Faris sets out to expose the 'devious' practice of giving Shi'a children non-Shi'a names to deceive the Sunni population. The shaykh argues that the Shi'a have abandoned names such as Ja'far, 'Abbas, Kazim and Musa. They opt for non-Shi'a names such as 'Abd al-Rahman, 'Abd Allah, Muhammad, Ibrahim and Salih in order to avoid being identified as Shi'a. The shaykh also alleges the existence of a

common practice of concealment of Shi'a identity, whereby heavily pregnant mothers are taken away from Shi'a provinces to other parts of the country to ensure that Shi'a children obtain birth certificates from places other than Qatif, al-Ahsa' or Sayhat. The shaykh warns that this concealment does not mean that the Shi'a are working to assimilate with their Sunni neighbours; it means that they want to infiltrate Sunni communities by disguising their real identities.[27]

The Shi'a of Medina

One of the very few articles published by the Saudi Sunni ulema on the Shi'a of Medina specifically outlines their characteristics. The article was written by Shaykh Abu 'Abd Allah al-Athari, a student of Shaykh Ibn Baz and Shaykh 'Uthaymin. According to al-Athari, the Shi'a in Medina consist of a number of tribes, which he addresses one by one: the Nakhawilah, who are Twelvers; the Banu Jahm, who are associated with the Nakhawilah; al-Ashraf, who al-Athari considers improperly claim superiority due to their descent from the Prophet Muhammad, at the expense of true devotion to God; and al-Mashahidah, who live in both Medina and Mecca.[28]

The shaykh extensively elaborates the characteristics of these groups, including their dress and distinct celebrations and cultural practices. The shaykh notes that men in these groups wear *al-dishdashah* (a loose garment that comes down to the knees), *al-ghatrah* (headgear without a headband), *al-izar* (a piece of cloth that looks like a towel, is wrapped around the waist, and is worn instead of pants, common particularly among the Shi'a laymen), *al-basht*, also known as *al-'iba'h* (a cloak sewn with golden thread and for clerics, silk thread), and *al-'imamah* (a turban, the colour of which signifies the wearer's social status within the Shi'a community. White turbans are worn by clerics or students studying religion, and black turbans are worn by the descendants of 'Ali, who hold a special status).[29]

According to the shaykh, the Medina Shi'a refuse to allow prayers to be held for their deceased in the Prophet's Mosque because it is the final resting place of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. He states that these Shi'a abhor Sunnis and refuse to bury their dead in Sunni graveyards. He notes that names such as Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'A'ishah and Hafsah are conspicuously absent from these communities, and claims that they refuse to intermarry and mix with Sunnis.[30]

This article is evidence of a concerted effort to differentiate the

Sunnis and the Shi'a living in Medina. The shaykh goes on to emphasise the connections of the Shi'a of Medina to Iranian pilgrims visiting the city, and ultimately questions their loyalty to the kingdom.

Shi'a Isma'iliyyah in Najran

Shaykh Mamduh 'Ali al-Harbi, a contemporary scholar who specialises in 'deviant' sects, has dedicated a long lecture, accessible online, to discussing the Shi'a of Najran. In the lecture, he talks about the political history of the Isma'ilis and their establishment in Saudi Arabia.[31] Besides educating the public about the physical appearance of the Isma'ilis of Najran and what distinguishes them from Sunnis, Shaykh al-Harbi emphasises that not all members of Najran's Banu Yam tribe are of the Shi'a conviction. According to al-Harbi, the Isma'ilis of Najran were divided into two political factions following the passing of their leader Husayn ibn al-Hasan al-Makrami. He was expected to be succeeded by his assistant and treasurer Muhsin ibn 'Ali al-Makrami. However, Husayn left a will stating that his true successor should be a man from Ta'if, Husayn ibn Isma'il al-Makrami. Muhsin al-Makrami refused to relinquish power and rejected the demands of the will. However, he failed to contain the movement to bring Husayn ibn Isma'il al-Makrami from Ta'if to assume leadership. Muhsin remained determined to re-establish himself as the religious leader of the community and practised black magic on Husayn ibn Isma'il until he became plagued with an unknown disease. Muhsin and his supporters succeeded and took over Khishwah (the Isma'ili capital in Najran) but then lost to Husayn for a second time. According to Shaykh al-Harbi, this conflict has not subsided and remains a significant feature of the Isma'ili community.[32]

