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Institute for Gulf Affairs

*POLICY BRIEF:*

# On Being Shia in Saudi Arabia

*A survey looking into the lives of Saudi Arabia's second-class citizens.*

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## **On Being Shia in Saudi Arabia**

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### Introduction:

One does not need to search very intently to find that the Shia of Saudi Arabia have been classified - through the social, political and religious spheres - as second-class citizens. The Shia minority, largely concentrated in the Eastern province, are estimated to make up around 5-7 percent of the Saudi Arabian Population. The vast majority of the Kingdom's citizens are Sunni Muslims; many of whom adhere to the rigid Wahhabi ideology, which in principle is extremely anti-Shia.

The general contempt of Shias in the Kingdom is by no means a hidden phenomenon. Religious publications under the government, school materials, and many of the Saudi government Clerics are very outspoken about their disdain for Shias. One prominent cleric in Saudi Arabia – Mohammed Al Arifi delivered a speech stating “Today the evil Shias continue to set traps, for Monotheism and for the Sunnis”, he continues in this same speech to claim all Shia loyalty is to Iran and that Shias wish to do violence against Sunnis “because their name was Omar or Aisha”, and that they would “skin Sunnis and boil them in water.” The homogenization of Shias reflected in these claims would seem outrageous to an academic or anyone with experience interacting with Shias. However, many Saudis believe this discourse and have been

indoctrinated with a deep hate for Shiism, although the majority have little to no interaction with Shias.

It is no surprise that the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia took to the streets in 2011 and 2012 following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. It is not the first time that they have demonstrated and demanded their rights. An uprising following the 1979 Iranian revolution inspired many Shias to demand they be treated equitably. However, these uprisings have always resulted in brutality and bloodshed for the Shias and statements from the Saudi ministry of Interior justifying their harsh actions by shifting the blame to the demonstrators.

In order for there to be an understanding between Shia and Sunni in Saudi Arabia, the Shia minority's concerns and voices must be heard. At the point in time, Saudi Arabian Shias are not given a voice to represent themselves. They are ultimately represented by corrupt clerics with ulterior political motives – leaving the Saudi public confused and misguided in regards to the Shia doctrine and the population of Shias within the country.

The aim of this project was to voice the concerns of the Shias in Saudi Arabia. I began interviewing from inside the Kingdom in 2011, shortly after the protests in Qatif had begun. Due to the sensitivity of the subject and security risks, the majority of the people who I have interviewed have entrusted me to keep their identities concealed. It was very difficult to get people to agree to sit down for an interview, as many Shias are afraid to speak out about their

situation. They are mindful of the repercussions that may be exacted against them by the Saudi government. Many people whom I approached absolutely refused to answer questions. This reaction in itself was a good indication of the reality of their situation – many Shias do not feel free or safe enough to speak out in their own homeland.

Of the 22 people interviewed, the average age of the interviewee was 31.5 years old; the youngest being 21 years old and the oldest being 61 years old. The majority were male professionals, though seven of the interviewees were Saudi women. The majority came from Qatif, then Dammam, Hassa, Khobar and Saihat; all of which are cities in the Eastern province.

The interview consists of seventeen questions; some are yes or no questions while the majority of them require elaboration. To all of the questions, there were extremely similar responses - showing a shared perception of general discrimination of Shias in Saudi Arabia. The respondents expressed a strong desire for positive change; to be heard and understood. I will go through each question and explain the general theme of the responses, and share statements from the interviewees that help elaborate or capture their sentiments.

#### Question One:

The first issue addressed in the survey was equality in the jobs sphere between Shias and Sunnis. In question one, the interviewees were asked; “**Do you feel there is equality between Sunnis and Shias in Saudi Arabia in**

***Job opportunity? If no, explain.***” To this question, 100 percent of the respondents replied no. There seemed to be no disagreement among the interviewees that access to jobs and promotions was much easier for Sunnis, and that Shias were often the victims of discriminatory actions in the workplace.

Those who elaborated on their response mentioned that Shias were not allowed key positions in the government, major companies or the military. Some pointed out that there has never been a Shia minister. A number of interviewees mentioned that in the Shia-dominated Eastern provinces’ female school branches, there has not been a single Shia school principle. Many mentioned that even though a Shia may be better qualified than their Sunni colleagues, their salary would be significantly lower; some arguing that the initial salary offer is lower for a Shia than a Sunni.

One man told his story of working as an IT Professor training his Sunni colleagues. He was asked to train a Sunni co-worker who was less qualified than him and in a lower position at work, but who had a salary five times higher than his own<sup>1</sup>. Another man from Qatif told his story of being forced to retire early from Saudi Aramco right as he was due for a promotion to a very high position. When the man was retired, the position was offered to a Sunni man who had been in a position below him.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview # 4 – Question One

<sup>2</sup> Interview # 9 – Question One

There is no doubt that the sentiment among Saudi Shias is that they do not have fair access to job opportunities. The respondents reached 100 percent consensus in their beliefs that Saudi Sunnis were given favor in the jobs market.

### Question Two:

The Second issue addressed attempted to see if the most intimate form of social amalgamation – marriage- was acceptable between Sunni and Shia families. The question was “***Are marriages between Sunni and Shia common practice in Saudi Arabia (or are they socially acceptable)?***” 100 percent of the people interviewed said that Shia-Sunni matrimony is considered socially unacceptable; though a small number did mention that before sectarian tensions arose, intermarriage was a more common practice in certain cities.

