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THE FORGOTTEN UPRISING IN EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA

Frederic Wehrey

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: +1 202 483 7600
F: +1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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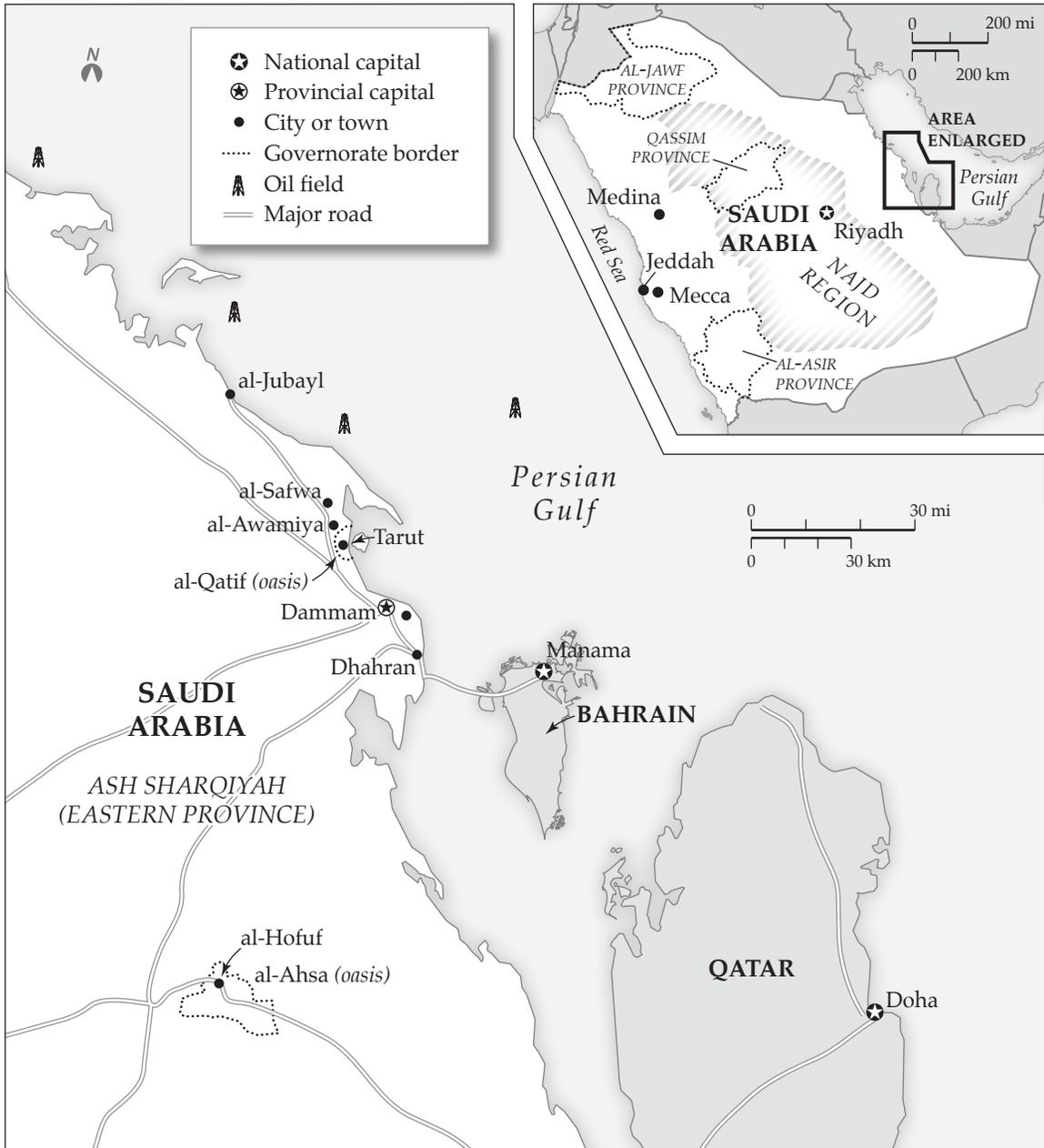
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About the Author

Frederic Wehrey is a senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research focuses on security and political reform in the Gulf and North Africa. His most recent Carnegie publications include *The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya* (2012) and *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy* (2013).

Prior to joining Carnegie, he was a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, where he was the lead author of monographs on Iran's Revolutionary Guard, Saudi-Iranian relations, and the strategic impact of the Iraq War in the Middle East. In 2008, he led a RAND strategic advisory team to Baghdad, Iraq, focusing on post-surge challenges in support of Multinational Forces–Iraq. Wehrey is also a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve and has completed tours in Turkey, Uganda, Libya, Algeria, and Iraq, where he earned the Bronze Star in 2003.

His articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *Washington Quarterly*, *Current History*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Survival*, *Sada*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Financial Times*, and the *Chicago Journal of International Law*. He has been interviewed by major media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, PBS *NewsHour*, NPR, BBC, and CNN. He is the author of the forthcoming book *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (Columbia University Press).



Summary

The eastern region of Saudi Arabia has witnessed a deadly cycle of demonstrations, shootings, and detentions for more than two years. While Shia in the east share grievances with the rest of the country, simmering discontent is aggravated by a history of regime discrimination and provincial neglect. To stabilize the region, the regime must address the roots of dissent at both the local and the national levels.

Eastern Turmoil

- Dissent in the Eastern Province traditionally stems from the regime's sectarian discrimination against Shia and economic neglect and political marginalization of the region.
- Shia activists in the east call for truly participatory governance, the release of political prisoners, the establishment of an elected consultative council, and the writing of a constitution, among other demands.
- The regime has responded with a timeworn strategy of handing out economic subsidies, co-opting Shia clerics to dampen the protests, launching a media counteroffensive that inflames sectarianism, and undertaking a campaign of arrests and detentions.
- The regime's crackdown has deepened divisions between its traditional interlocutors among older Shia activists and clerics, and networks of impatient youth who have soured on the pace of reform. While the goals of these youth activists are similar to those of their older counterparts, they prefer street protests to petitions.

Recommendations for the Saudi Government

Take immediate steps to resolve the sectarian and socioeconomic drivers for protests in the east. These include removing Saudi troops from Bahrain, releasing all political prisoners, and establishing a commission to investigate the Ministry of Interior's actions in al-Awamiya, an impoverished town that has been a focal point for Shia dissent and the regime's crackdown.

