Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi’a Uprising of 1979
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For seven dramatic days in late November 1979, bloody street violence between state security forces and thousands of frustrated Shiites rocked the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. Sparked by the Saudi regime’s brutal repression of those peacefully celebrating ‘Ashura—the annual mourning of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein—the fury resulted in an unknown number of dead and wounded. Among the destruction, demonstrators burned the British bank in Qatif as well as the offices of the Saudia National Airline. They destroyed state-owned vehicles, attacked police, raided the coast guard office in the village of al-‘Awamiyya, seized weapons from soldiers, and even occupied the old city in downtown Qatif, from which they held off the Saudi military for days. One report relates that a group even burned a toy store owned by a government official. Women as well as men marched in anger. The security forces, which included 20,000 Saudi National Guard, cordoned off the major roadways, particularly those in Qatif, Sayhat, and Safwa to localize the protest, control the flow of information, as well as to prevent nearby oil facilities from being destroyed. Reports swirled that soldiers fired on virtually any public gathering of people, including at least one funeral procession in Safwa, forcing the mourners to flee and abandon the corpse in the street. State and hospital officials refused to release other bodies from the morgue for burial until the uproar quieted, leveraging the dead as blackmail. The National Guard relied on the heavy firepower of helicopter gun ships for crowd control, turning the area into a deadly conflict zone characterized by terror, hostility, and fear.

The uprising compounded what already constituted a political crisis in the Arabian Peninsula, one that directly threatened the security of the House of Saud. The unrest overlapped temporally with the occupation of the Grand Mosque at Mecca by a group of religious radicals headed by Juhayman al-‘Utaybi and his band of neo-Ikhwan. The occupation of the mosque in Mecca, which lasted several weeks and required the use of Saudi Special Forces to end, shook the kingdom to its core. Meanwhile, in the east, because the vast majority of the residents there and therefore those who took part in the rebellion were Shi‘a, the uprising suggested the popular appeal and the arrival of the revolutionary message of Ayatollah Khomeini—a direct threat to the Saudi regime.
In his analysis of the events of 1979–80, Jacob Goldberg argues that “the violent disturbances reflected growing social and economic unrest among the Shi‘is.” Documenting such a conclusion has remained a challenge, however, and the specific and empirical details of social conditions in the east and especially those that led to frustration have eluded observers, as have the ideological and political features of the networks that led the demonstrations. Drawing on new primary sources and previously untapped materials published in the kingdom and by Saudi Arabians in exile, this article addresses in more detail the particular challenges and difficulties that communities faced there. In examining the social and political foundations of politics in eastern Saudi Arabia at the end of the 1970s, I develop the argument that the ideological and substantive contents of various political activities derived from the specific contradictions in the Saudi regime’s attempts to deploy policies and the language of development while simultaneously practicing various forms of social and religious domination. The political mobilization of Saudi Arabians in the east should be attributed to frustration with the effects of what appeared to Shi‘is on the ground to be the state’s discriminatory development politics as well as the unfulfilled promises it made about modernization. Seeking to remold society in the kingdom through modernization, and to marginalize adversaries such as the Shi‘is from the process, the regime created both the structural conditions for politicization and provided the political vocabulary by which agitators expressed their frustration. The regime raised expectations by engaging in a public discourse about developing the nation, whereas in reality it marginalized many from the benefits, creating a powerful situation in which stark contrasts divided the winners and losers in the oil kingdom.

EMBRACING THE REVOLUTION?

There is little doubt that Iran’s revolution helped galvanize politics and energize dissent amongst Shi‘is in neighboring countries, who had long suffered various forms and degrees of repression. Observers rightly point out that the revolution helped explain both the timing and some of the forces that encouraged Saudis to take to the streets. Madawi al-Rasheed notes in her history of Saudi Arabia that “the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979 turned several Shi‘a activists into ‘Muslim rebels.’” She points out that, in part, “the riots were products of the success of the Iranian revolution whose leadership began to attack Saudi Arabia for corruption, alliance with the West, and above all questioned the Saudi leadership’s claim to protect the two Muslim shrines in Mecca and Medina.” James Buchan notes that Iran actively sought to distribute its message to Shi‘a co-religionists in neighboring states, using radio to broadcast its message. Regarding the timing of the uprising, Joseph Kostiner suggests “when the Shi‘is finally did become politically restive in late 1978, they were stirred first by the inspiring example of Khomeini’s revolution,” although he notes that it “was prompted not so much by Iranian manipulation as by a sense of communal solidarity and real grievances, and was genuinely populist in character.”

The Iranian revolution did have tremendous implications for political life in Shi‘a communities throughout the Gulf and in Saudi Arabia, although making sense of Iranian–Saudi connections has remained a challenge. The significance of the revolutionary Shi‘a event was profound. And, there is little question that the revolution emboldened Saudi Shi‘is and inflamed anger, even generating confrontational tendencies. Throughout
1979, Saudi Shi‘a community leaders grew increasingly daring, undertaking measures that they had avoided in the past. The example of Iran was indeed influential, but the uprising in Saudi Arabia was not a derivative event. Although the symbolic power of Iran was central—images of Iran’s revolution such as images of Ayatollah Khomeini were common in Saudi Arabia—the 1979 uprising reflected the convergence of external factors with specifically local grievances and objectives. Despite it being tempting to say otherwise, the Saudi uprising constituted something more than a response to Khomeini’s call for the region’s Shi‘is to embrace and foster their own revolution.

Although Saudi Shi‘is regarded Khomeini as a source of political inspiration, most did not consider him as their religious or political authority (marja‘iyya), particularly in the areas affected by the uprising. Rather, since the early 1970s, the most political Saudi Shi‘is followed the marja‘ Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi, who had fled Iran for Kuwait in the late 1960s, returning to Qom in 1979 after the fall of the Shah.

Throughout the 1970s, his influence spread throughout Gulf Shi‘a communities. Although al-Shirazi supported the overthrow of the Iranian regime, he was not a close supporter of Khomeini’s principle of the rule of the jurisprudent (wilayat al-faqih). Al-Shirazi advocated the creation of a clerical political class to help run the affairs of the state, although he sought the formation of a committee of senior mujtahids rather than the rule of single powerful faqih. The difference between his vision and that of Khomeini did not generate personal tensions between the two men, although they were clear rivals in Iran, and there were more bitter relations between al-Shirazi and Khomeini’s junior supporters, such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

It is difficult to assess the specific impact of al-Shirazi’s influence on Saudi Arabia’s radicalized Shi‘a organizations and their activities in the 1979 uprising. The effect of al-Shirazi’s direct leadership on local Shi‘i communities manifested clearly elsewhere in the Gulf. In Bahrain, for example, where the Shi‘is constituted a majority of the population, Hadi al-Mudarrisi, an Iraqi who represented al-Shirazi on the island, founded the revolutionary Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (al-Jabha al-Islamiyya li-Tahrir al-Bahrain) in 1980 and maintained direct relations with al-Shirazi in Qom. Close contact there was driven in part by coordination between offices, but they were also familial, as Hadi al-Mudarrisi, along with his older brother Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarassi—currently Grand Ayatollah and one of two successors to al-Shirazi—were al-Shirazi’s nephews. Although Saudi Arabian followers of the al-Shirazi marja‘, led by Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, founded the Shi‘a Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia and then later the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Saudi Arabian peninsula (Munathamat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Jazira al-Arabiyya al-Sa‘udiyya, the OIR) in the late 1970s, they did not maintain close relations with the senior cleric, particularly after he left Kuwait for Iran in 1979. Sources indicate that Saudi Shi‘is communicated with al-Shirazi about events in the region later that year but did not seek assistance or guidance in organizing or coordinating them. Rather, the group maintained its local character, reflecting community interests and objectives. Members of the OIR certainly took inspiration from revolutionaries in Iran, even appropriating their symbols. However, it seems likely that relations did not surpass the level of the symbolic.