This version of history has become a focal point of the anti-Isma'ili literature produced by Saudi religious authorities. Anti-Isma'ili materials insist that the Isma'ili faith is founded on deviant practices, most prominently sorcery. This helps to explain why many Isma'ilis in Najran are often detained on sorcery charges. The Permanent Committee for Scientific Research and Legal Opinion (CRLO) under the leadership of 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Abd al-Latif Al al-Shaykh, a descendant of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, issued a fatwa in 2007 which stated that the naming of the tenth to twelfth century Isma'ili caliphate as the 'Fatimid' caliphate, after Muhammad's

daughter Fatimah, is 'false' and designed to deceive Muslims. The fatwa referred to the Fatimid dynasty as 'infidels' and 'debauched atheists' who legalised alcohol.[33]

Like Shaykh al-Athari with respect to the Shi'a of Medina, Shaykh al-Harbi has sought to distinguish the Isma'ilis from the Sunnis of Saudi Arabia in a physical way. He states that the Isma'ilis wear white turbans and long dresses that cover the ankles. The pious among them keep long beards, but to differentiate themselves from the Sunnis (which he emphasises they take pride in doing), shave their cheeks. The shaykh states that the Isma'ilis are to be found in Khishwah (the centre of the Isma'ili leadership), as well as in Dahdah and Jum'ah (neighbourhoods in Najran).[34]

Shi'a infiltration of the Saudi education system

Shaykh al-'Umar's 1993 treatise expressed concern about Shi'a efforts to educate their population, stating that schools and educational facilities have proliferated in Qatif. Other Saudi ulema base their attacks on the Saudi Shi'a by referring to the 1993 treatise, mentioned earlier. The treatise has been recommended by prominent ulema including Shaykh al-Jibrin and Shaykh al-Hawali. Less prominent ulema who use the treatise to attack the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia include Shaykh Mamduh al-Harbi, Shaykh al-Faris and Shaykh al-Salafi. The treatise can also be found on the personal websites of many Saudi ulema, including that of Shaykh Sa'd ibn 'Abd Allah al-Hamid, who published the article alongside others as sources of information to understand the activities of the Shi'a in the Eastern Province. Shaykh al-'Umar's treatise provides a detailed description of Shi'a educational institutions in the Eastern Province.[35] The shaykh emphasises that these schools are not only for boys; Shi'a girls also receive an education. He points to al-'Awamiyyah[36] a village in al-Qatif which hosts seventeen schools of different levels for both boys and girls, and expresses fury that most of these schools are not privately owned but are government schools.[37]

Shaykh al-Faris addresses a different aspect of Shi'a education. He notes that Shi'a children attend prestigious government schools in the kingdom, which educate their pupils with a 'proper' understanding of Islam. However, the Shi'a do not allow their children to be indoctrinated by these teachings; they are later brain-washed through evening classes in their *hussayniyyah*s, to cleanse them of what was taught at school during the day. The shaykh claims that the Shi'a attend

government schools purely for practical reasons: to obtain proper qualifications for future employment. He also claims that the Shi'a are active in the promotion of Shi'a religious education and pursue private programs for students. He notes that the Shi'a have demanded the removal of Shaykh Salih al-Fawzan's commentaries on Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Book of *Tawhid*) from being used in state schools, and conduct teaching activities during the month of Ramadan which include social gatherings, seminars, and lectures participated in by the Shi'a ulema, businessmen, and elites.[38]

