

Sectarianization of Identity and Nation Building in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded on 23rd September 1932 by the strategic amalgamation of dual kingdoms of Hejaz and Najd under Ibn Saud. Like all nation building paradigms, there are some prominent nation building tenants of the Saudi Kingdom as well. This paper is an analysis of the historical foundation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a nation and locates the role of sectarianization of identity in hindering the recent initiatives of rebuilding the Saudi nation state, by modernizing its economy and cultural space. The study is a brief examination of how the sectarian political biases were exercised in the country's formative years, and the departure point of sectarianization in Saudi Arabia. The article also takes a case study of one of the sects in Saudi Arabia; the Ismailis of Najran and it moves on to briefly explain the international norms and standards making thorough reflections on sectarian discrimination inside the country. Lastly, the article also delves into the consequences of sectarian politics as a roadblock in nation building in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Sectarianization, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Nation Building, Ismailis of Najran.

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Suudi Arabistan'da Kimlik ve Ulus İnşasının Mezhepselleşmesi

Öz

Suudi Arabistan Krallığı 23 Eylül 1932'de Hicaz ve Necid ikili krallıklarının İbn Suud liderliğinde stratejik olarak birleştirilmesiyle kurulmuştur. Bütün ulus inşası paradigmaları gibi, Suudi Krallığı'nın da bazı önemli ulus inşa mutasarrıfları bulunmaktadır. Bu makale, bir millet olarak Suudi Arabistan Krallığının tarihî kuruluşunu incelemekte ve kimliğin mezhepselleşmesinin, ekonomik ve kültürel alanda modernizasyona giden Suudi ulus devletinin son süreçte yeniden inşa girişimlerinin engellenmesindeki rolüne odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma, mezhepçi siyasi önyargıların ülkenin oluşum yıllarında nasıl uygulandığının ve Suudi Arabistan'daki mezhepselleşmenin çıkış noktasının kısa bir incelemesidir. Makale ayrıca Suudi Arabistan'daki tarikatlardan biri olan Necran İsmailileri üzerine vaka incelemesi yapmakta ve daha sonra ülke içindeki mezhepsel ayrımcılığa ışık tutarak uluslararası norm ve standartları kısaca açıklamaktadır. Son olarak, makale ayrıca, Suudi Arabistan'daki ulus inşasının önünde bir engel olarak mezhepçi siyasetin sonuçlarını da ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mezhepselleşme, Suudi Arabistan Krallığı, Ulus İnşası, Necran İsmailileri.

مذهبية بناء الدولة والهوية في المملكة العربية السعودية

الملخص

أسست المملكة العربية السعودية عبر اتحاد استراتيجي بين مملكتي الحجاز ونجد على يد الملك ابن سعود بتاريخ 23 أيلول سبتمبر 1932. وكما في نماذج انشاء الدول القومية كان لانشاء المملكة السعودية تصرفات مهمة في انشاء الدولة. تقوم هذه المقالة على دراسة التأسيس التاريخي للمملكة العربية السعودية ومذهبية الهوية، وتركز على دور ذلك في إعاقه مسير المملكة نحو الحداثة في المرحلة الأخيرة وخطوات الانشاء من جديد في مجالات الاقتصاد والثقافة. الدراسة عبارة عن كيفية تطبيق السياسة المذهبية في مرحلة التأسيس ونقطة الخروج من المذهبية في المملكة العربية السعودية. كما تعمل الدراسة على اجراء دراسة ظاهرة على احدى الطرق في المملكة وهي طريقة اسماعيلي نجران، ومن ثم نقوم بتسليط الضوء على التفرقة المذهبية في البلد وتوضيح المعايير والأعراف العالمية. وفي النهاية تقوم الدراسة أيضا بالحديث عن نتائج السياسة المذهبية على أنها عائق أمام تأسيس الدولة في المملكة العربية السعودية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المذهبية، المملكة العربية السعودية، تأسيس دولة، اسماعيلي نجران.

Introduction

In 1932, Al-Saud in his political ambition brought together what we today know as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The kingdom has its high sovereignty and prestige due to the location of Mecca and Medina inside it. These two historical cities are the birthplace of the religion 'Islam'. As the making of the Saudi regime has the Saud family in the centre, so is their narrative one of legitimacy to sovereignty. Joseph Nevo explains, "the use of religion by the royal family to consolidate a Saudi national identity, in turn will constitute an additional attribute for the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty."²⁰⁷ What is the national identity of the Saudi's: what does it mean to be Saudi? According to the definition given by Benedict Anderson²⁰⁸ on nationalism, it is an imagined or primitive affiliation people of a particular area imbibe upon in order to develop belongingness to that particular region. This creates a nation with the help of cartography or mapping, particular national religion in (Saudi Arabia's case: Sunni Islam), a particular official language along with other paraphernalia's of the imagined community of one nation. In the case of Saudi Arabia the very beginning of the imagined idea of on Saudi state in its heart contains the value of a Sunni Wahhabi Muslim Country.

In 1932, King Abd al-Aziz (Ibn- Saud), the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stated that the two most important features for the people of the Saudi Arabia were religion 'Islam' and the "right inherited from our fathers" (Ameen 1993; as quoted in Ibn Saud's speech.). The sole legitimacy of the Al-Saud family has to do exclusively with religion along with tribal allegiances (Nevo, 1998; Mohan, 2019). The national identity criteria for the people of Saudi Arabia is not only limited to being practising Muslims but also it has to do with the un-compromised loyalty to the House of Saud. Now, this latter portion of the bargain is problematic when it comes to the other sects in the Saudi Arabia, for example the Ismailis of Najran, a scattered population of Shia's in Eastern Province. This paper brings together this conflict of sectarianization along the lines of a nation building paradigm.