Those respondents who mentioned that they did know of people who had inter-married, all had stories of unhappy endings. Two men from Qatif said they had heard of a marriage which came to an end when the “government forced them to divorce”<sup>3</sup>. One woman from Saihat says:

“I have a friend who married a Sunni man from Riyadh...After they were married he wouldn't let her go to visit her family, and they had a child but he taught the child bad things about Shias. They got a divorce...Most of the stories we hear are like this.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interview #4 & #5, Question #2

<sup>4</sup> Interview #10, Question #2

The responses indicated that intermarriage was most common or accepted in Al-Hassa, which could be due to the fact that this is the Shia majority city with the largest Sunni minority. The most optimistic of all responses comes from a 28 year old man from Qatif:

“I personally know at least a dozen people, Shia women & men, married to Sunnis from Saudi or mostly from other Arab countries. In Al Hassa, it’s also common in many villages that Shias marry Sunnis, or at least was until Sectarian tension rose. Many families and clans in Al Hassa have Sunni and Shia branches, and sometimes in the same household.”<sup>5</sup>

Part of this phenomenon could be understood through the fact that many Saudi clerics have declared it is forbidden for Sunnis to take Shias as marriage partners. In a religious pamphlet published by the Saudi government for instruction on the Islamic principles of Marriage it states:

“Forbidden to you in marriage are Hindus, Buddhists, Polytheists, atheists, and Shias” <sup>6</sup>

Another Saudi cleric was asked on his webpage if it was permissible to marry a Shia. This was the cleric's Fatwa:

“The Rejecters<sup>7</sup> call the Sunni infidels (as it is said in their famous books) and do not pray with them; hence Sunni consider them infidels because they object the Quran...and call the greatest companions infidels, and reject their Hadith in their two trusted

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<sup>5</sup> Interview #14, Question # 2

<sup>6</sup> Islam and Marriage, p. 13

<sup>7</sup> This is a vulgar term that Al Wahhab used to refer to the Shiites, it is used to this day in discriminatory manners towards Shiites.

books, and they worship Ali Ibn Abu Talib and Hasan and Hussein, and Zein Alabedeen, and call them Lord...Hence their slaughters and fornicating with their women is forbidden.”<sup>8</sup>

The responses in regards to marriage show that Shia and Sunni marriages are not common practice and are not typically considered socially acceptable. The discourse of Sunni clerics even claims that it is forbidden in Islam for Sunnis to take Shias as spouses, making it a religious sin to wed a Shia. However, in the case of the Shias it seems that marriage to a Sunni is merely a social stigma; something that is culturally shunned but does not have a religious basis.

### Question Three:

The third issue addressed was equality in public services of Shia majority cities to similar-sized Sunni majority cities. The question was **“Do you feel that quality of public services in Shia majority cities are different than in similar sized cities with Sunni Majorities? If so, how?”** Regarding this issue, 20 out of the 22 respondents – or 90 percent believe that the services are unequal, leaving Shia majority cities with inadequate or even non-existent public services. Nearly every interviewee mentioned that there are no existing universities for men or women in any of the Shia majority cities, while small Sunni majority villages have had a number of campuses opened in recent years.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://ibn-jebreen.com/?t=fatwa&view=vmasal&subid=8748>, April 2010; Translation from Sharaf Al-Hourani, *Time Magazine*, Cairo.



One respondent, a self-described activist from Qatif explained that he went with a group to ask government authorities to build a university for them so their children wouldn't have to travel out of town for higher education. In response, the government authorities recommended that they simply attend the university of Dammam (Dammam is considered a city with a Sunni majority). Despite the fact that Shias are a very well-educated group, especially in regards to the rest of the Saudi Arabian population, there are no universities in their population centers. Some interviewees mentioned that Shias from the Eastern province are well known for being well educated, especially in the medical and engineering fields.<sup>9</sup> One Qatifi man mentioned:

“There are no universities in Qatif, while there are towns with less 1/5<sup>th</sup> of its size that have universities.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the two interviewees who responded that services were equal (though he believed them to be equally poor) mentioned some exceptions to this equality.

The 29 year-old man from Dammam says:

“There are infrastructure and public service problems (severe ones sometimes) but they are not limited to Shia areas. Look at Jeddah for example. It is the second largest city, mainly Sunni, and look what happened when floods attacked in 2009 due to bad infrastructure. One exception is the universities.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews 4 and 9

<sup>10</sup> Interview # 14, Question three

<sup>11</sup> Interview #1, Question Three

One Saudi engineer from Dammam also said that the services were equal (again, equally poor) but mentioned that mosques were the exception to the equality:

“Yes they are equal but they are poor everywhere. For mosques, it’s very hard to get approval for Shia mosques and the government never contributes for the payment in the building, and only Shia can pay for these. Hospitals are terrible everywhere.”<sup>12</sup>

The majority mentioned that there are major discriminatory policies in place for Shias who try to build mosques. For example one 29 year-old Qatifi Computer Teacher mentions:

“Shia residents face discrimination in building new mosques...Unlike the other provinces, the Islamic Affairs Ministry (Awkaf) does not build mosques in Qatif; building permits are also not issued, thus obliging residents to either build them illegally as houses, or renovate old mosques and Hussayniyat, some of which are over a century old and thus incompatible with contemporary demographic increases.”<sup>13</sup>

It appears that this is true; in a confidential document from the US consulate in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia, the consul General Kevin Kreutner wrote in 2009:

“...Sunni Mosques are generally funded and operated by the Ministry of Endowments (Wizarat al Awqaaf), and the approval process to build these mosques is straightforward. Sadek joked that “if just one Sunni complains that he must travel too far to attend mosque the government will approve and fund a new

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<sup>12</sup> Interview #11, Question Three

<sup>13</sup> Interview #6 – Question Three

mosque tomorrow...According to several contacts, building a Shia mosque in Al-Ahsa is very challenging. In 1998, the Saudi authorities announced new licensing requirements for Shia mosques in al-Ahsa and have since closed 20 mosques. Many of these mosques were in operation for over a decade before being closed. The authorities often use tactics similar to what is currently being done in al-Khobar to force closures...including cutting off electricity to the mosques and threatening the arrest of the property owner.”<sup>14</sup>

Another issue that was brought up by this question was quality of healthcare. Many people interviewed expressed that hospitals and clinics in Shia-majority cities were not on par with those in Sunni-majority cities of similar size. A 32-year old Qatifi man stated:

“In Qatif the official numbers says there are about half million people living in Qatif and it only has one central government hospital and a few health centers; on the other hand, a similar size county has about 60-70 more hospitals.”<sup>15</sup>

Another interviewee, a 29 year-old teacher from Qatif says:

“In Qatif there is only one hospital, it’s 26 years old, with 360 beds capacity for all types of patients, other Saudi cities have specialized hospitals.”<sup>16</sup>

