

# Saudi King Puts His Foot Down, But Gently

*Cleric's Takfiri Statements Show the Fine Line King Abdullah Walks with the Wahhabis*

Kirk H. Sowell  
www.kirksowell.com  
August 11, 2009

RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA – Word has spread that Saudi Arabia has quietly demoted an imam at the Mecca Mosque for repeatedly declaring Shia Muslims to be infidels despite a warning from the ruling family. Until a BBC Arabic interview in May, **Adel Kalbani**, the highest-ranked Saudi official of African origin, was primarily known as the “Saudi Obama.” The controversy has increased his fame considerably.<sup>1</sup>

- *The Kalbani controversy shows how the ruling family manages dissent from the clerical establishment.* While non-Wahhabi dissidents are often jailed for long periods for lesser offenses, here a Wahhabi cleric twice attempted to undermine the king and received first a warning and then a demotion. This may also shed light on the struggle for power within the Saudi elite, between those closer to the Wahhabi establishment and those wanting more aggressive reform.

The context behind this controversy is **King Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz's** ongoing efforts at reform, including a series of “dialogue” conferences culminating in last November's UN Conference on religious understanding.<sup>2</sup> Some noted the irony of Saudi Arabia holding a conference in New York on religious tolerance,<sup>3</sup> yet the conference's message was widely covered in the kingdom's domestic media as well.

Abdullah then instituted a series of reforms on February 14, 2009, including one ending the Wahhabi monopoly the senior clerical council. The following week, on February 17, Saudi religious police clashed with Shia pilgrims in Medina, beating them and arresting some, including women.<sup>4</sup> Interior Minister **Prince Naef**, known to be the closest of the senior royals to the Wahhabi establishment, vocally supported the religious police, while Abdullah said nothing but pardoned the arrested Shia pilgrims.<sup>5</sup> Naef may have directed the police to instigate the incident to discourage further reforms.

The Medina attack led to a series of protests, some small-scale violence, and a threat of secession by the radical Saudi Shia cleric **Nimr Baqir Nimr** in the Eastern Province in March.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by a campaign of arrests and electricity cut-offs which has continued to the present time.<sup>7</sup>

## *A Takfiri Interview*

With this backdrop, on May 4 Kalbani gave his now infamous BBC interview in which he declared all Shia clerics to be infidels.<sup>8</sup> This was *takfir*, to declare someone who has

embraced Islam to not be a Muslim. This is not a purely theological question; apostasy under Islamic law is nominally punishable by death, and today takfir is the doctrine which al-Qaeda uses to justify murdering Shia. Kalbani did say that that he did not favor forcing the Shia to convert. The BBC interviewer noted the contradiction with King Abdullah, and pressed him on it. Kalbani said that with Christians “perhaps” there could be dialogue, but with the Shia there was no point, contradicting the king.

At this point, the sectarian boil in the Eastern Province was a daily news item in the Arab media and Kalbani was surely aware that he was throwing gas on a fire the king was trying to put out. The interview quickly made its way onto Youtube and from there ricocheted across the Arabic web, featured in news outlets and widely condemned by Arab Shia. Saudi Shia leaders demanded Kalbani resign,<sup>9</sup> as did many in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Saudi Arabia’s most prominent Shia cleric, **Hassan Saffar**, argued that due to his high office he was harming the state, and that this contradicted the dialogue initiative of the “political leadership,” meaning the king.<sup>11</sup>

Iran’s Supreme Leader **Ali Khamenei** sought to use Kalbani to gain the moral high ground, and attacked him in a speech before a Sunni audience of Kurdish Iranians.<sup>12</sup> Iran’s *al-Alam* satellite news channel placed a banner at the top of its website on the issue and kept it there for weeks.<sup>13</sup>