Nevo argues, that the idea of Arab Nationalism has negatively affected the reach and classification of Ummah; and at the same time, the emergence of nation-states has further narrowed that space. He explains that this has hap-

²⁰⁷ Joseph Nevo, "Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1998, vol.34, no.3, p.34, chromeextension://oemmnndcblldboiebfnladdacbdmfmadadm/https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00263209808701231?needAccess=true

²⁰⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso: London, 1983).

pened because the collective identity formation in the Middle East evolved around three parallel yet distinct realms. It includes; first the general Islamic identity; second, the identity of an individual as an Arab (Arab Nationalism, Pan-Arabism); and third, the local and national identity. The third realm is one where local identities including sectarian identity play a very important role. Here the divergences and distinctions are narrow and context specific in nature. This has not only highlighted the Muslim multiple identities but has also revived the debate on “what makes Ummah”? In the case of Saudi Arabia, it could be stated that the country and especially the ruling regime derives its legitimacy from the Wahhabi branch of Sunni Islam. This national identity, in turn, has also created a subtle sense of hierarchy where other sects of Islam are seen as inferior. The article highlights the presence of sectarian policies in the Saudi Arabia and the rationale of discriminatory practice which is also a part of the survival strategy glued together with the purposefully intended political identity formation shielding the legitimacy of the al-Saud family as the sole sovereign of the state. In other words, “religion (primarily the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam) has played a prominent role not only in moulding the individual’s private and collective identities but also in consolidating national values”²⁰⁹.

Mamoun Hamza al-Fandy states, “Arabia is a state but not a nation. Using Islam as its source of legitimacy, the nation (umma) is more outside the state boundaries of Saudi Arabia than inside it”. In the case of Saudi Arabia, it is Islam that has undergone modifications and adjustments, not the state.²¹⁰ Because of its monopoly of power and resources and its need to maintain exclusive authority, the state does not tolerate an autonomous religious domain that may compete with it for the loyalty of the citizens. His argument is that the state has not made adjustments to become more Islamic, instead Islam has re-shuffled itself to become more statist.²¹¹ This has happened because the first two factors including the ‘Islamic identity’ and the ‘Arab identity’ both are insufficient in creating and defending the nature of statehood of Saudi Arabia. The only resort which is left is the making of a distinct identity specific to the people of Saudi Arabia. It is not a unique phenomenon utilised by the Saud family alone. Historically speaking, in the case of India, when the tribal herdsmen populations did not find their place inside the Verna system (four fold caste system), they instead appointed Brahmans (local

²⁰⁹ Nevo, *op.cit.*, p.35.

²¹⁰ Mamoun Hamza al-Fandy, “State Islam and State Violence: The Case of Saudi Arabia” (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University, 1993), p.41.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.32.

priests) to write their genealogy connecting their lineage to the sun or the moon. Religious priests were appointed to build a lineage with the Gods (Sun and Moon) and therefore derive specific legitimacy as the mandate of heaven to rule. This was called as Rajputisation under subtitles of “Suryavansha” or “Chandravansha”.²¹²

The Concept of Nationalism and the Case of Saudi Arabia

What is nationalism? In textbook understanding, the concept of nationalism is categorised as primordial nationalism, socio-biological nationalism and modern nationalism. The advocates of primordial nationalism believe that nationalism as an entity has existed throughout history; nation as perennial. Political theories including John Armstrong and Anthony D. Smith advocate continuity from nation (ancient ethnic communities) to nationalism of modern nations.²¹³

Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation focuses on an “imagined political community” emphasizing imagination and sovereignty.²¹⁴ Annals historian, Immanuel Wallerstein points out, “the nation hinges around one of the basic structural features of the world economy”, that is, “the political superstructure of this historical system, the sovereign states that form and derive from the interstate system.”²¹⁵ According to Wallerstein nations derive from the political structuring of the world-system; he gives more focus on world economy and the forces of capitalist world economy.²¹⁶ Ernest Gellner defines nationalism in context of the impact of industrialization, class competition along with these, the impact of language and education. He argues that, “the processes of industrialization undermined the traditional social structures and gave primacy to cultural elements”. These definitions focus on the process of modernization and industrialisation in the making of modern nationalism. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia’s case is different from this; the role of the rentier economy in relationship with the Wahhabi nationalism plays a crucial role in the making of early nationalism in Saudi Arabia.

²¹² For further details see D.N. Jha’s *Ancient India: In Historical Outline* (1998); Ranabir Chakravarti (2013); R. S. Sharma, *India’s Ancient Past* (1991).

²¹³ J Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1982)

²¹⁴ Anderson, *op.cit.*, p.15.

²¹⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity”, *Sociological Forum*, 1987, vol. 2, p. 381.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.383.

Anthony Giddens' definition of nationalism may be more helpful in understanding the situation in Saudi Arabia. He defines nationalism as, "the existence of symbols and beliefs which are either propagated by elite groups, or held by many of the members of regional, ethnic, or linguistic categories of a population and which imply a community between them."²¹⁷ Wahhabi nationalism provides a political paradigm for building a national collective community within a nation state. This definition of nationalism has been also termed as "qawmiyya", unlike the concept of Pan- Arabism.²¹⁸ Nationalism for decades was incompatible with the Kingdom's dominant religious identity which cemented a sense of unity for the country while legitimising the government through a narrative superimposing the cleric's emphasis providing adherence to the ruler.²¹⁹

For instance, the Hanbali School, to which the origin of Wahhabism could be traced, is dominant in the central region of Najd. Clerics of this school hold positions at official religious institutions that, inter alia, are involved in the political arena. Those who do not belong to this school are not allowed to join the state mechanism that decides educational, welfare, and religious affairs.²²⁰

The primordial sense of belongingness in a society comes from the group identity based on certain primordial, irrational attachments based on blood, race, language, religion, region, and so on. Clifford Geertz explained it as the ineffable and yet coercive ties, which are the result of a long process of crystallisation.²²¹ In the case of Saudi Arabia, the primordial nationalism still remains the crux of nation building and the transition from primordial to the modern nationalism is the challenge the article focuses on. As the primordial nationalism or the Wahhabi nationalism is based on exclusive tribal ties rooted in the history of the origin of Islam, therefore the sectarianization of Saudi Arabian society was a natural process. This was also supported through the

²¹⁷ Anthony Giddens, *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, (London, Macmillan, 1981), p.190- 191.

²¹⁸ A. Baram, "Qawmiyya and wataniyya in Ba'thi Iraq: The search for a new balance," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1983, vol. 19, p. 188-200.

²¹⁹ Eman Alhussien, "Saudi First: How Hyper- nationalism is transforming Saudi Arabia", ECFR, 19 June 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia

²²⁰ Gadi Hitman, "Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism and Nationalism: The Evolution of Wataniyya into Qawmiyya", 2018, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dome.12131> also see, H. al-Hasan, *The sectarian map of Saudi Arabia*, 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/specialfiles/pages/c5d7b415-e43a-4426-9c86-a87fd291603f>

²²¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York, Free Press, 1973).

delay in the industrialization process and lack of development in a modern industrial capitalist sector unlike the third world countries. Simultaneously, the mechanism of the rentier economy has also delayed the rise of alternate modern nationalism in the Saudi Arabia. Since 1979, sectarianism in the Saudi Arabia saw a tremendous growth and the Wahhabi clerics consequently enjoy central role in the national policy building. Sectarianization plays a major part in this paradigm and thus remains crucial for the survival of Saudi Arabia's current political regime.