End the practice of arbitrary arrests and repeal sweeping laws against "sedition." These excesses have fueled much of the youth-driven anger in the east and elsewhere in the country.

Empower elected municipal councils across the country to exert greater oversight and executive authority over their budgets. In the east, these powers will help bolster infrastructure, improve educational facilities, and diversify the economy—all of which are crucial to staving off youth dissent.

Recognize the Shia Jafari legal code and give Shia representation in the Senior Ulema Council. In the long term, increasing the diversity of these institutions will help reduce sectarianism in Saudi society.

Refrain from tolerating portrayals of eastern dissent as evidence of Iranian subversion. Such depictions fuel a toxic political environment and contribute to the alienation of the younger generation of Shia.

Simmering Discontent

Two years after the start of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia remains an enigma.¹ To outside observers, it seems to have largely bypassed the revolutions and turmoil that have convulsed the rest of the Arab world. But beneath the surface, it is a country beset by mounting political, economic, and demographic challenges. The expectations of a younger generation that faces widespread unemployment and looming exclusion from the state's patronage system are rising. The social media landscape enables unprecedented exchanges of ideas and the breaching of previously sacrosanct taboos. Meanwhile, services and infrastructure are being strained, the public sector is bloated, and questions of succession within the aging leadership go unanswered.

If there is one corner of Saudi Arabia where these challenges are thrown into sharpest relief, it is the oil-rich Eastern Province, where the majority of the country's "Twelver" Shia citizens—estimated at 10 to 15 percent of the total population—reside.² Since the start of the Arab uprisings in late 2010, the eastern region has witnessed continuous, low-level unrest in an unending cycle of detentions, shootings, and demonstrations. Sixteen young men have died in the course of this tumult.

For much of the past two decades, dissent in the Eastern Province has reflected a mix of provincial economic neglect and political marginalization that often involves inflated notions of Shia deference to Iran. In addition, Shia activists have confronted a long-standing narrative presented by the royal family and its allies that the country's citizens are prone to tribal, sectarian, and Islamist passions and are therefore not ready for full democracy. Under this framework, the al-Saud fulfill the role of a benign mediator—the glue that binds the fractious citizenry together. In response, Shia activists, along with a growing chorus of Sunni reformists, argue that it is precisely the lack of civil society and participatory governance that accounts for the chronic persistence of sectarianism and tribalism in Saudi society.

Sectarian discrimination certainly weighs heavily on the everyday lives of the Shia minority in the east. But many of the protesters' demands do not relate specifically to Shia rights. Rather, they encompass a range of goals that have long been advanced by reformists elsewhere in the country: the release of political prisoners, an elected Majlis al-Shura (consultative council), an independent judiciary, a constitution, and greater power for municipal councils. In this sense, it would be wrong to interpret dissent in the Eastern Province

Saudi Arabia is a country beset by mounting political, economic, and demographic challenges.

as a purely localized or narrowly Shia issue. Although the situation is certainly aggravated by sectarian discrimination, many of the underlying drivers of dissent afflict other parts of the kingdom, with varying degrees of severity.

In responding to the protests, the regime has resorted to time-tested strategies of providing subsidies and other economic benefits, co-opting more quietist and conservative Shia clerics to dampen the anger of the youth, launching a media counteroffensive that portrays the protests as criminal in nature or guided by Iran's Shia regime, and undertaking a security campaign of arrests and detentions. The government's crackdown has deepened the divisions between its interlocutors among the Shia clergy and a more activist cadre of youth that has soured on the reform process.

To achieve lasting social peace in the east, the regime needs to address the deep-rooted drivers of dissent at both the national and the local levels. Ultimately, instability in the east is best mitigated through a comprehensive reform process that includes a more transparent and independent judiciary, greater authorities for municipal councils, an end to discrimination in the public sector, and more religious diversity in the country's clerical establishment.

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The Provincial and Sectarian Roots of Dissent

In many respects, the problem of eastern dissent is the result of the unequal distribution of economic resources and political capital—a deficiency that afflicts many of Saudi Arabia's provinces. In the east, however, this sense of exclusion is deeply rooted and has a long pedigree, stemming from the kingdom's early days.

In 1913, the oases of al-Ahsa and al-Qatif in the eastern region were brought under the control of Ibn Saud and his tribal allies from the central Najd region. They were incorporated into the modern Saudi state in 1932. In the subsequent period of nation building, the eastern areas remained subordinate to the Najd region in terms of their economic development, political power, and prominence in the official narratives of the state.

Shia activists acknowledge that the east's standard of living has generally improved over time, particularly when compared to other provinces like al-Jawf and al-Asir. But problems certainly remain. There is still frustration about easterners' lack of input into municipal budgets and the administration of the province. In certain areas of the east, particularly the town of al-Awamiya, skyrocketing unemployment and crushing poverty have added to the woes—made all the more bitter since the village abuts a major gas pipeline.

The sense of political and provincial marginalization has been exacerbated by religious exclusion. Under the kingdom's 1992 Basic Law, Sunni Islam is enshrined as the source of authority for the state. The country's highest

religious body, the twenty-person Senior Ulema Council, issues religious edicts that affect nearly every aspect of social and political life in the kingdom. Although the council includes representatives of the Sunni Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi schools, as well as Hanbalis, there are no Shia representatives.

As a result, discrimination is felt by Shia across a number of areas. Although the government permits private religious gatherings, the Shia continue to face bureaucratic and legal obstacles in the public licensing and recognition of mosques and mourning houses. Shia clerics complain that coverage of Shia religious ceremonies is neglected by official media. The educational system is another major area of concern: school textbooks frequently contain derogatory allusions to the Shia and in some cases juridical arguments for socially excluding or even killing them.