Another Qatifi man states:

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<sup>14</sup> Kreutner, Kevin, “*Saudi Authorities Crack Down on Shia in Al Ahsa*”, US Confidential Files, Dharan Consulate 2009

<sup>15</sup> Interview #4 – Question Three

<sup>16</sup> Interview #6

“For example, there’s a public hospital bed for every 1456 people in Qatif; while the ration is half or even a quarter of that in other similar size cities.”<sup>17</sup>

A woman from Al Hassa says:

“Even though our cities have large populations and are oil rich, it seems like a poor country because of how bad the schools and hospitals quality is.”<sup>18</sup>

Two of the women interviewed discussed an event last year where a man was brought into a hospital with a broken arm and was killed by malpractice on the part of the doctors. They argued this was because of the poor quality of doctors at Qatif’s hospital.<sup>19</sup> A number of respondents from Saihat or Qatif said they drove out of their cities into the Sunni majority cities to seek health care.<sup>20</sup>

The sentiment of inequality seems to be strong among Shias in regards to their cities public services. The overwhelming majority of those interviewed felt that the government closing Shia Mosques, purposely refusing to open universities in the Shia majority cities, and not making an effort to improve health care in their areas were proof enough of discriminatory and unfair government policies.

#### Question Four

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<sup>17</sup> Interview #14

<sup>18</sup> Interview #19

<sup>19</sup> Interviews #10 & #12

<sup>20</sup> Interview #12 & 21

The fourth question asked was for a general response; **“How do you feel that most Sunnis in Saudi Arabia view Shias?”** 100 percent of those interviewed wrote that the general perception of Shias in Saudi was negative.

A 50 year old man from Qatif says:

“There is a difference in opinion. However you will find that the majority doesn’t have much of an idea of what being Shia is. They are fed a lot of propaganda through the clerics and through small Da’wa books that are published through the government, many of which have very strong anti-Shia messages, and they are even educated by parents to be this way. I think some despise us, but mostly we are seen as second-class citizens in a way. Very few are open to it – and most who are open in this way you will find have studied overseas, or spent significant time outside the Kingdom.”<sup>21</sup>

Another very common theme was that many Sunni viewed Shias as their enemies, and believed that Shias were loyal to Iran.

“The majority here are view us as infidels and traitors, fools who follow the Iranian Government.”<sup>22</sup>

“Most of them see us as enemies who are planning on something against them”<sup>23</sup>

“The majority feel like we are coming from another country which is Iran, so they deal with us as if we don’t have rights in our cities.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Interview #9

<sup>22</sup> Interview #11

<sup>23</sup> Interview #4

<sup>24</sup> Interview #7

Some of the responses made a difference between the views of Salafi/Wahabi Sunnis and liberals:

“I’d say it’s a mix of different views that depend on many factors. But all in all, it’s a mix of distrust, hate, bigotry, ignorance on the most part, but there’s also tolerance, coexistence and cooperation. For example, Sunnis who historically lived around Shias along with those from Hijaz (Makka, Madina and Jeddah) usually have tolerant views. Also, liberals in general tend to get along with Shias and don’t have a very hostile attitude towards Shias. However, the most hateful are the religious Salifis and those who have hostile views to people outside their social, religious and tribal circles; and they view Shias with implacable animosity that is fascist and genocidal in nature in many instances.”<sup>25</sup>

“Wahabi clerics say that Shias are not Muslims, but moderates and liberals see them as a part of the country”<sup>26</sup>

“Not all of them hate us, but I would say the majority do. I think there is a lack of respect for Shias even though they don’t know what we are or what we believe, they just hear lies, they believe what they are told and they think we are bad. It is not their fault it is the fault of the Saudi system that teaches children from a young age that nothing is more important than Saudis version of Islam (an interpretation unique to the Kingdom), and that Shias are the worst.”<sup>27</sup>

Though some did differentiate between liberal and Salafi views of Shias, there was general agreement by all of the interviewees that Shias are held in contempt in Saudi society.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview #14

<sup>26</sup> Interview #6

<sup>27</sup> Interview #22

## Question Five

The fifth question asked was, **“What do you think are some myths that Sunnis have about Shias?”** The responses were very consistent in this section, some which are very shocking. Among the myths that were mentioned, were comments that Shias are liars and hypocrites who are waiting to betray Sunnis. In addition to this, Shias have secret plans to take over Sunni property, read from a different Quran, worship Ali (the cousin of Muhammad), worship Imams, secretly work for Iran, are mostly children born out of wedlock, that they killed Imam Hussein (the son of Ali), perform adultery on Ashura (the Shia day of mourning), spit and pee in food that they serve to Sunnis, are actually secret Jews, that their belief was established by a non-Muslim, that they hate the Prophet, that they believe Ali was the Prophet and not Mohammed, and that Shias have tails. Surprisingly, eight of those interviewed listed ‘Shias have tails’ as a myth held by Sunnis about Shias in Saudi Arabia.<sup>28</sup>

One of the most common themes in this answer set was that the Shia participate in some sort of sexually forbidden practices which were permitted by their beliefs:

“That Shias are bastards.”<sup>29</sup>

“Some of them think that Shias do prostitution (especially in Moharam) and it is legal.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interviews #4, #5, #7, #9, #11, #17, #19, #21

<sup>29</sup> Interview # 1, #4

“That Shias commit adultery in order to have a baby.”<sup>31</sup>

“Some say Shias have group sex on Ashura”<sup>32</sup>

“Shias have orgies on Ashura, women engage in sex even with their siblings and fathers, and the end result is called “Sayyed”.

Shias give their wives for Muta’a to Shia clerks. “Sons of Muta’a”, a very prevalent anti-Shia slur.”<sup>33</sup>

As you can see a number of responses have something to do with myths of sexual perversion within Shiism. Though the temporary marriage is not accepted by all Shia schools, it is generally accepted among Twelver Shias. It’s practiced in Iran, but illegal in Saudi Arabia. Many of these sexually perverse myths appear to be a frustration for those who were interviewed. The loyalty to Iran also seemed to be a frustration. Many mentioned they had never been to Iran and felt no special connection to the country; some even denounced the Iranian regime.