Nationalism also requires a strong sense of 'other' and in Saudi Arabia's case the other identity cannot be on the basis of Islam per se; as the region itself is primarily Islamic. At the same time, the region of Arabia is not limited to the Saudi Arabia alone; and, hence one can only locate in 'Wahhabism' an exclusive sense of identity and legitimacy built upon the narratives of purity of Tribal allegiances along with the purity of religious traditions. Putting together this has provided the Saud family with enough royalty to have unchallenged rule since its very inception. As it can be seen, the ruling regime has not been able to find any other additional source of legitimacy and thus Wahhabism has the central role to play.

The role of Wahhabism as a nationalist tool simultaneously reflects the administrative and political behaviour of the state in order to maintain this legitimacy through sectarianization of identities. Let us look at the various ways in which the process of sectarianization has been taking place in Saudi Arabia and the sufferers of this political tool. On the role of Wahhabism, Helen Leckner puts it as;

"the Al Saud have good reason to retain Wahhabism as the base of their political control as it prevents the development of independent thinking, dangerous to their rule, and has given them the opportunity to develop their ascendancy in the Muslim world. Here Wahhabism has been the product, and financial power the means"²²².

In the Saudi textbooks the Arab Nationalism is mentioned as modern and secular ideology against Islam²²³. An assessment of which shows deep fear of commonality in the ruling regime and thus Wahhabism is not only depicting but also emphasizing and maintaining what is called as the notion of 'difference' and 'otherness'. The analysis shows that, the nation building process

²²² Helen Lackner, *A House Built on Sand: A Political Economy of Saudi Arabia*, (London, 1978), p.215.

²²³ Ayda Athopaiti, "A Comparative Analysis of the Treatment of Arab and World History in Saudi Arabian and Egyptian High School Textbooks since 1900," *Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh*, 1987, p.4.

in Saudi Arabia due to these afore mentioned reasons may not follow the same paradigm as the other nation states; as the very basis of the state attains legitimacy through constant production of religious exclusiveness juxtaposed with suppository historic- traditional purity. The very intentional and purposeful segregation of Wahhabi Sunnis from other sects like the Shia's has a lot to do with this inherent problem or strategy vital to the creation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Sectarianization: Shia- Sunni dynamics in the Middle East

In simple words; sectarianism is the process through which various forms of ethnic or religious identity are politicized²²⁴. The role and importance of sectarianism and ethnic divide varies depending upon region. Some would also argue that the sectarian issue in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is not an age-old dilemma as they are often perceived and portrayed, it is a relatively modern phenomenon, and also sectarian affiliation was neither a scrupulous marker of identification, nor a reason for open conflict even a century ago.

The contemporary crisis in the Middle East cannot simply be explained with a single factor as it is an amalgamation of various aspects ranging from international politics of power and space, regional dynamics, the aftereffects of the Cold war, petroleum and the natural gas politics. The colonial mandate system also played a very important role in the making of false identity lines as the colonial regime carved out states without keeping in mind the natural distribution of social and religious identities. This has led to further deepening of sectarian identity politics in the Middle East. The Shia-Sunni divide is one of the most frequently witnessed causes of tensions in Middle East countries. The question of sectarian tensions has always been an important issue in the Middle East because the three monotheistic religions of the world including Judaism, Christianity and Islam originated from the Middle East.

There is historical baggage of multiple identity politics in the Middle East, and especially in the case of Saudi Arabia, the country is a religious monarchy having Islam as the base for governance at every level. The Saudi Arabia has a population of majority Sunni Muslims, dominated by Wahhabi

²²⁴ Sectarian Politics in the Gulf-Working Group Summary Report, *Centre for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown university school of Foreign Service in Qatar*, 2012, p.3.

ideology; along with that there are also minority Shia groups mostly in rich regions of the Eastern Province. Some scholars have looked at the contemporary schism in the region as a sectarian civil war²²⁵, this alone puts too much importance on religious identities whereby sidelining the other major factors discuss above.

Historically, religion is always central in the making and break up of modern Middle Eastern states. Even though the MENA region is predominantly Islamic, religious politics has complex paraphernalia associated with it. Over the years, from the Iraq- Iran war, the Syrian civil war, and the Kurdish crisis have managed to create an international broad-based understanding about the strategic role of religious politics in the region. Both at the domestic and international levels sectarianism directly influences and impacts the modern politics of the Middle East. Sectarianism is very sensitive to individuality and thus makes it an appropriate tool to be used by the state to keep people divided and the society fractured. As discussed above, nationalism of Saudi Arabia deeply parasites upon this identity politics based on sectarianism and the object of the 'other'. As the national boundaries are not natural but created in time; and thus the region since its making is familiar with issues relating to transnational ideologies and identities. This could be seen as a failure of artificial national boundaries in MENA countries, these were made by colonial powers unaware of the multiplicity of layers of identities flowering in this broad region. Nationalism's strong criticism dwells upon this false identity which is not time tested, centrifugal to state oriented goals and thus infiltrates to normative nationalism or the sense of belongingness.

The Making of Sectarian Politics

In the shifts of the contemporary international world order, MENA has acquired the centre stage because of its strategic politico- economic location, it is the largest exporter and retainer of Petroleum and natural gas; and therefore, is central to international politics. Vice-versa, the domestic politics of the MENA countries are extremely significant for the whole world now, this brings the sectarian politics and sectarian conflicts straight to the centre of discourse. Many scholars argue that the sectarian lens over-simplifies the real dynamics of the regional conflict in MENA²²⁶. An over emphasis on sectaria-

²²⁵ Gause III, F. Gregory (2014). Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War, *Brooking Doha Center Analysis Paper*, Number 11, July 2014, p.5.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, *op.cit.* p.5.

nism often shifts the focus away from the analytical bent, and over simplifies the complexity of the regional upheavals. The easy binaries of the Sunni-Shia divide often hide the real politico-economic rationale behind actions of the state and therefore, the importance of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia cannot be taken on face value alone. Simultaneously, it's important to analyse the political and economic angles attached with them. Martin Kramer opines that, the Sunni-Shia binary has made the Alawis, a sect of Shiite Islam in the eyes of most Shiite religious scholars into "Shia", in order to set it into Sunni versus Shia schema²²⁷.

