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Articles

Iraq's Shias: Baghdad's
Albatross [redacted]

Iraqi Shia Muslim opposition to Sunni Muslim political domination has been a recurring threat to the stability of Iraq since the 1920 revolt against the British-imposed mandate government. The antigovernment motif and preoccupation with oppression woven into Shia religious traditions have been the basis of the community's activism since the seventh century. Although Iran's appeals for a Shia revolution have helped to rally the Iraqi Shia opposition, Iraqi Shias have their own strong traditions separate from Iran and oppose becoming its tool. In addition, President Saddam Husayn has used a system of rewards and punishments with the Shias to try to blunt this threat. The government's ruthless crackdown of Shia unrest in the south during the current insurrection will further embed Shia hatred for any Sunni leadership in Baghdad with ties to Saddam Husayn. [redacted]

Long Outside the Mainstream

Iraq's minority Sunni Muslims, who view the Shias as dangerous heretics, dominated Iraqi political life throughout both Ottoman and British rule in Iraq. Shia Muslims comprise about 60 percent of Iraq's 18 million population and are concentrated in central and southern Iraq near major oilfields and along the major roads and railroads to the Persian Gulf. When the British took over the government from the Ottomans following World War I, Shias for the most part were less educated, poorer, and politically weaker than the Sunni minority. Most Shias had deliberately chosen not to participate in the Sunni-dominated political system or train in military colleges. Up to the end of World War II, only three Shias served in Iraqi Cabinets. [redacted]

Since Saddam assumed direct power in 1979, he has launched economic, social, and political programs to deflect Shia discontent and to help build a sense of national identity. The Iraqi Government has aimed a considerable portion of its development programs at the Shias. During the Iran-Iraq war, the government

Shia Islam: A Sect of Protest

Shiism is a splinter sect of Islam originating from a disagreement among Muslims over the selection of a caliph, or successor, to the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632 A.D. Supporters of Ali, a cousin of Muhammad who had married the Prophet's daughter, objected to the selection of Muhammad's uncle, Abu Bakr, as the first caliph. They believed Muhammad's sons had the right to carry his "divine light." During the rule of the next two caliphs, Ali's supporters—the Shias—became known as the Shi'ah and continued to press Ali's claim to the caliphate. [redacted]

In 656, Ali was proclaimed the fourth caliph after the third caliph, Uthman, was assassinated. He moved the seat of the caliphate from Al Madinah to the Iraqi city of Kufa, where he later was murdered. Ali's death instigated fighting over the succession to the caliphate, which culminated in the Sunni massacre of Ali's son, Husayn, and his followers at the Iraqi city of Karbala. Husayn's death sealed the division between Sunnis and Shias and became the catalyst for Shia preoccupation with martyrdom and persecution. [redacted]

Today, Husayn's martyrdom is commemorated by Shias on the 10th day—called Ashura—of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year. This year Ashura falls on 22 July. Devout Muslims reenact the events leading to his death in a passion play, and young men practice self-flagellation. Shias worldwide revere Iraq's holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala. Ali is buried in An Najaf, now the seat of Shia spiritual guidance. His warrior son, Husayn, is buried in Karbala. [redacted]

improved housing in Baghdad's slums, where about 2 million Shias live. One Shia urban renewal area was renamed Saddam City. Baghdad also refurbished the Shia holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala and allowed the resumption—under tight control—of politically sensitive Shia religious celebrations. [redacted]

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Shia participation in the government and military has expanded under Saddam. In the 1980s the government strongly encouraged Shias to join the Ba'ath Party, which resulted in substantial increases in Shia representation in the party at the grassroots level as well as in the party's ruling Regional Command. For their overwhelming war contributions, some Shias were promoted to senior military positions. Shias dominate the junior officer corps as well as make up about 70 percent of the rank and file in the military. (SNF)

Despite these gains, the Shias remain second-class citizens. Shia-dominated southern Iraq is still considerably poorer than the Sunni heartland. Shias still are underrepresented in the government. They hold only a handful of ministerial and Revolution Command Council posts. Even increases in Shia membership in the Ba'ath Party have been offset by the party's loss of power to an increasingly presidential form of government. Shias also are virtually excluded from the Republican Guard, Saddam's elite military force.

