



Is Sectarian Balance in the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar at Risk?

By Ahmad Khalid Majidyar

The Persian Gulf states of Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have largely been immune to the rising tide of sectarianism that has rocked the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. The three monarchies have successfully integrated their Shi'ite minority populations into their countries' sociopolitical and economic spheres, giving those populations little reason to engage in violence or seek political guidance from Iran or Iraq. Omani, Qatari, and Emirati Shi'ites strongly identify themselves as citizens of their respective countries and remain loyal to their ruling regimes. However, the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war—a sectarian conflict between the Shi'ite Iran-Hezbollah-Assad axis and the opposition groups backed by regional Sunni governments—are threatening Sunni-Shi'ite stability in the UAE, Qatar, and to a lesser degree, Oman. The United States should help maintain harmony in these states by reaching out to independent Shi'ite business communities and by working with regional leaders to ensure equal citizenship, political rights, and religious freedom among minority populations.

The Shi'ite Communities of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman has a population of approximately three million, two-thirds of which are citizens. About three-quarters of Omani nationals, including Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, are Ibadi Muslims; this Islamic sect evolved from a seventh-century AD rebellion and is distinct from Twelver Shi'ism and traditional Sunnism. Although Shi'ites in Oman constitute only 5 percent of citizens, they possess disproportionate influence in the political and economic spheres. They strongly identify themselves as Omanis and are loyal to the regime despite their different religious views.¹ Omani Shi'ites are ethnically and linguistically diverse and are divided into three main groups: the Lawatiyya, the Baharna, and the Ajam.

The Lawatiyya are the wealthiest, the largest in number, and the most politically influential

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- The Shi'ite minority populations of Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have largely integrated into their respective countries' political and economic spheres and have remained loyal to their respective monarchies.
- Escalating Shi'ite-Sunni conflict in the Persian Gulf in the wake of the Arab Spring threatens sectarian stability in these countries.
- The United States must take a more active role in shaping Omani, Qatari, and Emirati Shi'ites' perceptions of their governments and the West to undercut Iran's destabilizing influence and to prevent all-out sectarian war in the Gulf region.

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Shi'ite group in Oman. Most Lawatiyya reside in Muscat Province—predominantly in Muttrah and Muscat cities—and are also present in small numbers around the coastal cities of Al-Batinah Province.² The group's origin is unclear; many historians believe they migrated to Oman from Hyderabad, a city in present-day Pakistan, more than three centuries ago.³ In recent decades, however, the community has claimed Arab descent, reasoning that they temporarily lost their Arab and tribal identity by residing in India for centuries after the Islamic conquest of the subcontinent. The Lawatiyya were initially Ismaili Shi'ites, but were excommunicated after a dispute over the legitimacy of Aga Khan's succession in 1862.⁴ Some Iranian authors claim that Iranian preachers visiting Oman have converted the community into the Twelver school.⁵

The Lawatiyya are the most educated community in Oman, and their knowledge of South Asian languages, Arabic, and English has contributed to their success.

The community has traditionally occupied the Sur al-Lawatiyya, a gated complex of residential and religious buildings located in Muttrah. Most Lawatiyya families have long since resettled in Muscat's more modern neighborhoods. In the past, non-Shi'ites were forbidden from entering the Sur, but visitors can now enter the site by invitation. Money from the Lawatiyya charitable trust [*waqf*] goes into funding and maintaining the Sur.⁶ Not all Shi'ites frequent the Sur, however; the Baharna and Ajam communities and noncitizen Shi'ite groups have their own mosques and places of worship and social gathering [*housseiniyas*] in Muscat.⁷

Lawatiyya families run big businesses, dominate trade, and hold sizable shares in the National Bank of Oman and petroleum companies such as Petroleum Development Oman.⁸ The al-Sultan family, for example, is one of Oman's oldest and richest merchant families. The family owns W. J. Towell Group of companies, a leading Omani private-sector contracting firm, which also has branches in Kuwait.⁹ Additionally, the Lawatiyya are the most educated community in Oman, and their knowledge of South Asian languages, Arabic, and English has contributed to their success.¹⁰ As a result, the Lawatiyya have held senior positions in the government, including

posts as cabinet ministers, members in the Diwan of the Royal Court, and ambassadors to the United States and European countries.¹¹

The Baharna Shi'ites are Arabs who migrated to Oman from Bahrain, Iraq, and eastern Saudi Arabia over the last few centuries. The Baharna mostly live in Muscat and are adherents of Twelver Shi'ism. They maintain close contacts with fellow Baharna communities in other Gulf nations; following the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, for example, the Omani Baharna accommodated relatives fleeing Iraq and Kuwait.