A long-standing grievance is Shia treatment under the judicial system, which is governed at the national level by the Sunni Hanbali school of jurisprudence. Although Shia in the east enjoy the use of Jafari courts of Islamic jurisprudence on family matters, inheritances, and endowments, the scope of their rulings is geographically limited to cases in al-Qatif and al-Ahsa. Shia from other parts of the country, including areas of the Eastern Province, Najran, and Shia areas of Medina in the west, do not have access to Shia courts. Moreover, the power of Eastern Province Shia courts is circumscribed by Sunni courts, which have veto power over the Shia courts' rulings. Any defendant or plaintiff who disagrees with the ruling of a Shia judge can seek to have the case reopened in a Sunni court.³

Shia are also excluded from sensitive government organs, such as the Ministry of Interior, the National Guard, and the Ministry of Defense. With the exception of traffic control, police forces in the Eastern Province are usually staffed by Sunnis, often from other parts of the country, creating a sense of estrangement between local communities and law enforcement officers. The Royal Court, cabinet, and diplomatic corps are other fields of exclusion. At the local level, Shia are better represented in municipal councils, holding six of the eleven seats in the Eastern Province. Yet, real power in the province does not lie with the councils but rather is located at the governorate level, which falls under the Ministry of Interior and is firmly controlled by the royal family.⁴

Underpinning much of the discrimination is the historic and symbiotic alliance between the ruling al-Saud family and the Salafi religious establishment. In return for legitimating the family's rule, the Salafi establishment is allowed a prominent place in the kingdom's public and social discourse. For many clerics in the upper reaches of this bureaucracy, the promotion of sectarianism provides real material benefits by ensuring their continued and exclusive access to political power. Any formal recognition of Shia identity—whether in the political, legal, or cultural spheres—would effectively undermine this primacy. The Salafi clerics

For many clerics in the upper reaches of the Salafi bureaucracy, the promotion of sectarianism provides real material benefits by ensuring their continued and exclusive access to political power.

are hardly uniform in their behavior toward the Shia, but they are generally united in the view that the Shia are deviants from Salafi Islamic orthodoxy. The Shia are consequently denigrated as *rawafidh* (rejectionists).

Sectarian discrimination has proved beneficial for the ruling family in addition to the Salafis. The Saudi regime has long permitted the proliferation of anti-Shia and anti-Persian tracts, sermons, and Internet statements, many of them recycled from the kingdom's ideological counteroffensive against the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Anti-Shiism frequently serves as a useful domestic tool for the regime—a means to placate potential critics in the Salafi establishment and deflect popular sentiment away from the regime's failings. To manage demands for reform, the regime has frequently played the sectarian card to similar effect, portraying Eastern Province protests as exclusively Shia in character. The ultimate goal in this strategy is to forestall any cross-sectarian cooperation among activists in different parts of the kingdom.

Lingering Suspicions of Outside Influence

Saudi Shia have also long been excluded because of inflated suspicion about their transnational ties to Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Among these linkages, the most prominent is the uniquely Shia institution of the *marja al-taqlid*. The term literally means the “source of emulation” and in practice refers to venerated senior Shia clerics whose edicts provide nonbinding guidance over spiritual, social, juridical, and, in some cases, political matters. Because the authority of the Shia religious establishment is theoretically not limited by national borders, the institution has proven problematic for Shia integration by fueling Sunni suspicions of Shia disloyalty to the state. At the core of this concern are questions of whether the transnational authority of the *marja* is directive or consultative and whether it extends beyond spiritual and social affairs to political matters. Some Shia writers have argued that for the Shia to truly integrate, they must first reform this institution. It is a debate that is still ongoing among the Shia and one that has been profoundly affected by regional events in Iraq and Iran.

Suspicions of political loyalty to the Iranian regime continue to bedevil the Shia of the Eastern Province.

Suspicions of political loyalty to the Iranian regime continue to bedevil the Shia of the Eastern Province. Overwhelmingly, the Saudi Shia eschew formal political ties with the Islamic Republic and reject the Iranian system of theocratic governance in favor of the more quietist vision of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest-ranking Shia cleric in Iraq. Yet this was not always the case—the Iranian Revolution spurred a major shift from quietism to activism among the Shia in the Eastern Province.

The most seminal event in the east following the revolution was the seven-day uprising of November 1979.⁵ Although the demonstrations were partly

inspired by the Iranian Revolution, many of the mobilizing grievances of the protesters were domestic and nonsectarian. The late 1970s saw growing disappointment among the Shia at the government's failure to deliver on its promises to modernize the Eastern Province, where living conditions contrasted sharply with the growing opulence of Saudi elites in the central Najd region. The protests began after Shia activists organized public processions on the Ashura holy day, which commemorates the death of Imam Hussein, in al-Qatif in direct violation of a ban that had been in place since 1913. The revolt quickly spread to nearby villages, and the regime's repressive response—via the Saudi National Guard—was swift. At least two dozen Shia protesters perished. By December, the leaders of the uprising—Hassan al-Saffar, Tawfiq al-Saif, Jafar al-Shayeb, and others—had formally founded the Organization for the Islamic Revolution,

In the wake of the uprising, Iran continued its efforts to exert influence over Shia activism in Saudi Arabia. In 1981, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps established the Office of Liberation Movements with the explicit purpose of supporting revolutionary groups in the Gulf.⁶ Saudi Shia clerical figures and lay activists—many of them followers of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, known as members of the so-called Shiraziyyin current—had particularly close ties with this office. These individuals later proved instrumental in supporting the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in Saudi Arabia.

Yet, Iran eventually became dissatisfied with its ability to control the Organization for the Islamic Revolution. That lack of control, along with shifting factional politics inside Tehran, led the Iranian leadership to establish a more pliant, militant group in Saudi Arabia, the so-called Hezbollah al-Hejaz. Members of the group were alleged to have conducted the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in the Eastern Province in which nineteen U.S. servicemembers were killed and close to 500 people were wounded.⁷ Following the bombers' subsequent arrests and a warming of Saudi-Iranian relations in the late 1990s, the group disbanded and its members coalesced into a political faction known as the Khat al-Imam (the Imam's Line—in reference to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini).