When it comes to Shia's in the Persian Gulf, these are the people of minority faith and the total estimate of their population is 2 million within the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. To be precise, in Bahrain, the Shia's are in the majority compared to Sunnis; In Kuwait their size is approximately 25-30% Shias; and in Yemen's Shia Zaydis are almost 25% of the population. The other four GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states also have minority Shia populations of roughly around 10-20%. The population of Shia's in Iran and Iraq is comparatively very high; In Iraq there are 22 million Shia people and in Iran there are about 70 million Shia population.

"The Shia who live on the Arabian side of the Persian Gulf are not part of the higher strata of the social fabric. This is dominated by those who can claim an old and so-called "pure" (asli) Arab descent by being descended from one of the big tribal confederations originating from Central Arabia, and also belonging to the socially dominant status group of the hadhar, the old settled and/or urbanized population."²²⁸

Shia's are a demographic and political minority in all the six GCC states, The majority of Bahraini Shia is deliberately kept out of the most powerful institutional positions as well as sensitive sectors of the administration, which are held either by members of the Sunni ruling dynasty or Sunnis of various social and ethno-national backgrounds.

Saudi Arabia is one country which has the highest amount of youth bulge inside the MENA region. When the Arab uprisings shook the whole region,

²²⁷ Martin Kramer, "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism," in *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), p. 237-254.

²²⁸ Laurence Louër, "The State and Sectarian Identities in the Persian Gulf Monarchies: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in Comparative Perspective", in *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Lawrence G Potter, (London: Hurst Publishers.2001), p. 117-142.

this strategically located monarchy reacted in ways to stop the domino effect of the mobilisation which had turned thrones upside down in the neighbouring countries. The MENA region was un-naturally and artificially divided by the colonial powers according to their convenience and therefore creating sectarian and regional conflicts at every moving step. Sectarian politics is one divide- and-rule policy which the Saudi Arabian regime used instead of responding to the challenges of a new era by introducing political reforms at home. The Saudi regime moved towards sectarian politics along with that, it took support for legitimacy from Wahhabism, the branch of Sunni Islam. This made the Saudi identity narrow and politically distinct and thus responded to the need for the national identity of us versus the 'other.'

There is no question that the history of state formation in the region has played a crucial role in the development of this Sunni Wahhabi majoritarian bias, but this does not mean that Shia everywhere in the Gulf are subjected to various forms of sectarian- based discrimination; the situation is not uniform everywhere. As Saudi Arabia is one such monarchical state where the identity of the state is based on a specific reading of Sunni religious orthodoxy, therefore here one can witness a widespread state-sponsored policy of sectarian discrimination towards the Shia minority. This has led to bitter conflicts among people and also various revolts and protest by the Shia community inside the country.

Salameh Kaileh opines that, "Sectarianism is any religious or sectarian barrier that is based on inherited beliefs against the 'other'. That is to say; sectarianism is turning diversity to conflict. Without doubt this diversity is a result of an ancient conflict; however, the conflict at that time had economic and ideological bases for a political and ideological class conflict".²²⁹ She also argues that earlier it was used to represent intellectual currents rooted in material social classes and conditions. But today the nature of its use has changed, and the language of an old struggle is used now in an essentialist way having no relationship to ideologies or classes.

She also talks about "sectarian instrumentalisation", meaning a certain class could utilise these inherited beliefs to advance its own interests, without necessarily believing in them. This can be seen in the context of a class's defence of its own privileges and existence against other classes, or against

²²⁹ Kaileh, Salameh, and Shams, Victorios (2014) What is Sectarianism in Middle East?. *Open Democracy*. URL: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/salameh-kaileh-victorios-shams/what-is-sectarianism-in-middle-east> (accessed on 13 April 2017).

other sectors from the same class (Al- Saud's hereditary right on Mecca). This sectarian instrumentalisation can be seen in the Saudi Arabia as well where the Sunni's are privileged upon the Shia minority on various levels.

Toby Dodge discusses two ways of sectarian rhetorics; one is from above, and the other from below. In case of sectarianism from above, the use of communalist language to further the interests of ruling elites can be clearly identified in Saudi foreign policy, in the state sanctioned rhetoric of Qatari media outlets and preachers, and in the speeches of those who previously claimed to be working for anti-imperialist Arab unity in the Middle East. On the other hand, in the case of sectarianism from below; the popular use of aggressive and divisive communalist rhetoric can be seen as a direct response to this elite encouragement.²³⁰ Never the less one could see this as a consequence of the growth of social media across the MENA region. The new wave of democratizing communication has opened up new spaces for previously suppressed or marginal voices in order to find speech as well as audience through this shift in new media. Mawadi al-Rasheed opines that "the Saudi regime has a vested interest in the Saudi public remaining fragmented and unable to bridge the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide. Both Shia and Sunnis in Saudi Arabia have been invigorated by the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings, and in their own regions have staged minor protests demanding similar rights. However, the regime's entrenched sectarian propaganda has succeeded in isolating the Shia and delaying a confrontation with Sunni Islamists. In the short term this may be a successful strategy, but in the long term, it may fail to contain the frustration of Saudis who want serious political reform".²³¹

Joseph Nevo believes that the promotion of national identity has been an official as well as a practical policy, reflecting the state's venture to enhance its position and to gain legitimacy.²³² Mamoun Hamzde al-Fandy mentions that "in Muslim history relations between state and religion were introduced in two ways: (a) the resources and apparatus of the state were used to promote Islam, as in the time of the Prophet and the first four Khalifas; (b) Islam was mobilized to protect the state. Saudi Arabia is a modern manifestation of the latter."²³³

²³⁰ Dodge, Tody (2014), "Seeking to Explain the Rise of Sectarianism in the Middle East: the Case study of Iraq," Islam in the Changing Middle East, The gulfs Escalating Sectarianism POMEPS (project on middle east political science).

²³¹ Mawadi Al-Rashidi, "Saudi Arabia's domestic sectarian politics," *Norwegian peacebuilding resource centre* November, 2013 p.1, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/168350/c7a41915bdbc6948f29bd81333b587d7.pdf>

²³² Nova, *op.cit.*,

²³³ Al- Fandy, *op.cit.*,

Sectarian Identity after the Iranian Revolution

Very often recent facts are presented as age old- histories; this is the power of narrative building, here the example of Saudi Arabia is a classic one. The rhetorical question of Shia-Sunni conflict in Saudi Arabia is a relatively recent development unlike many would like to believe. For ages religion has been used as a handmaiden to the politics and thus to understand the dynamics of sectarian politics in Saudi Arabia and its complex relationship with Iran, it's important to trace the history of this conflict along with the history of this trend of sectarianism in the MENA region as well.