While the Omani Baharna number only about a few thousand people, they play an influential role in Oman's politics and economy. Many families are represented in the Diwan of the Royal Court, and two prominent Baharni families, the al-Asfur and the Darwish, are among Oman's top businesspeople. Additionally, several Baharnis have held prominent political positions in Oman: Asim al-Jamali became the first minister of health in 1970 and later served as Oman's prime minister, and Ahmed Bin Abdul Nabi Makki served as the Omani ambassador to the United States and France and as the minister of civil service and minister of finance.¹²

The Ajam are Persian Shi'ites who migrated to Oman from southern Iran over the last several centuries, mainly in search of better economic opportunities and to escape the policy of compulsory military service under the Pahlavi rulers. They predominantly live in Oman's northern al-Batinah Province abutting the United Arab Emirates and in small numbers in Muscat. The Ajam community has assimilated well into Omani society; they rarely speak Persian and do not maintain family ties with Iran, and many have intermarried with other communities and have even taken Arab family names. Compared to the Lawatiyya and Baharna, the Ajam are less socially visible and are underrepresented in Oman's political and economic spheres. Many members, however, serve in the low ranks of Oman's security forces. Sheikh Mohammed Ridha al-Ajmi serves as the community's senior religious authority and as a liaison to the government, and they have their own mosques and charities.¹³

Each of Oman's three Shi'ite groups has its own elected leadership committee that manages the community's affairs according to the Shi'ite Jafari'a jurisprudence, including the community's endowments and charity distributions. Oman's Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) has lax oversight of the

committee's financial affairs. In addition to these three groups, there are noncitizen Shi'ite communities from Lebanon, Sudan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan, and other regional countries who have come to Oman for work.¹⁴

Emirati Shi'ites have greatly benefited from the UAE's economic boom, with some Shi'ite families included among the richest Emirati merchants.

Iranian Influence over Omani Shi'ites. Iran's influence over Omani Shi'ites has been limited. A large majority of Omani Shi'ites follow Iraq-based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as their religious source of emulation, and few look to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other Iranian ayatollahs for religious or juridical guidance. This reality, however, might change after al-Sistani's death, especially as a growing number of Omani Shi'ites have chosen Qom, Iran, over Najaf, Iraq, for religious and theological studies because of the past decade's security concerns in Iraq.¹⁵

Despite the Omani Shi'ites' demonstrated loyalty to Oman, some government officials and non-Shi'ite citizens still question the Shi'ites' loyalty, mainly because Shi'ite leadership has maintained ties with foreign sources of emulation [*marja'iyyas*] in Iran and Iraq. In 2008, a senior MERA official told an American diplomat that Sheikh Mohammed Ridha al-Ajmi, the leader of the al-Ajam community, was "Iranian-influenced." The official also alleged that Sheikh Ihsan Sadiq al-Lawati, the leader of the Lawatiyya community who studied theology in Qom from 1984 to 1993, also had pro-Iranian leanings. In contrast, he described the Baharna's Sayyid Sharif al-Massouwi as "reasonable" and "following his own views" instead of taking dictation from foreign sources.¹⁶

Some Omanis also criticize their Shi'ite compatriots for sending religious charity to Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon rather than assisting the poor inside Oman itself. As a result, MERA and the internal security services monitor Shi'ite activities to limit potentially destabilizing foreign influences on the Omani Shi'ite communities and to prevent strong connections between Omani Shi'ites and transnational Shi'ite political groups such as Hezbollah and the followers of the prominent

Shi'ite leader Ayatollah Sayyid Mohammed al-Shirazi.¹⁷ Oman's security services vet names and monitor the activities of foreign Shi'ite leaders who visit Oman during Shi'ite religious festivals to ensure that they do not promote political agendas; the Omani government has even been known to occasionally refuse visas to Iranian religious figures who seek to visit Oman.

Perhaps because of the Omani government's inclusion of its Shi'ite minority, as well as the community's small size, transnational Shi'ite groups have failed to make significant inroads into Oman. Most notably, there is no Hezbollah branch in Oman. Even the two leading international Shi'ite movements—the Dawa and Shirazi groups—had little success in their attempts to influence the Omani Shi'ites in the 1970s.¹⁸

Shi'ites in the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) population is more diverse, and noncitizens account for about 89 percent of the country's nine million residents. Of the one million nationals, between 10 and 15 percent are Shi'ites; the rest are Sunnis.¹⁹ The largest noncitizen Shi'ite communities in the UAE are merchants and migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and Iran. A majority of Shi'ites—both citizens and noncitizens—live in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Sharjah. Shi'ites have lived in the UAE since the mid-19th century, when they migrated to the Trucial Coast from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India. Most Arab and Iranian Shi'ites in the UAE belong to the Twelver school, while Shi'ite immigrants from South Asia are predominantly Ismailis.²⁰