For some Saudi Shi‘is, the uprising did indeed constitute the local playing out of a transnational Shi‘a event. Yet, on close inspection, it becomes clear that the ideological character of the Saudi uprising was not framed exclusively in terms particular to the
varieties of political Shi‘ism emanating from Iran. Pamphlets circulated before and during the events of the fall of 1979 as well as what followed included various political groupings. Leftists who avoided specifically sectarian politics as well as Islamists mobilized and demonstrated in response to what they perceived to be years of neglect and to the course of events in November 1979 themselves. Of interest, the uprising’s political complexity mimicked events in Iran, where the actions of Islamists and leftists helped drive out the Shah. Khomeini and his supporters came to dominate the political system only later and only by violently driving out their leftist corevolutionaries. Unlike Iran, Saudi agitators did not coordinate. Divided ideologically, Saudi Shi‘a rebels lacked clear objectives and failed to formulate a sustainable vision.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF VIOLENCE

The violence of 1979 concentrated in Qatif and the villages and towns surrounding it. Minor disturbances erupted in outlying oil towns such as Abqaiq, and small skirmishes were reported in Hofuf and al-Mubarraz, the major cities in the al-Hasa oasis. Toward the end of the week of unrest, demonstrators paraded through al-Khobar, Dammam, and Dhahran—the modern triopolis that emerged as a result of the growth of Aramco and the oil industry. Yet, the center of activity and the heart of hostility were in the coastal towns and villages located north of the province’s capital Dammam. The geography of violence in the late 1970s, and in particular its intensity in one but not both Shi‘a communities in the Eastern Province, was the product of social and ideological differences that developed in both historically.

The Eastern Province earned its name officially when the Saudi rulers moved the administrative capital of the region from Hofuf to Dammam in 1950.13 Previously, at least according to the nomenclature of the rulers in Riyadh, the region shared its name with the al-Hasa oasis, located in the southern part of the province. Historically, however, the region was home to two distinctly separate population centers, one in al-Hasa and another in Qatif, the two separated by over 120 kilometers. Date agriculture dominated both communities, although rice as well as various other fruits and vegetables were also grown in each. Between them, they produced enough dates for export, supplying markets across the peninsula, the Persian Gulf region, and as far abroad as South Asia and Western Africa.14 Qatif, situated on the Gulf coast, was also home to a vibrant fishing and pearl-diving industry.15 The rich resources and relative wealth of both attracted regular and intense interest from various imperialist powers. In addition to their similar settled, agricultural, and trade patterns, the populations in both communities were, and are, predominantly Twelver Shi‘a. Population figures for the religious group are unknown, and estimates vary widely as their status remains controversial and sensitive inside the kingdom. In the early 1980s, Jacob Goldberg and others determined that the total number of Shi‘a in both Qatif and al-Hasa was around 350,000.16 Shi‘is in both Qatif and al-Hasa shared various religious institutions in common such as the hussainiyas, prayer houses that served as centers for religious and community services. Because the al-Saud forbade the building of Shi‘a mosques, the hussainiyas were particularly important in defining and shaping spiritual life.

It is a mistake, however, to view the two communities as a single entity. In reality, there existed important markers that divided them, including distance, demography, and
religious practices. In Qatif, the Shi’a constituted the vast majority of the population, perhaps around 95 percent of the community. The demography of al-Hasa proved more balanced, as the Shi’a constituted roughly 50 percent of the oasis’ population, although they dominated in the poorer and more remote areas. In addition to demographic particulars, other important differences distinguished the two. Within the Shi’a branch of Islam, two theological schools dominated in the 20th century: the Usuli and Akhbari schools. In Saudi Arabia, both are represented, the former in Qatif and the latter in al-Hasa. The embrace by Qatifis, although not al-Hasawis of Ayatollah al-Shirazi, an Usuli, is explained in part by these connections. In addition, social conditions in Qatif played an important role in generating and sustaining public defiance there. Qatif was home to several concentrated urban centers, including Safwa and Sayhat, as well as dozens of surrounding villages. More integrated than the Shi’a communities in the south, Qatifis occupied positions across the social spectrum. That Qatif was both urban and rural seemed to have been a critical factor in animating the community. In al-Hasa, although the two main cities Hofuf and al-Mubarraz were large urban centers and home to large numbers of both Shi’is and Sunnis, the vast majority of the Shi’a were poor landless peasants who lived in isolated villages on the outskirts of the oasis. Isolated, they were either unable or disinterested in sustained popular protest. The different social universes did not mean that the two did not suffer through similar material hardships. Although the al-Hasawi Shi’is may not have participated broadly in the uprising, they were no better off than their neighbors to the north. Both communities found themselves on the outside when it came to state services and the largesse generated by great oil wealth.

THE SOCIAL CRISIS AND THE FURY OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

In December 1979, the OIR released a pamphlet of seven statements that the group had circulated during the unrest exhorting people to take to the streets. The OIR emerged from underground in the midst of the intifada itself and assumed a leading role in the community. In a brief introduction, the pamphlet’s author(s) asked rhetorically was “what happened...merely an emotional uprising, one having no social or political foundation, as Minister of the Interior Prince Nayif bin ‘Abd al-Aziz and Minister of Information Muhammad Abdu Yamani depicted it? Or did the intifada possess an essentially social and political foundation?” In answering the question themselves, the authors outlined three reasons for the intifada and its character. First, they cited the “deprivation and misery” of Saudi Arabians throughout the kingdom, but particularly in the east. In making the case that regular citizens suffered unnecessarily, the authors argued that the state had conspired to mask the extent of its wealth while many Saudi Arabians knew only poverty and desperation. The authors questioned “What do you [foreign reader] imagine the condition of the people to be whose government possesses such wealth? If only the world knew the condition of our people and understood the extent of the deprivation and misery that our masses of oppressed (jamāhīrān al-mustad’afa) live in under the shadow of the Saudi regime.”

The pamphlet displayed pictures of dilapidated tin shacks with thatched palm roofs with a caption stating “in the land that houses one-quarter of the world’s oil reserves, you find these homes.” Thousands of people, the authors argued, possessed no running water or electricity as late as 1979. Even in Ras Tanura, home to the kingdom’s massive
oil refining facilities, power stations, a huge desalinization plant, and vast modern technological systems, thousands lived and toiled without utilities or basic services. Humiliation was heaped on top of misery. When the English Queen Elizabeth visited Dammam in 1978, the authors wrote that the local municipality erected barriers and fences so she would not be able to view “the mud hovels” or the extent of the people’s despair.