In the context of higher education, the Shi'a are accused of deliberately infiltrating Saudi universities. In his treatise, Shaykh al-'Umar lists all the Saudi universities that at the time hosted Shi'a students and employed Shi'a staff, and describes the alleged activities of the Shi'a at these universities in detail. He singles out the King Faysal University of Dammam for its large number of Shi'a students and for the fact that it has Shi'a staff in charge of admission and enrolment. He also identifies and names senior academic staff at the King Fahd University of Petroleum who are Shi'a, expressing concern that they specialise in subjects related to petroleum. He also regrets the number of Shi'a students at King Saud University in Riyadh, claiming that 15 buses are sent to transport Shi'a students back to their home towns on the weekends.[39]

Al-'Umar also argues that Shi'a students boldly and shamelessly question Sunni religious traditions, including the revered collection of *hadith*, *Sahih al-Bukhari*.[40] Similarly, Shaykh al-Faris briefly stresses in a lecture that the Shi'a of Medina are dangerous and determined to infiltrate the education system. The shaykh points out that there are three hundred male teachers and two hundred female teachers of Shi'a conviction in Medina. However, the shaykh expresses satisfaction that this number has significantly decreased in recent years.[41] Shaykh al-'Umar and Shaykh al-Faris's main objectives seem to be the identification of Shi'a activities and, when possible, Shi'a individuals. Obviously the ulema are not fond of integrating the Saudi Shi'a within Sunni communities and, if given the power, would isolate the Shi'a from participation in social activities such as education, given that such activities may enable the Shi'a to improve their employment prospects and living conditions. The position of the Shi'a within the economy and the labour market, especially the public sector, is another significant concern for Saudi Arabia's Sunni clerics.

Shiʿa infiltration of the labour market and Shiʿa economic activities

Shaykh al-ʿUmar argues that the Shiʿa are not only actively employed within government departments but non-government organisations and businesses, specifically mentioning Aramco, the national oil and natural gas company. He further points out that Shiʿa employees are to be found in ministries with responsibility for health, agriculture, postal services, and communication services and the media. The shaykh claims that even within the Ministry of Hajj, one can find Shiʿa officials.[42] Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke on the other hand note that the Shiʿa are barred from employment in the Ministry of Hajj and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.[43] Shaykh al-Faris also claims that the Shiʿa hold positions within government departments and help secure posts for their relatives. The shaykh warns that such patronage could translate into the Shiʿa being promoted into leadership positions within the public sector. Al-Faris outlines three reasons why this situation could be dangerous. First, public sector employment gives the Shiʿa financial stability, not only for the individual holding the post but for his family members; second, such employees will be able to contribute financially to Shiʿa communities; and third, allowing the Shiʿa to obtain public sector jobs will enable the spread of Shiʿa doctrines throughout the bureaucracy. The shaykh gives an example of an unnamed Shiʿa who works in a government department, who he described as committed, driven and guided by these three objectives.[44]

The two shaykhs also raise concerns over the employment of Shiʿa within the judiciary. Shaykh al-ʿUmar notes that the two Shiʿa courts in Qatif and al-Ahsaʾ employ only Shiʿa and are headed by a Shiʿa cleric. What is more appalling to the shaykh is the appointment of Shiʿa judges in Sunni courts in Qatif, passing judgments in cases involving Sunnis who, according to the shaykh, are the only Muslims in the kingdom.[45] The appointment of Shiʿa judges (or *qadi*s) has been a common concern of the ulema in Saudi Arabia. A fatwa was issued by Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ibrahim (1893-1966) declaring it impermissible for the Shiʿa to be appointed as *qadi*s, not only in Sunni courts but also in Shiʿa courts.[46] The shaykh was a descendant of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab and was one of the founders of the Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University. He was prominent within the Saudi religious establishment and is used as source of reference by more recent Saudi ulema including Shaykh ibn Baz and Shaykh ʿUthaymin.[47]