Islam is the state religion in the UAE, and the constitution's Article 32 guarantees the "freedom to exercise religious worship . . . in accordance with established customs, provided that it does not conflict with public policy or violate public morals."²¹ Unlike Saudi Arabia, the Emirati government allows its Shi'ite minority to congregate and worship in their own mosques and *huseiniyas*, with only a few restrictions. Although Shi'ite mosques and *huseiniyas* are considered private property, Shi'ite representatives can request financial assistance from the government for building and maintaining their places of worship.²²

While the government appoints all Sunni imams and distributes weekly state-approved sermons to Sunni mosques, it has provided the Shi'ites with the autonomy to choose their mosque leaders and to write their own sermons (with some exceptions in Dubai). To

promote Sunni-Shi'ite harmony, senior Sunni government officials attend Shi'ite celebrations. Although foreign Shi'ite communities from South Asia, Iran, and Arab countries run their own places of worship, they often intermingle for Friday prayers and important religious gatherings.²³ The Emirati Shi'ites have their own council—the Jaafari Waqf Charity Council—which administers Shi'ite family law cases such as marriage, divorce, death, and inheritance. The Islamic studies curriculum teaches Sunni Islam only, but it does not include discriminatory content against the Shi'ite faith.²⁴

Given the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East, the Emirati federal authorities exercise more vigilance over Shi'ite citizens and Iranian and Lebanese diaspora in the country.

Emirati Shi'ites have greatly benefited from the UAE's economic boom, with some Shi'ite families included among the richest Emirati merchants. In recent years, Shi'ite-run businesses such as Alfardan, Al Sayegh, Galadari, and Al Yousuf LLC have prospered. Although Emirati Shi'ites are more satisfied than their co-religionists in other Arab countries, they do face some discrimination in public-sector employment, especially in the security and diplomatic sectors; the federal state security department, too, only hires Sunni Emiratis, and there are also no Shi'ite pilots in the UAE air force. However, while Emirati officials publicly speak about Islamic extremists and the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts to gain a foothold in the UAE, they do not mention Shi'ite citizens as a security threat.²⁵

Iranian Influence over Emirati Shi'ites. After the Islamic Revolution, UAE leaders were worried that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's hegemonic ambitions would cause them trouble. When an Iranian religious leader arrived in Dubai on a private visit right after the revolution, the authorities detained and deported him.²⁶ Despite this concern, Tehran has managed to increase its religious, cultural, and economic influence in the UAE through a concerted soft-power campaign. Taking advantage of a sizable Iranian expatriate population in Dubai, the new revolutionary regime in Tehran began building and financing many religious institutions and charities within the city. In 1984, for example, the Iranian government built the Imam Hussein Mosque next to the

Iranian Hospital in Jumeirah, Dubai. The Office of the Supreme Leader appoints the mosque's imams, who also serve as Khamenei's representative to the Shi'ite community in the UAE. In early 2010, Khamenei appointed Hojatoleslam Seyyed Mahmoud Madani Bajestani to the post.²⁷ Each year, the mosque holds more than 150 religious ceremonies in which Shi'ites of different nationalities participate.²⁸

The Ajam, who have lived for more than a century in what is now the UAE, are politically loyal to the Emirati state and identify themselves as Emiratis; yet some government authorities still question their loyalty because of their spiritual allegiance to the Iranian clergy. Many Shi'ites, for example, display photos of Iranian ayatollahs in their houses rather than those of Emirati leaders. Shi'ite allegiances, however, vary region to region: most wealthy and educated Shi'ites see themselves as Emirati first and Shi'ite second, while in poorer northern emirates, Shi'ite identity takes precedence over national identity.²⁹

Thousands of Iranians also immigrated to the UAE in the wake of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the UAE is currently home to about half a million Iranian expatriates, most of whom live in Dubai.³⁰ As a result, an estimated 8,000 Iranian businesses operate in Dubai.³¹ In recent years, however, as the United States and its allies have intensified sanctions against Iran and put more pressure on the Emirati government to enforce the sanctions, the UAE has become less hospitable for the Iranian business community.³² Trade between Iran and the UAE dropped from \$9.8 billion in 2011 to \$6.8 billion in 2012. Membership in the Dubai-based Iranian Business Council has fallen from 400 to 200 companies over the past two years as traders have moved to safer markets in Asia and Iraq.³³ Iranian businesspeople in the UAE now find it difficult to buy property, receive loans, and extend residence permits.