The authors argued that Saudi oil money was being funneled into wasteful and excessive channels that did not serve the interests of Saudi citizens. Citing unnamed sources, the group exclaimed its exasperation at the suggestion that the Saudi regime might be responsible for 23 percent of global arms purchases. The authors wondered “against whom will these weapons be used” pointing out the Saudi regime was not involved in any regional or global conflict and did not appear to be under threat of any direct attack.23 American banks, they charged, were benefiting from petro-capital, as the dollars generated from oil sales routinely made their way back into Western markets and coffers rather than into Saudi communities. The worst abusers of national wealth were members of the Saudi royal family. Alluding to various instances of excess and opulent living by state leaders, the authors were disgusted and angry that, in contrast, many Saudi Arabians “suffered a crisis with [a shortage of] water as well as health and social services.” The authors remarked that “when the people look at the exploitation and squandering of the [national] wealth—and every area in which they live is deprived, miserable and suffering—is it not natural for them to behave in a revolutionary way, and for them to practice violence, and to persist in fighting for their rights and the protection of their wealth from the betrayal of the criminal al-Saud?”24

The authors also cited the absence of a constitution guaranteeing basic freedoms such as free speech and freedom of the press as the second set of factors that mobilized the public expression of frustration. Third was the hostile position of the Saudi regime to the Iranian Revolution, which the authors heralded for its Pan-Islamic message and its appeal for unity against Western and American imperialism. The three reasons outlined by the OIR for the outbreak of the intifada provide a glimpse at the complexity of the grievances shared by those who took to the streets. Whereas the latter two reasons speak to the OIR’s specific ideological agenda, the group acknowledged that it was the long-term crises and anxieties born from social despair and the imbalances of Saudi development that fueled the intensity of the revolt. Although some benefited and profited from massive oil wealth, many—particularly minorities and those on the margins of power—seemed to have been intentionally left behind.

The OIR’s writings used passion, anger, and the power of emotional rhetoric to rally support and sustain direct pressure on the regime. Importantly, it also framed hardship in very specific terms, which tells us a great deal about the issues that galvanized unrest. The OIR not only juxtaposed popular “misery and suffering” with state opulence and wastefulness, it also pointed out how the difference was predicated on the unfulfilled promise of modernization, which the regime had widely and very publicly marketed as the most important commitment it had toward Saudi citizens. The second five-year Saudi development plan released and widely celebrated in 1975, for example, claimed that the “fundamental values and principles which guide Saudi Arabia’s balanced development” included the goal to “develop human resources by education, training, and raising standards of health.” The plan emphasized the regime’s desire to “increase the well-being
of all groups within the society and foster social stability under circumstances of rapid change” by “develop[ing] the physical infrastructure to support [the] achievement of the above goals.” In the spring of 1979, the regime introduced its annual budget with much fanfare. King Khalid marked the year’s 160 billion Saudi Riyal budget stating that the funds would “enable the government—God willing—to present increases in services to citizens all over the kingdom.” Local officials in the east echoed the state line. Prince Abd al-Muhsin bin Jiluwi, the powerful governor of the Eastern Province, opined that the budget clearly situated the “happiness of the citizens” as the priority of the Kingdom’s regents. He declared that the huge budget was evidence of King Khalid and Crown Prince Fahd’s commitment to the “development of the nation.” In particular, he emphasized that, in the east, the focus would be on health and social services as well as developing human resources. In the past, such declarations served to heighten expectations. By the end of the 1970s, they generated animosity.

According to local observers and activists, the regime, both its national and local institutions, failed to deliver. Although members of the royal family built villas, traveled around the world, and purchased expensive weapons, they did not provide the very services and basics promised to Saudi citizens. Poverty remained widespread in those areas on the margins of power, and many had tired of the state’s failure to fulfill its assurances. It appeared to the authors of the OIR pamphlet and others that the broken promise was premeditated; an act in which the “criminal al-Saud regime” engaged in a willful act of “betrayal” that intentionally left thousands behind.

The result of intentional negligence or not, it was clear that hundreds of thousands of people were suffering, living in meager conditions, lacked basic services, and were angry about it. In the year before the uprising, social decay and the shortcomings of state services dominated local newspaper reporting in the Eastern Province, with the pages of al-Yawm—the region’s local paper based in Dammam—full of examples of suffering, investigative reports into administrative ineptitude, and angry letters from local citizens. Although the press never targeted the royal family directly, their animosity with local branches of government and the politics of development, and thus the central state, was clear.

Several issues dominated discussion, the most important being a crisis in water management and diminishing resources as well as the local municipalities’ inability to manage the worsening situation. Contracting water resources as well as failing water systems reached crisis stage in both oasis of al-Hasa and in Qatif and the surrounding villages. In 1979 alone, there were over fifty articles, letters, or pictures about the water problem in the province. In the al-Hasa oasis, the problem was acute. Water resources—vital to the oasis’ agricultural production—appeared to be in sharp decline, despite efforts over the previous two decades to manage them. As a result, local farmers and landowners scrambled to dig their own deep wells and secure private access to the oasis’ precious life blood. This scramble, however, contributed to the further depletion of the already low water table. The water shortage was complicated by other factors as well, such as chemicals in the drinking water, waterborne disease, and the mixing of fresh water with sewage. In one article, Hussein al-Tantawi an agitated reporter for al-Yawm, wrote an investigative report drawing attention to the deepening crisis. In response to a local initiative by the al-Hasa Municipal council to find new sources of water, al-Tantawi questioned the wisdom of the council’s handling of the problem, arguing that
the problems would probably repeat themselves as the board’s planning had failed to take into account the growing population, increased demand, and the need to cover a wider geographic area. He further argued that the salt and chloride contents of water throughout the oasis were outrageously high, over twice the international standard, which he declared “unacceptable.” Similar problems plagued various villages throughout the oasis.

In Shi’a Qatif and the surrounding area, the problem was even more dramatic. In a series of articles, editorials and picture essays *al-Yawm* systematically documented the various water problems in Qatif. Most importantly, as was the case in much of al-Hasa, the city of Qatif and its villages possessed no centrally planned or functioning system to deliver fresh water. Where there were old local networks, the pipes often lay exposed and disintegrating, pumping both fresh water and sewage into public areas. Safwa, a town just south of Qatif, suffered from massive ponds of standing water and sewage that had seeped from the antiquated system. Tarut Island, which lay several kilometers to the east of the main city, was of particular interest to the journalists at the newspaper. Remarkable for its natural beauty, its past fertility, its historic landmarks, and its potential for investment, the small collection of villages stood in virtual ruin. In a June article, the paper wondered if the citizens of Tarut would eventually be forced to drink sea water. Citing the two main problems as the absence of drinking water as well as year-long reservoirs of bogs, local citizens and authorities blasted the Ministry of Municipal and Village Affairs and its Committee for Environmental Health in the Eastern Province for neglect. They even suggested that the problems were the product of willful disregard. Citing a telegram from the Qatif Municipal council, the paper quoted the following:

> the drinking water wells in Tarut are producing negative results and the reason for that is the absence of a functional drinking water network, which was arranged 15 years ago. We previously raised the issue for your consideration... But it has not been completed this year. Now, the problems have grown worse and thus the citizens complain.

The paper stated that “these bogs remain throughout the year and every area. The health of the citizens is gravely affected. [The citizens] request the establishment of offices there to follow the condition of [people’s] health, and not only to author reports that have no effect or provide no speedy resolution.”

Raising the possibility of willful negligence, the director of Qatif’s Municipal Council—passing the buck—went on record that, despite the efforts of some local authorities to care for the health of the community, the Ministry of Agriculture and Water did not appear to be overly concerned with the fate of the problems of the general public. He remarked that “the Municipality undertook work to drain the bogs and budgeted for the [sewage] network. It raised the issue to the Committee of Environmental Health. The Committee agreed [to resolve problems] on the part of the project that is located on government land and hoped to secure agreement on the remaining part!!!” Ultimately, however, he claimed that the Ministry’s Committee “left the part allotted to citizens in addition to the non government land” to be sorted out among themselves.