In 1993, the Shia leaders of the Organization for the Islamic Revolution, many of whom had been exiled, returned home and made a deal with the Saudi government. In exchange for promising to abandon violence, they received government assurances regarding political reform and the redress of Shia grievances.⁸ This marked the start of an extended period of peaceful activism by clerics and activists that are now known collectively and colloquially as the Islahiyyin (Reformists). Despite having distanced themselves from Iran, many of these individuals have faced recurring charges by the regime and the Salafi clerics that they have continued to act on behalf of Tehran and at the behest of Shia clerics in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Hollow Reforms and Mounting Disappointment

Saudi Shia political activity since the turbulent period of the 1980s has largely consisted of petitions to the royal family, grassroots civil society work, participation in municipal council elections, and dialogue with like-minded reformists among Saudi liberals and Sunni Islamists. Much of this activism is aimed not so much at redressing the specific sectarian offenses against the Shia but at building civil society and more participatory structures of governance in the kingdom.

With the accession to the throne of King Abdullah in 2005, Eastern Province Shia hoped that reform might be a reality. First as crown prince and then as king, Abdullah sponsored a number of initiatives aimed at tempering sectarian divisions and increasing public involvement in the country's political life. Among the more notable of the initiatives was the creation of the National Dialogue sessions, which aimed to bring together individuals from different segments of Saudi society to discuss a variety of national issues. The initiative took the revolutionary step of acknowledging the kingdom's sectarian and regional diversity. Abdullah also instituted a massive,

nationwide scholarship program to send young Saudis abroad for their university education. And perhaps most importantly, he oversaw the country's first experiment in mass participatory politics—the 2005 municipal council elections.

But these reforms failed to live up to their promises. By nearly every account—from Shia youth to clerics to intellectuals—initiatives like the National Dialogue and the National Society for Human Rights proved to be fundamentally cosmetic. The 2005 municipal council elections

raised hopes about improvements to governance in the east. But they too proved a disappointment, with ultimate power over local budgets, administration, and personnel appointments remaining in the hands of the governor of the Eastern Province and the Ministry of Interior.

A February 2009 ministerial reshuffle looked promising. It included the ouster of hardline stalwarts from the government, such as Ibrahim bin Abdullah al-Ghaith, the head of the so-called morality police, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, and Saleh bin Mohammed al-Luhaydan, the head of the Supreme Judicial Council. The reorganization raised expectations that Shia would gain representation in the Senior Ulema Council and the Supreme Judicial Council, also a high religious body. Yet no Shia were appointed.

Even worse, formal and informal efforts at cross-sectarian dialogue between Shia and Sunnis gradually came undone, either due to the regime's lack of support or, increasingly, because of its obstruction of such efforts, along with rising sectarian tensions in Saudi society. "The 2005 to 2007 days

Saudi Shia political activism is aimed not so much at redressing the specific sectarian offenses against the Shia but at building civil society and more participatory structures of governance in the kingdom.

of Shia-Sunni reconciliation are gone,” lamented one Shia activist in al-Hofuf to the author in early 2013.

If there was one bright spot, it was the overseas scholarship program. This program, according to many Shia interlocutors, was administered without regard to sect or region. Yet even this proved a double-edged sword, as many of the Shia youth who benefited from the program returned to a country that was unable to accommodate their aspirations at precisely the moment when the promise of reform had given way to renewed cynicism and despair.

The Generational Divide

Over the past two decades, the Islahiyyin’s attempts at peaceful activism have produced disappointing results. Eventually, mounting frustration with the lack of reform turned into collective rage. If a single event can pinpoint the shift, it was the February 2009 riots in Medina—a revered city among the Shia because it contains the graves of Shia imams. Clashes broke out between Shia pilgrims visiting the cemetery and members of the regime’s morality police. Although accounts differ, the trigger for the unrest appears to have been the morality police’s reported videotaping of female Shia pilgrims. The security forces then moved into the Shia neighborhoods of Medina, beating and arresting residents. Dozens were injured.⁹

The regime’s newly appointed second-in-line, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz al-Saud, equivocated in his condemnation of the incident, further incensing the Shia. In a subsequent press interview, Nayef appeared to justify the morality police’s heavy-handed response, stating that Saudi Arabia follows “the doctrine of Sunnis” and that although some citizens “follow other schools of thought . . . the intelligent among them must respect this doctrine.”¹⁰ For Shia in the Eastern Province, the regime’s response seemed to confirm the growing suspicion of a halt or reversal to the royal family’s outreach to the Shia. Demonstrations quickly erupted in al-Qatif, al-Awamiya, and al-Safwa, marking the most serious outbreak of Shia dissent since 1979.

The Medina riots and the ensuing crackdown sharpened divisions within the Shia community over the pace and scope of reform. In early March, Hamza al-Hassan, one of the Organization for the Islamic Revolution’s early ideologues who now resides in London, announced the formation of the Salvation Movement in the Arabian Peninsula. Citing the sluggish pace of reform as the key driver behind its formation, the group explicitly rejected the gradualist and participatory approach of the Islahiyyin, arguing that self-determination was a “legitimate right” for any persecuted group.¹¹

But the most enduring effect of the clashes was to boost the popularity of Nimr al-Nimr, an outspoken Shia cleric who also rejected the participatory approach of the Islahiyyin and whose support had previously been confined to his hometown of al-Awamiya.¹² In a Friday sermon on March 13, al-Nimr lambasted the regime and warned that the east’s secession from the rest of

the country was the only remaining option. It was a fiery performance that attracted unprecedented numbers of frustrated young men and quickly gained widespread fame on the Internet as the “Dignity Speech.” In its brazenness and unsparing rejection of dialogue, it proved deeply unsettling to the more pragmatic figures in the Islahiyyin. Unsurprisingly, the speech’s reference to secession aroused the ire of the regime, which acted swiftly, arresting al-Nimr and a number of his supporters and imposing a curfew on al-Awamiya.

Far from stifling dissent, the arrests sparked widespread calls for solidarity with al-Nimr, ironically bolstering the stature of the Shia figure the regime wished most to marginalize. Activists across the Eastern Province organized sit-ins calling for the release of al-Awamiya protesters. In April, a group of 60 Shia personalities, including eighteen prominent clerics, issued a statement expressing solidarity with al-Awamiya’s inhabitants and demanding an end to sectarian discrimination, while also distancing themselves from al-Nimr’s calls for secession.¹³

By late 2010, a younger, more activist cohort of Saudi Shia was increasingly seeing the older cadre of Islahiyyin as having been co-opted by the royal family and having failed to deliver any meaningful improvements. This younger generation was highly susceptible to the winds of change sweeping the region. Increasingly, disagreements about strategies for reform fell along generational lines. It was a growing divide that would eventually reach its apogee in the wake of the uprisings in Tunis and Cairo.