The economic activities of the Shiʻa community in Saudi Arabia are a concern for many Saudi ulema. Shaykh al-Faris discusses what he sees as the determination of the Shiʻa to exploit the country's economy. He claims that the Shiʻa of the Eastern Province focus on business matters and stress the importance of economic success. The Shiʻa own food, industrial, and other companies, enabling them to export produce and goods to other parts of the kingdom and overseas. Some of these products are branded with Shiʻa family names, but others are identified only as originating from Qatif or Sayhat. What is important, argues the shaykh, is an understanding that the Shiʻa have a strong grip over the economic activities of the Eastern Province.[48] Shaykh al-ʻUmar has raised similar concerns, arguing that the Shiʻa have economically infiltrated other parts of Saudi Arabia. The shaykh gave an example of two bakery companies, operating nationally and owned by Shiʻa: ʻAbd Allah al-Matrud and al-Jawad. The shaykh outlines other Shiʻa economic activities such as gold trading in Qatif, al-Ahsaʼ, and Dammam; and agriculture in most parts of the Eastern Province. According to the shaykh, during ʻAshura the price of apples and vegetables increases dramatically because the Shiʻa halt business activities to observe Shiʻa celebrations. He also claims that the Shiʻa are in control of the date industry and own the best date plantations in the country, in Qatif and Medina. Similarly, he claims the fishing industry in the Eastern Province, the biggest in the country, is controlled by the Shiʻa.[49]

Shaykh al-Faris argues that although the Shiʻa employ foreigners to work for them, they are cautious and only use Shiʻa foreign workers from India and Pakistan. He gave an example of a Pakistani driver he encountered, who worked for a Shiʻa businessman. When asked, the driver claimed to be a Muslim but in a manner that, to the shaykh, clearly revealed himself as a Shiʻa.[50] The shaykh however did not further explain what he said was the 'Shiʻa manner' that gave the driver away. The shaykh argues that these employment arrangements allow the immigrant workers to strengthen Shiʻa communities in Pakistan and India and their employers to provide economic aid to Shiʻa communities abroad.[51] These views again signify the fear of Shiʻa transnational affiliations that permeates much of the sayings of the Saudi ulema, other examples of which have been given earlier.

Shaykh al-Faris also points to the Shiʻa property rush during the first Gulf War, during which many Yemeni small businessmen left their shops in the Eastern Province and headed back to their country.

According to al-Faris, local Shi'a grabbed the opportunity and bought the Yemenis' businesses at low prices, while the Sunnis in the area were outnumbered and could not purchase the properties.[52]

In 2008, a fatwa was issued by Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'ad, who was a student of Shaykh ibn Baz, Shaykh 'Uthaymin and Shaykh ibn Jibrin. The shaykh is currently a public servant in Riyadh and conducts lectures and classes in the evenings. His fatwa was published in Saudi newspapers and was endorsed by other ulema.[53] In the fatwa, the shaykh declares it impermissible for Muslims to sell land and houses to the Shi'a. The shaykh argues that selling properties to the Shi'a will help them spread their corrupt convictions. The danger, according to al-Sa'ad, is that property ownership by the Shi'a will enable them to gradually establish a Shi'a state within the kingdom.[54]

Shaykh ibn Jibrin issued a fatwa stating that Muslims should not offer help to the Shi'a poor because they are innovators (that is, they are guilty of *bid'ah*, or innovation regarding religious matters). This fatwa was distributed in a pamphlet whose title translates as 'A Hundred Questions and Answers about Charitable Activity', endorsed by *Hayat al-Ighatah al-Islamiyyah* (the Islamic Rescue Bureau).[55]

Shi'a religious activities

The Saudi ulema talk about the religious activities of the Shi'a in the kingdom as a major threat to Islam. Shaykh al-'Umar argues that the Shi'a conduct regular classes and lectures in their mosques and *hussayniyyah*s. These lectures are advertised through Shi'a shops, and Sunni neighbours are not allowed to attend except with the permission of the Da'wah Centre, which the shaykh finds infuriating. The shaykh claims that these lectures and classes are riddled with conspiracies and slander against the Sunnis. According to the shaykh, and in another repeat of allegations of transnational affiliation, the Shi'a public are indoctrinated by these activities to pledge their loyalty to Tehran and Qum.[56] Al-'Umar also alleges that the Shi'a of the Eastern Province actively pursue literary activities that promote their religion, such as hosting annual book fairs to distribute and display their deviant books, and publishing books and newspaper gazettes propagating their understanding of Qatif's history and civilisation.[57]

