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SHIʿITES IN ARABIA

SHIʿITES IN ARABIA: the Arabian Peninsula including the Persian Gulf Regions.

The Ḥejāz. The Shiʿite presence in the Arabian Peninsula dates back to the early history of Islam. In fact the northwestern region of Arabia, the Ḥejāz, is the cradle of Shiʿism. Its emergence is related to developments in Medina after the death of the prophet Moḥammad. Four of the Shiʿite Imams spent much of their lives there: Ḥasan b. ʿAli (d. 669), ʿAli Zayn al-ʿĀbedin (d. 714), Moḥammad al-Bāqer (d. 733), and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādeq (d. 765). They are all buried in the old cemetery of Medina, called Baqiʿ al-Ḡarqad, al-Baqiʿ or Jannat al-Baqiʿ. The burial place of Fāṭema al-Zahrāʾ is also in Medina, but its exact location is not known with certainty. As a result, a pilgrimage to the shrines (*zeyārat*) in Medina, usually before or after the pilgrimage to Mecca, is considered a sacred duty by many Shiʿites.

In the early centuries of Islam, numerous members of the *Āl al-bayt* (descendants of the Prophet), for religious and social reasons, were drawn to the holy places in the Ḥejāz and settled there. Sunni observers such as Ebn Jobayr (d. 1217) and Ebn Taymiya (d. 1328) deplored the strong presence of Shiʿite "heretics" (*rawāfeż*) in the Ḥejāz in general and in Medina in particular. However, the Ḥejāz always remained under Sunnite suzerainty, with the notable exception of the Ismāʿili Fatemid caliphs of Cairo who were the acknowledged rulers of Mecca and Medina between 976 and 1171. As far as religious life in the two holy cities is concerned, the situation was, and has remained, somewhat different: The Zaydi denomination of the (Ḥasanid)

Sharifian rulers of Mecca and the Imāmi-Shiʿi leanings of the (Ḥosaynid) emirs of Medina were well known to medieval Sunni and Shiʿi observers. This situation gradually changed under Mamluk rule (for the development over several centuries, up to the end of the Mamluk period, see articles by Mortel mentioned in the bibliography below). A number of Shiʿite and Sunnite sources hint at (alleged or real) sympathy for the Shiʿa among the Hāshemite (officially Sunni) families of the Ḥejāz, or at least some of their members. This seems to hold true for the Mamluk as well as the Ottoman period. Concerning the latter, it is recorded even for the 19th and 20th centuries (Salati ,1993; Ende, 1997).

Under Ottoman rule, i.e., from 1517 onwards, the authorities pursued a more or less open policy of discrimination against Shiʿites, and in particular the pilgrims. However, the number of both indigenous and foreign Shiʿites residing in the two holy cities remained relatively large–at least in the 16th century. The conflict between the Ottomans and the Safawids (and later Persian dynasties) resulted in a series of crises over the pilgrimages of Shiʿites to Mecca and the *zeyārat* to Medina (Faroqhi, p. 127ff.).

Sometimes these developments also had serious repercussions on the situation of the indigenous Arab Shiʿite population of the Ḥejāz. This is especially true of an Imāmi-Shiʿi community living on the outskirts of Medina, the so-called *naḵāwela* (sing. *naḵili*). The name of this group is derived from the fact that its members lived in the palm groves south of the holy city. They were forced to exist there as a pariah-like community. For instance they were not allowed to settle inside the walls of Medina, or to bury their dead in the cemetery of Al-Baqiʿ, i.e., in the immediate neighborhood of their imams (Ende, 1997, pp. 293-98).

