The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

Arab Shia Communities in Transition: A Peacemaking Opportunity for the International Community?

Workshop Report

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The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), launched in 2015, is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to providing expert research and analysis of the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Gulf Arab states and key neighboring countries and how they affect domestic and foreign policy. AGSIW focuses on issues ranging from politics and security to economics, trade, and business; from social dynamics to civil society and culture. Through programs, publications, and scholarly exchanges the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform the U.S. foreign-policy, business, and academic communities regarding this critical geostrategic region.

info@agsiw.org

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About This Report

On November 22-23, 2021, the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Syria/Iraq office held a workshop with the theme "Arab Shia Communities in Transition: A Peacemaking Opportunity for the International Community?" Convened virtually, the workshop brought together a diverse group of two dozen practitioners, researchers, and academics from the Middle East. The discussions, held under the Chatham House Rule, focused on the development of a new, autonomous Shia identity in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. This report was compiled by Geneive Abdo, visiting fellow at AGSIW. It represents the ideas and opinions of the author and does not necessarily reflect those of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

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Executive Summary

The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung held a workshop November 22-23, 2021 on Shia communities in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. The workshop explored the shifting dynamics within these communities, their relationships to their respective states, and their attempts to oppose government policies, some of which marginalize Shia communities. The growing independence of Shia communities from the state was the central focus of the workshop. The first and third sessions focused primarily on the opposition movements in Iraq and Lebanon. The second session focused on Shia communities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and their cross-border relations. The final session detailed the evolution of Arab Shia communities since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. At that time, Iran intended to export its ideology to the Arab Shia population. However, more than 40 years later, Arab Shias are increasingly distancing themselves from Iranian influence and charting their own course.

Introduction

Discussions during the workshop "Arab Shia Communities in Transition: A Peacemaking Opportunity for the International Community?" focused on the development of a new, autonomous Shia identity in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Participants defined this new Shia identity as independent from states, particularly in countries where Shias are a minority, while also independent from Shia-majority Iran and its theocratic rule. This evolving Shiism also competes with national identities in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait and is different from one Arab country to the next, depending upon the receptivity of the larger population and the government's inclusiveness of the Shia community in the political sphere.

This new-found Shia "autonomy," as one participant described it, is a departure from both Sunni state marginalization and religious and political manipulation from Tehran. It marks a major development in the Middle East. It also signals a remarkable turn in the historical trajectory of the Arab Shias, who for centuries have largely defined themselves – and in turn, been defined – not so much in their own terms but in opposition to a dominant Sunni majority.

Participants agreed that there is little value in the timeworn concept of a "Shia Crescent" of homogenous co-religionists stretching across a map of the Middle East. Likewise, casting the Shia population in Arab states as a permanent, historical underclass to the broader Sunni majority obscures the diversity of Shia social and political life – and even religious practice – today. It is time for a new approach, one that takes into account the presence and vitality of individual Shia communities, rather than dismissing differences in the name of an imagined Shia monolith that is largely submissive to Iranian political power.

One of the many reasons for the growing autonomous Shia identity is the ongoing geopolitical rivalry for influence between Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and Shia-dominated Iran over the last decade, which has led to the polarization of sectarian identities among Shias and Sunnis. In many Arab countries with large Shia communities, Iran has tried to co-opt the Shia population primarily because many Arab Shias adhere to the Twelver Shia religious school of thought, which Iran considers its domain as the self-appointed guardian of Shias across the

world. However, this co-optation has backfired, and a growing number of Shias are asserting their autonomy.

With Iranian sponsorship of Arab Shiism, there was a realization that it was not so much a spiritual mission, but rather for many Arab Shia communities, it translated into geopolitical benefits for Iran. – An Iraqi scholar

In practical terms, Shia communities are in transition and engaged in transnational networks. This is illustrated by growing Shia opposition to Iran's claim on religious and political leadership, a gravitation toward the Najafi school in Iraq (instead of the religious center of Qom, Iran), and a search for a new political leadership that speaks to Shia grievances. Iraq is a prime example. Since October 2019, protesters on the streets of Iraqi cities, including Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, and Karbala, have been mostly Shias, and their grievances are with the Shia parties – some of which are backed by Iran – that are part of the political establishment. These protests have sparked what is perhaps the only formidable Shia opposition movement in the Arab world that is challenging a Shia-led government inside the country. Although their well-known grievances, including government corruption, unemployment, a corrupt and renegade security apparatus, and a lack of basic services, are shared among most Iraqis, the protests nonetheless illustrate the growing generational divide between the protesters and the Shia political establishment. The young protesters on the streets clearly have a new vision for Iraq, which the older Shia political elites consider an existential threat to their own power and influence.