Scholars are not clear about the departure point of this sectarian political mobilization but there are various junctures in history where one can trace its commencement. Many would argue that it can be traced back from the Lebanese civil war in 1975, if not to the signing of the National Pact in the summer of 1943, some others are of the view that it goes back to the time of the 1970's and the 1980's when the Saudi Arabian global Wahhabi process of proselytizing began at once. Nevertheless, it is after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 that this process took a boost and turned into a defensive over-drive as a reaction. Some scholars also consider the time when the Gulf state's financial support for Iraq's war came against Iran from 1980 to 1988.

Countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran are more tilted towards developing sectarian reflexes towards any development in the MENA region and they engage with so called "Sectarian Politics". As explained above, historically sectarianism is not something which independently causes problems among people because the primary text the *Shia's* and the *Sunni's* follow is the same. The Quran does not make any divide between Shia and Sunnis therefore when discussing these two sects it's very important to keep in mind the historical baggage these two come with. Saudi Arabia is one such country which is dominated by the Wahhabi ideology which is again a very recent phenomenon in the history of Islamic bifurcation. Wahhabism is a state-sponsored religious ideology and thus serves the politico-economic needs of the regime. Therefore, rather than doing a single handed analysis of sectarianism as a religious phenomenon, it is important to examine the other areas like economics, culture and more importantly regional power-politics. These are some of the other very important areas which define the behaviour of sectarian politics and sectarian identities in Saudi Arabia today. No doubt that the sectarian factor has played a role in shaping the region's politics, but the orthodox

religious divide has an underground political element attached to it which is very important to acknowledge.

Turkish foreign policy and Middle East politics expert Kemal Enat argues that “if a policy specifically focuses on the rights of only a certain minority sect, rather than being a general policy or approach to minority rights, then it is possible to claim that such an attitude signals sectarian politics”.²³⁴ He also argues that, if the states or non-state actors take benefit of the same or similar sectarian identities of others in different countries to serve their interests only, then at that point of time the states or non-state actors are definitely engaged in sectarian politics.

As explained earlier, the division between Sunnis and Shia cannot be overstated religiously because they follow the same fundamental beliefs, and have co-existed for centuries. But to deconstruct the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia it is better to look at it through the prism of a power struggle in the region and beyond. Both of these countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively are leading exponents of Shia and Sunni Islam, even their foreign policies are very much influenced and guided by their vested interests in sectarian politics, they often connect and support those other countries with the same ideology and thus give military backing to them as well, this in turn causes an unspoken understanding in the Middle East of the sectarian divide which is a reality today.

Since 1913, the Shia of Saudi Arabia has been banned from observing the Muharram rituals (10 days of mourning representative of the martyrdom of Hussayn in 680AD); it was done to avoid any clash with the Wahhabi Ulama in Saudi Arabia, who were the official patrons of the religion in the country as they are sponsored by the regime itself. Mostly the Shia’s observed these rituals in private in their *Hussainyyat* or confined spaces. This is one of the major reasons for the never ending clash between the religious police and security forces in Saudi; Prof. P. Burnett noted this in the 1970’s that the situation has been getting further aggravated and worsening during each passing Muharram.²³⁵

Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, Islamist political activist was among those who started a new trend in the Saudi-Shia minority, his group tried

²³⁴ Kemal Enat, “What is Sectarian Politics?” *The new turkey*, 2016, <http://thenewturkey.org/what-is-sectarian-politics/>.

²³⁵ P. Burdett, “Records of Saudi Arabia 1966-1971,” vol.5, 1970, p.512.

to counter socialism and communism from the 1950's onwards. In 1968, along with his brother, Hasan and nephew, Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi al-Shirazi, he started a secret political organisation named '*Harakat al-risaliyyin al-tala* also known as MVM (Movement of Vanguard's Missionaries). The political ideology of the *Shiraziyyun* and the kind of political discourse they spread throughout early 70's resulted in a feeling of dissent in the minds and hearts of the Saudi Shia population. A new MNM cell was organized in the Eastern Province in the late 1970's by the MVM deputy leader, Hadi al-Mudarrisi. The real political shift can be seen after the Ashura of 1978, when a close associate of Muhammad al-Shirazi delivered flaming sermons, he also delivered a few sermons in Qatif the year after and this was the turning point for the protesters during the intifada.²³⁶

In 1978, *Awwamiyya* was deliberately held in public causing a clash between the security forces and Shia people, this was an open act of disobedience to the government. On the First day of Muharram 1400 (20 November 1979) a group of Sunni rebels led by *Juhayman al-Utaybi* occupied the grand mosque of Mecca, they were dissatisfied tribals who were completely unrelated to the uprising in the Eastern Province, but the Saudi Shia did try to make use of the situation by linking the two events as a part of larger dissatisfied population of Saudi minority groups naming it as "an Islamist opposition cutting across sectarian lines".²³⁷ The intifada was the breaking point and since then the state began to see the Shia population in the Eastern Province as a serious problem and this perception continues till today. These three major events namely the Iranian revolution, Intifada (Qatif Uprising) and seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca led to an increase in security forces in the oilfields of the Eastern Province. Later on, a commission for industrial security was setup by the Ministry of Interior in order to decide people preferences for particular jobs which slowly went on to remove Shia's from security positions. Henceforth Shia's were given only menial jobs including drivers, clerks, gardeners, or in storehouses, food and community services. 1980's onwards discriminatory policies against the Shia minority began to be operated on various levels in the Saudi Arabian oil industry.

Therefore, one could say that the *Intifada al-Muharram* was a watershed for Saudi Shia; Saudi government after 1980's implemented some development

²³⁶ Louër, *op. cit.*, p.165.

²³⁷ Thomas Hegghammer, and Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: the Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2007, vol. 39, no. 1, p.103-22.

projects but it was always infused with institutional discrimination which was justified by the regime as “security measures”. Matthiesen interpreted the impact of the intifada as one which “soured relations with the Saudi state and spurred Shia infighting.”²³⁸

Iranian revolution among Saudi Shias

A major impact of the Iranian revolution of 1979 was seen on the MVM and its leaders (who became extremely close to some political units in Iran), the spiritual head of MVM, Muhammad al-Shirazi moved to Iran²³⁹. Hawzat al-Qa'im of the MVM located in Tehran also received hundreds of young Saudi Shia²⁴⁰. The main supervisor of the Hawza was Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi; others who also joined in were Hasan al-Saffar, Muhammad Fawzi, Muhammad al-Sayf, Sahib al-Sadiq along with some others. The students in the Hawza were primarily from Saudi Arabia.

