

## GUNS & NECKTIES

Ties and assault rifles have more in common than one might think. At popular Yemeni border crossings like al-Boq and al-Kadhr, travelers from Saudi Arabia have their pick of an impressive arsenal of weapons for rent. AK-47 rifles cost about 20 Saudi riyals (about \$5), pistols go for 15 riyals, and daggers an economical 10 riyals.

Carrying weapons remains an integral part of life in Yemen. Tribesmen traditionally use weapons for both self-defense and as markers of virility, wealth, and honor. It is not uncommon to see a man strolling down a street in the tribal towns of northern Yemen with multiple weapons strapped to his back. Saudis visiting those areas often carry weapons to help blend in, as well as for protection.

The proliferation of weapons in Yemen means small disputes sometimes turn deadly. Approximately 1,200 Yemenis are killed every year in intertribal warfare. Battles against the government are often bloody as well; casualties from gun clashes recently overwhelmed medical facilities in the northern city of Sa'ada. Experts estimate there to be at least nine million privately owned small arms in Yemen—almost two for every male Yemeni over 16.

Although the government has tried for decades to restrict weapons, especially in major cities, customs die hard in the rugged, mountainous country. A Yemeni professor named Ahmed al-Kibsi explained it matter-of-factly to the BBC: "Just as you have your tie, the Yemeni will carry his gun." ■-DL

## THE REAL SHI'A-SUNNI CONFLICT

By Jon B. Alterman

Religion, sometimes, is a continuation of politics by other means. Growing Shi'a-Sunni tensions in the Middle East provide further proof this is so.

Politics, not theology, was at the root of the Shi'a-Sunni split to start with. The Prophet Muhammad was both a religious and political leader, and he left no clear heir. Shi'a argued that leadership should be reserved to members of the Prophet Muhammad's family. Sunnis argued that it should be the most capable among the leadership, regardless of parentage. Doctrinal differences have emerged since—having to do with things such as the assessment of charitable responsibilities, inheritance laws, the position of one's hands during prayer, and other practical issues—but those differences came after the schism. Politics created the Shi'a-Sunni split, not theology.

Through history, populations have flipped back and forth between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. The world's leading Shia state, Iran, was largely Sunni until Shah Ismail I proclaimed Shi'a Islam the state religion of Persia in 1501. Scholars see Ismail's move as purely political. Until then, Persia was a geographic entity, not a political one. It bordered the Ottoman Empire, which was both the seat of the Sunni caliphate and an awesome political and military force. Shi'ism was an instrument through which Ismail sought to distinguish his domains from those of the Ottomans. His subjects quickly got the message. Populations embraced Shi'ism *en masse*, serving their own immediate political needs as well as the broader ones of the state. Shi'a Islam unified Persia, giving the country a kind of political coherence that it had lacked until then. So it has been, before and since. Sectarian identity has been a marker of difference and a sign of loyalty.

At the same time, sectarian identity has been held up as a sign of disloyalty. In modern Iraq, Sunnis sometimes refer to the Shi'a majority of the country as Safavids, after the empire Ismail established. The slur is meant to suggest that Shi'a loyalty is to Iran rather than to Iraq. Sunni majorities in the Arab states of the Gulf (and the Sunni minority of Bahrain) often accuse the Shi'a in their midst of being a fifth column—agents of Iranian influence against the interests of their homeland.

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## REACHING ARAB AUDIENCES

On February 21, 2007, the Middle East Program and Layalina Productions hosted New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman for a discussion entitled "Reaching Arab Audiences." The event marked the launch of Layalina's new series "On the Road in America" that covers the travels of three Arab youths across the United States and is being broadcast on MBC satellite network. Friedman argued that such efforts need to be one of many tools that the United States uses to communicate with Arab audiences. Still, he argued that such efforts cannot succeed absent a sound U.S. policy in the Middle East, including active engagement on the Arab-Israeli conflict. To listen to the event, please click [HERE](#). ■

It is here that the reality of the Shi'a-Sunni split becomes clearer. The issue is not so much Shi'ism as it is Arab fear of Iranian influence. Iran looms large for any number of reasons. It is a massive state with almost 70 million citizens, dwarfing countries such as Iraq with some 26 million and Saudi Arabia with perhaps 22 million, to say nothing of countries such as Kuwait with just over a million. Its military dwarfs that of its neighbors. It is a country with a rich tradition of history, art, literature and culture that stretches back thousands of years. For centuries Iranians disdained the Arabs of their south and west with the epithet "lizard eaters," suggesting that the Arabs are both impoverished and uncultured. What is perhaps most distressing is that Iran is a former empire with a long history of regional dominance. As one Gulf leader told me in January, "Iran has been Shia for only four centuries, but it has been Persian for millennia."

Britain mediated the Arab-Iranian rivalry for 150 years, starting in the early nineteenth century. Then in the mid-twentieth century, the United States managed the conflict by supporting both sides. The "Twin Pillars" strategy that the United States pursued in the Gulf brought the United States close to both the Shah's Iran and Saudi Arabia, relying on both as a bulwark against Soviet influence in the area. The Iranian revolution in 1979 ejected the United States as a referee; Arab states soon lined up behind Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a necessary balance against Iranian influence in the Gulf, and they threw themselves even more tightly into an American embrace.

With Iraq gone as a balancer, some now see Iran as unfettered in its bid for regional dominance. Many states in the region fear a U.S.-led war against Iran on their doorstep, but they also fear what an unconstrained Iran could do to coerce its neighbors.

For its part, Iran has not made these states more comfortable. Part of the Iranian strategy in the region appears to be to reach into local politics to strengthen Shi'a populations. There is scant political participation in most places in the Gulf, but where there is such participation, Shi'a are underrepresented. Socially and economically, Shi'a communities are more marginalized, less educated, and poorer. It is not surprising that as Iran seeks to expand its regional reach, it would reach out toward coreligionists; neither is it surprising that Shi'a across the region would welcome whatever outside support they could get.

Whatever the religious rhetoric (and that rhetoric has been remarkably heated), this is basically a political struggle over money and power—the sorts of political struggles that have existed for millennia. Antagonists battle using a religious vocabulary, but that vocabulary obscures the nature of the dispute rather than illuminates it.

There is nothing insidious in any of this, nor should any of it be surprising. Importantly, though, for all of the tensions between Shi'a and Sunni communities, there are political deals that can be struck that will put them to rest. Such deals will almost certainly occur in the coming years. Political consensus, however messy, is far easier to strike than theological consensus, and the stakes are lower. We should be grateful that the solution to this problem lies not with God, but with Mammon. ■3/12/07

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## Links of Interest

The Middle East Program continued its Congressional Forum on Islam with a discussion on "[Jihad and Modern Islam](#)" with Aron Zysow.

CSIS hosted [Frank Lavin](#), the Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade, for a discussion on the Iraqi economy.

Anthony H. Cordesman released a new report on [Iran's nuclear and missile programs](#).

The CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction project released a report entitled [Breaking Point: Measuring Progress in Afghanistan](#).

CBS Evening News interviewed Jon B. Alterman about the [use of dirty bombs in Iraq](#) and the [British withdrawal](#).

[Layalina Productions](#), creator of the "On the Road in America" series.

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