On a regional level, Shia communities are no longer isolated from other Shias living across national borders. Instead, Shias are establishing and benefiting from Shia networks outside their communities. At times, they have voiced cross-regional support for their Shia co-religionists battling Sunni-dominated states in political as well as religious terms.

Given this context, the workshop participants directed their discussions to address the following questions:

- Who are the Shia community's new leaders?
- Who are the Shia community's religious figures?
- Is the turn against Iran lasting or temporary?
- Is the mobilization among Shia communities heading toward any cohesive movement?
- What can the international community do to capitalize on Shia mobilization and engage those Shias drifting away from Tehran, especially as European governments, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the United States try to de-escalate the conflict with Iran?
- What are some concrete and actionable recommendations for policymakers?

Iraq – Moving Beyond Shia Victimhood and Oppositional Politics to a Struggle for Defining the Iraqi State

In Iraq today, the term "Shia politics" is anything but oppositional. Some Shias define the state and alienate non-Shia Iraqis from politics. The dominance of Shia political parties is not challenged by the Sunni parties but by the Shia youth and intra-Shia competition.
– An Iraqi scholar and former advisor to the Iraqi prime minister

In Iraq, ethno-religious trends have dominated politics since the first parliamentary elections in 2005. The president of Iraq has been a Kurd, the prime minister an Arab Shia, and the speaker of parliament an Arab Sunni. Iraq is marked by a hybrid form of politics. Although a younger generation, some of whom were on the streets in 2019 and 2020 to protest against the state, advocates for nationalism and an Iraq for all Iraqis, the electoral system is marred by *Muhasasa* consociationalism power-sharing arrangements, essentially a quota system, whereby ethno-religious affinities determine who is in power or how power is shared among different groups. The system places considerably greater influence in the hands of community and sectarian leaders, rather than the voters. When the system was created, the ruling elite justified the power-sharing order by arguing that Iraq was divided among ethnic and religious groups.[1]

The protest movement, which began in October 2019, is challenging the notions of the Muhasasa system. Although the protest movement, comprised primarily of young Shia activists, has no cohesive leadership, its campaign for an end to sectarian politics, government corruption, and economic and environmental disaster has resonated with larger Iraqi society. The protest movement is the most formidable challenge to Iraq's Shia-led government since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion opened the way for Shia-led governance and has gained broad-based support. The case of contemporary Iraq offers a good illustration of the need to move beyond old definitions and approaches. Rather than see the protest movement as a strictly oppositional force, it is important to recognize that the mostly young Shia activists are focused on creating new politics not simply reacting against the old.

In 2019, the protesters were protesters who happened to be Shia rather than "Shia protesters."
– An Iraqi scholar

In the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion and subsequent overthrow of Sunni power, a gradual but steady emergence of a distinct, national Iraqi identity came to the fore, as opposed to one grounded in binary sectarian affiliation – Shia or Sunni. The October 2021 parliamentary elections offered the greatest evidence of this growing national identity.

The election results, for example, reveal the growing influence of young Iraqis and women, with the latter holding 41% of seats in the new Parliament, according to statistics from one participant, a well-known and respected pollster. The pollster also noted that the candidates

1 Genieve Abdo, "Iraq's Elections: Will Boycott Efforts Delegitimize or Entrench Discredited Status Quo?," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, September 23, 2021.

from the protest movement, known as Tishreen, secured an impressive 16 seats across five different provinces in the 329-seat Parliament. If much of the movement had not boycotted the elections, the protesters would likely have won many more seats. The participants all agreed that this was an important lesson for the protest movement: The prospect of changing the system, which is the movement's ultimate goal, is more attainable by participating in elections rather than boycotting. One participant explained: There were two main strategies within the protest movement. One, which is receding, was revolutionary and attempted to force a change of the system from the street. The other strategy was to participate in the elections and justify this participation by distinguishing between the political system and the political class, which most Iraqis believe is corrupt. Those who embraced the latter strategy won seats in the Parliament.