Overall, the questions show that there are a large number of misunderstandings and myths about Shias in Saudi Arabia, many of those interviewed blamed the government’s Islamic educational system. They mentioned that school materials teach hateful propaganda about Shias, teaching kids from a young age that Shias are non-Muslims. Educators and clerics often convey inaccurate information about what Shias believe.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview #2

<sup>31</sup> Interview #5

<sup>32</sup> Interview #11

<sup>33</sup> Interview # 14 and 17



## Question Six

The sixth issue addressed how comfortable Shias are with revealing their identity. Oppressed minorities in discriminatory environments will often choose not to reveal religious identities. The sixth question was; ***“Do you, in certain situations, choose not to reveal your Shia identity around Saudis in order to avoid discrimination?”*** More than half of the respondents said yes, they do have to hide it at times for fear of discrimination. The other half of the respondents said no. Still, when it came time to elaborate, all recognized that many Shias have to hide their identity in order to be taken seriously:

“Generally, I don’t have to do that...This is probably because I live and work in areas that are either Shia areas or where Shias are familiar. Some Shias who work in remote areas with almost no other Shias have stated that they have to hide their identities from other Sunnis because they feared discrimination”<sup>34</sup>

“Although it’s hard because of my name and family name, I do my best to hide it. Some people don’t care but from many I receive unjust hate just because I am Shia.”<sup>35</sup>

“Some people do, but I have never done it, I am proud that I am Shia and I do not care if they like me or not.”<sup>36</sup>

“In the past yes, I did but now I don’t do this because I want them to accept me as a part of the country.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Interview #1

<sup>35</sup> Interview #4

<sup>36</sup> Interview #5

<sup>37</sup> Interview #6

“I didn’t choose it, but in some situations I fear that some Sunnis will deal with me by discrimination, and it happened”<sup>38</sup>

“It’s not something that I choose to hide. However, this is not the case for most of us. In order to keep someone’s respect for us, it’s better to not say it. Many problems arise after people know.”<sup>39</sup>

“I did most of my life because I wanted to feel respected by my people. But now, I don’t care, this is the time for a revolution of the mind and we should stop being afraid of their hate and tell them what is true and right about Shiism, and we need to educate them so they will understand that we are all Muslims and brothers and Sisters in Islam.”<sup>40</sup>

Based on the responses, it appears that many Shias have to avoid allowing Sunnis to know they are Shia in order to avoid discrimination and to earn their respect. The other respondents who said they chose not to conceal their identity for fear of discrimination recognized that it was still difficult for Shias to reveal their identities. Others simply stated that they were proud to be Shias and they did not care about reactions.

### Question Seven

The seventh issue addressed was discrimination on the individual level, the question asked; **“Have you personally experienced discrimination based on the fact that you are Shia?”** 100 percent of the Shias interviewed

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<sup>38</sup> Interview #8

<sup>39</sup> Interview #9

<sup>40</sup> Interview #22

had experienced some form of discrimination based on the fact that they were Shia. Every single respondent said yes without hesitation, revealing a difficult reality for the Shias of Saudi Arabia.

There were three men who told stories of being kicked out of mosques when they went to pray. Many Shias have some slight yet perceptible differences when praying, often making it easy to identify a Shia as they pray.

One man from Qatif said while he was praying at a mosque in Riaydh some men approached him after prayer time and told him never to come back to the mosque again.<sup>41</sup> Another man from Dammam said that he was kicked out of the Mosque in Medina during Ramadan by a group who told him Medina was for “Muslims only” thus “he wasn’t allowed to be there.”<sup>42</sup>

A Saudi cleric named Abudllah Bin Abd Alrahman Al Gebreen was asked if Shias should be permitted to pray in Mosques. Al Gebreen declared a fatwa stating that Shias should not be allowed to pray in Sunni mosques. He said:

“You have to ask them about their prayers whether it’s correct or false, if they say its correct make them pray with you, if they say it’s false ask them about the reason behind that, if they claimed you are wrong and called your worship false then they have declared you an infidel, and he who calls a Muslim an infidel is an infidel, so prevent them from praying because they are infidels in what they do and that is to call you infidels and calling your prayers false, so they have no prayers nor worship if they prayed in

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<sup>41</sup> Interview #5

<sup>42</sup> Interview #11

a way that conflicts with the prayers of the Muslims in the Muslims' mosques. So prevent them so that they would go to their countries and pray in their own worship houses, and may God protect us from their evil ways."<sup>43</sup>

A number of things are said in this *fatwa*. Beyond declaring that it is not allowed to let Shias pray in Sunni mosques, he also implies that Shias come from another country (possibly Iran) and should go there to pray. Lastly, he says it conflicts with the prayers of the "Muslims" in "Muslim" mosques, implying that Sunnis are the Muslims, and Shias are not. Thus, it is not surprising that a number of Shias would have experienced being kicked out of mosques, as it appears this is what has been declared proper religious behavior by powerful Saudi clerics.

There were a number of other issues of discrimination that the Shias addressed in their interviews. One man from Qatif explained that he was tired of automatically being associated with loyalty to Iran. He also mentioned that even though his medical test scores were in the 95th percentile, he was not accepted into a medical program, and not given a chance for an interview. Meanwhile the university accepted other Saudis with a much lower average.<sup>44</sup> Another man from Dammam said he felt the strongest form of discrimination

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<sup>43</sup> <http://ibn-jebreen.com/?t=fatwa&view=vmasal&subid=7827>, April 2012. Translation by Sharaf Al-Hourani, *Time Magazine*, Cairo.

