

**February
2013**

Governance of Sectarian Diversity in Saudi Arabia

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Religious diversity has been an issue in Saudi Arabia since the establishment of state, given the country's sectarian diversity with up to seven Islamic confessional and doctrinal schools present in its territory. However, the management of the country's diversity has been beset by a series of complexities; as this very diversity was supposed, had it encountered a proper intellectual and cultural environment, to contribute to interaction, harmony, and intellectual diversity among different sects. This has never happened, however. What happened was that this very diversity has strengthened an exclusivist religious culture manifested in hard-line attitudes, alienation and accusations of apostasy that reflected itself very negatively on relations among the sects' followers.

Anxious to establish stability in the country during the state's foundation period, the State's founder, King Abdul Aziz Aal Saud, followed a positive policy towards the Kingdom's sects by granting them religious freedom in return for loyalty to the State. This took place despite the deep annoyance of the hard-line Wahabi leaderships, allied to him at the time.

This situation did not last long, however; the extremist Sunni, conservative Hanbali School was adopted as the Kingdom's official

doctrine, and its followers took control of all religious, judicial and educational institutions, turning their backs on the country's religious diversity in the absence of any relevant regulatory laws. This naturally led to social unrest and fostered feelings of alienation and marginalisation among other Muslim sects.

Later on, however, when sectarian tensions escalated due to the marginalisation of religious schools that disagreed with the official religious line – including other Sunni creeds – extreme and arbitrary measures were

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used against followers of other sects. These included restrictions on the performance of religious rites and the construction of religious worship sites, denigrating and humiliating other sects' beliefs, and provoking sectarian tensions through the media and academic curricula. Though these measures mainly targeted the Shiaa sect, they had quite a negative impact on relationships inside the same schools within the wider Muslim community.

For this and many other reasons, such as promoting historical and sectarian debate that was triggered by hardliners on all sides, and the escalating sectarian and confessional upheavals in the region due to the fast pace of political change, the Kingdom's sectarian diversity turned into a real crisis among the parties concerned. The ensuing tepid relations between these parties, which centred round tensions between the Sunni, Shia and Salafist communities, further narrowed the frameworks of communication which the parties had previously failed to widen, and move beyond them to where bilateral relations could be strengthened in a manner that reflects itself in joint cultural and social activities.

This paper aims to review the issue of sectarian diversity in the Kingdom from the social and historical points of view, the manner in which it was dealt with politically and administratively, developments in the relationship among the followers of different Muslim sects, and the various projects and initiatives that ensued from the challenges they faced. The paper will also discuss the outcome and impact of these initiatives, and

offer a list of recommendations for a better diversity management system in the Kingdom.

A glimpse at the Kingdom's history and geography

Saudi Arabia is a large country of many regions, each of which has its own rich history and cultural characteristics that distinguish it from other regions, not to mention its close geographic proximity to several other countries, and the fact that it boasts a large number of Muslim religious sites, especially in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. For all these reasons, Saudi Arabia has all along its history played host to a large number of Muslim sects.

A look at the country's sectarian map will show that there are seven different Muslim sects in the Kingdom, the Maliki, Shafei, Hanafi, Hanbali, Zaidi, Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Shiite and Ismaili creeds, distributed among four main historical regions in the country. In the middle region (Najd) there is a large concentration of the Hanbalism followers, most of whom follow the Salafi and Wahabi interpretation of Islam. The region is the mainstay of the state's official creed and its inhabitants are appointed to high state positions in the legal and religious education fields. The majority population of the western region (the Hijaz) adheres to the Maliki and Shafei interpretation of Islam and some of their Sufi offshoots, alongside other minority groups such as the Twelver Shiite and *Kisa'a* branches. The population of the southern

region (Aseer, Najran and Jazan) is a tribal and sectarian mix the majority of whom follow to the Ismaili Shia sect, alongside some followers of the Shafei and Hanbali jurisprudence schools. The majority in the eastern region (Qateef, Ihsa' and a number of modern cities) follows the fundamentalist, *Ikhbarya* and *Shaikhya* branches of the Twelver Shiite sect, alongside followers of other Sunni jurisprudence schools, such as the Maliki, shafei and Hanbali schools.

There are no precise statics on the numbers of each sect's followers in each of the Kingdom's regions; current political conditions in the country and the constant harassments have forced many to either conceal their sectarian affiliation or move to other or between regions, blurring the lines between different regions' populations.