The new parties and factions, riding the crest of the protest movement, took around 40% of the seats, according to one participant. These parties included independents, not connected per se to the protest movement but advocating for the same reforms, as well as parties that emerged from the protest movement. Strengthened by significant electoral reform in 2020, new and smaller parties made deep inroads into the establishment's monopoly claim on political power. Now, they must consolidate those early gains and win over skeptical elements of Iraqi society that see any cooperation with "the system" as corrupt and, thus, illegitimate, the participants said. Preserving the new election law, which is the target of concerted opposition by the older, traditional parties, will be key to future success by the forces of reform. Separately, the reform movement and its political progeny must show that they can grapple successfully with a host of social and economic challenges and translate the anger and frustrations of the young generation into successful policies. Otherwise, the movement will fade away.

The data from the elections also reveals the degree to which political issues increasingly have a local character and focus rather than a national, sectarian one. And although there was a low voter turnout of 43%[2] – the pollster said his polling indicates that more than half of Iraqis believe the elections were fair – a great departure from previous elections when the electorate believed the elections were fraudulent.

Accompanying this is public opinion research that shows a diminution of support for Iran among Iraq's Shias, at times even lagging support for the other powerful foreign actor, the United States – although both figures fall short of 20%. Taken together, these trends represent profound social changes that can cut across old sectarian rivalries and create a new interest group politics focused on social, political, and economic issues outside of the traditional framework.

We started to see a shift from intersectarian to intrasectarian differences. This is a nationwide trend, and it is a historical moment that should be used to focus on the Iraqi identity rather than the Shia or Sunni identity. – An Iraqi pollster

Participants raised the question: Can the Iranian-backed old guard Shia politicians and factions, which suffered a significant loss in the October 2021 elections, regain the initiative by

2 Ahmed Tolba and Moaz Abd-Alaziz,"Turnout in Iraq's Election Reached 43% - Electoral Comission," *Reuters*, October 16, 2021.

reviving the politics of sectarian grievance, or have new strategies and fresh approaches been forced upon them? The answer was mixed, but participants agreed that the Iranian-backed traditional parties have failed to recognize either the scope of their defeat at the polls or the reasons behind it.

The problem is that many Iranian-backed factions are not behaving like losers – they are focusing on seat acquisition, and they are competing and trying to reconfigure the system to hold on to power. – An Iraqi scholar

Still, participants were largely in agreement that the election results as a whole would not be overturned or nullified. Rather, the traditional parties would likely try to dilute the opposition's influence in the new Parliament, blunt its initial successes, and plant doubts about election fraud, all as part of a comeback strategy for the next elections in 2025.

Saudi Arabia – Reimagining a Saudi National Identity, But Will It Succeed?

In 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told The Atlantic, "Shiites are living normally in Saudi Arabia. We have no problem with the Shiites. We have a problem with the ideology of the Iranian regime."[3] While this has been the public posture of the Saudi leadership regarding the country's Shia minority, the domestic politics of the kingdom in the past three years have been more complex. In particular, the crown prince is seeking to incorporate a new image of Saudi citizenship into the kingdom's Vision 2030 project and its wide-ranging economic and social aspirations. This effort has seen some token concessions, such as the closing of television stations that promoted Sunni Salafist clerics, who for decades espoused anti-Shia rhetoric, and extending citizenship to prominent Shias, such as the Lebanese scholar Mohammed al-Husseini in late 2021.[4] Parallel to Mohammed bin Salman's "liberalizing" reforms and his focus on entertainment since 2015, there has been an apparent attempt by the crown prince to shift Saudi national identity away from the religious sphere.