King Abdullah must have felt the need to respond. So Turki Sudairi, editor of *al-Riyadh* newspaper and head of the official journalist association, published a rebuke on Kalbani, “Obama and Kalbani.”<sup>14</sup> Then one of his fellow Mecca imams impliedly criticized him in a Friday sermon.<sup>15</sup> The highest-level rebuke came from Prince **Mashal bin Abd al-Aziz**, chairman of the succession commission, a key Abdullah appointee, who flatly contradicted Kalbani saying that “we are all Muslims.”<sup>16</sup>

- *Readers who do not follow the kingdom’s politics closely may view this as a case study in Saudi Kremlinology.* Senior royals never express disagreements with each other in public, and only rarely express open disagreement with the Wahhabi establishment or other Arab leaders. Even disagreements with the United States or Iran may require some decoding.

A May 16 article in the Omani *al-Watan* entitled “Behind the Sudairi Coup Against King Abdullah” put forth an intriguing theory. It juxtaposed the heightening sectarian tensions, Abdullah’s reforms to reduce them, and the fact that a recently promoted cleric with no tribal base was able to challenge the king and remain in office. The gist of it is that Naef wanted to highlight the Shia threat in order to strengthen his position.<sup>17</sup> He had recently been promoted to second deputy prime minister while King Abdullah was abroad<sup>18</sup> – Crown Prince Sultan being debilitated by long-term illness – and he wanted to be viewed within the family as the best man to face down the Shia threat, so he arranged an escalation.

Be that as it may, Kalbani appeared to have gotten off with a warning. He probably would have, but on June 11 he decided to make the statement again. This time

Kalbani's statement failed to register broad reaction as events in Iran engulfed the pan-Arab media. Yet it still spread across Arabic discussion forums, and it is clear from his comments that he crossed a red line.

The Saudi news website *al-Wifaq* published the interview: "Sheikh Kalbani Renews His Description of the Shia as 'Infidels' and Denies Pressure to Recant." It quoted him saying that "It is necessary for me to explain my view in regard to the infidel status of the misguided imams of the *rafida*," using a pejorative Sunni term for Shia, "which I referred to in my interview with BBC Arabic..." Takfir was not his invention, he said, but was supported by early Muslim authorities, the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, and his successors in the current Saudi clerical establishment. Kalbani denied pressure to recant, and sought to avoid directly contradicting the king by saying that dialogue was necessary with the Shia in order to explain their error to them.

Kalbani's obfuscation notwithstanding, the king's surrogates publicly indicated that he viewed Kalbani's statements as unacceptable, and he repeated them anyway. Now it appears that Kalbani has been demoted.<sup>19</sup>

News of this sort is never trumpeted in the kingdom, but the Saudi news website *al-Shms* explained his departure from the Mecca mosque to his having not had permission to leave his previous mosque, even implying that he might receive a call to return to Mecca.<sup>20</sup> Articles published on Kalbani's appointment prior to the controversy, however, portrayed it as a promotion and made no mention of this story, which is intrinsically implausible.<sup>21</sup> Appointments to the mosque are made by the general presidency of mosques of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

### *A Tilted Balance*

This is the tilted balance which Saudi rulers have struck to keep the country from erupting into sectarian conflict. Shia clerics are routinely arrested for setting up unauthorized religious meetings even to discuss mundane topics;<sup>22</sup> they don't have to do something so inflammatory as call for secession. Yet a Wahhabi cleric openly mocked the monarch's keystone initiative twice before receiving a simple demotion. One wonders whether he was receiving assurances from Naef's interior ministry.

Whether the anti-Shia escalation and Kalbani's later anti-dialogue outbursts were directly instigated by Naef to increase tensions and stifle reform is impossible to say. But Naef's endorsement of the anti-Shia attack was unmistakable, and Kalbani was right about one thing – his views on the Shia are not outside the mainstream among Wahhabi clerics. The Wahhabis have not been required to repudiate their takfiri beliefs, they just can't parade them on pan-Arab media. So the question now is, will Abdullah take further steps at religious reform, or has the backlash since February given him his fill? If Naef becomes the next king, these reforms may be the last for a while.