Moreover, and due to their geographic proximity to important religious centres outside the country, some communities were influenced by their relationship to these centres. For example, the Hijaz is close to Al-Azhar's religious line that accepts diversity, pluralism, openness and close ties with other sects. Many religious scholars in the Hijaz maintain regular contact with their counterparts in Egypt and North Africa, while there is close interaction in the south between the Zaidi and Shafei Imams in Yemen and their counterparts in southern Saudi Arabia, who are their main *marji'ya* (religious reference authority). The same applies to the followers of other Muslim sects in the eastern region of the Kingdom, where the Shia community maintains regular contacts with religious centres in Iraq, Iran and the Arab

Gulf countries, while followers of the Maliki sect maintain contact with their colleagues in the other Gulf countries.

Sectarian diversity and the State

The institutions of the state of Saudi Arabia were restructured in the 1960s, at the time when confrontation started with the communist and leftist currents in the Arab region, echoing the cold war between the then superpowers. This prompted the State to involve religion with its intellectual and institutional dimensions in the struggle. The motto of "fight against communism" became the banner under which it operates. Thus, in response to the prevailing climate in the country, the official conservative religious institution was reconfigured and given a prominent role at the expense of the religious opposition, including the Sunni non-Wahabi sects, and this laid the ground for dealing a blow to the country's national and leftist reform movements.

This is when the process of restructuring and reconfiguring the role of the religious institution began, by granting it a wider scope of manoeuvre at the expense of the other sectarian currents. Several conservative universities and religious institutions were established, and their graduates monopolised all positions in the judiciary. The promotion of the religious police's role, through the formation of "enjoining good and prohibiting evil" groups, went hand in hand with total control of the education system and its curricula.

These steps became a state policy applied in all official institutions and, with time, the manner in which these institutions treated other sects became a discriminatory policy dispensed through *fatwas* (religious edicts), accusations of apostasy, contempt for other sects' beliefs and restrictions on their intellectual and cultural output, while the official sect's followers monopolised the official media and the country's cultural and educational institutions. The official religious institution even used the state's financial capabilities alongside its influence on the academic curricula and the media, to change other sects' beliefs and religious orientation, if not combat their very existence, so much so that some Sufi sects and schools are in danger of extinction.

These fundamentalist views legitimised and provided an excuse for discriminating against followers of other sects, especially in appointments to public positions and those in the fields of religious education, Arabic language, history and different branches of the judiciary. Furthermore, it made the official media and cultural institutions deal with the country's other sects with extreme caution, to sideline them and obliterate their presence from the public scene.

Not only did these discriminatory practices have a negative effect on political and social conditions in the country, with time, other sects' followers became more attached to their beliefs and customs, despite keeping them hidden from public view. Moreover, whether overt or covert, these practices led to an increase in political tensions in the country.

Later on, after the success of the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the spread of Shiite Islam in the region provoked a sectarian conflict between the Sunni and Shia communities. The ground had been laid for this conflict by the poor conditions in which the Shia community had been living since the establishment of the State, manifested in official discrimination against them and their marginalisation from the country's political life. This new state of affairs exacerbated sectarian tensions and instituted a quasi-sectarian separation in the cities and in different walks of life, starting with education and employment and ending with the right to hold high public office in different state institutions. The situation became so bad that it was said that the Shias were second-class citizens.

The Shia community was not the only target of these measures; all followers of other sects received the same treatment, whereby sectarian discrimination became the order of the day at all levels. In an unprecedented move in this country's history, Islamic religious judges and imams of the Masjid al-Haram (in Mecca) and Al-Masjid an-Nabawi (in al-Madina), who did not follow the official creed, were relieved of their positions, and religious schools in the Ihasa' region closed their doors to students from the Maliki sect, and stopped teaching the sect's tenets.

Impact of September 11

Despite the negative impact that September 11 has had on the world in general, and on the Middle East in particular, some signs to the

contrary have emerged. One of its outcomes was the condemnation of sectarianism and hard-line attitudes that favour violence and call for denying the rights of those who do not toe the line. Voices were raised in favour of sectarian diversity and of the kind of dialogue that leaves inflexibility behind in the search for common ground, to remedy the sectarian crisis gripping the country. A variety of roles emerged, as diverse as the country itself is, and officially announced their presence on the scene, openly stated their opinion regarding the state and its policies, and underlined their rights as citizens and inseparable parts of this nation.