Moreover, given the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East, the Emirati federal authorities exercise more vigilance over Shi'ite citizens and Iranian and Lebanese diaspora in the country. The authorities fear that Iran may try to incite Emirati Shi'ites against the government and harm sectarian balance in the country.³⁴ In July 2013, the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee said the Emirati government had deported 500 Iranian nationals.³⁵ The committee's chairman, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, urged Iranian expatriates to leave the UAE and invest in Iran;³⁶ however, most Iranian merchants are reluctant

to return home and are relocating business assets to other countries.

Many independent Iranian businesspeople in the UAE claim that while sanctions have hurt law-abiding Iranian merchants, organizations owned by or affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)—Iran’s military-industrial powerhouse—are still prospering by engaging in illicit trade through the UAE’s loosely regulated ports or by paying bribes. These independent merchants—many of whom are critical of the Islamic Republic—do not call for lifting the sanctions, but suggest that the United States and European countries directly target individuals and entities related to the IRGC and the Iranian government.³⁷ According to Western diplomats and Gulf officials, the IRGC establishes fake front businesses in the UAE to circumvent sanctions and to acquire precision equipment from Western suppliers.³⁸ The US Department of the Treasury has sanctioned many IRGC-affiliated companies in the UAE over the past five years.³⁹

The Shi’ite Community in Qatar

About 87 percent of Qatar’s two million residents are noncitizens, divided almost equally between South Asian and Arab migrant workers. Of the 13 percent citizen population, a majority are Sunni Muslims, while Shi’ites constitute between 5 and 15 percent. Noncitizens run the gamut from Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims to Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists.⁴⁰

The Shi’ites in Qatar can be divided into three groups: Baharna, Ajam, and migrant workers. Similar to in Oman and UAE, the Baharna are Arab Shi’ites who came to Qatar from Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia.⁴¹ They maintain close ties with Saudi Shi’ite leaders, who periodically visit Qatar by invitation to speak at religious ceremonies. Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the most prominent Shi’ite leader in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, has been a frequent guest speaker at Shi’ite mosques and *husseiniyas* in Qatar.⁴² Shi’ites from Qatar also travel to Saudi Arabia to attend religious festivities.⁴³

The Ajam Shi’ites, who came to Qatar from Iran to seek economic opportunity, now speak Arabic and identify themselves as Qataris. In addition, there are tens of thousands of Shi’ite migrant workers from Iran, Pakistan, India, and regional Arab countries. A majority of foreign citizens in Qatar, including Shi’ites, work in the construction sector.⁴⁴ As Qatar is preparing for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, one million foreign workers may

enter the country to improve its infrastructure and build stadiums.⁴⁵ As in other Gulf nations, the Shi’ite minority in Qatar resides close to the oil fields, thus making Shi’ites strategically important for the government.⁴⁶

Qatar’s Shi’ite minority is loyal to the ruling regime, lives in harmony with the Sunni majority, and enjoys equal citizenship and political rights.

Qatar’s Shi’ite minority is well integrated into society: it is loyal to the ruling regime, lives in harmony with the Sunni majority, and enjoys equal citizenship and political rights.⁴⁷ Shi’ites are present in most government departments, including in the country’s Consultative Assembly.⁴⁸ The state religion in Qatar is Islam, and a majority of Qataris belong to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, including the ruling Al Thani family.⁴⁹ Unlike in Saudi Arabia, Qatari Shi’ites can practice their religious rituals freely.⁵⁰ Although the public education curriculum is based on Sunni Islam, it does not contain anti-Shi’ite propaganda. In 2005, the government established a separate court system for the Shi’ites to deal with issues of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other personal family matters on the basis of Shi’ite Jafari jurisprudence. The Shi’ite communities run several mosques and more than 20 *husseiniyas* across the country.⁵¹

Iranian Influence over Qatari Shi’ites. The Qatari government viewed Iran’s Islamic Revolution with considerably less anxiety than did Saudi Arabia: the Qatari Shi’ite population was too small to stage an Iranian-backed coup.⁵² Moreover, the integration of Shi’ites into Qatari society, along with the close relationship between Shi’ite businessmen and Qatar’s ruling family, made it difficult for Iran to leverage the Qatari Shi’ites for political ends.⁵³ A majority of Qatari Shi’ites emulate Iraq’s Ayatollah al-Sistani as *marja’iyya*; followers of Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei are smaller in number. However, although Qatari Shi’ites do not receive political guidance from Shi’ite leaders in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran, they maintain deep connections with theological centers in these countries. Because Qatari Shi’ites do not have their own religious seminaries, they travel mostly to Iran and Iraq for religious education.⁵⁴

