

ARMAGEDDON

Shias in Sunni Countries

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Shia Muslims on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf were largely ignored through centuries under Sunni rulers. First came the Islamic revolution of 1979 in neighbouring Iran, whose ripples frightened those Sunni rulers and emboldened their Shia subjects, leading to ugly clashes that subsided only in the 1990's. The more recent rise of Shia influence in Iraq and the success of Hizbullah—the Shia party-cum-militia in Lebanon, have caused similar waves, made stronger by Iran's bid to become the dominant—and perhaps nuclear-armed—regional power. Shias in Iraq are always the majority (60%) but deprived of political power initially by the Sunni Ottoman empire (1300-1920), then by the local Sunni rulers after the abolition of the Turkish Caliphate, that still continued after World War II till recently, when the Sunni rulers were militarily removed by Anglo-Americans. It is through Anglo-American-sponsored popular election, that the Shias attained political power in Iraq as the majority sect. Centuries-old wrong was righted and justice was done to the Shias in Iraq, thanks to Anglo-American military intervention in Iraq.

In Kuwait, Shias account for a third of ultra-rich citizenry; they have long been prominent in business and in government. In Bahrain some hold high position too, but proportionately far fewer than their two-thirds share of the island Kingdom's population. Only democracy can bring the Shias to attain their legitimate political power in Bahrain. Iraq is the example. Saudi Arabia has the largest number of Shias at 2 million odd, but they are thinly diluted in a population of Sunnis ten times bigger and are subjected to more systemic discrimination. No Shia has become a cabinet minister or a general in the military in the autocratic Kingdom - or even a headmistress in a state school, reflecting Saudi's severe *Wahhabism*, in effect the medieval Kingdom's official doctrine.

There is a mood of sectarian tension across the region. In Bahrain, months of agitation by Shias campaigning for greater rights, have led to growing government fears of worse to come in the event of trouble with Iran. Pressure from Saudi-aligned Sunni radicals has led to full-scale crackdown on Shia politicking. Widespread arrests, the closure of mainstream Shia websites and newspapers and banning of some Shia preachers from mosque pulpits have combined to tilt much of Shia opinion into sullen hostility to the State. Far-reaching reaction could be disastrous. Shia's time has come.

In Bahrain, Shias often complain that the government has secretly given citizenship to thousands of foreign Sunnis in a bid to alter the sectarian balance. It could be counter-productive.

Kuwait authorities have banned all public meetings of Shias. A Shia preacher from Kuwait—Yasser al-Habib, at present exiled in London, suggested in a sermon that one of Mohammed's wives had poisoned him, and this prompted widespread outrage, including condemnation by Shia clerics (Shia Muslims in the Gulf : Worrying Times, *The Economist*, London, Sept. 25, 2010, p. 72). Of course, it is a fact that Mohammed undertook his last pilgrimage to Mecca in 632 and fell ill there. What happened there is a matter of genuine unbiased investigation by proper historians. Conspiracy, betrayal, back-biting, and selfish politics maligned Islam from its very birth.

More quietly, Saudi authorities have for months been harassing local Shia campaigners, arresting dozens and holding many at a time. They describe the Shias menacingly as a fifth column for Iran.

In Pakistan also Shias are frequently attacked violently—their mosques are bombed by Sunni zealots too often.

Thirst for bloody clashes (intra-religious between Shia-Sunni, Jewish-Christian, Christian-Muslim, Muslim-Jewish) has made West Asia an ugly and dirty place on earth.

West Asia is a politico-religious volcano. Shia-Sunni bloody conflict is deep-rooted. When the volcano will erupt is a matter of time. Attempts to prevent it by parties involved are overdue and need urgent attention by relevant authorities. Otherwise, West Asia could be the armageddon of Shia-Sunni Islam. Only time can tell. Armageddon (New Testament) is the mythological site (now identified with Megiddo in Israel) of the final battle between the nations that will end the world. □