There are various versions to understand the impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Saudi Shia *Intifada*. Some scholars argue, the main reason leading to the culmination of the Saudi Shia revolt was local Shia grievances; according to these people the impact of the Iranian revolution was mainly symbolic.²⁴¹ Some would argue, the Iranian propaganda efforts in support of the Qatif uprising, instrumental usage of posters of Khomeini and relocation of the Shia leadership to Iran after the Intifada all points toward a connection between the two. Some even go on to argue that the intifada was a derivative of the Iranian revolution.²⁴² Iran played a very important role in intensifying the tension between Saudi Shias and the state during Muharram of 1979. The major role was played by the Media; with the help of Radio Tehran and Radio Ahwaz and other TV stations of Iran the news reached Qatif and spread like wildfire. The early 1980's onwards there was a daily broadcast in Qatif exposing and denouncing the ruling regime and also provoking Saudi Shias to wake up.²⁴³

²³⁸ Matthiesen, *op. cit.*

²³⁹ *ibid*

²⁴⁰ Interview with former leading MVM member, Damascus, August 2008, as quoted in Toby Matthiesen, “Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group,” *Middle East Journal*, 2010.

²⁴¹ Toby Craig Jones, “Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, May, 2006, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 213-233, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879971>

²⁴² Henner Furtig, *Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, (UK: Ithaca Press, 2002), p.3408;

²⁴³ Louër, *op.cit.*,p.181

It is important to note, that there is a shift in the methodology used by various Shia political leaders against the Saudi Arabian regime throughout history. Earlier in the period of the 1980's during the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini was fighting a war of words against Saudi Arabia but, along with that, the *Intifada*, Iran's support to OIRAP (Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, and various demonstrations in the period of *Hajj* (annual pilgrimage) all together worsened the Saudi-Iranian relations.²⁴⁴

Soon after the Iranian Revolution, MVM launched officially three more regional organisations apart from the one in the Saudi Arabia called OIRAP; in Iraq, Islamic action Organisation in Iraq (IAO) (Munazzamat al-Amal al-Islami fi al-'Iraq), founded in 1979, the other one was the Bahrain branch called as FLB, led by Hadi al-Mudarrisi. Iran also provided military training to the enthusiastic Saudi Shia youth. Some of them also fought from the side of Iran in the Iraq-Iran war. After the failure of the *Intifada* in 1979, MVM broke away from the military angle of it and thereafter OIRAP started to focus on publishing, recruitment and also on education of new recruits. This was done in order to create a social movement inside Saudi Arabia. From the early months of the 1980's OIRAP started to publish a monthly journal called *al-Thawra al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Revolution) which serves as a criticism of the Saudi Regime and its action towards the Shia minority.

From the 1970's onwards the two main communal Islamist movements of the Saudi Shia were, the *Shiraziyyun* and the *Khat al-Imam*. They became the strongest movements amongst all the other minor ones. Both these movements meant to enforce and imbibe a sense of public morality and counter secular tendencies in Saudi Arabian society. The 1980's was a time of deep tension between the state and the Shia people. Most activists were living abroad in political exile. The strength of the relationship between the Shia leadership in Iran and their acceptance went weak; similarly by the end of 1989 the channels of *Hizbullah al-Hijaz* and *Khat al-Imam* in Saudi Arabia were weakened tremendously. *Khat al-Imam* focused on the need to defend the Shia of Qatif and al-Ahsa against the regime and imposed a Wahhabi ideology. Even though the basic principle over which the two movements emphasised upon was Pan-Islamism but in their indoctrination and study circles they maintained consolidation of a distinct sectarian identity. The major bequest of the Saudi Shia communal Islamist movements in many ways was this persistence on sectarian identities.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Furtig, *op.cit.*,

²⁴⁵ al- Ibrahim, *op.cit.*, p.161.

Aftermath of Nimr Baqir

Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was born in 1959 and executed on 2 January 2016. His execution led to a huge sectarian firestorm in Saudi Arabia and also in the neighbouring countries with a Shia majority, especially Iran. Sheikh Nimr was a Shia Sheikh in *al-Awwamiyya* in the Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, the area is Shia dominated and also is a region extremely rich in petroleum natural resources. His arrest and execution led to a major shift in the diplomatic relations between Shia and Sunni governments.²⁴⁶ Nimr al-Nimr was extremely popular among the youth and also was widely famous for his open criticism of the Saudi Arabian government politics. He criticized the Saudi government for not conducting free elections in the country.²⁴⁷ In 2006 Sheikh Nimr was arrested by the Saudi authorities and again in 2009, he criticised Saudi authorities and recommended that if Shia rights were not respected then the Eastern Province should secede.²⁴⁸ As a response to his recommendations and speeches the Saudi authorities arrested al-Nimr along with 35 others.²⁴⁹ In the period between 2011 and 2012, the Saudi Arabian protests, al-Nimr called for protestors to resist police bullets using "the roar of the word" rather than violence, and he also predicted the collapse of the government if repression continued.²⁵⁰

The Shia minority of Saudi Arabia have seldom demonstrated since 1979, but after the anti-Israeli protests in 2002, Saudi Shia came out again in 2006 to protest the Israeli attacks on Lebanon.²⁵¹ In the Eastern Province in February, 2009 the sectarian clashes between the Shia and the Sunni pilgrims became widespread; the conflict broke out at the al-Baqi cemetery in Medina and ended with minor bloodshed. This event marked the start of a chain reaction of demonstrations in Safwa, Awwamiyya and Qatif.

In the same year security forces in the Eastern province told the religious leaders to refrain from communal prayers in order to suppress the rising

²⁴⁶ Ulf Laessing, Reed Stevenson; Michael Roddy, "Watching Bahrain, Saudi Shi'ites demand reform," *Thomas Reuters*, February 2012. (website is now defunct).

²⁴⁷ Slawson Nicola, "Saudi execution of Shia Cleric sparks outrage in Middle East," *The Guardian*. 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/02/saudi-execution-of-shia-cleric-sparks-outrage-in-middle-east>

²⁴⁸ Salah Hemeid, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2005 https://www.revolvy.com/topic/Nimr%20al-Nimr&item_type=topic

²⁴⁹ Slawson, op.cit.