Other problems abounded. Ali Yusuf al-Jarudi, a resident of Qatif, wrote a scathing letter to the paper in the early fall, ripping local branches of government for poor planning and neglect. Frustrated about generally poor conditions, he stated that “it is not a stretch [to say] that Qatif continues to have been deprived of projects since the 1975 budget and the second five year plan, which is about to end without helping [the city] at all.” Al-Jarudi made it clear that in his opinion, local officials “had not fulfilled
their duties to the community . . . It is noticeable” he pointed out “that Qatif suffers from a poverty of modern planning and that it is poor in industrial, commercial, luxury and community areas.” Even in areas where Qatif was historically rich, in agriculture, the community was suffering from the lack of services and assistance. Over time, thanks to heavy seasonal winds from the west, Qatif’s fertile fields were threatened by encroaching desert sand. In al-Hasa, the state had undertaken various projects to protect farms and farmers, including building various barriers and planting patches of trees and shrubs to stave off the invading desert. Al-Jarudi argued that “although Qatif is among the most fertile agricultural areas in the kingdom, the Municipality is lost” in dealing with it.34

It is not as though the Eastern Province’s local councils did nothing in the communities, although they made little real impact other than frustrating and insulting those left behind. Various community offices spent millions of Riyals on various projects and campaigns. In the small predominantly Sunni village of al-Jafar in al-Hasa for example, the village council spent SR 200,000 on cleaning and other services. It also staged a contest in which it awarded SR 6,000 to the citizens with the cleanest homes.35 Hundreds of thousands of Riyals were allotted for planning meetings, addressing various water issues, and for beautification projects such as the building of public parks. Even in Qatif, local government reportedly budgeted over SR 400,000 on health and social services, including researching the health status of 94 communities in 1979.36 In Ras Tanura, the local governor commissioned the construction of a new one hundred bed hospital and an international phone system.37 Given the anger of letter writers and journalists, however, the impact of these meager initiatives proved minimal, even aberrant. In contrast, Dammam, al-Khobar, and Dhahran—the center of administrative and business life in the region—enjoyed greater prosperity and attention. In the spring, the SR 120,000,000 Abdallah Fu’ad Hospital opened its doors, complete with 300 beds, an intensive care department, a twenty-four hour emergency room, an electronic laboratory, and even computers.38 In September, SR 2 billion was slotted for improving the water and sewage networks in Dammam and al-Khobar, a huge sum that underscored the central importance of services in the capital district and suggested indifference to other areas.39 The difference in emphasis on the main cities of the region historically, seemingly at the expense of treating the outlying regions of Qatif and al-Hasa, was not lost on observers. Al-Yawm wondered “why municipal services focused only on the cities while the villages live in worse conditions?”40 Commenting on their unwillingness to resolve community problems, the paper remarked that local officials preferred to “limit [their own] responsibility” to action.41

The remarkable differences between community life in outposts of Saudi power and those on the margins—both geographically and socially—generated intense frustration among those left behind. As various accounts by citizens and journalists in al-Yawm suggest, patience with the status quo had grown increasingly tenuous by the end of the decade. Worse was the seemingly dismissive and unsympathetic position of many of those in a position to ameliorate the struggling of so many thousands. Broken promises of development roused specific grievances and provided a ready vocabulary for those angry with the regime. Without question, the politics of (un)development exacerbated the frustrations produced by the hardships of daily life and gave rise to increasingly intense demands for greater attention, a real commitment to deploying technological solutions in remote communities, and the rejection of the state’s seemingly prejudiced development strategy. By itself, it is impossible to know if widespread misery and social neglect
would have generated the violence that gripped the Eastern Province in late November. As the writing of the OIR made clear, however, repeated instances of apparent neglect and the failure to fulfill stated objectives of the regime certainly made the possibility more likely. Ultimately, what provoked the uprisings in the fall and winter were local grievances born of social despair and political oppression combined with the emergence of a willfulness on the part of Shi‘a community leaders to express and practice their various ideological convictions—a willfulness that the regime in Riyadh sought to crush.

THE TURN TO VIOLENCE

Violence erupted in Qatif in late November 1979. The political tension leading up to the uprising had deep historical roots. State oppression against the region’s Shi‘is dated back to 1913, when the al-Saud and its warrior army conquered al-Hasa and Qatif for the third time since the 18th century. After the conquest, the Saudi regime relied on various forms of suppression to subdue the Shi‘a minority, but did not often engage in sustained or direct acts of violence. That changed in the year before the uprising, when the state grew increasingly nervous about subversive activities in the remote towns and villages in the east. The first indication of the state’s growing discomfort came in the village of al-‘Awamiyya, located a few kilometers north of Qatif, in 1978. Reportedly, villagers there accosted a Saudi police officer. In response, according to an account of the events recorded by the Communist Party in Saudi Arabia, state security forces apprehended more than seventy people and detained them without a trial, a pattern that persisted for many months. The communists claimed that the people of the village “lived under the weight of oppression, ignorance, poverty and disease” and that “police negligence” served to only further provoke the “feelings of the people.” Perhaps not surprisingly, in the early stages of the uprising in November 1979, the people of al-‘Awamiyya assaulted various centers of the security forces and “disarmed them of not only their weapons, but also their military clothes, police miscellany, and their clocks.”

Although state nervousness, along with its willingness to act harshly with even a hint of subversion, manifested much earlier, the showdown of 1979 was directly precipitated by the boldness of religious leaders in Qatif that summer. In August the community’s leaders boldly proclaimed that they would publicly celebrate the banned ceremony of ‘Ashura. According to James Buchan “the demand came at a time when the General Directorate of Intelligence . . . was acutely concerned at possible subversion by Iranian pilgrims both in the haramain (Mecca and Medina) and in the villages.” Similar provocations had been made by Shi‘is in Bahrain, a predominantly Shi‘a island under Sunni rule located twenty-five kilometers off the coast of Saudi Arabia, one that was historically integrated with the Shi‘a communities in the eastern Arabian Peninsula. In fact, public discord manifested itself much earlier in Bahrain than in Saudi Arabia. In mid-August, several waves of unrest unfolded in Shi‘a communities there. On 11 September, the disaffected staged demonstrations, provoking a heavy-handed response. Saudi security officials interpreted the rising boldness of the Shi‘is elsewhere in the Gulf to be menacing to their own interests and the result of the dangerous influence of Iran. On 13 September, al-Yawm reprinted an article from the Bahrain-based newspaper Akhbar al-Khalij that quoted the Bahraini Minister of the Interior as saying he would “not permit the continuance of any demonstrations of nonsense in the country and that it [would] face them with all the violence and strength and severe measures” necessary.
The paper reported that the police had dispersed the protestors, which they belittled as an “extremist” and “insignificant group” committed to stirring up “chaos and tension” and to destabilizing Bahrain. The message to potentially sympathetic and like-minded Saudis was clear. In addition, on 13 September, to underscore the seriousness of the Saudi state’s concern and frame of mind, the paper ran an article acknowledging for the first time that the Saudi regime was concerned with the regional impact of the Iranian Revolution. That day the Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal attended a meeting in Bahrain in which regional leaders “deliberated on the prevailing political situation in the region since the success of the Iranian Revolution.” On 2 and 3 October, Saudi Crown Prince Fahd hosted the Bahraini Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa in Jidda to discuss the “security and protection” of Arab affairs in the Gulf. Nonplussed, the Saudi Shi’is took to the streets on 26 November when 4,000 marchers staged the first public mourning procession of ’Ashura in Safwa.