Saudi Arabia’s “Day of Rage” in the Eastern Province

In the wake of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s fall and the momentous changes sweeping the Middle East in 2011, it was the older group of activists, the Islahiyyin, that first began to press for change in Saudi Arabia. These reformists with a preference for peaceful protest signed a letter to the royal family demanding a constitutional monarchy. Entitled the Declaration of National Reform, the document’s 119 signatories included a wide swath of activists from across the ideological and sectarian spectrum. It urged a broad array of political and civil reforms, including the establishment of an elected National Assembly, the protection of human rights, and, importantly, the institution of a federal system that would give greater authority to provincial governments. The latter was especially significant as a grievance that united both Sunnis and Shia.¹⁴

But for youthful activists in the east, inspired by the crowds of Tunis, Tahrir Square, Benghazi, and the Pearl Roundabout, the petition was emblematic of a timeworn approach that had failed. Many of these activists joined in planning nationwide demonstrations scheduled for March 11—described variously as the “Day of Rage,” the “Day of Longing,” and,

increasingly, the “Hunayn Revolution,” a historical reference to the Battle of Hunayn fought between the Prophet Muhammad and his followers and a Bedouin tribe near Taif in 630 CE.

In early March, disparate youth groups across the country appeared to have coalesced under a cross-sectarian umbrella movement called the Free Youth Coalition. The coalition issued a lengthy, 24-point set of demands, including the release of political prisoners, an end to corruption, the cancellation of all “unjustified debts and taxes,” the election of a consultative council, and the establishment of an independent judiciary.¹⁵ But the effort ultimately failed due to mutual suspicions among Sunnis and eastern Shia about goals and protest sequencing.

Tensions Between Local and National Agendas

Tensions quickly emerged within the protest movement over the prioritization of local or national agendas. The Shia in particular began to focus more on demands and reforms specific to discrimination in the Eastern Province rather than overarching national aims like ending corruption and creating a constitution. The first Facebook pages that focused specifically on the Eastern Province appeared around March 3, including the popular page “The Eastern Region Revolution.” It is still active and includes links to video clips and publications.

The organizers of the Eastern Region Revolution page made clear that their agenda was distinct from the larger Hunayn Revolution. The site listed as its core demand the release of nine “forgotten” Shia prisoners who had been detained for sixteen years without trial because of their alleged involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing, as well as the release of Tawfiq al-Amir, a popular cleric from al-Hofuf who had been arrested for calling for a constitutional monarchy.¹⁶

In addition to voicing their own local demands, the Shia scheduled their own protests. The first occurred on March 3, eight days before the planned Day of Rage, when roughly 100 protesters in al-Awamiya and al-Qatif marched in solidarity with the “forgotten.” Similar protests occurred the following day after Friday prayers in al-Qatif, al-Hofuf, al-Safwa, and al-Awamiya. The regime responded with the arrest of roughly two dozen protesters, including prominent intellectuals, on the street in al-Qatif. Several were reportedly injured. On March 6, Saudi authorities released al-Amir along with other detained protesters in an apparent gesture of conciliation.¹⁷

The Eastern Region Revolution page also called for sit-ins on March 9 in al-Qatif. In setting this date, the organizers argued that the case of the still-forgotten prisoners would be drowned out “among all the other slogans shouted on [March 11].” “Our Revolution,” they asserted, “is a condemnation of the hideous crimes committed by [governor of the Eastern Region Province] Muhammad bin Fahad.”¹⁸

The reaction from other opposition voices was swift. An online commentator named Salma al-Shihab argued that the Eastern Region Revolution page was regionalist and sectarian and pointed out that the organizers themselves were even critical of such divides.¹⁹ Others claiming to represent the sponsors of the main Day of Rage argued that it was founded and led by Sunnis and that the Shia protests risked polarizing and splitting the larger national movement.

Protests took a more dramatic turn on March 17, when Saudi and Emirati forces intervened in Bahrain to help the Sunni Bahraini monarchy suppress ongoing protests by the country's Shia majority. The deployment of Saudi troops in Bahrain has long animated Shia protests in the Eastern Province because there are deep connections between the Shia communities in both countries. Shia rally slogans in Saudi Arabia increasingly focused on the withdrawal of Saudi forces and expressions of solidarity with Bahrain's protesters—an important illustration of how dissent in the two countries is mutually reinforcing.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's protests failed to meet the high expectations of their organizers. In their postmortem reflections on why the protests fizzled, many activists in the east attributed the failure of the demonstrations to attract broad public support to Sunni apathy and the historic aversion of the Najdi heartland to mounting any sort of dissent against the status quo. For their part, Sunni activists blamed the Shia for starting their protests too soon. In contrast, official media outlets saw the absence of nationwide protests as a validation of the benevolence and legitimacy of the al-Saud family. "Everybody was surprised when this day of rage turned into a silent *baya* [oath of loyalty] which saw the Saudi public wordlessly express their support of the leadership," noted the editor in chief of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper, Tariq al-Humayd.²⁰ It was a theme that figured prominently in the government's countermobilization.

The Regime's Countermobilization

In responding to the protests, the Saudi regime applied a template it has long used to manage and contain internal dissent, particularly in the east. But the net effect of these measures did little to address the root causes of dissent.

Economic Benefits and Municipal Council Elections

Among the most significant of the regime's measures to contain dissent was its provision of massive subsidies to the population. In February 2011, following a three-month absence abroad for medical treatment, King Abdullah announced a familiar-sounding economic package totaling \$130 billion. Subsequent press releases detailed the program as alleviating the impact of inflation, introducing an unemployment benefit (an especially salient

concession for the Eastern Province Shia), providing a state scholarship program for Saudis studying abroad, and maintaining an “inflation allowance” for Saudi state employees.²¹

On March 22, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs announced that the first stage of elections for the kingdom’s 219 municipal councils would be held on April 23. Originally scheduled for October 2009, the elections had been repeatedly postponed, and their sudden acceleration appeared timed to placate the burgeoning protests.²² A key reform demand—the participation of women in the voting—was not included in the initial announcement, although King Abdullah later announced that women would indeed be allowed to participate in the next elections.²³

In addition, the government undertook an astonishing expansion of its public sector. By September 2012, more than 299,000 Saudi men and women had been hired into public employment in the space of a year—a figure that was roughly equal to public-sector hiring for the entire previous decade.²⁴

But unemployment is still high, and al-Awamiya continues to suffer from sectarian discrimination. Solving the east’s problems will take much more than job creation.