²⁵⁰ Press TV, "Saudi cleric warns Al Saud regime", *Press TV*, 24 January 2012, <http://www.bfnews.ir/prtb99bs.rhbgzpe4ur.html>

²⁵¹ Al- Jazeera, "The Breakup of the Third Protest of Saudi Shia in Support of Hizbullah" (Tafriq thalith muzahar li-shi 'at al-su 'udiyya da 'man li-hizb Allah). <http://al-jazeera.net>.

wave of tension. This was not acceptable to Nimr al- Nimr; he went on and disobeyed the security forces many times. In opposition to the 1993 agreement, al- Nirm disavowed any engagement with the state and has called for a boycott of the municipal elections, along with that at one point demanded a share of the oil income for the Shia population.²⁵²

Later, al-Nirm delivered an emotionally charged sermon in a small mosque on the outskirts of Awwamiyya, which was circulated widely across the web. Here, he was openly blaming and criticising the Saudi Arabian leadership for the events in Medina and reflected on the general conditions of the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia. He made an open argument for the need of secession of the Eastern Province and this was the final departure as the ruling regime took it as a confirmation of Shia disloyalty. On the other hand, the opposition outside the country took advantage of the conditions in the region and they also tried to capitalise the gains.²⁵³

This was followed up by the arrest of dozens of people for displaying Shia banners and also for participation in Shia religious festivals²⁵⁴, and this went on to another level when the religious police closed down a Shia religious ceremony in Medina. In 2010 for a brief period of time Muhammad 'Ali al-Amri was arrested, he is the son of the spiritual leader of the *Nakhawila* Shia in Medina. This and many other such incidents put forth an outrageous flare in the Shia minority. According to the Shia sources, Sunnis attacked Shia people who wanted to perform Ashura, and this led to a bitter clash concerning hundreds of men.²⁵⁵ Toby Matthiesen observes, since 1993 the political and clerical elite of Saudi Arabia have been pursuing an accommodationist stance towards the Shia population. This became a bone of contention and cause for the rise of dissatisfaction in the minds of Saudi Shia population. One of the major reasons leading to this aggravated tension was a new zoning law for the municipality of Qatif; the law restricted the city of Qatif and also the land on which the Shia's can build upon²⁵⁶. All these developments over the years have been concentrating into a long drawn tension between the Shia minority and the Saudi regime. This got another boost with the Tunisian uprising of 2011, leading to the emergence of a new Saudi Shia protest movement.

²⁵² Matthiesen, *op.cit.*

²⁵³ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis- Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism*, (New York: Cambridge university press, 2015), p.201.

²⁵⁴ IRFR, "Unprecedented Arrests Campaign in Al-Hassa," Rashid English, International Religious Freedom Report: Saudi Arabia (July-December 2010) URL: www.rasid.com

²⁵⁵ Matthiesen, *op.cit.* 2010

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Shias in Saudi Arabia-The Ismailis of Najran

The new protest movement which began after 2011's Arab Uprisings had a very different nature and can easily be called as a break from Shia position of 1993. Toby Matthiesen in his work, "the other Saudi" talks about the three political groups which together led to the reconstitution of the political environment which pushed for larger public protest in the Saudi Arabia. Of the three, the first were those who followed *Mudarrisiyya*, the group that broke away from the mainstream Shirazi movement and went on to pursue *Marji'iyya* of Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi. Nimr al-Nimr was a primary figure in this set of people. The second group of people were followers of Khat al-Imam and his family of nine prisoners jailed for their suspected sponsorship in *Hizbullah al-Hijaz* and involvement in the Khobar Tower bombing of 1996. Third and the last set of activists were, those *Shiraziyyun* who became completely disgruntled with the accommodationist stance of the Shirazi headship in Saudi Arabia especially around the region of Hasan al-Saffar. Hamza al-Hasan, London based activist, and Fu'ad Ibrahim were also some of those people who joined this third group of people. They are two key figures who, after the medina clash of 2009, amplified their online activities and demanded secession of the Eastern Province.²⁵⁷

The *Ismailis* are a religious and ethnic minority with a historical foundation set in Najran Province of the south-western Saudi Arabia. For years now they have faced official discrimination by the Saudi Arabian state and thus are an important part of our analysis. They have faced discrimination at various levels ranging from political representation to social existence, education and legal rights. One of the most famous conflicts between the *Ismailis* and the Saudi army unit took place outside the Holiday Inn hotel in Najran city in April 2000. Government employment, religious practices and the justice system are some of the main areas where official discrimination takes place against the *Ismailis*.²⁵⁸ They are excluded from making government official decisions and publicly disparage their faith.

Najran is the region of a fertile valley on the border with Yemen; in 1926 Saudi Arabia conquered the independent principedom of the Idrisis of Asir

²⁵⁷ Dar al-Mutlaqa, *Hamza al-Hasan, al-wataniyya hawajis al-wahda wa-l-Infisal fi al-su'udiyya* (Nationality: Thoughts about Unity and Separatism in Saudi), Dar al-Mutlaqa, 2009. www.moltaqaa.com (now defunct)

²⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, (HRW) September 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2008>

region and in 1933 they occupied the Ismailis of the Yam tribe in Najran.²⁵⁹ As historical sources show, Najran was the last territorial conquest of the re-emergent Saudi state (Al-Yami and Al- Mansur, 2006). The region is famous for being the spiritual seat of the Sulaiman Ismailis; a branch of Shiism, its status dates back to the 1640's.²⁶⁰ There are various reports from 2006-2007 showing that the highest government-appointed clerics and judicial authorities of Saudi Arabia openly assaulted the people of this sect. Personal comments and ridiculing of the norms of Ismailis are frequent.²⁶¹

The people of the Ismaili sect have their own system of law; religious scholars have accounted a few modifications since the series of legal treatises created by the Fatimid high judge Nu'man in the 11th century.²⁶² Ismailis are deliberately kept away from participation in local decisions as they are not given high official posts in the governorate. There is a continuous threat of sudden imprisonment to those Ismailis who write petitions, or speak to the media. Religious restrictions are also extremely severe towards these people. The Ismailis are not allowed to visit their religious leaders. There is restriction on mosques building or even renovation. On the other hand, no such laws are implemented for the Wahhabi Sunni sect which is state sponsored; they are free to develop along with government financial support.²⁶³ In the realm of education, Ismaili children are ridiculed for their faith and trained in Wahhabi thought. Similarly, in the justice system, these people are faced with unfavourable judicial rulings because of their religious identity.²⁶⁴

Sectarian Discrimination under International Scrutiny

The international law protects the rights of religious, ethnic and any other kind of minority, and it also prohibits any discrimination on the basis of religion. These prohibitions and protections are clearly outlined in the most important international human rights treaties which include, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1969), the Convention against Discrimination in Education, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1962).