Longstanding Tradition of Dissent

Iraqi Shia dissidence is grounded in longstanding Shia clerical opposition to Sunni government with its secular trappings. Shia clerics believe Islam provides the only legitimate ideology for state and society and reject secular nationalism, socialism, and liberal capitalism. Under the rule of the Sunni Ottoman Turks in the 19th century, leading Shia clerics—most of them Persian—refused to cooperate with the Turkish governor in Baghdad and instead looked to Iran for inspiration and guidance. Shia religious leaders also rejected the Sunni monarchy installed by the British in 1920, and subsequently many were expelled to Iran. Shia clerics from prominent Arab and Persian families in Iraq's holy cities of An Najaf and Karbala—the Sadr, Hakim, Shirazi, Khalisi, and Tabatabai—have a long history of opposition to the central authority in Baghdad, and members of these families are well represented in the Shia dissident movement today.

Shia clerics began to organize an underground political-religious movement in the 1960s. According to an Iraqi academician, the clerics were concerned

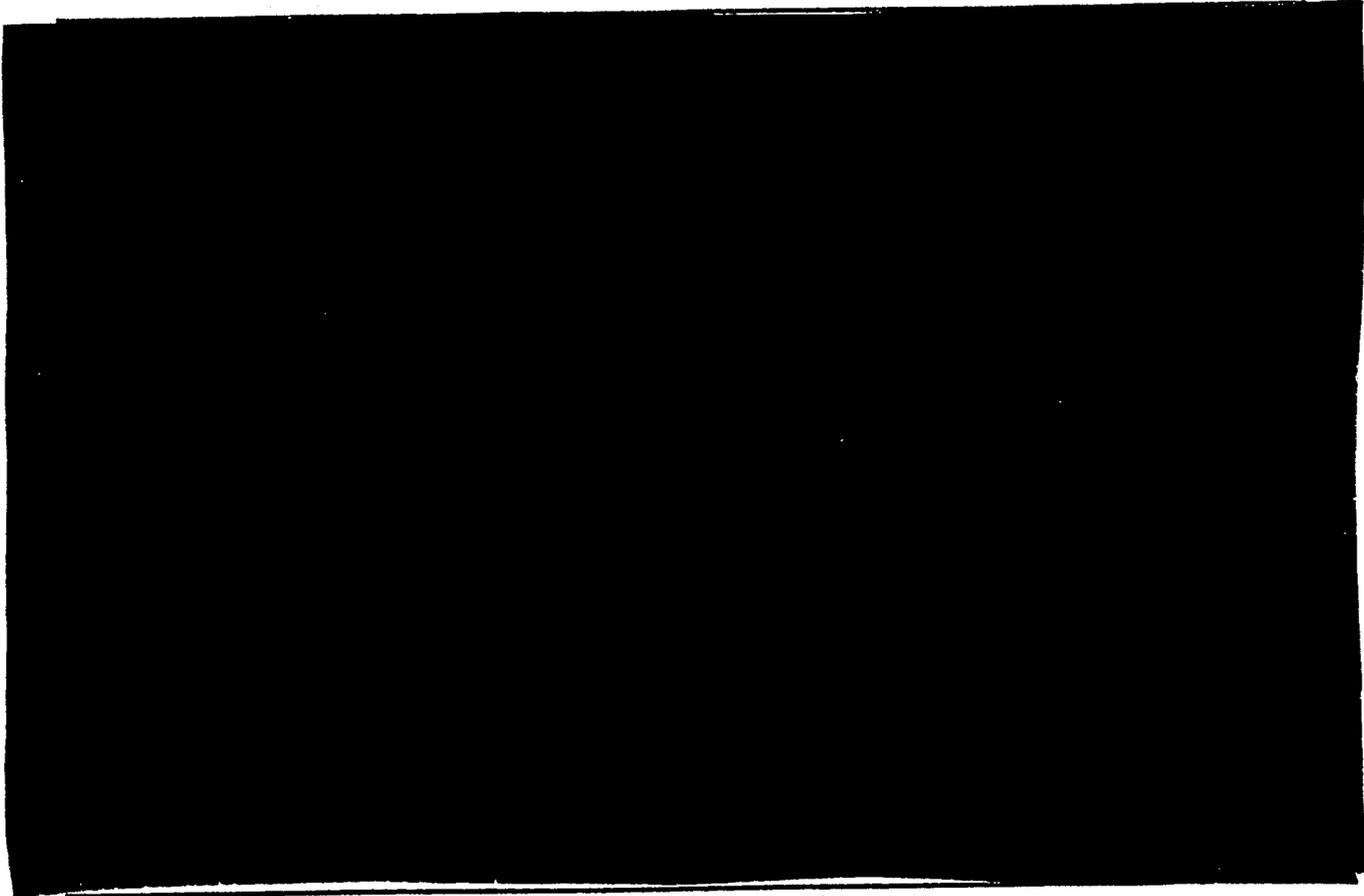
Iraq's Shia Clergy

Shia clerics traditionally have been a major source of leadership in the Shia community, but many of the clerics have refrained from political activism. The religious leadership in Iraq is concentrated in a handful of respected clerics who primarily live in An Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad and who come from old-line Arab and Persian Shia families. They enjoy a following by virtue of their long years of study, their upright Islamic lives, and their "just" and apolitical stands on issues of the day. A wider group of perhaps a few thousand Shia teachers, or mullahs, is responsible for preaching in mosques. Iran's late Ayatollah Khomeini spent the years 1963-78 in exile in An Najaf.