Shaykh al-Faris expresses similar concerns about the extent of public Shi'a religious activities. He argues that the building of *hussayniyyah*s is on the rise within the Eastern Province; some are

obvious and others are hidden. According to the shaykh, the Shi'a mourn the death of Husayn (on 10 Muharram) using loudspeakers placed outside their *hussayniyyah*s. They recite poems and stories that can be heard miles away. The shaykh also addresses the closing of Shi'a shops to commemorate the death of Husayn, making the purchase of goods in Shi'a areas of the province impossible. Another Shi'a practice condemned by al-Faris is the wearing of black to occasion their despair and sadness at the martyrdom of Husayn.[58] Shaykh ibn Baz also issued a fatwa condemning *hussayniyyah*s and the practices that take place within them, which he argued were heinous acts of *bid'ah* (religious innovation).[59]

Another Shi'a activity highlighted by the Saudi ulema is the propagation of their doctrines by distributing cassettes to Sunnis. Shaykh al-Faris claims that cassettes have been found placed on cars and in Sunni mosques. The shaykh narrates an incident where Sunni students of an Islamic college in Riyadh were confronted with Shi'a bulletins left on their chairs at the college's hall after returning from a lunch break.[60] Many Saudi ulema have issued *fatawa* condemning Shi'a efforts to preach their religious beliefs to others, particularly Sunnis. Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah, although now known as a relatively moderate cleric, has vehemently attacked the Shi'a for pursuing activities designed to convert Sunnis. The shaykh issued a *fatwa*, published in 2007, expressing abhorrence with the spread of Shi'ism and arguing that the theological gap between the two sects is so significant that religious reconciliation is impossible.[61]

The Saudi ulema defending themselves

The Saudi ulema view their own authority on religious matters as unquestionable; their interpretation of Islam is flawless, especially against the Shi'a. The ulema often assert their superiority by engaging in mutual public flattery. This self-importance, coupled with the conviction that their theological positions are beyond reproach, makes Shi'a criticisms of the ulema unpardonable.

Shaykh al-Faris considers the Shi'a respect for their clerics ridiculous. He states that 'the Rafidah host lectures and advertise these lectures freely promoting their corrupt clerics as if they were Shaykh 'Uthaymin or Shaykh al-'Awdah.' This statement signifies the shaykh's view that the (non-Shi'a) Saudi ulema are superior to Shi'a clerics. In the same sermon, al-Faris claims that the Shi'a of the Eastern Province

slander Shaykh ibn Baz and other leading contemporary Sunni clerics, and accuse those clerics of intolerance of the Shi'a. The shaykh claims that these Shi'a also challenged Shaykh ibn Baz to a public debate.[62] Shaykh al-Harbi states:

> One of the evil [Saudi] Shi'a Shaykhs (Husayn ibn Fahd al-Ahsa'i) slanders 'Umar ibn Khattab, and Abu Bakr […], curses Ibn Taymiyyah labelling him a dog and accuses the distinguished Ibn Baz of being a hypocrite and that not only was his vision impaired, he was intellectually impaired.[63]

It is impossible to verify that all Saudi ulema, who are thousands in number, have similar views towards the Saudi Shi'a as the views of the clerics cited in this article. What we do know is that the ulema do not publicly criticise or disagree with each other on the topic. There is a notable absence of sermons, publications, *fatawa* or lectures produced by fellow Sunni Saudi clerics debunking the common rhetoric of the religious establishment about the country's Shi'a. Indeed, Shi'ism is one matter on which the views of Sunni ulema on opposite sides of Saudi politics agree upon. Some of the views of the famous dissidents al-Awdah and al-Hawali have already been set out; their positions on the Shi'a are indistinguishable from those of the establishment clerics. If there is any difference, it is because the non-establishment clerics, who usually attack the regime from the right, are more hardline. To that end, another example is that of Shaykh Yusuf al-Ahmad, who criticised the Bahraini government's response to the 'Arab Spring' uprisings, a response backed by Saudi Arabia, on the basis that the regime there should have been more forceful and should have done more to protect Sunnis from Shi'a demonstrators.[64]

The clerics cited in this article speak for themselves. They do not mince their words. They are openly hostile towards Shi'ism, and that hostility translates into rhetoric of suspicion and fear of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a populations.