On 28 November, the Eastern Province turned into a killing field. That night thousands marshaled their forces and paraded through Sayhat, a small Shi’i community situated a few kilometers north of Dammam, angrily shouting anti-regime slogans such as “yā Khalid shīl idāk, kul al-sha’b ma yurūdāk.” Tension mounted as the marchers advanced on a group of agitated Saudi National Guardsmen. In the front ranks of the procession, nineteen-year-old Hussein Mansur al-Qalaf, a recent graduate of Aramco’s Industrial Training Center, led the marchers in a violent and frenzied confrontation with the security forces. Initially, the National Guard relied on clubs and electric prods to control the crowd. In response, the attacking mob surged, hurling stones and wielding wooden canes and iron bars in defiance. According to one account, “at that point the security forces opened fire on the demonstrators.” Into the maelstrom, al-Qalaf rushed to the aid of one of his wounded friends where Saudi forces then gunned the nineteen-year-old down, marking the first martyr of the uprising. Over the next few days, at least two dozen people perished and hundreds fell wounded in a crescendo of mayhem and violence that the regime effectively sealed off from the world.

By 3 December, after large marches in Dammam and al-Khobar, public protest ebbed as local dissidents withdrew. Public action flared again on 12 January, as thousands again took the streets forty days after the fall of the first martyr in November, marking the period of mourning. An act of tribute, the public display was also a display of defiance toward the regime. State security forces, including the National Guard, followed behind the processions, although there was no violence. The same was not true on 1 February, the first anniversary of Khomeini’s return to Iran, when thousands again clashed with the regime’s security in Qatif. According to a statement issued by the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia (CDHR), crowds began milling in an area in downtown known as Martyr’s Square—named after a number had been killed in clashes there in November—early on the morning of 1 November. For two hours in late morning and early afternoon, they listened to orations on the need for heroism and the absence of fear as well as stories from the Iranian Revolution. Around one o’clock, they marched to the Qatif market and assembled signs of martyrs and the arrested. They also railed provocatively against state brutality. The CDHR reported that wide scale violence erupted after a military officer opened fire on the crowd, killing one and wounding many others. In the bedlam, the crowds torched various buildings and vehicles throughout the city. The state declared a national emergency in the east and the National Guard augmented its forces in subsequent days, protecting administrative offices such as the
local Municipality, the police station, and the local governor’s office. Throughout the rest of the month, the CDHR reported continuing acts of resistance as well as mass arrests and police brutality. Expectations that the violence would endure, both among locals and the security officials, persisted well into 1980. Aside from some minor skirmishes, however, it did not as local rebels preferred clandestine activity, and self-preservation, to open confrontation.

IDEOLOGIES OF DISSENT

The marking of the religious ceremony of ‘Ashura and the state’s swift resort to police violence to oppress it, thus sparking the uprising in November and subsequent clashes, has directed observers to interpret the events that followed as religiously centered and even Iranian controlled. The initial turnout of marchers should certainly be attributed to the call by community clerics to honor the religious holiday. What transpired in subsequent days, however, assumed a more complex character. The numbers of marchers swelled by the thousands, unexpected by anyone in the province. On 29 November, a day after the first deadly violence, the communists estimated that 18,000 people marched in protest, a figure echoed by other observers. The escalating ranks of angry protestors reflected popular disaffection that, in many ways, transcended religious conviction. To be sure, identity mattered to the course of the uprising, in the sense that it was the Shi’a communities that suffered disproportionately in Saudi Arabia. However, that did not predict their response or render it uniformly coherent. Indeed, the initial religious reasons for public gathering passed and as the regime brutalized crowds, the protests became more populist and impassioned—driven by shared communal outrage at regime cruelty combined with the already simmering anger with appalling social conditions and the broken promises of modernity. Although populist and unpredictable, there was a mixed ideological character to the intifada. Amid the violence, forces emerged and organized, competing for the favor of the masses, struggling to define the event and to sustain direct public pressure on the regime. The struggle to direct and generate public action persisted well into 1980, with various networks of easterners pressuring the regime for the amelioration of political and social grievances. In the end, the state extended limited concessions and superficially addressed core community issues; all the while rooting out political groups, crushing them, and driving political refugees underground or into exile.

During the uprising, two political networks clearly emerged and operated in the east: one Islamist and the other nationalist leftist. On the Islamist front, the Organization of the Islamic Revolution assumed the mantle of religiopolitical leadership, drawing on Iran for inspiration—although not leadership. The origins and operations of this group date back to 1975 when Hassan al-Saffar established the Shi’a Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia. Mamoun Fandy writes that, under al-Saffar’s direction, “leaders adopted a militant stance” between 1975 and 1980 and that “events in 1979 helped to further radicalize the movement, namely, the coming of an Islamic government in Iran, the uprising in the Eastern Province, and the takeover of Mecca’s Grand Mosque. Leaders of the Shi’a movement, including Shaykh al-Saffar, followed the Iranian line.” Madawi al-Rasheed, in contrast, writes that the OIR “began to take shape as the political outlet for the group [the Shi’is] following the spontaneous events of 1979. Members of the organization were drawn from students in the University of Minerals and Petroleum
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(Dammam) and workers at the oil fields. The organization began broadcasting from Iranian radio stations in an attempt to reach the community in Saudi Arabia, and an information office was opened in Tehran to coordinate political activities.\(^57\) Elements of both accounts are correct, as Hussein Musa shows. In his account, Musa argues that loosely organized Shi’a dissidents rallied around Hasan al-Saffar in the late 1970s, congealing formally only after the success of the Iranian Revolution.\(^58\)

In the year before the uprising in 1979, Saudi Shi’is took inspiration from the Iranian Revolution, a powerful example that stirred excitement throughout the region and generated political enthusiasm. Iran’s example foreshadowed what transpired elsewhere, but it did not set the political terms. Musa writes that “the issue of authority [marji’iyya] played an important role in [the] polarization” of Shi’i politics throughout the Gulf.\(^59\) Although various Shi’a groups agreed that political change was necessary, there were important “divergences” on the issue of who should lead. Throughout the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia, many Shi’is regarded the Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husseini al-Shirazi as their communities’ authority on political and juridical matters, not Ayatollah Khomeini, although the latter was a powerful and respected figure. Whereas Shi’is in Saudi Arabia did revere the popular al-Shirazi, they went a step further and “sought to establish independence from the Iranian authorities and to establish local ones . . . to distinguish themselves from the Iranians.”\(^60\) They exhibited a specifically local sensibility, one in tune with their own community interests and needs. Musa argues that, although they respected the Iranians whom they encountered during the hajj and while abroad, the Shi’a Islamic movement in eastern Arabia “did not embrace the Iranians.”\(^61\)

Although the followers of al-Shirazi had been active within the Shi’a Reform Movement since 1975, its leaders and followers were radicalized in 1979. They subsequently rebranded the movement as the OIR and announced that they would strive for change through confrontation. Preparing for what was sure to be a charged public celebration of ‘Ashura, the OIR adopted a threatening pose by dispatching ominous warnings to resident Americans in the Eastern Province and by calling for young Shi’is to rebel. On 24 November, the group sent an English language letter to American employees at Aramco, whom the OIR viewed as imperialists exploiting the Shi’is’ natural and human resources, threatening retribution if the American government involved itself in community affairs. In a menacing opening paragraph the group wrote “we realize the dubious role that you play in our country and toward our national resources. God willing, we will settle our accounts with you in the near future.” Citing popular belief that American commandoes and military personnel had arrived in Saudi Arabia while staging for operations in Iran they threatened that “we will not permit you to use our land and our resources against our Muslim brothers. Therefore, if your oppressive government takes any aggressive and military action against Iran, then you will be its victims here.”\(^62\)