The Sunni leadership has actively sought to limit the influence of Shia clerics among the majority Shia population. In 1973 the Iraqi Government nationalized Shia private schools and replaced many Shia teachers with secular Christians. The government also controlled Shia religious endowments through the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Grand Ayatollah Abd al-Qasim Musavi Khu'i is one of the preeminent spiritual leaders of Shia Islam today. In his late nineties, he is probably the most venerated of the grand ayatollahs. Even Khomeini—his former student—regarded him as Shia Islam's foremost authority. As a result, Khu'i, the only grand ayatollah in Iraq, has a large following among Iranian, Gulf, and Iraqi Shias. He has long been apolitical, refusing Saddam's request to bless Iraq's eight-year war with Iran.

Where Ayatollah Khu'i stands in regard to the Shia rebellion is unclear. According to press reports, the prominent cleric issued a religious edict forming a committee of eight clerics to administer civil services in Shia cities. In March the Iraqi leadership televised an alleged condemnation of Shia unrest by Ayatollah as a propaganda ploy to reassert control of southern Shia cities. According to press reports, Iraqi Shia opposition leaders charged that the Baghdad regime had arrested Khu'i and forced him to make the statements.



about the declining public interest in observing Shia religious customs and the pronounced Sunni tone of the government. The largest and most influential Shia opposition group formed was the Islamic Call (Dawa) Party. The party's founders included the late Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, the Shia spiritual leader in Iraq from 1960 until his execution by Baghdad in 1970, and Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr. Sadr's ideas about Islamic government and economics and his call for social revolution appealed to Shia activists unhappy with Baghdad's continuing pattern of discrimination and political repression.



The Dawa Party has faced brutal government repression for over 20 years. In the early 1970s the sons of Muhsin al-Hakim fled Iraq with other Shia dissidents after a harsh government crackdown but continued to dominate the Dawa Party. The group, which claimed membership in Iraq of 30,000 to 40,000 in the early 1980s, engaged in significant terrorist activities.

Baghdad responded by expelling to Iran over 60,000 Iraqi Shias of Iranian origin and imprisoning or executing Dawa Party members.



The Iraqi Shia exiles are divided largely by their relationships to Iran and their view of clerical rule.

Although many view the establishment of an Islamic republic in Iran as a model for Shia activism, no Iraqi Shia leader talks about making Iraq a puppet of Iran. The Shia community in Iraq is not controlled by Iran and has its own historical traditions and religious institutions that predate those of Iran. Dissident leaders probably want to follow pro-Iranian policies but are aware that the presence of sizable Kurdish and Sunni Arab minorities in Iraq probably rules out a Shia government in Baghdad like the one in Tehran. [REDACTED]

The Dawa Party competes with other Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia factions for military aid, financial support, and encouragement from Tehran. These groups are heavily influenced by Khomeini's teachings and favor creation of a clerical-style Islamic government modeled after Iran. Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim is head of the 40-member Tehran-based Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, an umbrella organization created by Iran in 1982 for Iraqi Shias and Kurds to coordinate dissident activities. Ayatollah Khomeini chose Muhammad Baqr, believing the Hakim name would attract widespread support among Iraqi Shias. [REDACTED]

Many Iraqi Shia dissidents favor greater independence from Iranian influence and reject Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, political rule by a supreme religious figure. Elements of the Dawa Party and other Iraq Shia factions have claimed the Supreme Assembly is too subservient to Iran and that Muhammad Baqr has sacrificed the autonomy of the Iraqi Shia opposition movement. To put distance between themselves and Iran, these groups have set up splinter organizations linked to the Dawa Party but based in Damascus and London. [REDACTED]

London-based Iraqi Shias publicly espouse politically moderate aspirations almost certainly hoping to extend their support beyond radical, sectarian lines. Groups such as the Rabitat Bayt al-Ahl led by Husayn al-Sadr generally oppose the intervention of the clergy in the political life of the country. [REDACTED]