<sup>44</sup> Interview #4

when watching Saudi media<sup>45</sup>. Other Shias give us their examples of discrimination at the work place:

“I was a lecturer at the Teachers College in Dammam in 2006 after graduating from there, and I succeeded in all tests and passed all personal interviews, they then asked me to sign acceptance papers and asked me not to accept any other job and the college listed my name as a lecturer for the next term. After they knew that I was from Qatif they refused to complete my acceptance papers.”<sup>46</sup>

“The strongest case was when I was at work, and it’s in fact why I decided to finish with the company. Aramco was much better when it was run by Americans, when Saudi took over the hierarchy changed very much. Though I was more productive and qualified, the position that I should have been promoted to was given to a person with less experience, less qualifications, and less productivity but who was Sunni.”<sup>47</sup>

“Yes, however, I felt discrimination the most when my father, who had a Masters in Economics, was laid-off from his job and given a package, while unqualified people were left to operate and lead the company. The lay-offs and forced retirement targeted all Shias then.”<sup>48</sup>

Another Shia woman who was a university teacher in a rural Sunni majority city explains how she had to hide her identity at work. She would say her

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<sup>45</sup> Interview #1

<sup>46</sup> Interview #6

<sup>47</sup> Interview #9

<sup>48</sup> Interview #14

prayers with her office door locked to make sure nobody would see her. She also states:

“My students do not know I’m Shia because I’m from Dammam, but my origins are in Qatif. When I told some girls I went to Qatif during a vacation they were disgusted and said don’t be with those people they are bad people who are not Muslims.”<sup>49</sup>

Another man from Qatif shared a story about a Shia teacher who had been teaching at an exclusively Shia school in that city in 2010. He was fired from his position for teaching his Shia students the Shia way of praying.<sup>50</sup>

Apart from employment discrimination, there were a number of stories about discrimination in their personal lives. One Saudi woman from Saihat says she celebrated Ramadan with Sunni Saudi Arabian students who were studying with her in the United States. These students did not know that she or her two friends were Shia. When it came time to pray and break the fast, their prayer mannerisms revealed their identities as Shias. She went on to say that the Sunnis whom they had been passing the first two weeks of Ramadan with never called them back or invited them to do anything after that day. She also explained that there were other Saudi exchange students who would warn incoming Saudi exchange students not to talk or trust them because “they were Shias.”

Another woman who attended University in Dammam said she once heard a friend of hers insulting Shias, and when this woman revealed her

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<sup>49</sup> Interview #16

<sup>50</sup> Interview #13 – See additional comments at the end of Interview.

identity as a Shia, her friend put the friendship aside and started insulting her. She says this happens often at universities that are mixed.<sup>51</sup> Another woman from Dammam explains:

“I also had an American colleague who was curious about Islam, she knew a Sunni girl who knew me. When the Sunni girl knew I was Shia, she told my American friend that I am Shia so she doesn’t have to listen about Islam from me because we are not Muslims. She also told the American girl that we cut up babies on Ashura and that we hate the Prophet Mohammed PBUH. I know this because the American girl came to me scared asking why we Shias like to cut up babies.”<sup>52</sup>

Another man told this story:

“My daughters all experienced some discrimination and had problems with friends when they found out they were from Qatif and Shia. In public schools they are also taught religion by people giving the governments’ version of Islam, therefore many of our children sit in class and are told that they are non-believers by their teachers.”<sup>53</sup>

Though not every Shia interviewed told their stories, some wrote a simple yes, that they had experienced discrimination. The clear reality from this sample of people is that discrimination has touched a very large portion of the Shia population in Saudi Arabia. 100 percent responded that they had experienced discrimination based on their religious identity.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview #10

<sup>52</sup> Interview #16

<sup>53</sup> Interview #9

## Question Eight

The next issue addressed was whether or not discussion about the divide between Shia and Sunni was socially tolerated. Often in largely oppressive societies it is not socially acceptable for the minority population to discuss their position with the members of the majority. This often leads to a build-up of social discontent and a feeling of being misunderstood. When minorities are not allowed to explain their situation or discuss openly their beliefs, it forces the majority group to seek alternative sources of information. This opens the door for myths, assumptions, and unrealistic evaluations of the minority group to become mainstream beliefs.

In trying to examine this very issue, the next question asked, ***“Is the Shia/Sunni divide something that can be discussed openly in Saudi Arabia, or is the topic generally avoided?”*** Again, to this question 100 percent of those interviewed said it was not something that can be openly discussed and is generally avoided. One man says:

“Not really, no. Better not to open it because people do not have the culture of intellectual debate, and such dispositions usually end up to be confrontations. In the media however, especially social media and sometimes in TV, this topic is more acceptable, but still most of them become very heated.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview #1



“It’s avoided between the two groups of people, but talked about within the groups. Shias talk about it among themselves and Sunnis among themselves. In public nobody talks about it.”<sup>55</sup>

Two men stated that there was a conference in Riyadh recently about the dangers of Shias to the “Muslim community”.<sup>56</sup>

“It’s not a subject of discussion; it’s rather a subject of incitement from radical Salafi clerks in their weekly Friday sermons, seminars, and university lectures. However, Social media has provided a medium for both incitement and also discussion and positively exchanging views. Recently, a “Scientific Seminar” titled “The Rafedhi Doctrine and its Danger on Sunni Communities” was held in Riyadh.”<sup>57</sup>

Overall, these responses expose a taboo surrounding the discussion of Shia-Sunni relations. This could be the source of additional frustration for the Shias who may be forced to keep stay silent while misrepresentations of their beliefs are proliferated. There seems to be little understanding among the Saudi public as to what the Shias actually believe. This could be largely due to the fact that they do not represent themselves, and instead are represented by clerics with religious or political agendas.