The group also circulated a flier exhorting young Shi’is to take to the streets. The impassioned call for action pleaded “Oh, noble faithful: you are called forth these days to revive the case of Imam Hussein, to commemorate his memory, and to augment the climate of revolution in this great season of revolution. The best means to revive the issue of Imam Hussein, the great revolutionary, are the mourning processions that fill the streets and energize the people.” The OIR cited several reasons for the need to undertake public processions, foremost being the honoring Shi’ism’s first martyr. In addition, they declared that “it is a practice of our religious freedom, which others to take from us.” Sensing community nervousness and fear about the possibility of Saudi
retribution, the OIR sought to overcome such uncertainty by appealing directly to the impressionable and, hopefully, more passionate youth. The pamphlet encouraged the faithful “not to fear the police or security forces for they will inevitably be put to flight by your endurance and persistence for mourning. Whoever suffers an injury such as a beating or imprisonment, God will be with him and for him great rewards. He will be a servant amongst the mujahedeen along the path of Imam Hussein. As for your fathers who fearfully warn you from rebelling...rebel and do no heed their ban.” As for those unwilling to participate, the OIR declared that they “are cowards” and interested only in their own affairs.63

In the closing days of the violence and in the weeks that followed, the OIR also used its powers to communicate with outside groups, sharing the brutal details of what transpired and trying to call global attention to the events. In addition to communicating with the outside world, including the United Nations and various press agencies, the group also printed and circulated documents and materials it received from abroad. In addition to encouraging support from Saudi Shi’a students in Iran, the OIR circulated the text of two telegrams from Ayatollah al-Shirazi, who lionized the protestors and condemned the brutality and “criminality” of the Saudi security forces.64 Al-Shirazi’s communication with the OIR leadership certainly reflected Iran’s interest in happenings inside Saudi Arabia and vice versa, but it did not indicate that the Ayatollah played a role in coordinating or organizing the uprising in the kingdom. Most importantly, it seems, the OIR leadership believed that the telegrams from al-Shirazi extended legitimacy to their own efforts and thus validated their independence and abilities. It is also clear that the Iranian example, both its success and elements of Khomeini’s message, resonated in Saudi Arabia. The terms of revolt in the kingdom, however, reflected local experience and concerns. The passion and power of the OIR’s message aside, it is difficult to precisely determine the extent to which the community responded specifically to their call. The early turnout of 4,000 mourners on 26 November demonstrates considerable support. Tens of thousands responded to the violent turn of 28 November, however, signifying that the masses took to the street in reaction to state brutality.

Although the OIR demonstrated leadership and vision, it was not alone in the Eastern Province. Alongside the Islamists, leftist nationalists expressed their presence during the uprising as well. Importantly, however, secular elements were forced to respond to the initial call to action, not invited by the Islamists and caught unaware of what was to come. At least in the first few days, leftists did not exhibit leadership on the same scale as the OIR. The most important organizational contribution of the leftists seems to have been limited, with the biggest push coming after the most dramatic waves of violence in November, although, without question, they did participate in the uprising. The best sources available for the leftists result from the efforts of the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia to collect and distribute details of the uprising, including several eyewitness accounts, as well as documents produced by other left organizations, such as the CDHR, the Union of Democratic Youth, the Workers’ Committee, the League of Democratic Women, the League of Students in Saudi Arabia, and a more loosely organized group that emerged during the uprising who called themselves the Assembly of Saudi Citizens. Several of these groups had a long history of leftist activity in the kingdom, and particularly in the Eastern Province.

These various organizations did not claim responsibility for generating mass dissent nor for leading events on the ground in November. The Communist Party’s narrative
argues that “the democratic forces tried to encourage the religious groups to not raise signs and slogans possessing a sectarian character . . . as it believed the regime would use it as a pretext for justifying oppression.” The clerics refused to cooperate with the leftists according to the Communists, who reported that “attempts were made to coordinate the two sets of forces [religious and leftist]. However, the religious leaders forbade this from the beginning, [believing] that their cooperation with politically progressive parties and organizations would bring them harm and that they alone were able to lead the events and what was facing them.”65 As a result, the leftist groups proceeded to participate independently, taking to the streets without local guidance or any specific objective. They carried their own banners, calling for the “fall of the Carter, Begin, Sadat alliance” and the repeal of Camp David. Others included nationalist slogans such as “through a free nation will the people find true happiness” and “down with Khalid, Fahd, and Abdallah the agents of imperialism.”66 Throughout the period of unrest, according to subsequent reporting, the leftists sought to emphasize the popular character of the uprising, all the while sympathizing with its anti-imperial and anti-American tone. During the first phase of events, in November and early December, it is clear that the religious forces dominated the call to action and shaped the course of action. In the weeks and months that followed, however, the “progressive democratic” forces left their mark as well.

Throughout December, the leftists coordinated and spearheaded various efforts to petition the government for the amelioration of social and political ills in the east and complaining about the violence of November. They pursued two sets of objectives. First, they implored the King to “lift the restrictions, pressures and sectarian practices against the Shi’a and to grant them their religious rights.” In addition they beseeched the regent to end “the fraud and injustice against the people of Qatif” and to grant them equal rights alongside “the Sunna in every field of employment.” In particular, they called for opportunities for educated Shi’is, who held university degrees, to take positions in their respective fields of training, for “it is well known that not one of them [occupies] a position of responsibility in local government administration such as the Municipality, traffic police, and others.” Second, the petitioners called for the “scientific planning in developing Qatif and its villages, which are the worst of cities and regions. This planning includes the complete development of agriculture, which was in the past played a vital role in providing the country with vegetables and fruit, as well as the services and health sectors.”67 The petitions pointed out that many of the region’s residents lived in squalid conditions and collapsing homes, which the petitioners blamed on greedy real estate speculation by the authorities. According to the CDHR, the government’s response declared that it intended to form a committee to investigate the claims, to which a citizen reportedly remarked “we the people of Qatif do not want paper projects, for we are sick and tired of promises and planning. All we want is the preservation of our spirit, our customs and our honor.”68 As for the violence, the state pinned the blame for the deaths on the protestors themselves, claiming that their action “forced” the security forces to fire on them in self-defense.

**THE AFTERMATH AND THE STATE’S RESPONSE**

Almost immediately, the state indicated that it wished to address the social roots of violence. In response to the demands of both the OIR and the leftists, the state undertook efforts to appease the social despair of residents in Qatif and surrounding areas. In early
December, for example, local administrators in Qatif came up with SR 700 million for a new sewage network. On 11 December, a SR 39 million project was announced to improve Qatif’s streets. Al-Hasa was not ignored. That same week, the oasis’ governor announced SR 1 billion for various projects. That the Saudi regime conceded the poor condition of the Shi’ites and agreed to remedy their grievances has been commented upon in the literature on the kingdom’s persecuted minority. Jacob Goldberg, for example, wrote that “a comprehensive plan was launched, aimed at improving the living standards of the Shi’i population. It included an electricity project, the re-asphalting of streets, new schools for boys and girls, a new hospital, the draining of large areas of swamps, and projects for additional street lighting, sewage, and communications. Perhaps most importantly” he notes “the government decided to provide loans, through the Real Estate Development Fund, to town residents to build new homes for themselves.” According to many analysts, subsequent Shi’a passivity reflected their satisfaction with the government’s efforts. Citing a trip by King Khalid to Qatif and al-Hasa the next year around ‘Ashura and the friendliness with which Qatif community leaders and the regent interacted, Goldberg concluded “it seemed that the desire to mend fences was mutual. Although the government realized that it had to reassess its policies toward the Shi’i population, the Shi’is believed that they had to reevaluate the situation, given the new Saudi attitude.” Concluding from their subsequent attitudes and willingness to cooperate with the regime, Goldberg remarked that “once these issues started to be dealt with, the Shi’is became satisfied and abandoned any idea of challenging or confronting the Saudi regime.”