Faced this kind of insistence, and in response to outside pressure, King Abdullah called for a national dialogue in 2003, when he was still the crown prince. This was tantamount to a tacit recognition of the country's sectarian diversity, for the very first time, whereby representatives and personalities from every sect in the country were invited to attend a round-table meeting and discuss different national issues.

Gradually, tensions began to ease opening the door to contacts among major religious figures from all creeds, within the framework of the national dialogue. After only four sessions, the dialogue was able to make significant progress in bringing together national figures from all sectarian and intellectual backgrounds, thus providing an atmosphere conducive to the frank and open discussions that framed the relationship based on the common national denominator.

The dialogue helped open channels of communication among various cultural and religious groups of all orientations, and promoted interest in national affairs and in the need to overcome local and inter-factional disagreements. This was undeniably an important step forward for the nation, despite the hard-liners' rejection of the project and refusal to take part in many of its activities.

In addition, the above developments also prompted a review of the country's education curricula to bring them up-to-date with the recent developments, and remove from them all provocation and expressions of contempt for other religious and sectarian groups. However, although it gradually became possible to openly display one's religious affiliation and express it in a variety of ways, these limited measures did not change state policies on sectarian diversity, such as officially admitting and recognising the country's diversity and allowing different groups to openly display their symbols, appear in the media and spread their culture and traditions.

Challenges

The Kingdom could have played an exemplary role to demonstrate an advanced and honourable level of religious tolerance and sectarian diversity. However, the fact that it gave free reign to the hardliners to continue spreading religious extremism and fanaticism, in the absence of regulatory laws to manage the relationship between the parties, turned the situation upside-down. The Kingdom became the benchmark and reference point of

accusations of apostasy in other Muslim communities.

The Kingdom's intellectuals realised what these policies would inevitably come to, and hoped to find the remedy in state instituted principles of coexistence based on citizenship rights and the promotion of mutual respect among all the parties concerned, with the expectation that this would ultimately lower sectarian tensions in the country. Based on that, a number of intellectuals began highlighting and spreading Islam's message of diversity and freedom, helped by the fact that many of them were well aware of the positive religious climate prevailing in several other countries of the region. Many wrote books and openly shared their thoughts in the media, such as Professor Zaki Al-Milad, a member of the Shia Community who wrote a book entitled "Unity, Diversity and Dialogue in Contemporary Islamic Thought," and Professor Mohammad Mahfoudh whose book is entitled, "The Family and the State, Statement for a Communal Peace." In 2003, the two authors wrote several articles for "Al-Kalima" Journal on a wide range of subjects, in which they cemented the importance of dialogue, human rights, communal peace and a healthy civil society, prompting the Journal to publish a special book on intra-Islamic dialogue, to which many other intellectuals and authors contributed. Two more books on the subject added to the list, one by Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, entitled "The Salafists and the Shia: Towards a Better Relationship," and the other by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Yousef entitled, "The Legitimacy of Difference: A

Deep Systematic Study of the Other Opinion."

Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar revealed to Al-Jazeera Channel that he had taken part in a series of meetings with other religious scholars, led on the Salafist side by Sheikh Abel-Muhsen Al-Obeikan, in which many well-known hardliners from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf had also taken part. During the meeting, the participants discussed the provisions of a code of honour between the Sunnis and Shias in Saudi Arabia, with the hope that it would dispel the misunderstandings between them and put an end to the mutual harm inflicted on each other's communities, without having to make any ideological concessions to one another. Al-Saffar believed that, "It would be a grave mistake and a major obstruction," to make the good relationship between Sunnis and Shias conditional on an identity of views, since this would violate the freedom of opinion and interpretation, not to mention the impossibility of achieving such an identity among members of the same religious school and sect, let alone among different ones.

These intellectual efforts, and others that contributed to fostering a suitable climate for discussions, helped open up the parties towards each other leaving behind exclusivist attitudes to explore various means of peaceful coexistence, despite the scepticism of the majority who did not believe in a detente between the Shia and the Salafists. One of the news channels conducted a survey on the subject, which showed a 75% negative attitude.