## Question Nine

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<sup>55</sup> Interview #11

<sup>56</sup> This conference and information about it can be found online at (<http://dd-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=145011>)

<sup>57</sup> Interview #14

The Ninth question addresses the issue of how well integrated the two groups are. Particularly in cities where the Shia and Sunni populations are very mixed, like Dammam or Khobar. The question asks ***“In cities where the Shia and Sunni populations are largely mixed do you feel that they mix together or are they generally segregated?”*** All but one, or 95 percent, replied that the populations are generally segregated. One man from Qatif says:

“They mingle in public places naturally but they don’t pray together and each of them lives in specific places and no marriage between them.”<sup>58</sup>

The most optimistic response is from a man from Qatif:

“Dammam is a relatively new city, most of its residents come from other areas. But usually people from Hassa tend to live in certain neighborhoods, but also don’t favor to live in Qatif. In Qatif, towns Safwa, Enak and Tarut are areas where Shias and Sunnis live next to each other. Also, in Al Hassa, there are many villages where Shias and Sunni live side by side.”<sup>59</sup>

Often in cities where different populations are largely in contact and mixed, the relationship between the two will be much better. However, in Saudi Arabia it doesn’t seem to be the case, despite the two populations living side by side in many of the cities in the Eastern province, the majority of Saudis interviewed have responded that they remain segregated (unless forced to be together in the work environment or in public, etc.) This sort of close-contact segregation can

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<sup>58</sup> Interview #6

<sup>59</sup> Interview #14

lead to further problems for the minority group. As the majority group which feels itself to be surrounded by the minority group, can develop a false sense of “understanding the other”. This attitude leaves a person less open to hearing new ideas given about the minority group, as they deem themselves knowledgeable through experience. Often their experiences do not involve enough intimacy to truly understand.

Overall, it appears that even in cities where there are a large number of both Sunnis and Shias, they remain segregated.

#### Question Ten

Question ten asked “***Do you believe most Saudis would consider Shias Muslims (Estimate a percentage)***” According to the responses; 86 percent of the Shias interviewed believe that the majority of Sunnis do not consider them to be Muslim (only 3 of the 22 interviewed said that more than half of Saudi Sunnis would consider them Muslim). The percentages varied.

Based on the responses of those who gave a percentage, the average showed that they believe that about 67 percent of Saudi Sunnis do not consider Shias to be Muslim. The highest figure given stated that 90 percent did not consider Shias to be Muslims, and the most optimistic stated that 40 percent did not consider Shias Muslims. One interesting factor, was that the majority preferred to answer with a percentage of how many Sunni’s *did not* consider Shias Muslims; while in the next question asking how many Shias considered Sunnis Muslims, they answered with the percentage of how many Shia *did* consider Sunni Muslims.

## Question 11

The next question was the same as the previous but in reverse, **“Do you think that most Saudi Shias would consider Sunnis Muslims (Estimate a percentage)?”** To this answer 100 percent of the Shia interviewed believed that the majority of Shias consider Sunnis to be Muslims. The average of all the responses says that about 94.5 percent of Shias would consider Sunnis to be Muslims. The highest answer was 100 percent of Shias believed Sunnis were Muslims, and the least optimistic response was that 90 percent considered Sunnis Muslim. Many of them added that due to the Wahhabi discourse, some Shias have a strong feeling of resentment towards Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. One quote from a Qatifi man sums this up well:

“The majority of us know they (Sunnis) are Muslim, around 90 percent. However, many consider Wahhabi to not be Muslim, or to be misguided. There is strong hate for Wahhabism in our community.”<sup>60</sup>

“Although I started to differentiate between the Wahhabis and other Sunnis, I see Sunnis as Muslim. I still think the Wahhabi are Muslim, but I question their origin and their ideology. I find that Sunnis and Shias are very similar. They both accept and are tolerant with Muslims, Jews and Christians. It’s the Wahhabis who believe they are the only right one and have zero tolerance with the non-Wahhabis.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Interview #9

<sup>61</sup> Interview #4

According to these comments and the results, it is a possibility that the small percentage that was left out was reserved for those Shias who didn't consider those who follow Wahhabi interpretations of Islam to be Muslims. There was also one respondent who mentioned that no Saudi Shia clerics state that Sunnis are not Muslims. A sharp contrast Sunni cleric comments about Shias. In any case, it is certain that the majority of Shias accept Sunnis as Muslims while they perceiving that the majority of Sunni do not accept Shiism as a legitimate form of Islam.

#### Question 12

The twelfth question was “***What is the current Wahhabi discourse about Shiism?***” The responses were 100 percent negative with more than half of the respondents saying that Wahhabis have a violent discourse against Shias. Many mentioned that Wahhabis consider it *halal* or permitted in Islam to kill Shias. More than half also responded by saying that Wahhabis don't consider Shias Muslim at all and that they are the enemy to Islam. Many of their responses play into what al Wahhab taught hundreds of years before. It seems the message is very prevalent in Saudi society to this day.

“The Wahhabi discourse ranges from gentle takfir (excommunication), to complete fascism. Some Wahhabi clerks would call Shia clerks infidels, and say their followers are deceived but not infidels. Very few would try to avoid the subject. However, Mohammed Bin Abdulwahhab, Ibn Taymiah and other godfathers of the Wahhabi Faith all call Shias infidels, and at times, call for

their death and taking their possessions. Recently, the discourse has been very hostile.”<sup>62</sup>

“They think about it as a large movement that is eating Islam up. They believe that Shias are a part of the Zionist movement trying to take over the world. They think we are strategically planning to live close to the oil with a plan with Iran and Shia leaders to take over Mecca and Medina and ruin the Muslim world.”<sup>63</sup>

The unfortunate reality from these responses was that from the Shia perspective, the real problem in their country comes from the Wahhabist ideology, which happens to be the ideology that was adopted by the State as its religious interpretation.

### Question 13

The next posed was about the effects of the Iranian Revolution on the Shia population in Saudi Arabia. Due to the fact that the average age of those interviewed was around 30, many of them were unable to answer properly due to the fact that they would have been too young to remember 1979. However, some did respond and those who remembered said it definitely impacted their communities. The question was “***Do you feel that the 1979 Iranian Revolution changed the perception of Shias in Saudi Arabia?***”

“Absolutely. Before that date we were not considered a threat to the Salafi school of thought. The revolution and Iran political

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<sup>62</sup> Interview #14

<sup>63</sup> Interview #11

leadership made Salafi scholars fear the expansion of the Shia school of thought more.”<sup>64</sup>

“After the revolution in Iran the Shias in Qatif tried to do the same thing, but Saudi government responded with brutality.” <sup>65</sup>

“It completely changed Saudi Arabia. Many of the Shia clerics and activists and scholars were forced into exile and to leave the country. After this we were quickly denied visas to go to Iran or Iraq for a few years. We were then seen as a threat to Sunnis, and though it was a small issue before it was made into something very large.”<sup>66</sup>