Given the new Saudi commitment to developing the east and the relative calm that settled in the Eastern Province in the 1980s, Goldberg’s conclusions about mutual resolve to get along are partially correct. Shared resolve to overcome the social imbalances that helped generate violence did not mark an end to discriminatory political practices, however. Furthermore, the Saudi will to develop the Shi’a areas, although certainly beneficial to some extent, was a stop-gap measure aimed at deflating the immediate causes of protest rather than a long-term commitment to the social welfare of the communities. Although the initial efforts to uplift the depressed areas were promising, the regime did not persist in its commitment. By the end of the 1980s, similar grievances about social problems and environmental crises, such as the lack of water in the al-Hasa oasis, endured. Furthermore, the state did not seriously address the ideological and religious demands of the Shi’a community. Religious intolerance persisted and sectarian discrimination, including limited access to jobs, education, travel, and resources, continued to dominate Shi’i–Sunni relations and inflame the passions and underpin the fears of the Shi’a. State security forces also continued to harass and terrorize local residents throughout 1980 and the heavy security presence no doubt accounted for the passing of the 1980 ‘Ashura season in relative quiet. Although the regime did release more than one hundred political prisoners on the eve of the holiday in 1980, many hundreds more had fled the country, preferring exile to the prevailing conditions in the kingdom.

Perhaps the most misleading indication of the newfound Saudi benevolence is related to the claim that it worked to assist Shi’is in accumulating new real estate and constructing new homes. The CDHR recounted that, in an “attempt to soak up the vengeance” of local
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Shi‘is, the Saudi authorities announced on 22 January, through the Municipality, that it was “distributing applications for ownership of land for those citizens who owned neither land nor home. On 23 January, hundreds of people gathered near the Municipality of Qatif to take their applications.” Given that land was scarce, there were limited numbers of applications and, therefore, land to be distributed. In an alleged act of duplicity, police and intelligence officers reportedly stood in line, and upon the opening of the office, they rushed in with local citizens and absconded with hundreds of applications, depriving many of the opportunity to become owners.77 True or not, the story reflects a basic distrust on behalf of locals for state representatives, indicating that the alleged mutual desire to settle hostility was fantasy. In interviews with local citizens twenty-five years after the intifada, I was told that many residents refused to apply for land, as they suspiciously viewed the program as an attempt to break up the contiguity and integrity of the community, making it easier for the central state to monitor and control affairs there. The community’s fear of the newfound good intentions of the government was not unfounded. In the aftermath of the uprising, the government razed historic downtown [qal‘a] Qatif, in whose maze local rebels had holed up and held off security forces for days during the uprising. The destruction of the old city was viewed with deep anger and as a violation of the community’s identity and spirit.

CONCLUSION

The intifada of November 1979 and the violence that followed constituted a significant moment for the Shi‘a community in Saudi Arabia. The implications of the uprising resonated widely, both inside the kingdom and out. The protests and violence of 1979–80 forced the regime to reflect on its domestic policies toward the minority. Whether the turbulence compelled the regime to soften its position toward the Shi‘is is doubtful, but it did direct Saudi leaders to give the appearance of placating them. Saudi Shi‘is did not rise up again in mass protest, reflecting fear of another crackdown, improved state oversight of the community, and the absence of a local political leadership, which fled the Kingdom in the early 1980s. Sensing the potential long-term threat of a radicalized minority in its midst, particularly one in the oil-rich Eastern Province, the royal family was driven to plot a political course that protected its interests above all else. The uprising, which coincided with the occupation of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, signaled that various forces in the kingdom stood poised to topple the al-Saud. The Saudi rulers quickly scrambled to co-opt the message of the rebels in Mecca, whose ideological and theological orientation was based on Salafi principles that demanded a return to a past and purer Islam. In theory, the conservative doctrine of the Salafi rebels were the same as those on which the royal family legitimated its right to power, although many critics argued that the regime had lost its moral compass in the age of great wealth. In adopting the message of the neo-Ikhwan, the royal family deflated the power of its rivals and redirected its ideological program so that it was more in line with the conservative and potentially powerful forces at home. The uprising in the Eastern Province played a critical role in determining and shaping the new doctrine as well. Given the disparate nature of the two threats, the threat of a radicalized Shi‘a community—perceived to be an external threat that could potentially wrest away control of the kingdom’s source of wealth—was certainly more troubling. By late 1979 and early 1980, already cool relations between
the revolutionary regime in Iran and Saudi Arabia frosted over, leading to over a decade of hostility that influenced the shape of war in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The uprising also captured the attention of foreign observers, who after long-neglecting the fate of the Shi’is in the oil kingdom “discovered” in the events of 1979 something exceptional and powerful, that is, a compelling story that seemed to speak to various domestic, regional, and global forces. Indeed, they did. Yet interpretations of the event have proved wide ranging. Various observers have argued that ideology drove the violence or that social and economic conditions accounted for the despair and eventual course of events. The truth is that both factors figured greatly in the calculus of events and that important complexities and contingencies accounted for the route of the uprising and the violence that it generated. Although the violence was sparked by the regime and its handling of the ‘Ashura ceremonies, the intifada proved to be of mixed character, including religious and leftist forces all angrily expressing their deep hostility toward the Saudi state. Despite differences in ideological vision and political program, both factions rallied and agitated for relief of religious discrimination as well as the social duress that paralyzed the Shi’a communities. Sectarian tensions aside, the uprising was not only about social despair or the “generic” suffering of the poor masses. Rather, it emerged from a specific kind of dislocation born of Saudi Arabia’s experience with modernity, particularly as the country entered into a complex global modern system. Initially, both the OIR and the various leftist forces operating in the Eastern Province determined the source of anxiety not to be the contradictions of modernity and modernization but that they had been excluded from it. Negligence and marginalization, combined with decades of religious discrimination, drove dissent and violent action. In rejecting their treatment at the hands of the al-Saud, they were not rejecting modernity but the broken pledges that had been promised to them in its name.

In the 1980s, the OIR changed its tone on the issue of modernity, rearticulating the group’s frustration as a rejection of modernization. In its various publications a decade after the uprising, the group cited the moral decay and the threat to religious values posed by development and modernization—a familiar argument to observers of radical groups operating in the late 20th century. In 1984, the organization published a special newsletter commemorating the events of 1979. In an article on the roots of the revolution, the authors commented—in contradiction to their writings on the eve of violence five years earlier, that “the reason [for the intifada] was not because of poverty or desperation, for many believed that they had been swindled. [It was] not just political, although political change was foremost amongst the demands. Rather the real push . . . was the sense of destruction, the destruction of society because it was becoming more Western.”

NOTES

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1The decision to stage the ‘Ashura celebration in public was a specifically political act. Because it had long been banned in the kingdom, marking the ceremony served notice that Saudi Arabia’s Shi’i community sought to exert community will and challenge state efforts that not only prevented them from observing religious rituals but also, as the Shi’a believed, to suppress them politically.


4My intent in using this word is not to reproduce or embrace the notions of “modernization” popularized by Western academics and policymakers in the 1950s, nor is my use of “center” and “periphery” to describe geopolitical relationships between Saudi Arabian cities a signal of my reliance on dependency theory. Modernization is meant to reflect a process discussed and planned for by Saudi Arabian officials whereby the Kingdom would achieve a level of technological and industrial capacity allowing for independence and integration. Saudi Africans use various words to describe both policies and activities that I lump into the category of modernization, including development (namfi and tanmiyya), renovation or reform (islith), progress (taqaddum), and prosperity (‘umran). Importantly, although Saudi Arabian commentators did not embrace Western concepts of modernization (that only through it would they be able to arrive at the same stage of politicor moral development as the West), they did echo Western beliefs that the state had a burden to work on behalf of its citizens and that part of this burden was through providing social and technical services. As for my use of center and periphery, they are meant to portray a specific political and social relationship between regions within the east, but not necessarily one in which the periphery (as in a colonial or semicolonial state) provided the natural resources for the center. Rather, my use of the periphery is intended to reflect the idea of marginality, in that the peripheries inside the east were deliberately cut off as much as possible from the administrative and political center.