---

<sup>1</sup> The total hits on Google for Kalbani's name were 11,400 as of May 20, and almost all the prominent hits related to this interview. His full name returned 310 videos on Youtube, and his last name 396. He has only been otherwise famous because he is the highest ranking Saudi cleric of African origin.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent conference in this series of "interfaith dialogue" conferences was at the UN in New York under Saudi auspices in November 2008. See

[http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2008/081113\\_Peace\\_Culture.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2008/081113_Peace_Culture.doc.htm).

<sup>3</sup> "The Saudis' Dubious Interfaith Agenda at the UN," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 2008 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/1113/p09s02-coop.html>).

<sup>4</sup> See "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads," Toby Matthiesen, *Middle East Research and Information Project*, May 6, 2009 for discussion of the February attack in Medina and Nimr Baqir al-Nimr's secessionist call the following month. Several Saudi Shia periodicals, including *al-Rasid*, *Walfajr*, *al-Awamiya*, *al-Twafaq* and others have published dozens of articles since February on arrests, protests, the presence of national guard troops in the streets and sporadic violence.

<sup>5</sup> "Naef: We Reject Loitering Around Tombs and Slandering the Companions; the Shia are Not Being Targeting," *al-Okaz*, March 14, 2009 (<http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/osf/20090314/Con20090314264170.htm>).

<sup>6</sup> The statement was widely reported, and various segments of the sermon have been posted to Youtube. This is one example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdPC8KJN00U&feature=related>. The reference to "secession" is around the eight minute point.

<sup>7</sup> For a recent news report, see "Arrest of Three Youths in Continuing Sectarian Campaign in Hasa," *al-Rasid*, August 9, 2009 (<http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=31103>).

<sup>8</sup> BBC Arabic interview with Adel Kalbani, May 4. Several versions are posted on Youtube; a long segment of the interview is at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TytRBiZaxl&feature=related>. The initial statement related to the Shia being infidels is after the two minute point. A clip containing the first part of the interview is on *al-Forat*, <http://www.alforattv.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=37369>.

<sup>9</sup> "Saffar Calls for Kalbani's Removal... or a Disavowal of Takfir of Shia Muslims," *al-Rasid*, May 8, 2009 (<http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=28862>). See also, "Hundreds of Shia Public Figures Demand Prosecution of Kalbani for 'Terrorist' Statements," *al-Rasid*, May 19, 2009 (<http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=29178>).

<sup>10</sup> Among the Iraqi publications which played up the issue was Prime Minister Nuri Maliki's coalition website; see "After Kalbani Statements Against the Shia, Najaf Provincial Council Calls for Saudi Arabia to Prohibit Takfir," *Dawla al-Qanun Network*, May 18, 2009 (<http://www.qanon302.com/news.php?action=view&id=685>) and "Statement of the Muhammad Baqir Sadr Center for Thought and Dialogue," *Dawla al-Qanun Network*, May 18, 2009 (<http://www.qanon302.com/news.php?action=view&id=687>). See also, "Sistani Representative Condemns Takfiri Fatwas Against Shia," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, May 8, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/wp-content/themes/aswat/print.php?p=143763>).

<sup>11</sup> "Saffar Calls for Kalbani's Removal... or a Disavowal of Takfir of Shia Muslims," *al-Rasid*, May 8, 2009 (<http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=28862>).