In spite of many difficulties, the Twelver Shiʿite community of Medina has survived up to the present day, i.e., even under Saudi-Wahhābi rule. Its numerical size, however, is far from certain – especially since some authors add an estimated number of 5000 people from Shiʿa Sayyed families (who in general are well integrated into the Medinese society) to the figure of about 19,000 “real” naḵāwela. Others even include several thousand Shiʿites from some tribes in Wadi al-Faraʿ (Ende, pp. 316-318, and al-Khoei, p. 248)

There has been speculation, mainly by Sunni authors from Medina or from abroad, concerning the alleged foreign ethnic origins of the naḵāwela. There is no evidence, however, that the whole group, or a considerable part of it, is

originally of Iranian or otherwise non-Arab extraction. Some observers, such as Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (pp. 39,64,66f.) have noted that almost all of the naḵāwelathey met in Medina were of dark complexion. In fact there may be an admixture of the descendants of former African slaves or immigrants (concerning the whole question of the origin of this group, see Ende, 1997, pp. 298-312).

For a long time, the survival of the naḵāwelaand other Shiʿites in the Ḥejāz was guaranteed by the protection they received from some bellicose sub-tribes of the Banu Ḥarb and the Johayna, which openly declared themselves to be Shiʿites, but apparently without strong affiliations to any particular *maḏhab.* However, the gradual erosion of the political and military power of the tribes under Saudi rule, and the migration of many of the tribal people to the towns, led to the disappearance of this protection. In the Shiʿite petition of 2003 (see below), the oppression of the Shiʿite community of Medina is mentioned as being particularly serious.

In Shiʿite writings concerning the Ḥejāz, both the history and present condition of the cemetery of al-Baqiʿ (see above) are a frequent topic (Jaʿfariyān, pp. 257-79). There are many complaints about the treatment of Shiʿite pilgrims visiting this graveyard. Under Ottoman rule, Shiʿites from Persia and other lands were sometimes prevented from entering the Baqiʿ or, more frequently, had to pay an additional levy to do so. From 1805 to 1812, the Wahhābis were in either direct or indirect control of Medina. Among other things, they are accused of having destroyed the tombs and domed shrines there, including the mausolea of the four Shiʿite Imams (see above). Several of the shrines were rebuilt after the Ottomans had again taken control of the Ḥaramayn. In April 1926, however, the Wahhābi-Saudi conquerors, in accordance with their doctrinal disapproval of the veneration of graves, once again ordered the destruction of all the tombstones and mausolea at al-Baqiʿ. Since then, protests against these measures and the present condition of the cemetery are a leitmotiv of Shiʿite writings concerning the *ḥajj*, Saudi Arabia and related issues. It is true that not only Shiʿites, but also a number of Sunnite authors, such as the Egyptian Moḥammad Ḥosayn Haykal (pp. 525-28) have criticized the destruction of the most important historic cemetery of Islam. However, the bulk of (more or less polemical) literature on the present state of al-Baqiʿ stems from Shiʿites. Occasionally the issue of that cemetery is also part of campaigns in various countries, including Persia, aimed at securing international, pan-Islamic control of Mecca and Medina–something the Saudi dynasty, as well as

the Wahhābi ulema of course, strongly reject (al-Ḥasan, II, pp. 203–32; a survey of monuments demolished in Medina since 1926 is to be found in ʿĀmeli, pp. 401–53; a statement by Iranian president Moḥammad Ḵātami concerning a possible restoration of al-Baqiʿ is quoted in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*, 23, 1999, publ. 2001, p. 516).

Eastern Arabia. From early Islamic times, eastern Arabia has been an arena of contention between Sunni and Shiʿi Muslims. The major Shiʿite branches involved in this confrontation with local Sunnites have been the Ismāʿilis and the Imāmis (Twelver Shiʿites). Of particular importance was the establishment, in the late ninth century, of a Carmathian (q.v.) state in Bahrain and the coastal regions of the peninsula. For a considerable time the Carmathians (Arabic plur. *qarāmeṭa*), a radical Ismāʿili sect, controlled the overland trade as well as many of the pilgrimage routes of eastern Arabia. Some Carmathian tribes remained important at least into the 15th century. Already in the 13th century, however, there was a gradual shift of many Shiʿites in the region from Carmathian Ismāʿilism to the Twelver Shiʿa–first to the Oṣuliya and later to the Aḵbāri school (Cole).