²⁵⁹ Isam Ghanem, The Legal History of 'A Sir (Al-Mikhlaḥ Al-Sulaymani), *Arab Law Quarterly*, (3 August 1990), vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 211- 214.

²⁶⁰ Heinz Halm, *Die Schia*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), p.234-243

²⁶¹ HRW, *op.cit.*

²⁶² Farhad Daftary, *Al-Qadi al-Nu'man and Isma'ili jurisprudence*, ed., Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 117-114.

²⁶³ HRW, *op.cit.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.3.

The United Nations has also passed many declarations that express human rights standards in order to deal with matters of discrimination. Aforementioned are some of these: 1) United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (UN Report, 1981), the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978) and the UNGA Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities (1993). According to ICERD racial discrimination can be defined as:

“any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life”.²⁶⁵

The UNESCO declaration of 1978 states;

“Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, ethnic or national origin or religious intolerance motivated by racist considerations” to be incompatible with human rights.” (Article 3)

The Convention against Discrimination in Education, in article 1, also includes religious factors among prohibited discrimination. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief declares that “*discrimination between human beings on the grounds of religion or belief constitutes an affront to human dignity.*” (Art. 3) According to these prohibitions any discrimination against the enjoyment of all fundamental rights, including the rights to development, work, and access to justice etc is a violation of the international law. It is the responsibility of the States to guarantee equal access for everyone in all areas of life including economic, social and cultural rights; especially the rights to work, free choice of employment, just and favourable conditions to work, protection against unemployment, equal pay for equal work, also to just and favourable remuneration.”²⁶⁶ For the matter of religion and religious freedom, UNGA came up with a declaration in 1981 which stated;

²⁶⁵ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted December 21, 1965, G.A. Res. 2106 (XX), annex, 20 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 14) at 47, U.N. Doc. A/6014 (1966), 660 U.N.T.S. 195, entered into force January 4, 1969, Article.1.

²⁶⁶ ICERD, *op.cit.*, Article.3.

“Freedom to have a religion ... and freedom ... to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching” is protected, and “coercion which would impair this freedom” is prohibited.²⁶⁷

Some of the basic specifications which fall under the realm of protection of freedom of religion are as follows; assembly for worship, observance of religious holidays, maintaining and erecting buildings for worship, acquiring items for use in religious rituals, religious teaching and appointment of religious leaders, fundraising for religion, and communication with coreligionists.²⁶⁸

These are some of those basic international norms and law guide lines and definitions on discriminations of various kinds. In the case of the Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi sect of Sunni Islam completely dominates the political and economic, including every other sector. The Saudi regime itself uses religion and religious policies as a handmaiden for their political and economic gains. Be it the *Ismailis* of Najran or the Shia people in general, the discrimination is at every level, sectarianism is playing a dominant role in keeping the divide and at the same time sitting as a roadblock for nation building even today.

Ismailis' participation in public affairs in Saudi Arabia has clear discrimination, for instance; the provincial council in Najran is headed by a Sunni from outside Najran, and similar is the case with the head of the municipality.²⁶⁹ There are only about five *Ismailis* amongst all the members of the provincial council including the heads of government departments except all others are Sunni appointees.²⁷⁰ Also it's worth noting that the municipal council does not have any real power but is only an officially dormant position.

Ismailis have claimed discrimination in both public sector jobs as well as private sector jobs. Under the governorship of Prince Mish'al there is tremendous amount of discrimination against *Ismaili* people especially in the employment policy, which is extending to the whole sector. In the government security apparatus very few *Ismailis* reach senior ranks and most of them end up at menial and lower rank jobs only. It is exceptional for an *Ismaili* to rise to a higher rank in the military services.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ Ibid

²⁶⁸ Ibid. Article.6

²⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Shaikh Mas'ud bin Haidar of the elected municipal council, Najran, December 12, 2006.

²⁷⁰ HRW, *op.cit.*2008

²⁷¹ HRW, *op.cit.* 2006.

Civil service in the Saudi Arabia has 15 ranks, and from rank 11 onwards ministers hold the sole right to appoint anyone. As noted by a former official, in his entire career “only one person from the region was appointed above rank 10, while 20 persons from outside the region were appointed”.²⁷² This is the level of discrimination the sects are facing in the region. The same is the case in local business opportunities; here also the Ismailis face extensive discrimination. The government even prefers the Yemeni Sunni’s over them which reflects the essence of sectarian politics in the Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

Even though there is the step by step systematic discrimination and sectarianization playing a crucial role in the Saudi Arabian socio-politics; the article states that this particularly does not happen because of simple hatred of the Saudi state against Shias, instead the article argues, it is a necessity for Saudi Arabia to keep sectarianization alive in order to maintain their suppository mandate to rule. The Saudi nationalism’s crisis in the 21st century is because of this inherent conundrum of sectarian identity formation which is playing an important role in regional as well as international political standing of Saudi Arabia. As argued throughout this article, the government of Saudi Arabia has not yet been able to develop an alternative form of political legitimacy tool for successful rule over the Kingdom. Sectarianism along with many other factors remains crucial in legitimising the Al-Saud family’s rule over the country. Therefore, it is not only a roadblock to a fully integrated Saudi Arabia, instead it is also a purposefully and strategically implied political agenda to create an entity called the “Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”. It is important to note that the contemporary debate on equality of rights and citizenship in Saudi Arabia ignores the crisis of the nation-building paradigm where the basic inculcation of identity, if formulated on false religious hierarchies, transcending these realities is a challenge Saudi Arabia is facing today. The biggest challenge for Saudi Arabia is to develop other areas of nationalism, which may facilitate the identification of individuals of the country independent of sectarianism. This is even more problematic because, with the passing of time, a high youth bulge and a very high share of expatriates contributing to the social makeup of the Saudi Arabia, the urgency to include these people and at the same time delay the process of democratisation will be a challenging issue which waits ahead for the ruling royal family.

²⁷² HRW, *op.cit.*2008.

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