Toward this end, in 2017, Mohammed bin Salman silenced, detained, and, in some cases, imprisoned members of the kingdom's religious elite: Salafi clerics who have vast numbers of adherents throughout the Middle East. He banned their television programs and censored their Twitter accounts, some of which had millions of followers. One reason was that the Salafists opposed his liberal and nationalistic reform agenda. The other was that they based their global influence on an anti-Shia platform. Some even went as far as to argue that Shias are not real Muslims.[5]

However, despite such actions, Saudi Arabia has largely maintained a policy of persecuting Shia clerics, which, taken to the extreme, led to the execution of Nimr al-Nimr in 2016. The Eastern Province, located near the Saudi-Kuwaiti border, which is largely home to the kingdom's Shia

3 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good,'" *The Atlantic*, April 2, 2018.

4 "Lebanese Shia Scholar Among Those Granted Citizenship by Saudi Arabia," *Al-Arabiya News*, November 15, 2021.

5 Geneive Abdo and Abdallah Hendawy, "Saudi Arabia is Trying to Contain the Spread of Salafism. It Won't Work," *The Washington Post*, December 20, 2017.

population, has been a target of marginalization and persecution over many years, particularly during the 2017 crackdown in Qatif against the Shia community.[6] The kingdom's repression of Shia public religious practices continues to cause friction, and many Shias travel from Saudi Arabia to Kuwait to perform religious rituals, such as during commemorations like Ashura, the time of mourning to mark the assassination of Imam Hussein, the most revered Shia religious figure.

In the near future, changes in the makeup of an international Shia voice – as exported by Iran – may influence how Mohammed bin Salman treats Saudi Shia communities and their alleged connections to foreign ideologies, such as Iran's. Domestically, recent changes in the relationship between the Saudi Shia community and the government have been driven by an ascendent Shia identity built on Arab nationalism rather than religious sectarianism. Therefore, Mohammed bin Salman likely understands he is walking a tightrope between developing a new Saudi national identity, which would incorporate the kingdom's Shias, or risk that they develop a sectarian identity influenced by Iran – a potential challenge to Saudi state authority.

Participants agreed that Mohammed bin Salman and Vision 2030 seek to reimagine a Saudi national identity, outside of sectarian affiliation or leanings. But the past retains a powerful influence on any idea of the future, and that past is one of Shia marginalization, backed by structural violence. This poses serious obstacles to any nation-building project.

Now approaching a century of marginalization of Shia in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, that history is not easily forgotten in the name of the new nation-building project … History has shown us that marginalization and fear of the "other"' can rear its head again very easily, so there are many spoilers that could rear their heads to disrupt this complex process.
– A professor of international affairs who specializes in Saudi Arabia

Success would require the creation of a new model of Saudi identity, which remains rooted in a traditional ideal – masculine, Sunni, tribal, and Arab. Yet, Saudi Arabia is now moving increasingly toward absolute centralization, a policy that cannot help but adversely affect the Shia minority, even as it takes religion out of the central equation. At the same time, one participant said, "Visual signs of regional, ethnic, or religious differences have become more important in the rise" of Saudi nationalism. For example, the participant noted that people in the Hijaz region have been targeted more due to their tribal and traditional dress – attire in advertisements has been changed in recent years to the more modern dress of the Najdi region. This makes promoting a shared national identity much more difficult.

Where you come from in Saudi Arabia plays a factor in self-identification. The rise of nationalism has helped to blur these differences on a superficial level. Due to the clampdowns, you don't hear Shia-Sunni debates anymore. – A Saudi scholar

One participant argued that exceptional events, not Saudi state policy, would be necessary to create a more inclusive Saudi society for the Shia population. One example was the attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant on Shia mosques in Saudi Arabia in 2016, which left the community more reliant on state protection and earned Shias sympathy from the majority

6 "Awamiya: Inside Saudi Shia Town Devastated by Demolitions and Fighting," *BBC News*, August 16, 2017.

Sunni population.[7] He also cited a nationalist tinge to the Saudi campaign against the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, a trend that cut across sectarian lines. Likewise, the war in Yemen forced Saudi Arabia to be more accommodating to its domestic Shia community. The mass arrests and repression of extreme religious voices, in particular popular Salafist television preachers and social media stars, helped tone down sectarian tensions in the kingdom but left a religious vacuum that has yet to be filled.[8]

Participants were unable to agree on the degree to which religious identity is giving way to a national one. One participant argued a minority view that Shia communities are more localized and a transnational community that ripples across borders does not really exist. Others responded that regionwide Shia protests over the Saudi government's execution of Nimr al-Nimr showed that there was an international community capable of responding in a unified fashion.[9]

Still, there was a sense that a "universal" sectarian leaning did not necessarily dictate responses to local political or social problems. This could explain differing regional responses among Shias to events that happen in one country or another.