Since the second half of the 18th century, the Shiʿite communities living in the Gulf region of present-day Saudi Arabia (Al-Aḥsāʾ, also called Al-Ḥasāʾ, and Qaṭif) have been confronted with a notoriously anti-Shiʿite movement, the Wahhābiya (Peskes and Ende, pp. 39-47). With the establishment in 1913 of direct Saudi rule in this region, the religious and political situation of these communities became precarious. While Ebn Saʿud was reluctant, for pragmatic reasons, to put much pressure on the Shiʿites there, the Wahhābi ulema urged strict measures. In a *fatwā* dated February 2, 1927, the leading Najdi scholars demanded, among other things, a more radical policy towards this community. They advised Ebn Saʿud that the Shiʿa living under his rule "must be asked to surrender to true Muslims, and should not be allowed to perform their misguided religious rites in public" (Arabic text in Ḥāfeẓ Wahba, *Jazirat al-ʿarab fi l-qarn al-ʿešrin*, numerous editions, 5th ed. Cairo 1967, p. 296f., Engl. tr. in idem, *Arabian Days*, London 1964, p. 135f.). Ebn Saʿud had to give in on this point. The ensuing policy of forced conversion to Wahhābism was, however, discontinued from 1930 onwards, but the situation remained tense. Shiʿites were prohibited from building new mosques and *ḥosayniyas*. Their educational institutions met with many difficulties. As no qualified local scholar could be found to fill the position of *marjaʿ al-taqlid* (high-ranking jurisconsult), some *mojtaheds* (leading ulema) of Najaf have exercised this

function since the late 1940s, but used to appoint a lower-ranking scholar to serve as their representative on the spot (Steinberg; and al-Ḥasan).

The Eastern Province (as the region was officially called since 1952) is the heart of Saudi-Arabia's oil industry. Local Shiʿites allegedly constitute between 40 and 60 percent of the workforce in this industry (Fürtig, p. 36; referring to Ḥamza al-Ḥasan, vol. II, pp. 285ff). Any political unrest among this community is inevitably viewed by the Saudi government as a serious challenge. The positive response of many Shiʿites in the Eastern Province to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, manifesting itself, inter alia, in highly politicized ʿĀšurāʾ processions, is a case in point. There was even a series of riots, which came to an end only in 1980.

In the following years, there has been intense agitation on the part of various Shiʿite opposition groups operating mainly from abroad. On the other hand, there was some easing of tension inside the country in the late 1990s (Fandy, pp. 195-228). The underlying conflict, however, continues unabated: A petition handed over to crown prince ʿAbd-Allāh on April 30, 2003, clearly stated both the grievances and demands of the Twelver Shiʿite community. (The text did not mention the existence of Zaydis and Ismāʿilis in the country). The petition was signed by 450 Shiʿite citizens of Saudi Arabia, including 50 religious scholars, 151 businessmen, and 24 women. In the first place, they called for an end to all religious, political and social discrimination (of which they gave many examples). While stressing the importance of both Muslim and Arab national unity, the petitioners declared their loyalty to the kingdom: Shiʿite citizens (*mowāṭenun*) are, in their words, "a deep-rooted (*aṣil*) and inseparable part" of the indigenous population. For them, Saudi Arabia is "their definitive fatherland (*waṭan*); they have no alternative to it, and feel no loyalty (*walāʾ*) to any other country" (Arabic text in the Beirut daily newspaper *Al-Safir*, May 22, 2003, p. 19).

In general, the Shiʿites of Saudi Arabia are now increasingly determined to reassert their religious and cultural heritage. In spite of its shortcomings, the *Moʿjam* published by Āl Jomayʿ (see bibl.) is a case in point. At the same time, some government circles have declared their readiness to enter into a dialogue with this community. An interesting new development is to be seen in the fact that Shiʿite intellectuals from the Eastern Province are writing their own regional history, thereby seeking to dismiss, *inter alia*, any suggestions that their community (or a considerable part of it) is of Iranian or otherwise non-Arab origin (Al-Rasheed).

Bahrain and the other Gulf States. As mentioned above, there had been a gradual shift in the Bahrain archipelago from Ismāʿilism to Twelver Shiʿism. The importance of the Twelver Shiʿi community there increased under Persian (more or less indirect) sovereignty from 1602 onwards, but declined after the Sunni Āl Khalifa (of Najdi origin) had established their rule over Bahrain in 1783.