Notes

[1] Ayman Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (London: Westview Press, 1985), 59 and 97-98.

[2] Prominent clerics who have been imprisoned include Salman al-'Awdah and Safar al-Hawali in 1990s and, more recently, Nasir al-Fahd and Yusuf al-Ahmad.

[3] Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 26.

⁴ Guido Steinberg, 'Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi‘is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of anti-Shi‘ism' in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious* Movement, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 116.

⁵ 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Hasan, 'Rasa'il wa Fatawa al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Hasan ibn Shaykh al-Islam Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab', compiled by Shaykh Sulayman ibn Sahman in *Majmu‘at al-Rasa'il wa al-Masa'il al-Najdiyyah* I (Egypt: Matba‘at al-Manar, 1928), ch. 2, 6-7 and 16-22 and 'Abd al-Latif al-Azhari ibn Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman, 'Majmu‘at al-Rasa'il wa al-Masa'il al-Najdiyyah', compiled by Shaykh Sulayman ibn Sahman in *Majmu‘ah al-Rasail wal-Masa'il al-Najdiyyah* III (Egypt: Matba‘at al-Manar, 1928), section 2, 31 and section 11, 66.

⁶ 'Abd al-Latif al-Azhari ibn Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman, 'Majmu‘ah al-Rasail wa al-Masail al-Najdiyyah', compiled by Shaykh Sulayman ibn Sahman in *Majmu‘ah al-Rasail wa al-Masail al-Najdiyyah* III (Egypt: Matba‘ah al-Manar, 1928), ch.2, p. 23.

⁷ Ibrahim, *The Shi‘is of Saudi Arabia*, 26.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹ Ibid., 23-24.

¹⁰ For more information on al-‘Umar, see Islamway, al-Shaykh Nasir ibn Sulayman al-‘Umar (Islamway, n.d.) <http://ar.islamway.com/scholar/49?ref=search>. Accessed 19 June 2010.

¹¹ Shaykh Nasir al-‘Umar, *Waqi‘ al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid* (n.p.: Islamway, 1993) <http://ar.islamway.com/book/3165>. Accessed 19 June 2010.

¹² Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Ahdaf al-Shi‘ah fi al-Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah* (n.p.: Audio Islam, n.d.) <http://audio.islamweb.net/audio/index.php?page=audioinfo&audioid=195814>. Accessed 23 September 2011.

¹³ Toby Matthiesen, 'The Shi‘a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads', *Middle East Report*, 260 (Fall 2009).

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shi‘a Citizens* (September 2009), 16.

¹⁵ Matthiesen, 'The Shi‘a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads'.

¹⁶ Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, *Nas Wathiqah Matalib al-Shi‘ah allati Qaddamaha al-Nimr li Na'ib Amir al-Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah* (Muslimnet, 2009) <http://www.muslm.net /vb/showthread.php?t=304725>. Accessed 23 September 2011.

¹⁷ Shaykh Safar al-Hawali, *al-Aqalliyyah Hina Tatahakkam fi al-Akthariyyah: Radd Safar al-Hawali ‘ala Matalib al-Rafidah Nimr al-Nimr* (Majles Alukah, 2009) <http://majles.alukah.net/showthread.php?t=9476>. Accessed 14 October 2011.

¹⁸ Shaykh Muhammad al-‘Arifi, *Wala' al-Rafidah fi al-Sa‘udiyyah* (Safa, n.d.) <http://www.qassimy.com/game/game/394/%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9_%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%A7_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9.html>. Accessed 19 August 2011.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Saudi Shi'a, *Saudi Shiites Call for Withdrawal and Shiite Religious Leaders Incriminate Massacres in Bahrain* (Saudi Shi'a, March 2011) <http://www.saudishia.com/ ?act=artc&id=259&print=1>. Accessed 7 October 2011.