“Yes. The tensions got much harder between the two. There was an agreement between the Shias and King Abdul Aziz that Shias could practice their religion openly, but after the revolution they considered Shias more and more of a threat.”<sup>67</sup>

“Yes, it has changed the Shia perception; it has given an extra revolutionary charge for an already politically and revolutionary motivated society in Qatif. However, that charge faded into the nineties and was revived with the Arab Spring. But I believe the most politically charged era was the Left and Arab Nationalism era. The Sunni perception of Shias more or less followed this charge, but the most important factor was that in the seventies the Sahwa clerks came to the scene; a wave of Wahhabi clerks became

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<sup>64</sup> Interview #1

<sup>65</sup> Interview #5

<sup>66</sup> Interview #9

<sup>67</sup> Interview #11

influential. I'd say the eighties and the 2000s are probably the highest in Sunni-Shia tensions."<sup>68</sup>

For those who can remember, there was a significant impact on the Shia population in Saudi Arabia after the Iranian revolution. An article by Fouad Ibrahim reflects on the "Intifada of 1979 in Saudi Arabia". He explains how in late November, 1979, the Shias in Qatif and al-Hasa took to the streets after hearing inspiring words from the prominent Sheikh and activist Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar. The Shias performed their *Ashura* processions (mourning the death of Imam Hussein) in public, prompting the National Guard to intervene. 20,000 Saudi soldiers were deployed to the region to stop the uprisings in 1979 which lasted several days. The army fired live ammunition on the crowd. Ibrahim states that the protestors were chanting slogans demanding rights equal to those of their Sunni counterparts –

'No Sunna, no Shia, but Islamic unity...We are Shia and Ja'fariyya ...What we want is freedom...The Prophet's religion is one without discrimination"<sup>69</sup>

It is clear from these events that there was a significant impact from the Iranian revolution on the Shias of Saudi Arabia. People felt as though a new problem arose within Saudi Arabia based on the fear of Shia insurrection. The general feeling seems to be that relations between Shias and Sunnis were much better before the 1979 revolution in Iran.

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<sup>68</sup> Interview #14

<sup>69</sup> Ibrahim, Fouad. Intifada of 1979 in Saudi Arabia



#### Question 14

The next objective was to understand current events and their impact on the community - Bahrain (a gulf state with a Sunni monarchy ruling over a Shia majority population) was the only gulf monarchy to protest on a large-scale after the Arab Spring began. The question was ***“Do you feel that the uprisings in Bahrain in 2011 impacted the Shia community in Saudi Arabia, or how some Saudis viewed Shias?”*** To this question, which was more relevant for the age group of those who were questioned, 100 percent responded yes. However, they had different stories to tell about what that impact was. The respondents seemed to be divided in their opinions, some seeing it as having a positive impact and others seeing it as negative.

“Yes. We felt really bad and threatened, especially when we saw how happy and excited many Sunnis were about what happened, and how ‘ready’ they are to do the same to us in Saudi if the government allows. Most Saudi Shia scholars are against confrontation with the government, so they tried to send a message to the Shia public not to go with the flow and endanger their security. Some young activists were inspired as they claim, and went out to protest. But such protests were not supported by the majority of Spiritual leaders.”<sup>70</sup>

“Not many people know that but Qatif protests started like 7-10 days before Bahrain’s protests. It was like riding the wave of the Arab Spring for us, but our demand/tension goes back to 2007, and 2009. There was a problem between Shia and Sunna in Madinah in Feb 2009 ended with declaring Shia guilty. There was

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<sup>70</sup> Interview #1

a demand of releasing the '9 forgotten prisoners' which was really growing before the Arab Spring started. The uprising in Bahrain was like a scenario for what would happen in Qatif – that's how I read it – if the Bahraini people bring down the government then Qatif people might go for the same. On the other hand, if the government was able to shutdown with violence the people there then it's like a message for Qatif people of what they would do to them if they tried the same. Bahrain and Qatif people are connected deeply and what happens there and here has an impact on both areas but as the Saudi government went to support the Bahraini government and violently suppressed our people in Bahrain it opened the door for us to support Bahrain protesting."<sup>71</sup>

“Yes, sectarian tensions have increased. Many friendships were affected. It reached a point where Shias would receive anonymous sms messages with insults and threats.”<sup>72</sup>

The protests in Bahrain inspired most respondents while serving as an irritant for a few. Still, there was sadness over the loss of life and mistreatment of Bahraini citizens. Many felt that the issues in Bahrain addressed ongoing problem which had been silenced in the region. Based on this sample, almost all Shia agree that they are oppressed and treated poorly. Many members of this sample believed that protesting and challenging the government's policies was not an option that worked for all Shias.

### Question Fifteen

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<sup>71</sup> Interview #4

<sup>72</sup> Interview #14

The next issue addressed the message the government-appointed Sheikhs were sending to the Saudi public. **“What do Saudi Clerics teach the public about Shiism?”** Not surprisingly, 100 percent of the responses to this were that the message of government appointed clerics was very negative towards Shias. Some responses:

“Late Grand Mufti BinBaz described Twlevers as Rafedha, Ali worshipers, and the most deceitful Shias along with Alawites. Famous Saudi Scholar Ibn Jebreen: ‘It’s forbidden to marry or eat with Shias, Alawites or Druze’. Ibn Jebreen: ‘Don’t allow Shias to pray in Muslim mosques, let them pray in their temples, in their countries’. Many say they are worse than Jews.”<sup>73</sup>

“The problem is these Sheikhs can use most of the media channels against Shias and no one can stop them. They antagonize Shias in Mosque lectures, TV, printed and social media so openly.”<sup>74</sup>

“It is so frustrating to even think about our “sheikhs” and religious leaders. They are a shame to Islam and causing problems in Saudi Arabia.”<sup>75</sup>

Again, the government gives these Sheikhs power to speak in the public sphere, where the Shias are not in a position to defend their beliefs against myths, leaving the Saudi public with a rather skewed perception of Shiism.