Popular support for pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia dissidents peaked immediately after Ayatollah Khomeini assumed

power in Iran and waned throughout the Iran-Iraq war. Iraqi Shias demonstrated an even greater hatred and fear of the Iranians during the war than they did of Saddam's Sunni Arab-dominated regime in Baghdad. The government's propaganda machine helped by playing skillfully on longstanding ethnic animosities between Arabs and Persians. The Shias bore the brunt of the fighting, comprising three-quarters of the Iraqi troops at the front and suffering a similar share of Iraq's 375,000 dead, wounded, and missing. The Hakims and other Iraqi Shia dissidents who sat out the war in Iran probably lost considerable credibility in the Iraqi Shia community. [REDACTED]

Saddam's Iron Fist

Despite opening up some political and military posts to Shias, Saddam Husayn has vigorously repressed Shia opposition activities. Security officials have directed their efforts against actual and potential Iraqi Shia leaders such as teachers, professional people, and students, while Saddam's propaganda apparatus extolled the quality of his leadership for all Iraqis. Perhaps the most significant example of Iraqi determination to destroy the Shia opposition was the execution of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, who was strangled in prison along with his sister in 1980. Baghdad used the execution of the religious leader to emphasize to Iraqi Shias that the regime was prepared to use brute force against prominent clerics to maintain control. The execution probably also demonstrated to Iraqi Shias that Iran could not protect its supporters inside Iraq. [REDACTED]

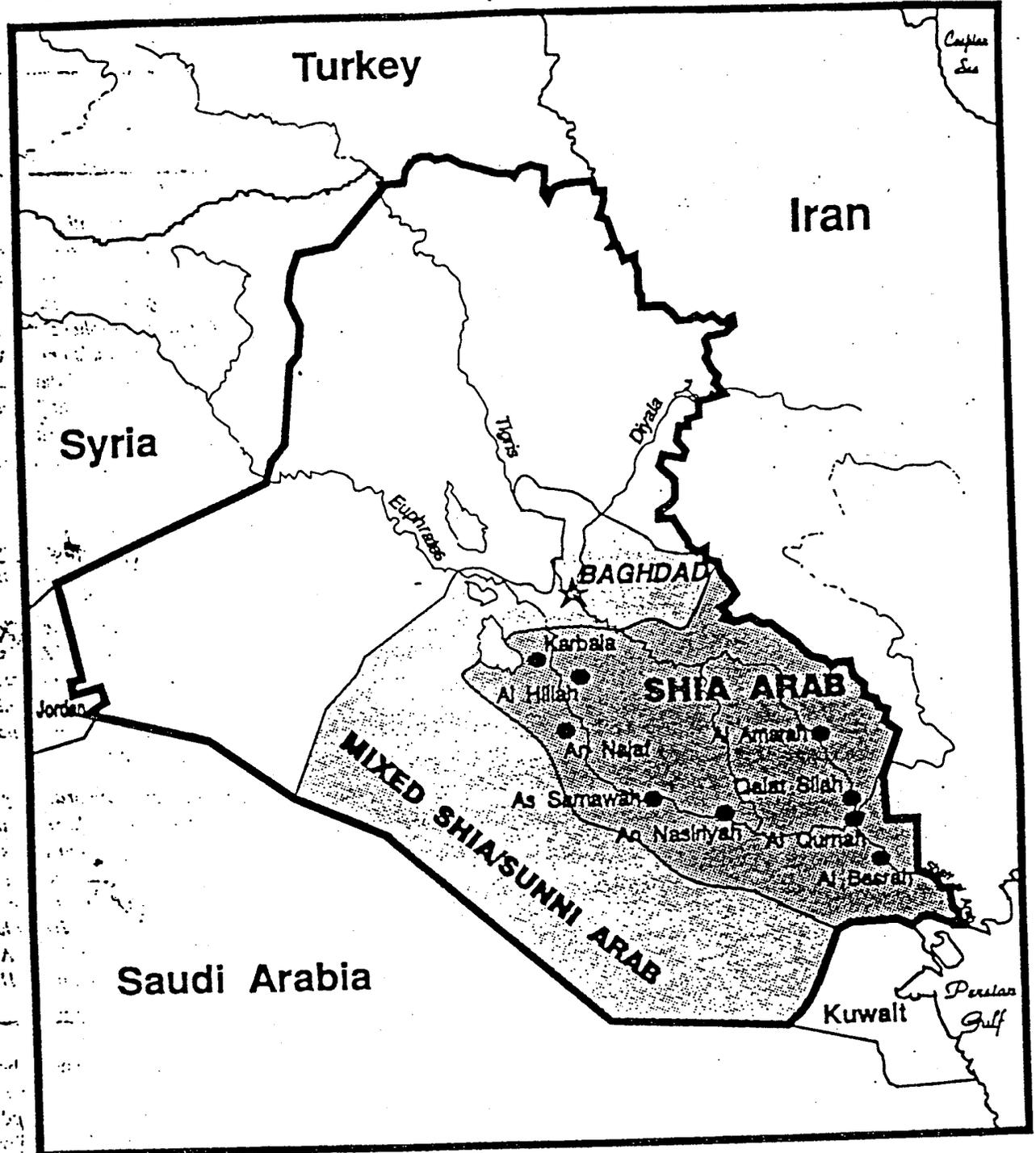
Iraq's security service has hunted down Shia dissidents who flee the country and also uses threats against relatives still in Iraq to cow other Shia activists abroad. For example, in April 1983 the Dawa Party was implicated in two terrorist bombings in Baghdad. In reaction, Saddam ordered the arrest of 70 members of the Hakim family and a month later executed six of them. In 1988, Iraqi agents assassinated Mahdi al-Hakim, Muhammad Baqr's brother and a Dawa Party leader, in Sudan. As a result of the regime's rigorous suppression of Shia dissidents in Iraq and abroad, the Shia opposition leadership and support network inside the country have been severely weakened. [REDACTED]

