

March 5, 2000

## Silent Minority

*A study of Shiite Muslims and their plight throughout much of the Arab world.*

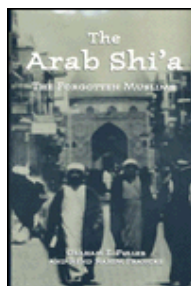
### Related Link

- [First Chapter: 'The Arab Shi'a'](#)

By IRA M. LAPIDUS

**T**his book deals with a subject that receives scarcely any attention from American policy makers and even less from the general public. The Shiite Muslims of Iran are relatively well known to us. The Shiite minorities throughout the Arab world are virtually unknown.

The numbers are small. Adherents of the Shia branch of Islam represent about 12 million Iraqis, or between 55 to 60 percent of the population; about 400,000 Bahrainis, or 70 percent of the population; some 500,000 Kuwaitis, or 25 to 30 percent of the population; some 300,000 to 500,000 Saudis, or 2 to 3 percent of the population; and about 1.3 million Lebanese, or 30 to 40 percent of the population. But they are strategically situated in the oil-producing and transit regions of the Persian



### THE ARAB SHI'A The Forgotten Muslims.

By Graham E. Fuller  
and Rend Rahim  
Francke.  
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Gulf or on the sensitive Israeli frontier.

"The Arab Shi'a" calls our attention to their plight. In general, the Shiites are impoverished, discriminated against and sometimes brutally repressed. The regime of Saddam Hussein has curtailed their religious activities, executed the principal religious leaders and crushed any organized Shiite opposition. After the gulf war countless numbers of Shiites were killed for rising up against the government. In Saudi Arabia they are not even considered Muslims. No public expression of religious faith is allowed; religious books are banned; rights to build mosques are restricted.

The Shiites in the Arab states ask for an end to discrimination and for freedom to worship. But in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Iraq they have no leverage. No dialogue is possible with these governments. If resistance is expressed for the sake of a just Islamic state, both moderate Shiites and Sunni Muslims will reject the call as religious radicalism. If Shiites present their claims in secular democratic language, the Sunnis will reject them as a cover for sectarian interests. Violence is not inherent in Shiism, but in these countries there is practically no other recourse.

Graham E. Fuller, a senior policy analyst at RAND Corporation, and Rend Rahim Francke, the executive director of the Iraq Foundation, an organization dedicated to democratization in Iraq, urge us to recognize that the condition of the Shiites is a serious problem in terms of human rights, the safety of oil supplies and long-term regional stability. They are gently critical of American policy for its support of dictatorial regimes, and they argue that Washington should pressure Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait to further integrate their Shiite populations. The reader can tell that they have little hope that this will be done. United States policy in the Persian Gulf region is based on the support of these friendly governments.

The situation of the Shiites in Lebanon is entirely different from that in other Arab countries. There, civil war destroyed the state and gave the Shiites, once the poorest, most despised part of the population, a chance to become the most powerful political force in the country. In post-civil war Lebanon, Amal, one of

the largest political parties, and the more radical Hezbollah have accepted the idea of a multireligious society. This pluralism is Fuller and Francke's best model for a solution to the Shia question.

The book is especially valuable for policy considerations, but it lacks the human dimension that might engage our deeper sympathies. More important, the central concept of "The Arab Shi'a" seems flawed. Despite shared religious beliefs, Arab Shiites are not a single people. They do not have a central religious authority or any common institutions. Some Shiites are religious militants calling for a just Islamic state; others are secularists working for integration into the existing states. While Iran is now the most important center of Shia religious scholarship, Arab Shiites keep their distance, understanding that Tehran has its own nationalist agenda. The truth is that the Shiites are not unified anywhere except in this book, and there cannot be a single American policy toward them, only a variety of responses depending upon the conditions in each country.

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*Ira M. Lapidus's most recent book is "A History of Islamic Societies."*

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