In modern times, it can be said that the majority of the urban population is Sunni, while the rural population is almost exclusively Shiʿi (see BAHRAIN ii. SHIʿITE ELEMENTS). The indigenous Shiʿites call themselves Baḥārna (sing. Baḥrāni), while the Sunnis prefer the name Bahraini for themselves. About 15-18% of the population are said to be *ʿajam*, i.e., people whose ancestors have immigrated to Bahrain, in most cases from the 19th century onwards, from the coastal regions of Persia. Approximately 25% of them are allegedly Sunni. Many of them speak Persian amongst themselves, but the majority insist that their families are originally of Arab, not Iranian, extraction (Meinel, pp. 144-47).

According to government sources, the Shiʿites in the mid-1990s comprised about 35% of the total indigenous population of about 350 000 persons. Opposition sources speak of 55 to 60% or even more. At all events, the Shiʿites of Bahrain, among whom there are some Šayḵis, in their majority represent the poorest sector of society. There is obvious discrimination against them in the civil service and the army.

In 1995, the long-standing conflict between the Shiʿites and the government erupted in a number of violent clashes. In the following years, however, there has been some easing of tension between the two sides. This development has been fostered by an improvement of political relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a result of which the question of the age-old Iranian territorial claims to Bahrain has become less pressing. Back in 1971, the Shah had formally given up Iran's claim, but after the Islamic Revolution this statement appeared no longer valid (for details concerning internal developments, see Mühlböck, and the annual reports in *Middle East Contemporary Survey*). In September 2003, an international pan-Islamic conference with the aim of promoting reconciliation and solidarity between Sunnis, Shiʿis and other Islamic religious sects (*maḏāheb*)was held, with royal patronage, in Manama (see *Dialogue*, a bulletin published by the Public Affairs Committee for Shiʿa Muslims, London, October 2003, pp. 4-5).

In other Persian Gulf states (Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and what is now the UAE), the indigenous Shiʿite population had been comparatively small. As a result of the oil boom, however, there has been massive immigration of workers, clerks, businessmen and others, including many Shiʿites from Iran, India, Pakistan and elsewhere. In Kuwait and Qatar, for instance, some 20% of the population are Shiʿites–in most cases non-natives. To the dismay of some Sunnites, they make their presence felt in public, especially during Shiʿite religious festivals such as ʿĀšurāʾ and Ḡadir Ḵomm.

The Yemen: Ḥaḍrami Sayyeds and Shiʿism. From the early 20th century onwards, there has been a tendency among Sunni Sayyed (plur. *sāda*) families in Ḥaḍramawt to display their Twelver Shiʿite leanings openly. To some extent, this seems to have been a reaction on the part of some of the *sāda* to the growing Wahhābi (Salafi) influence among Ḥaḍramis living in Southern Arabia or abroad. It appears, however, that this tendency has only had lasting success among members of the Ḥaḍrami diaspora in South East Asia (Ende, 1973, pp. 82-97; Alatas, pp. 323-39; Hartwig, pp. 340-44).

The Zaydiyya. As is the case in other regions of the Arabian Peninsula, Shiʿism has had its adherents in Yemen since the era of the Ḵolafāʾ Rāšedun. The particular role of the Shiʿa in that country, however, begins with the establishment, by Al-Hādi ilā' l-Ḥaqq, of a Zaydi imamate in 897. The town he chose to become the capital of the new state, Ṣaʿda, has remained the stronghold of Zaydism in Yemen, and in particular of the legal school named after him, the Hādawiya.