### Question Sixteen

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<sup>73</sup> Interview #14

<sup>74</sup> Interview #1

<sup>75</sup> Interview #22

The next question addressed how the respondents felt the situation for Shias in Saudi Arabia compared with other countries with significant Shia populations. They were asked **“How do you feel that the situation in Saudi Arabia between Sunnis and Shias compares to the situation in other countries where the populations are mixed?”** There were mixed feelings in the responses, many felt that the Wahhabi influence on Saudi society made their situation worse than in other countries.

“Unfortunately, some political hands are working very hard to deepen the conflict between the two, not only in Saudi Arabia, but everywhere. I think we hit a very deep low last year. It used to be worse in Saudi, but now I think it is not better in places like Bahrain. However, in Iraq and Lebanon, I think it is not as bad.”<sup>76</sup>

“It’s different; can’t be compared. Saudi is a country that professes to being an Islamic country that follows that Salafi school of Islam, which considers Shiism to be its arch enemy. That coupled with the dynamics of the tribal system, makes the situation of Shias unique. However, in Saudi, there hasn’t been violence like that seen in Iraq or Pakistan, although an Al Qaida leader recently threatened Saudi Shias with extermination and taking their land.”

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“It’s better in most other countries. Bahrain may be the exception, because it is sad how many people are dying there now. What the people don’t know is our people are protesting and dying here too. But Saudi/Wahabi relationship makes it so complicated for us, and Saudi is probably causing the majority of problems in

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<sup>76</sup> Interview #1

<sup>77</sup> Interview #14

Bahrain, their hand is involved for sure. Saudi is so complicated because of oil and lots of money and our history. I think this is the most difficult place to be Shia.”<sup>78</sup>

“I was envying what they have there, but then Saudi interfere and ruined what it’s in Iraq and then what it’s in Bahrain. Sunnis and Shias were living in peace till the Saudi version of Sunni took place AKA Wahhabi.” <sup>79</sup>

“Due to the power of the Wahhabi in Saudi Arabia, this is a much more difficult situation here.” <sup>80</sup>

“I feel Bahrain is worse than Saudi now, but Saudi has been a mental prison for Shias since Wahhab and worse than the others.”

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The complication for the Shias in Saudi is the Wahhabi ideology, mixed with political power. While half felt that Saudi Arabia was the worst place to be a Shia, the other half disagreed.

### Question Seventeen

The last question addressed the recent protests in Qatif and in the Eastern province. I asked the interviewees what they believed the motives behind the protests were. All of the answers were along the lines of stopping discrimination against Shias. Many mentioned that people wanted the release

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<sup>78</sup> Interview #16

<sup>79</sup> Interview #4

<sup>80</sup> Interview #9

<sup>81</sup> Interview #22

of prisoners that were taken without trials. The protests initially began as a way of demanding rights and did not advocate the fall of the Saudi regime. However, in the summer of 2012, as more lives were lost and their voices were ignored, the demand for rights turned into a demand for the fall of the Al Saud regime. One woman makes a strong statement:

“We want to feel we are human beings like everybody else. We don’t feel that in this prison. Imagine me, what is the value of my life to them? I am a woman and I’m Shia; two things that my country does not respect”<sup>82</sup>

Saudi leadership gave security forces permission to use live ammunition in taking on the uprisings in the Eastern province, and thus Qatif lost a number of lives this year. The loss of Shia life is typically not reported in the news. The Ministry of the Interior will often release a version of events which the Shia population will contest on grounds of inaccuracy. This results in greater frustration for the Shia community in Saudi Arabia, who feel that they have yet to attain justice in their own country.

### Conclusion:

The situation in Saudi Arabia is very delicate for Shias. Mohamed ibn Abdul Al Wahhab’s declared “there is none more misguided than the one who calls on others than Allah” - a statement that Al Wahhab aimed at the Shias – appears to be the sentiment among many Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, according to this sample.

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<sup>82</sup> Interview #22

The Shias interviewed easily offered lists of myths that Saudis had about them, yet they mentioned that they have not been given a voice to defend themselves against these myths. 100 percent of those who were interviewed stated that discussing the issue of Shia and Sunni relations in Saudi Arabia is not socially acceptable. Many of the Shias of the Eastern province are very well educated, yet 100 percent believe they don't have equal access to jobs. Shias believe in the oneness of God and that Mohammed was his Prophet, yet they believe the majority of Saudis do not see them as Muslims. They also feel that they are prevented by the government, clerics and social stigma to worship freely. Many Shias feel the need to hide their identity in order to maintain other Saudis respect, yet they all have experienced discrimination on a personal level. Shias and Sunnis tend not to inter-marry, be mostly segregated, and Shias tend to feel misunderstood.

These are the very reasons why people have taken to the streets in the last year – hoping to be granted religious freedom, to have a voice and to be treated with respect by their Sunni countrymen.

This paper does not seek to create sectarian problems, but rather to address them so that they can be fixed. Denying the sentiments of neglect and inequality of the Shias in Saudi Arabia only causes the problem to grow.

If the Saudi government wishes to avoid problems in the Eastern region, there are a number of ways to go about doing this. A necessary first step will be giving the Shias freedom to worship in the way that they choose. Shias should not face harassment over mosque construction and mosques should not be

shuttered by the government. Rather than Sunni clerics speaking on behalf of the Shia population and telling the Saudi public what the Shias believe and do; the Shias should be given a voice to represent themselves. This may allow many of the myths that have proliferated to be dispelled and replaced with awareness and mutual understanding. The school materials teaching that Shias are not Muslims need to be changed as well. Many of the Shias believe that Saudi Sunnis know little or nothing about Shiism or that they are strongly misinformed. Many of these misunderstandings are adding to the feelings of frustration and fear between both groups. The Shia belief system is strongly based on the idea of fighting injustice, and the more unjust the Saudi government becomes with the Shia population, the more likely they will be to take to the streets again.

Though I feel these measures can lead to a better Saudi Arabia, I fear the window for change may have passed. Many in Qatif have recently begun calling for the fall of the house of Al Saud. The Al-Saud family must rely on reforms to placate this restive region. In the absence of genuine reforms to bring equality to the Shia people, the Al-Saud family may struggle to contend with another rising generation of disgruntled Shia. A prospect that may spell the end for this entrenched monarchy.