<sup>12</sup> "Leader of the Revolution: The Wahhabis Seek to Divide Muslims," *Mehr News Agency*, May 12, 2009 (<http://www.mehrnews.com/ar/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=877432>). To see how Khamenei's response echoed inside the Saudi Shia community, see "Khamenei Attacks Wahhabism Accuses It of Implementing Divisive Plan Among Muslims," *al-Rasid*, May 14, 2009 (<http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=29005>); "Elements and Agents of Wahhabis and Salafists Work for the Enemy Even if Unaware," *Minar al-Wilayah*, May 13, 2009 (<http://www.m-alwelayah.net/?act=artc&id=374>). Note the difference in terms of reference; pro-Iranian publications refer to Khamenei as "the Imam" or as "the Leader" while publications like *al-Rasid* not aligned with Iran simply refer to him by name, or as the "spiritual guide of Iran."

<sup>13</sup> "With the Event," *al-Alam*, May 13, 2009 (<http://www.alalam.ir/site/mokhtarat/Maalhadas/Maalhadas826.htm>)

<sup>14</sup> "Obama and Kalbani," *al-Riyadh*, May 10, 2009 (<http://www.alriyadh.com/article428278.html>). "Turki Sudairi Criticizes Opinions of Adel Kalbani," *Qassim News*, May 12, 2009 (<http://www.qassimnews.com/news-action-show-id-4608.htm>).

<sup>15</sup> "Voices Increase for Removal of Kalbani," *Middle East Online*, May 11, 2009 (<http://www.middle-east-online.com/saudi/?id=77362>). This article contains an array of quotes from various figures, Sunni and Shia, against Kalbani.

---

<sup>16</sup> “Chairman of Succession Council: No to Racism, No to Sectarianism, Yes to Unity and We are All Saudis,” *Qassim News*, May 14, 2009 (<http://www.qassimnews.com/news-action-show-id-4553.htm>).

<sup>17</sup> “Behind the Sudairi Coup Against King Abdullah,” *al-Watan*, May 16, 2009 (<http://www.watan.com/feature-more/11510-2009-05-09-16-50-00.html>).

<sup>18</sup> “Desert Schism: Prince Nayef Bids for Saudi Throne,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 31, 2009 (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3038>).

<sup>19</sup> This has been widely reported on various Shia websites. For example, see “Removal of Sheikh Kalbani from the Mecca Mosque?” Wahabia.net, July 9, 2009 ([http://www.wahabia.net/wahabia/index.php?sec=V1d4a1lySm5QVDA9&sub=V1cweFYwMHIUak5RVkrBOQ==&r={0005D0A9391D3C1/000056874A5B9B2A524EF/0000000C9033B4CAA60E/000056874A5B9B2A524EF/000000063FE59E5319EE}&id=4612&act=show&Sectyp=145](http://www.wahabia.net/wahabia/index.php?sec=V1d4a1lySm5QVDA9&sub=V1cweFYwMHIUak5RVkrBOQ==&r={0005D0A9391D3C1/000056874A5B9B2A524EF/0000000C9033B4CAA60E/000056874A5B9B2A524EF/000000063FE59E5319EE}&id=4612&act=show&Sectyp=145))).

<sup>20</sup> “After His Departure from Leadership of the King Khaled Mosque, Kalbani Begins His Fourth Trip Between the Pulpits,” *al-Shms*, Muhammad al-Suhami, June 26, 2009 (<http://www.shms.com.sa/html/story.php?id=64130>). Another Saudi website has an article about Kalbani at his new mosque, but no word of the recent controversy. “Kalbani Leads Prayer at the Muhaysim Mosque,” *al-Wa’im*, June 20, 2009 (<http://www.alweeam.com/news/news-action-show-id-10917.htm>).

<sup>21</sup> See “Sheikh Kalbani... Unexpected Occurrence Led him to the Mecca Mosque,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 7, 2008 (<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=44&article=485874&issueno=10876>). This article traces his career through the years, from working as an imam for Saudi Airlines through various positions and finally to the country’s chief mosque.

<sup>22</sup> Saudi Arabia does allow the Shia to hold religious meetings and have a certain number of mosques, but they are limited, and the setting up of a husseiniya – a Shia religious center less formal than a mosque – without authorization is grounds for detention without trial. There have been several instances of this since February.