On the other hand, in an effort to dispel the crisis and its different ramifications, many enlightened and well-educated Sunni authors contributed to the resolution of a number of relevant issues. The most prominent among these were Dr. Mohammad Ali Al-Harfi, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Bulaihi, Mohammad Ali Al-Mahmoud, Abdullah Bijad Al-Otaibi, Hassan Farhan Al-Maliki, Mansour Al-Nqaidan, Mashari Al-Thaidi, Saud Al-Sarhan, and others. The latter critiqued, among other, the path and development of extremist ideologies to pinpoint the gaps in it, and evaluated its activities, manifestations and statements to assess its impact on national unity. However, though it is still early to judge the impact these initiatives will have on the local scene, the ongoing challenges that still impede progress in this domain should be diligently studied in order to find the right solutions for them. Among these challenges are:

A) Implementing the national dialogue's mechanisms

Ever since a group of reformers launched a call for national dialogue in a petition to King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, in 2003, entitled "A Present and Future Vision of the Kingdom," signed by 104 political and social figures, a lot of hope has been pinned on a project capable of sensing the citizens' problems and finding the means to overcome the present isolationism, seclusion, alienation and extremism in the country. However, since the reformers' objective was also to encourage recognition of the Kingdom's sectarian, intellectual and regional diversity without harming the national interest, the

project became much too cumbersome and some felt that it was impossible to implement.

The fact that the dialogue was based on a national platform meant that it had the potential to pave the way for healthy social relationships, characterised by openness and eagerness to know the other, which is exactly what happened in the dialogue's successive meetings. The dialogue has achieved considerable progress at the level of the activist national elite from different creeds and intellectual currents, and helped lay the ground for frank and open discussions among them, based on shared national principles.

Nevertheless, the problem that has affected the national dialogue scheme is that its image is quite ambiguous for citizens. For neither is it an official instrument that can turn recommendations into concrete and practical projects, nor is it a civil organisation that undertakes neutral, objective studies and research for officials and parties interested in developing and reforming the public sphere so as they can take into account.

As a result, despite their importance, the dialogue's recommendations are still locked up in office drawers and files, given their focus on the need to promote citizenship values, reinvigorate the religious discourse aimed at reducing sectarian provocation in the local media between the Sunnis and Shias, and formulate strategies to deal with pressing issues, such as youth and women's education and terrorism.

B) Failure to develop a joint national political project

Despite the numerous theses that reject discrimination on sectarian, regional and tribal bases, and despite the media campaigns launched expressly for that purpose, no comprehensive national project that promotes the national identity has been developed yet.

The fact that such a project does not exist renders these initiative useless and limits their outcome, because rather than being ultimately linked to a basic strategic project, they simply reiterate slogans, terms and issues that are more episodic in nature than institutional and strategic. There is need for a national institution that focuses on and promotes the national identity, plays an active role in addressing pending issues such as discrimination on any basis, reviews and evaluates the State's policies on sectarian diversity, and works to integrate all sects in the political and social system.

C) Failure to legislate the freedom of expression

Among the current challenges is the unchecked religious and cultural discourse that takes into consideration neither national frameworks nor the public interest, and has, consequently, become a source of anxiety and tension among different social groups. Friday sermons, religious lectures and the religious establishment often fail to promote tolerance, harmony and respect for sectarian differences, and often end up causing more tension and disagreements.

Even worse is the absence of regulatory or legal controls that criminalise this kind of behaviour, whereby members of other sects are sometimes prevented from responding to harmful accusations, and are punished if they do.

This is why it is important to institute a legal system that protects sectarian diversity in the Kingdom, admits its existence and underscores every citizen's right to practice his own rites and traditions.

Conclusion

The paper ends with a confirmation that sectarian diversity, in its various forms, is a fact of life in Saudi Arabia, and has been so since the establishment of the modern state. It is also able to confirm that the Kingdom's adoption of a system that relies on a single creed, during the stage of the state's reconstruction in the 1960s, has harmed sectarian diversity, denied the rights of other sects and caused an imbalance in sectarian representation.

The paper gives examples of what Saudi Arabia's sectarian diversity management crisis has led to, including the problems that ensued from sidelining other sects' followers from the decision-making circles, and from positions in the religious and educational establishments, as well as the judiciary. It also shows how these sects have started to atrophy due to the constant pressures brought to bear on them.

However, although an examination of September 11's impact shows that there was some change in the management and

treatment of other creeds, it does not seem that the state is following new strategic policies, meaning that the few discernible changes are mostly cosmetic and temporary.

After giving examples of some personal efforts aimed at bridging the sectarian divide, especially by a number of intellectuals and enlightened members of the community, the paper ends by referring to some of the challenges that impede progress in this domain. These include the need to implement the national dialogue's recommendation, develop a comprehensive political project to promote the national identity, and impose legal checks on the religious discourse in the country without infringing on the right of self-expression.