As part of the discussion, the participants compared the Shia community in Saudi Arabia with the Shias in neighboring Kuwait. One participant argued that Kuwait is the "Shia success story in the Gulf because they have enjoyed widespread rights and far less marginalization than in other Gulf states." For Shia communities in the Gulf, Kuwait has served as a gateway to shrines in Iraq and Iran as well as a safe haven for Saudi Shias to mark their religious rituals. However, the significant Shia minority (estimated around 40% of citizens) has had a complicated relationship in recent history with both the central government and the broader tribal structure of Kuwaiti society.

The specter of Iranian infiltration has produced anxiety from the government about Kuwait's Shias in the past, exemplified in the 2015 mass arrests of the Shia Abdali cell linked to Iran, and the gradual expulsion of popular transnational Shia clerics from the country over the past decade. Additionally, Shias in Kuwait have been historically excluded from ministerial posts that would give their community a grasp on institutional power. On the other hand, Kuwait is a relatively Shia-friendly country in the Gulf and extends bona fide citizenship to its Shia population, unlike the complicated legal status of such communities in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

Also, periods of suppression and exile, such as those in 2011-15, have often been followed by a period of rapprochement. In late 2021, for example, the same members of the Abdali cell were granted amnesty alongside the government opposition members who fled after the Arab Spring uprisings.[10] Sectarian pressure is felt most sharply by Kuwait's Shias during these periods of intense sectarian focus, particularly as predominantly Sunni government opposition parties have made greater challenges to the emir since 2008. Since then, the Shia community in Kuwait has begun shifting toward broad support for the sitting emir, as opposition politicians

7 "Shia Mosque in Saudi Arabia Hit by Gun and Bomb Attack," *Reuters*, January 29, 2016.

8 "Saudi Arabia Shuts Office of TV Channel for Fomenting Sectarian Tension," *Reuters*, November 5, 2014.

9 "Iraq Figures Urge Severing of New Saudi Ties Over Nimr Execution," *Reuters*, January 2, 2016.

10 "In Long-Awaited Move, Kuwait's Emir Pardons Dissidents," *Associated Press*, November 14, 2021.

have promoted more openly anti-Shia sentiments. This has placed many Kuwaiti Shias in a tenuous political situation between a national government they do not fully trust and Sunni opposition figures beating a drum of sectarian antagonism.

However, Kuwait has a much more robust and historical system of civic nationalism and citizenship for Shias than Saudi Arabia. Shias have legal access to the bureaucratic systems of the state and have won elected government positions in the past, albeit few. This relatively open political system has helped to give Kuwaiti Shias the largest voice of any such community in the Gulf Arab states and will likely continue to help them promote their interests in the future.

Lebanon – Strengthening the State Could Minimize Hezbollah's influence, Create Political Space for Broader Lebanese Shia Population

The problem Shia are facing in Lebanon is that there is no realistic alternative to Hezbollah. However, the community is not monolithic. – A Lebanese scholar

Lebanon is facing its most severe crises in modern history. The confluence of economic, structural, environmental, health, and political catastrophes are too challenging for a stable government, much less a failing state such as Lebanon, where sectarian politics is a major cause of state collapse.

After decades of relative prosperity, three-quarters of Lebanon's population lives in poverty. The government provides electricity for less than two hours a day. Thousands of physicians have fled the country, causing the collapse of the health-care system, which suffers from shortages of medicine, technology, hospital beds, and the exodus of physicians.[11]

By 2019, Sunni, Shia, and Christian sects were all suffering from the failings of the system to provide basic services. Many Shias in Lebanon and Iraq do not accept the Iranian theocratic model of governance – but they still face existential threats if they leave the Iranian "ecosystem." Therefore, Hezbollah is seen by Lebanese Shias as a safety net. Yet, Hezbollah is facing financial challenges and a loss of credibility due to its relations with Lebanese political elites, some of which oppose Hezbollah. While many Lebanese Shias have had a favorable view of Iran, that has begun to fade in recent years with the greatest declines in areas away from the dangerous and volatile Israeli border – where Hezbollah's security forces are more important.