In principle, the function of the imam is not hereditary in Zaydism, and so the formation of dynasties was not favored by Zaydi doctrine. Nevertheless, over many centuries there have been Zaydi Sayyed families ruling over relatively large areas of Yemen (Smith, pp. 271-73). In 1962, Imam Moḥammad al-Badr, and with him the dynasty of the Ḥamid al-Din, was overthrown by a military coup. The ensuing proclamation of an Arab republic was a serious challenge to the traditional Zaydi imamate. Admittedly, there had been times in the past without a generally recognized imam, and the legitimate period of an interregnum had never been fixed by the Zaydi scholars. But under the new circumstances it was necessary to reconcile Hādawi Zaydism, based on descent-based authority, with the (probably permanent) absence of an imam as well as with the basic principles of a republic. In the years following the unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in May 1990, there have been

some signs of a Zaydi revival. A political party drawing its support from Zaydis has been established, and there has been greater ritual activity as well as an increase in Zaydi religious instruction. Traditional doctrine and history, including the imamate, have been subjected to critical scrutiny by a number of authors. This development has been fostered and inspired by the existence of a reformist school in Zaydism (called "neo-Sunni" by some) going back to scholars such as Moḥammad ʿAli al-Šawkāni (d. 1834). The ultimate aim of this recent internal debate is to show that Zaydism is able to accommodate itself to the absence of an imam (in the traditional sense) without compromising its "real" principles. (For details concerning developments in Zaydi thought after 1962, see G. vom Bruck and B. Haykel, in bibl.).

In general, religious polemics between Zaydis and Sunnis are avoided by both sides in the country itself. However, hostile statements by foreign Wahhābi scholars concerning Zaydism in many cases have been rejected by Zaydi authors – see, e.g., Badr al-Din (..) al-Ḥawṭi al-Ḥosayni, *Al-ijāz fi l-radd ʿalā fatāwi l-Ḥejāz*, Ṣanʿāʾ and Ḥodeyda, n.d. (1977 or somewhat later), a reply to Saudi-Wahhābi *fatwas* (in particular by Shaikh Ebn Bāz, d. 1999) according to which the ritual prayer of a Sunni behind a Zaydi was unlawful.

The bulk of the Zaydi population is still concentrated in the highlands of Yemen. It has been swollen by the forced repatriation of many migrant workers from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere after the Gulf war of 1990/91, when the Yemeni government had temporarily sided with Iraq. Many of those returning workers, however, chose not to go back to their native towns or villages, but rather to settle with their families in and around Ṣanʿāʾ.

The Ismāʿiliyya. In various regions of the Arabian Peninsula, such as the Ḥejāz and Bahrain (see above), Ismāʿili Shiʿism has been of great importance in the past. The same holds true for Yemen. A number of local Ismāʿili dynasties acknowledging the Fatemid caliphs of Cairo, such as the Ṣolayḥeds (1047-1138), were able to rule over considerable parts of both the highlands and the Red Sea coastal region for some time. One of the most important Arabic works concerning the history of the Ismāʿili *daʿwa* in Yemen (covering the time up to the 12th century, but written in the 15th) has been published by Ayman Fuʾād Sayyid (in collaboration with P. E. Walker and M. A. Pomerantz), *The Fatimids and their Successors in Yaman. The History of an Islamic community. Arabic Edition and English Summary of Idris ʿImād al-Din's ʿUyun al-akhbār,* vol. 7, 2002 (useful bibliography pp. 96-101).

There is still an Ismāʿili minority in that country, living mainly in the Ḥarāz region near the town of Manāḵa. In Saudi Arabia, a small indigenous Ismāʿili community is concentrated in or around Najrān, near the border to Yemen. There are a number of Ismāʿilis among migrant workers (from India and other countries) living in Oman, Kuwait and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region.

Concerning the population figures (in total number or percentage) mentioned in the present article, a general caveat is in order: There are significant discrepancies in government statistics, international surveys, press reports and opposition publications. Government circles usually tend to give low figures (if any) for the Shiʿa or other minorities in the Arabian Peninsula, while representatives of such groups are prone to exaggerate the relevant data. Moreover, some obvious discrepancies in the sources are the result of terminological blunders, such as the confusion of the number of "inhabitants" of a country (including immigrant workers and others) with that of its regular "citizens."

This in turn is the result, *inter alia*, of the rather draconian laws of naturalization and the way so called "native" or "regular" residents are distinguished from "immigrant workers" who have been residents of the country for many years without becoming citizens.

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