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The Current Unrest and Beyond

The Shia opposition has tried to exploit Saddam's defeat in Kuwait to improve its political position. It is trying to play down long-held aspirations for an Iranian-style Islamic regime and accept in its stead a coalition-style government that would include representatives of all ethnic and sectarian groups. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Press reports suggest that the Shia dissident bloc has been playing a major role in shaping the opposition agenda—no doubt with strong Iranian backing. [REDACTED]

Since the end of the Gulf war, the Shia exile leadership apparently has taken advantage of spontaneous civilian unrest, the breakdown in civil order, and the influx of thousands of retreating Iraqi soldiers into southern Iraq to attack regime forces. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Despite Iranian involvement, Iraqi Shia civilians may not be coalescing around them and may be choosing to support new local opposition groups and leaders. [REDACTED]

At the same time, Hakim and other exile figures apparently have decided to remain outside Iraq and enlarge their international role as spokesmen for the Shia rebellion. Emboldened by civilian unrest, they are publicly calling for Saddam's overthrow and requesting international assistance to stop widespread atrocities by regime forces against Shia civilians. Hakim undoubtedly fears the regime's residual strength and probably has decided to wait until he believes Saddam is about to fall before returning to Iraq. We believe the exile leaders' unwillingness to return to Iraq limits their ability to organize and lead the rebellion and also undermines their credibility as opposition leaders. [REDACTED]

In response to regime repression, Shia dissidents could follow the example of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's retreat from open opposition after President Asad's massive use of force to quell Sunni unrest at Hamah in

1982. Several thousand Syrian troops moved into the city and crushed the insurgents during two weeks of bloodshed, leaving as many as 25,000 dead. A Muslim Brotherhood leader said in early 1983 that the opposition would have to adopt new tactics to avoid placing the civilian population in a crossfire between the militants and the government. [REDACTED]

Saddam's brutal crackdown in Shia cities and towns throughout the south is likely to permanently estrange the Shia community despite his public promises of political and economic reforms in March. In the past the regime generally has ferreted out suspected Shia activists while making conciliatory gestures to the Shia community at large to avoid a popular backlash. Now, however, the scope and intensity of government repression—probably far exceeding Syria's brutal crackdown in Hamah—are likely to embed a strong sense of revenge in the Shia community. Iranian, Syrian, and Western press reports indicate that regime forces are indiscriminately attacking civilians and destroying Shia mosques and shrines—including the sacred shrines in An Najaf and Karbala—to quell the rebellion. Large numbers of refugees from the fighting have streamed into coalition-occupied territory seeking food, medicine, and safety. [REDACTED]

Regardless of the leadership in Baghdad—Saddam Husayn or a successor government made up of military and Ba'th Party insiders—Iraqi Shias are likely to harbor strong antiregime sentiments. Many probably will look for ways to avenge regime atrocities. Government and Ba'th Party officials trying to reassert control of Shia cities are likely to be high-priority targets of individual Shias or organized opposition groups. The ability of Shia rebels to maintain even low-level resistance against regime forces over the next few months increases prospects that Shia dissidents will strengthen underground networks and establish new groups. The brutality of the government repression almost certainly has hardened the Iraqi Shia clerics and may spur a new wave of Islamic-based opposition to the regime. [REDACTED]