Solving the east’s problems will take much more than job creation.

The Media Counteroffensive: “Sectarianizing” the Protests

The Saudi regime also launched a media campaign to discredit and undermine the protests, deploying a wide range of themes. It emphasized the destructive nature of the protests, delegitimized them on the basis of Islamic law, and, importantly, portrayed them as serving the parochial interests of the Shia. A range of institutions conveyed these messages, using both traditional and social media, including the Ministry of Interior, the Senior Ulema Council, conservative and reformist newspapers, and Facebook pages that emphasized solidarity with the regime.

On March 5, the Ministry of Interior issued a forceful statement reiterating that protests were illegal and that those participating would be subject to prosecution.²⁵ This missive was further buttressed by a fatwa issued by the Senior Ulema Council that prohibited protests by citing Islamic legal precepts against the spreading of *fitna* (chaos).²⁶ A succession of other fatwas that censured the protests’ transgressions against Islamic law soon followed.

The regime sponsored—albeit indirectly—the creation of Facebook pages that attempted to discredit and isolate the Day of Rage organizers. The most notable of these were “Together Against the Hunayn Revolution” and “May Allah Blacken Their Faces.” On both pages, as in a plethora of YouTube videos, there were frequent references to the Shia and Iran as the hidden instigators behind the Day of Rage protests.²⁷ In response, the Free Youth Coalition issued a statement that “all the organizers [of the Day of Rage] are Sunnis.”²⁸ At least some observers believe that the regime’s propaganda partially explains the protests’ failure to win broad public support, particularly among Sunnis.²⁹

The regime undertook more repressive measures in the realm of traditional and social media as well. In February, it enacted a new law requiring online newspapers to be licensed by the Ministry of Interior. Activists complained that the law was sufficiently vague to encapsulate many forms of online discourse, such as video and text messaging.³⁰ The regime took additional measures to ban YouTube channels posting videos of Eastern Province protests.³¹

A spokesman for the Saudi Ministry of Interior also announced in early November that police in the Eastern Province would set up a Facebook presence and assign a special team to monitor social media in the region. The goal of the Facebook page was to encourage tips and information from anonymous sources regarding “outlawed” activity in the east.³² Nearly simultaneously, the regime blocked a number of Eastern Province websites.³³

Shia Clerical Intercession

In tandem with this media strategy, the government relied on local interlocutors among the Shia clergy in the east to dampen the protests. Much of this took place in behind-the-scenes negotiations with the governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, and in dialogue with youth. Clerics from across the ideological spectrum took part.³⁴

The ultimate results of this effort were mixed. In some cases it did have an effect, but in others it put the clerics in direct conflict with the youth. The youthful criticism was most intense when it was directed toward two particular clerical figures considered to be conservatives or traditionalists, Mansoor al-Jishi and Abdullah al-Khunaizi. They had tried to facilitate the release of political prisoners but were derided by youth activists as regime collaborators. In comments on Twitter, YouTube, and in the press, activists derided them for acting as “intelligence agents,” conspiring with the regime’s *baltijjiya* (thugs), or simply displaying a “lack of experience and self-awareness.”³⁵

The Turn Toward Violent Repression

The clerics’ efforts did not lessen the fervor of the youth activists. Accordingly, the government began what appeared to be a concerted security crackdown. At the same time the cleric-led negotiations were under way, the regime was detaining 120 protesters and maintaining a near-constant presence of security forces, helicopters, and armored vehicles on the streets of al-Qatif.

On August 3, 2011, popular cleric Tawfiq al-Amir was once again arrested, sparking further demonstrations, particularly among his supporters in al-Hofuf, and prompting expressions of solidarity on the Eastern Region Revolution Facebook page. On October 3, 2011, protests took their most violent turn yet when security forces clashed with armed protesters in al-Awamiya, which resulted in the wounding of eleven police officers and three civilians. Video posted on Facebook showed masked youth assaulting a police station. The confrontation was reportedly sparked after Saudi police

attempted to arrest a sixty-year-old man in an effort to force the surrender of his son, who had been taking part in pro-Bahrain protests.³⁶

Across the Saudi blogosphere and media landscape, al-Awamiya clashes spurred renewed debate and reflection about the underlying roots of violence. The Saudi Ministry of Interior predictably blamed the disturbances on “foreign parties” and threatened to meet the dissent with an “iron fist.” The ministry statement exhorted the protesters to decide “whether their loyalty is to God and their homeland or to that state and its authority.”³⁷ The official Saudi press largely echoed this line, with one prominent commentator arguing that it was Iran’s hand, not sectarian inequality, that was driving the violence.³⁸

From the other side, Shia and pro-reform voices lambasted the regime’s harsh response as an unmasking of its true character. Some compared al-Awamiya disturbances to the Syrian protests, arguing ominously that they were a harbinger of even worse violence throughout the kingdom.

The incidents that did the most to galvanize the youth to take to the streets occurred in early November 2011, when nineteen-year-old Nasser al-Mheishi was shot dead at a checkpoint near al-Qatif. His body was reportedly left on the ground for three or four hours because the government refused to let his family collect it, sparking protests across the city. A second man, Ali al-Ali al-Felfel, was then killed by police. By the end of the week, five people, including a nine-year-old girl, had been killed and six others wounded by police bullets. In a statement, the interior minister reported the government’s version of events, linking the protests to Iranian meddling: “A number of security checkpoints and vehicles have since Monday been increasingly coming under gunfire attacks in the al-Qatif region by assailants motivated by foreign orders,” by which he meant Iran.³⁹

From this point on, tire burnings, drive-by shootings, street marches, and police raids became near-nightly occurrences. Outside media access to al-Awamiya all but ceased; the city was filled with ubiquitous checkpoints and armored vehicles. Government attempts to disperse the protests were heavy-handed, with frequent reports of live fire being used against armed crowds.