Unlike the Saudi government, Qatar's ruling family maintains a good relationship with foreign Shi'ite leaders. In December 2010, Qatar's former emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, met with Khamenei in Tehran and pledged joint efforts for unity between Shi'ites and Sunnis.⁵⁵ On the emir's invitation in 2011, an influential Iraqi Shi'ite leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, traveled to Doha to discuss Bahrain. Qatar's ties with Iran and Iraqi Shi'ite leaders have at times strained Doha's relations with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).⁵⁶

In general, Iran has a strong presence in Doha: Iranian nationals make up about 10 percent of Qatar's foreign workers, Iranian merchants run successful businesses in Doha, and there is even a main market in the Qatari capital called Irani Bazaar.⁵⁷ Despite their ties, however, Qatari Shi'ites remain loyal to their state above all other foreign Shi'ite influences.

Is Sectarian Harmony in Oman, the UAE, and Qatar at Risk?

While the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein empowered Shi'ites in the Persian Gulf, the events also rekindled historical Sunni-Shi'ite divisions that have only worsened in the wake of the Arab Spring.⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia has been facing violent unrest, fomented with Iranian support, within its Shi'ite minority in the oil-rich Eastern Province.⁵⁹ The Al Khalifa royal family in Bahrain, with the GCC's support, has brutally suppressed the protests of its Shi'ite majority population, who demand political reforms.⁶⁰ Renewed sectarian violence in Iraq killed more than 800 in August 2013 alone, and the crisis in Syria appears to be plunging the entire region into an all-out sectarian war.⁶¹

Although Oman, Qatar, and the UAE have not encountered Shi'ite uprisings, the growing sectarian strife in the region has already harmed the Sunni-Shi'ite harmony in these countries. Leaked US diplomatic cables show that UAE leaders are increasingly worried about not just Iran's nuclear ambition, but also its efforts to establish "emirates" in the Muslim world.⁶² They fear that Iran may try to incite Emirati Shi'ites against the government and disturb the sectarian balance in the country.⁶³ In addition to the Iranian nationals, about 100,000 Lebanese live in the UAE.⁶⁴ As a result, the UAE government has recently restricted visas and expelled thousands of Shi'ites because of their

perceived support for Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and the opposition in Bahrain. Moreover, UAE authorities have initiated restrictions on Shi'ite citizens: in 2012, authorities closed a Shi'ite religious seminary and denied UAE Shi'ites permission to host an international Shi'ite summit.⁶⁵

The Qatari government has taken similar measures, including restricting Shi'ites' cultural and religious activities and limiting visas to foreign Shi'ites, particularly to those individuals from Iran and Lebanon.⁶⁶ Last June, the government reportedly expelled 18 Lebanese citizens after the GCC pledged to act against members of Hezbollah.⁶⁷ The GCC states are apparently exerting pressure on Lebanese Shi'ite migrants to punish Hezbollah's direct military support for the Syrian regime. The escalating sectarian rhetoric and punitive actions against Shi'ites in the Gulf are likely to radicalize the Shi'ite youth and allow Iran and Hezbollah to project themselves as the protectors of Shi'ites in the region. Many Shi'ites who despise the Iranian government and Hezbollah complain that they are unfairly subjected to "collective punishment" by Gulf monarchies and international sanctions.⁶⁸

The rise of sectarianism is threatening the stability of the Middle East: not only does it benefit Iran and extremist Sunni and Shi'ite groups, but it also undermines US national security interests in the region. In more stable states such as Oman, the UAE, and Qatar, the United States still has an opportunity to positively influence the Shi'ite communities to prevent them from becoming radicalized by the situations in Syria and Iran. Given the potential for Shi'ite-Sunni sectarianism to escalate, the United States must take a more active role in shaping Gulf-based Shi'ites' perceptions of their governments and the West.

To effectively enforce sanctions against Iran, the United States should encourage outreach to independent Shi'ite business communities and seek their aid in identifying and sanctioning individual entities owned by or affiliated with the Iranian government. This would require the United States to increase its intelligence assets in the UAE to make a distinction between licit and illicit trades, as well as between the Iranian government and private businesses. The United States must also work closely with all GCC leaders to ensure that all citizens—Shi'ites and other minorities included—are able to enjoy equal citizenship, political rights, and religious freedom. Whether Washington avails itself of these opportunities is an open question, and if history is any

guide, the answer will be no. The field will remain open for Iran, and the United States must not rely on hope alone to ensure that these small states do not fall prey to the ill wind now blowing through the Middle East.

Notes

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