5Noting the symbolic significance of the Islamic Revolution on Saudi Shi‘is, David Lesch states that the uprising “indicated to all interested observers that the reverberations from the Iranian revolution would be more than just fitful” and that “the emotional atmosphere produced by the ashura [sic] celebration naturally led to riots amid loud support for the Ayatollah Khomeini.” David Lesch, 1979: *The Year that Shaped the Modern Middle East*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001), 61.


10Author’s interviews, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, September 2003.

11Author’s interviews, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, September 2003.

12Author’s interviews, Manama, Bahrain, February 2005.


16It is impossible to accurately determine the population totals at virtually any time, as the Saudis published only one census in 1974 and did not distinguish citizens based on faith. Goldberg cites various estimates from 200,000 to 440,000. He settled on the figure of 350,000 for reasons that are not entirely clear, although he seems to rely on the work of James A. Bill for that determination. With a total population of 6 million at the time, that would place the Shi‘a at approximately 6 percent of the total—a contested number. Other estimates suggest that the minority probably constituted anywhere from 10 percent to 15 percent of the total, although no figures can be considered absolutely reliable. See James A. Bill, “Islam, Politics, and Shi‘ism in the Gulf,” *Middle East Insight* 3 (1980), 6; Goldberg, “The Shi‘i Minority in Saudi Arabia,” 230.
According to Juan Cole, the differences arise in the relationship between Shi’a religious leaders and the community around them—with adherents of the Usuli School having a more complex relationship with the community—as well as on matters of interpretation of the Qur’an. Akhbari mujtahids tended toward a greater degree of literalism when interpreting various texts and proved, according to Cole, to be more independent and conservative. Although the theological differences were most important in matters of law, and certainly helped define the different religious practices of the two communities, the significance of the split proved even more important in the turbulent era of the Iranian Revolution. In conversations with various community members in Hofuf I was informed that the difference existed and was an important detail when considering what one of them called “The Revolution” of 1979. One Shi’a community leader from a village east of Mubarraz related to me that the difference accounted for the rebelliousness of those in Qatif and for the quietest approach of those in the al-Hasa oasis. He claimed that at least 80 percent of al-Hasawis were Akhbari, whereas all Qatifis were Usuli. See Juan Cole, Sacred Space and Holy War (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Saudi Arabian Peninsula (OIR), Intifada al-Muharram fi al-Mantiqa al-Sharqiyya (with a’iq al-intifada), 1979 (The Intifada of Muharram in the Eastern Province [Documents of the Intifada], 1979), vol. 1. In other materials, the group dropped “Saudi” from its name.

The pages of al-Yawm contain numerous articles critical of local government officials and institutions. These remarkable pieces of journalism are rare in the history of Saudi Arabia, as the kingdom has long monitored and discouraged open political discussion. Although the efforts of al-Yawm journalists to document social problems and government responsibility was not unprecedented in the kingdom, it was and is very rare. After the events of 1979, the state reigned in the paper and stopped critical writing.


Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Saudi Arabian Peninsula (OIR), Intifada al-Muharram fi al-Mantiqa al-Sharqiyya (with a’iq al-intifada), 1979 (The Intifada of Muharram in the Eastern Province [Documents of the Intifada], 1979), vol. 1. In other materials, the group dropped “Saudi” from its name.

According to Juan Cole, the differences arise in the relationship between Shi’a religious leaders and the community around them—with adherents of the Usuli School having a more complex relationship with the community—as well as on matters of interpretation of the Qur’an. Akhbari mujtahids tended toward a greater degree of literalism when interpreting various texts and proved, according to Cole, to be more independent and conservative. Although the theological differences were most important in matters of law, and certainly helped define the different religious practices of the two communities, the significance of the split proved even more important in the turbulent era of the Iranian Revolution. In conversations with various community members in Hofuf I was informed that the difference existed and was an important detail when considering what one of them called “The Revolution” of 1979. One Shi’a community leader from a village east of Mubarraz related to me that the difference accounted for the rebelliousness of those in Qatif and for the quietest approach of those in the al-Hasa oasis. He claimed that at least 80 percent of al-Hasawis were Akhbari, whereas all Qatifis were Usuli. See Juan Cole, Sacred Space and Holy War (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).


The Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Saudi Arabian Peninsula (OIR), Intifada al-Muharram fi al-Mantiqa al-Sharqiyya (with a’iq al-intifada), 1979 (The Intifada of Muharram in the Eastern Province [Documents of the Intifada], 1979), vol. 1. In other materials, the group dropped “Saudi” from its name.

The pages of al-Yawm contain numerous articles critical of local government officials and institutions. These remarkable pieces of journalism are rare in the history of Saudi Arabia, as the kingdom has long monitored and discouraged open political discussion. Although the efforts of al-Yawm journalists to document social problems and government responsibility was not unprecedented in the kingdom, it was and is very rare. After the events of 1979, the state reigned in the paper and stopped critical writing.


Ibid.


Ibid.


CPA, The Events of November, 26.

Ibid.

Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery


49 “Oh [King] Khalid release your hands [from power], the people do not want you.”

50 Although there is virtually no documentation available from the Saudi security forces, the OIR managed to obtain copies of various administrative letters and materials that give a sense of the state’s direct approach to protest. In one, published regarding the summer of 1979, the Saudi chief of police in the Eastern Province warned security forces about possible Shi’i unrest during the month of Ramadan, purportedly at the urging of broadcasts from radio Tehran. Encouraging them to deal swiftly and powerfully with possible unrest, the letter directed the security forces to “be vigilant, attentive, and resolute in oppressing an aggressive act they [the Shi’i] undertake with [showing] no leniency or carelessness.” Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, no. 3049, 1400/9/26. In Supplement on the Intifada, 38.


53 Ibid., 36.

54 Ibid., 22–23. The CPA also claims that public events were staged in over 70 communities, a number that likely takes into account each village in the Eastern Province.


56 Ibid., 198.


58 Hussein Musa, *al-Ahzab wa-l-harakat al-islamiyya fi al-Khalij wa-l-Jazira al-Arabiyya* (The Islamic Parties and Movements in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula) (Manama, Bahrain: n.p., 2004), 52–53. This is not the author’s real name. A Bahraini political dissident who lived in exile for over thirty years, Hussein Musa is his pen name.


60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 53.


63 Ibid., 19–21.

64 Ibid., 27–38.

65 CPA, *The Events of November*, 22.


67 Ibid., 32.

68 Ibid., 32.


73 Goldberg, “The Shi‘i Minority in Saudi Arabia,” 244.

74 Ibid., 244.

75 Ibid., 245.

76 See Hanza al-Hassan, *Shi‘a fi al-Mamlaka al-Arabiyya al-Sa‘udiyya*, documents 5–8, 423–29 for local letters appealing to state authorities for an end to violence and the release of political prisoners. It seems that the kingdom’s leaders answered to pleas for kindness, rather than initiating it.

77 Saudi Shi‘is took up temporary residence in various world cities, including in Iran and the United States. Hassan al-Saffar spent most of the 1980s in Damascus and returned to the kingdom in 1994.

78 CDHR, in *The Events of November*, 40.