²¹ Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, *Saudi Ayatollah Nimr Al-Nimr Dares Saudi Regime to Attack Iran and Declares: We Are Loyal to Allah, Not to Saudi Arabia or its Royal Family* (Memritv, n.d.) <http://www.memri.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/0/3145.htm>. Accessed 19 October 2011.

²² Shaykh al-'Arifi, *Ahdath al-Bahrain bi-'Ayn Thaqibah* (DD-Sunnah.Net, n.d.) < http://www.dd-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=119853>. Accessed 2 November 2011.

²³ Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Salafi, *al-Taqiyyah 'Ind al-Shi'ah al-Imamiyyah al-Ithna 'Ashariyyah* (Islamway, n.d.) < http://ar.islamway.com/lesson/68338?ref=search>. Accessed 20 November 2011.

²⁴ Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

²⁵ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Takathur* (*Islamweb*, n.d.) <http://audio.islamweb.net/audio/index.php?page=FullContent&audioid=195814>. Accessed 9 September 2011.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Athari, *Bahth Tafsili 'an al-Rafidah al-Madinah al-Nakhawilah* (*Islamway*, n.d.) <http://ar.islamway.com/books/scholar/623>. Accessed 15 September 2011, 21-27.

²⁹ Ibid, 23-24.

³⁰ Ibid, 22-23.

³¹ Shaykh Mamduh 'Ali al-Harbi, *al-Isma'iliyyah al-Makarimah* (Islamway, n.d.) <http://ar.islamway.com/lesson/54736>. Accessed 16 September 2011.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Al-Riyadh* (9 April 2007) <http://www.alriyadh.com/2007/04/09/article240297.html>. Accessed 22 October 2012.

³⁴ Shaykh Mamduh 'Ali al-Harbi, *al-Isma'iliyyah al-Makarimah*.

³⁵ Shaykh al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

³⁶ Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr is from al-'Awamiyyah; it has been a centre for Shi'a opposition in the past.

³⁷ Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

³⁸ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah al-Ta'limi*.

³⁹ Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah al-Ta'limi*.

⁴² Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

⁴³ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 186.

⁴⁴ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-'Amal al-Rasmi al-Hukumi*.

⁴⁵ Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, ibid.

⁴⁶ See Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, 37.

⁴⁷ For more information of the shaykh, see <http://www.sohari.com/nawader_v/kalemat/mohd_ibraheem.html>.

⁴⁸ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Iqtisad*.

⁴⁹ Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

⁵⁰ Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Iqtisad*.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

[53] For more information on the shaykh, see <http://www.alssad.com/publish/article_39.shtml>.

[54] Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'd, *Fatwa al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'd fi Hukm Bay' al-'Iqar li al-Rafidah* (Sunnah, 2008) <http://www.dd-sunnah.net/records/view/id/1169/>. Accessed 16 September 2011.

[55] Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, 36.

[56] Shaykh Nasir al-'Umar, *Waqi' al-Rafidah fi Bilad al-Tawhid*.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Da'wah*.

[59] Shaykh 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Baz, *Hukm Hussayniyyah al-Rafidah wa ma Yahsul Fiha* (Bin Baz, n.d.) <http://www.binbaz.org.sa/mat/1980/print>. Accessed 12 April 2011.

[60] Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Da'wah*.

[61] Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah, *Salman al-'Awdah Yuhaddir min al-Ikhtiraq al-Shi'i li Wasat al-Sunni* (Islamway, 2007) <http://www.islamway.com/?iw_s=outdoor&iw_a=print_articles&article_id=2149>. Accessed 27 January 2011.

[62] Shaykh Ibrahim al-Faris, *Manahij wa Ahdaf al-Shi'ah fi Mantiqah al-Sharqiyyah: Manhaj al-Shi'ah fi al-Da'wah*.

[63] Shaykh Mamduh al-Harbi, *al-Ukhtubat al-Shi'ah fi al-'Alam*.

[64] Shaykh Yusuf al-Ahmad, *Wa ma Yahsal bi al-Bahrain wa bi Ba'd al-Duwal* <http://www.almadina55.com/vb/t79241/>. Accessed 22 October 2012.