At the same time, there were instances of armed assaults by Shia youth on police vehicles—an unsurprising outcome given the plethora of small arms in al-Awamiya. Protester deaths and imprisonments spawned an endless cycle of mourning and follow-up protests.

The weekend of February 10, 2012, offers an illustrative glimpse of how this escalation unfolded. Nimr al-Nimr, the cleric in al-Awamiya, once again made waves. He delivered a sermon demanding the end of the monarchy. Protesters then made their way across the city, shouting demands for reform and the release of prisoners. A protester threw an effigy of Prince Nayef, who had become crown prince, at a row of armored antiriot vehicles. Shots may or may not have been fired at security forces. In the ensuing clashes, police shot twenty-one-year old Zuhair al-Said, and he later died in the hospital. By

late 2012, over sixteen young men had been killed by security forces in the Eastern Province, the majority of them from al-Awamiya.

New Trends in Shia Dissent

Over time, the young protesters of al-Awamiya and al-Qatif have grown more and more weary and impatient with the failure of the Islahiyyin to deliver tangible improvements in living conditions, jobs, and an end to pervasive discrimination.⁴⁰ The youth networks across the Eastern Province have proliferated, and the firebrand cleric Nimr al-Nimr's popularity has climbed. Shia activists have also intensified dialogue with and outreach to Sunni reformists and activists.

The Youth Networks: Goals and Organization

In many respects, the goals of the new youth groups are not dissimilar to those of the older Islahiyyin—the release of political prisoners and a constitutional monarchy. Differences arise over time frame and tactics. “Where the sheikhs and the youth differ,” noted one longtime activist in al-Awamiya to the author in 2013, “is their amount of patience.” In a 2012 sermon, the prominent Islahiyyin leader Hassan al-Saffar appeared to acknowledge this, warning that “although previous generations tolerated and adapted to problems, the current generation is different.”⁴¹

Another crucial difference is the general disdain by youth activists for the ideological and juridical debates that have long defined Shia activism. In interviews, these new youth activists described themselves as “post-ideological” and nonsectarian in their demands. Many youth eschew the arcane disagreements among the various Shia *marjas*; some went so far

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as to argue that the ideological divisions between the pro-Iranian Khat al-Imam, the Shiraziyyin, and other clerical currents are largely meaningless among younger activists. In conversations, several regarded Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their preferred *marja* precisely because he stayed out of their political affairs—one went so far as to characterize him as a “secular *marja*” (*marja ilmani*).⁴²

Organizationally, the youth activists have formed networks of cellular, leaderless groups with names like the Free Youth Coalition, Missionary Youth Movement, Solidarity Group, the Free Men of Sayhat, the Free Men of Tarut, Supporters of al-Qatif, and a women's group, the Supporters of Zaynab in Qatif. By far the most popular of these groups, at least in its web presence, is the Eastern Region Revolution. Like their youthful counterparts in Bahrain, these groups make skillful use of social media to coordinate street protests, network with

like-minded activists, and disseminate criticism of the regime. In their statements, many show a clear deference to the teachings of Nimr al-Nimr.

In March 2012, several of these networks merged into the Freedom and Justice Coalition.⁴³ The coalition plays a prominent role in organizing demonstrations across the region. In marches in al-Qatif and al-Awamiya, its clenched-fist logo figures prominently on banners and placards. Although it maintains a robust Facebook presence, the coalition has historically had little mention in the open media and has refused to divulge details about its size, membership, and leadership for fear of retribution by the authorities. In September 2012, however, it disclosed that one of its founders, the longtime activist Hamza Alawi al-Shakhuri, had fled the country.⁴⁴

For their part, older Shia activists and intellectuals admire the zeal and enthusiasm of the youth groups but criticize their naïveté in thinking that localized dissent by a sectarian minority can spark a Tahrir-style movement. “We are a minority, we are a province, we can’t spark a revolution,” noted one older reformist to the author in early 2013. Others critique the youth’s lack of a program and organization, arguing that the Freedom and Justice Coalition has fallen short of being a coherent umbrella structure and that the plethora of Facebook pages for other groups implies a degree of coherence and capability that does not actually exist on the ground.⁴⁵

Renewed Support for Nimr al-Nimr

As the youth fragmented into various groupings, Nimr al-Nimr remained a center of attention. In the summer of 2012, his brazen rhetoric crossed a redline. In late June, al-Nimr delivered a rousing tirade against the ruling family. The much-feared interior minister, Prince Nayef, had died less than two weeks earlier, and al-Nimr rejoiced in his passing, imploring God to take the lives of the “entire al-Saud, Khalifa and Asad dynasties.”⁴⁶ Saudi security forces attempted to arrest him, and according to regime sources a car chase and a firefight ensued. Al-Nimr was wounded in the thigh, arrested, and taken into custody.

Far from quelling Shia dissent, the arrest of Nimr al-Nimr galvanized the Eastern Province toward further protests. Many Shia disagreed with al-Nimr’s highly personalized attack on Prince Nayef. But the regime’s seemingly brutal response—made even worse by graphic photographs of al-Nimr lying bloodied from a gunshot wound and sprawled in the back of a car—turned the outspoken cleric into a heroic icon for youth across the region. Soon after his shooting, the Facebook page of the Eastern Region Revolution called for protests against the al-Saud across the country.⁴⁷ On July 12, the Saudi oppositionist website al-Jazira al-Arabiya posted a statement from a hitherto-unknown opposition group called the Youth of al-Qatif Revolution, which threatened “to assault police stations and blow up oil wells” if al-Nimr

was not released.⁴⁸ Hundreds of Shia protesters took to the streets, and clashes with security forces became an almost-nightly occurrence.⁴⁹

As before, the escalating violence placed further strains on the conciliatory approach of the older clerics and activists. On July 14, 40 clerics drawn from across the ideological spectrum—from the Shiraziyyin to the Khat al-Imam—implored Shia youth to remain steadfast and cease all violence to avoid playing into the hands of the regime’s “sectarian incitement.” A similar missive appeared on August 19, issued by nine Shia clerics: “We ask the people of this town to stand firmly against violence in all shapes and forms, and to condemn transgressions against lives and property.”⁵⁰ Many younger activists saw these statements as a regime-sponsored ploy to stifle protests of any sort. “Their statement was just like the government’s line—‘stop protesting, you are causing *fitna* [chaos],” noted one young activist.⁵¹

Al-Nimr’s arrest also did not placate Sunnis or stem the tide of Sunni demonstrations. The summer and fall of 2012 were marked by sustained protests in front of prisons in Qassim—a longtime stronghold of conservative Salafism. Aside from outrage over political prisoners, Sunni anger was directed at economic mismanagement and corruption, especially in the kingdom’s western and southern provinces. Young Shia activists argue that these Sunni demonstrations are inspired by the protest culture of the east.