In Lebanon there is a weak national identity overall. The idea of a national identity keeps coming up in Lebanese history, but sectarian fears and concerns rise up. – A Lebanese scholar

The innate weakness of the Lebanese state reinforces the tendency toward sectarianism. Solutions to political, social, and economic challenges must come from within the communities themselves, strengthening social cohesion along sectarian lines. One participant said the

11 Will Todman, "Lebanon's New Government," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 10, 2021.

omnipresence of "middlemen" in the form of sectarian leaders and factions between the individual and the state effectively closes off any notion of a Lebanese identity. The only way to break this nexus between sect and power is to encourage the creation of a civil society outside the traditional bounds of religious, tribal, or ethnic affiliation.

The protest movement in Lebanon, which began in 2019, held out the promise of reducing sectarian identities. Lebanese of all sects were on the streets to demand basic services, an end to government corruption, and a new era of government transparency and accountability to its citizens. However, as major catastrophes erupted, including a blast that destroyed a large portion of Beirut, economic collapse that prevented the Lebanese people from withdrawing their money from banks, and massive electricity shortages, society's attempt to bridge the sectarian divides to unite to confront the government waned.

On August 4, 2020 hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate ignited in a warehouse in the Beirut port. The explosion killed at least 217 people and was one of the largest nonnuclear blasts in history. An August 2021 Human Rights Watch investigation revealed that Lebanon's influential politicians, including the president and prime minister, were well aware of the hazard for years but never took measures to prevent the disaster.[12] Apparently, the materials were housed in the warehouse under Hezbollah's direction. The blast perhaps more than all the other catastrophes since 2019 ended society's seemingly united protest for economic and political reform.

Participants disagreed over whether providing an alternative to Hezbollah would create a better life for Shias and all Lebanese. Simply encouraging a Shia alternative capable of challenging Hezbollah would not solve the core problems. While Iraq is also a weak state, its overall structure still allows it to allocate resources and political power directly across communal lines. This, in part, explains why a national identity can emerge in Iraq while failing to materialize in Lebanon.

Conclusion

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a catalyst in pulling Arab Shia communities into Iran's orbit as the Islamic Republic claimed to be the new guardian of the global Shia community. Decades later, the Arab uprisings, which began in 2011, allowed Shia communities to break free from Iran's umbrella for several reasons. First, the ideological motivation upon which Iran used to bring all Shias under its sphere of influence – the so-called "axis of resistance" to confront Israel – lost relevance among Arab Shias. As Arabs revolted against their respective governments, their grievances and demands were issue based and localized. The Israeli occupation of Palestine lost relevance for Shias and Sunnis alike. Second, in countries such as Iraq, Shias looked to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as their spiritual leader, not Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Therefore, their financial and spiritual loyalty is to Najaf, Iraq, the holy city for Shias, not Qom, Iran, the spiritual center for Iranian Shias. Participants noted that Shias travel every year, for example, to Iraq or Kuwait to practice their religious rituals, not Iran. Third, since protests in 2019 began in Iraq and Lebanon, Shia citizens are charting a new course and becoming autonomous, not only from Iranian proxies, such as Hezbollah

12 "Lebanon: Evidence Implicates Officials in Beirut Blast," *Human Rights Watch*, August 3, 2021.

in Lebanon and the Iranian-backed Shia militias and parties in Iraq, but from the established elites running their governments.

Participants agreed that growing Shia autonomy creates an opportunity for Western government engagement as a counterweight to Iranian influence in the region. They also agreed that Gulf Arab states' outreach to Shia communities, which has been very limited aside from in Iraq, should increase as part of the geopolitical strategy among Gulf Arab states to minimize Iranian political and economic influence over Arab states. However, as the participants made clear, the Gulf Arab states' ability to secure loyalty from their Shia communities requires a dramatic end to political and economic marginalization.