Shia Efforts at Cross-Sectarian Dialogue

Attempting to tap into this current of Sunni activism, Eastern Province reformists have launched a renewed effort at cross-sectarian dialogue with Sunnis across the country. As in the past, much of the dialogue takes place beyond the purview of the regime’s officially sanctioned “dialogue” forums, which many activists perceive as a means to regulate and circumscribe any sort of coordination on actual reform.

A younger generation of activists has used social media for outreach efforts. For example, in early 2013, a group of Shia youth launched a Twitter campaign to invite Sunnis from Jeddah to a celebration of the night of the Prophet’s birth.⁵² “They all thought we spoke Persian here,” joked one of the program’s organizers about the Sunnis to the author.

Despite these efforts, real cooperation has proven elusive because of entrenched sectarianism in Saudi society.⁵³ Many Salafi reformists remain tepid about associating too closely with Shia. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the stance of the immensely popular and provocative Salafi cleric Salman al-Awda, who has publicly hinted at democratic reforms, largely abandoned sectarian discourse, and received Shia delegations.⁵⁴ But local Shia lament that he has stopped short of collaboration for fear of alienating his Sunni base. “The growing respect between Sunnis and Shia has not translated into collective action,” acknowledged one activist to the author in al-Qatif. “We’ve done all we can; it is up to the Sunni reformists now.”

Toward Lasting Peace in the East

Saudi Arabia has passed the two-year anniversary of the Arab uprisings, and the Eastern Province is caught between glimmers of hope and perennial disappointments. By early 2013, there were some encouraging signs that the government had taken steps to redress long-standing grievances. These included shutting down some television networks that spouted anti-Shia rhetoric, appointing an additional Shia member to the nonelected Majlis al-Shura, and building an interfaith dialogue center—albeit outside the country, in Vienna. In addition, the longtime governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, was removed from his post, which he had held since 1985. Yet, despite his removal, many activists remained pessimistic about real change, noting that Eastern Province policy is centrally directed from Riyadh—from the Ministry of Interior, in particular—rather than at the governorate and municipal levels.

By mid-2013, it appeared that government policy was once again portraying Eastern Province activism as directed by Iran. The starkest evidence of this was the dragnet arrest of sixteen Saudi Shia—many of them professionals residing in the western part of the country—for allegedly conspiring to spy for Iran.⁵⁵ Around the same time, Saudi Arabia's state prosecutor called for the execution of Nimr al-Nimr by crucifixion.⁵⁶

The regime needs to move beyond a strategy of repression and co-optation to address the political and socioeconomic drivers of dissent. Importantly, initial steps in this direction have already been articulated.

In 2012, the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies commissioned a study into the disturbances in the east, a draft report of which was then posted on an opposition website.⁵⁷ Based on extensive interviews in the province, the 125-page document is remarkable for its objectivity and detail in identifying the roots of eastern dissent in entrenched social, economic, and political problems rather than relying on the usual explanations of criminality or Iranian-assisted subversion. “It is Saudi Arabia's own Bassiouni Report,” noted one Shia activist in al-Safwa, referring to the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry that investigated the 2011 abuses in that country.

Its recommendations include:

- stopping sectarianism in the media
- removing Saudi troops from Bahrain
- releasing all political prisoners, especially the “forgotten nine” who have spent sixteen years in prison without trial
- establishing a commission to investigate the Ministry of Interior's actions in al-Awamiya

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- reforming the local police station in al-Awamiya and boosting the development of al-Qatif through housing projects, better schools, and sports facilities for young people

Aside from implementing these local measures, there is more the regime can do at the national level. Arbitrary arrests, sweeping laws against “sedition,” and censorship are abuses that continue to inflame youth dissent in the east and have inspired protests elsewhere in the country. Ending these practices should be an immediate priority. More specific to the Eastern Province, the regime should formalize recognition of the Shia Jafari legal code and implement Shia representation in the Senior Ulema Council and the Supreme Judicial Council. They are crucial steps that will have a gradual ripple effect on societal attitudes, media, education, and local judicial processes. In the economic realm, ending employment discrimination for Shia is a long-term challenge that will demand national bureaucratic reforms in the Ministry of Labor and in Saudi business practices. A key starting point is integrating Shia into local police forces and the Ministry of Interior. Most crucially, the elected municipal councils across the country should be given greater oversight and executive authority over their budgets. In the east, Shia leaders frequently mention that these authorities will empower them to bolster local infrastructure, improve educational and sports facilities, and diversify the region’s economy into fields like tourism—all key to staving off youth-driven dissent.

Finally, the regime should end its policies, whether formal or implied, of painting any expression of dissent in the east as evidence of Iranian subversion. Not only does this fuel a toxic political environment, it also contributes to the alienation and potential radicalization of a younger generation of Shia who face an increasingly gloomy future. While the majority of these youth evince little sympathy for Iran, some have hinted that the regime’s incessant drumbeat of demonization could become a self-fulfilling prophecy—especially given the residual traces in the east of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah al-Hejaz. Seen in this light, substantive reforms in the east can support one of the Saudi government’s overarching strategic objectives: blunting Iranian influence at home and abroad.

Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, this paper draws on field interviews conducted in 2007, 2010, and 2013 with a range of Shia activists, clerics, and youth across the Eastern Province: in al-Qatif, al-Ahsa, Dammam, Tarut, al-Safwa, and al-Awamiya. I am grateful to these individuals for sharing their insights with me. I also wish to thank Alexandra Siegel for her peerless research assistance. For previous studies on protests in the Eastern Province, see Madawi al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, issue 3 (2011): 513–26; Madawi al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia: Local and Regional Challenges," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6, no. 1 (2013); Toby Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?': The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (Autumn 2012): 628–59.
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