

B. 08 RIYADH 1070

Classified By: CG JOHN KINCANNON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: In an August 13 meeting with PoOff, controversial Shi'a sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr sought to distance himself from previously reported pro-Iranian and anti-American statements, instead adopting a less radical tone on topics such as the relationship between Iran and the Saudi Shi'a, and American foreign policy. Arguing that he is portrayed publicly as much more radical than the true content of his words and beliefs, the Sheikh also espoused other conciliatory ideas such as fair political decision-making over identity-based politics, the positive impact of elections, and strong "American ideals" such as liberty and justice. Despite this more moderate tone, Al-Nimr reasserted his ardent opposition to what he described as the authoritarianism of the reactionary al-Saud regime, stating he would always support "the people" in any conflict with the government. He also continued to argue for the right of the Saudi Shi'a community to seek external assistance if it were to become embroiled in a conflict. The Sheikh was also cognizant of the increased profile that his strong language has earned him, saying that his fiery words continue to attract interest from an increasing percentage of the Shi'a community, particularly young people. END SUMMARY.

----- Background on al-Nimr -----

2. (S/NF) On August 13, PoOff met with Shi'a sheikh Nimr al-Nimr at the Sheikh's Awamiyya home in the Qatif area. The always controversial sheikh has gained extra attention over the past months by calling in bolder-than-usual terms for an end to anti-Shi'a discrimination in Saudi Arabia, and by seemingly endorsing the Iranian regime, its nuclear ambitions, and its increasingly active role in the region. Al-Nimr is typically regarded as a second-tier political player in the Eastern Province (EP), in large part because he is not directly affiliated with either the Islahiyyah movement (often called the Shirazis) or Saudi Hizbollah, the two largest political blocs in the EP Shi'a community. Despite this secondary status, al-Nimr is currently gaining popularity locally, particularly with young people, as his words appeal to those disaffected by the general economic malaise experienced by Saudi Arabia's lower classes and a perceived lack of sufficient SAG reform in relations with the Shi'a community. Meanwhile, at a national and international level, with everyone from Salafi sheikhs to regional intelligence agencies, al-Nimr's words have gained him increased notoriety due to fears that his words will spark unrest and perhaps point to an Iranian hand in Saudi Arabia (Reftel A).

3. (S/NF) Al-Nimr, a former follower of the late Ayatollah Mohammad al-Husseini al-Shirazi, now follows the religious leadership of Iraqi Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi, the Karbala-based spiritual leader of the Islamic Action Organization. In the meeting with PoOff, al-Nimr complimented both Ayatollahs for being leaders in combining the power of the mind with the power of the Quran in determining guidance for public life. Al-Nimr described his and al-Mudarrasi's attitude towards Islamic governance as being something between "wilayat al-faqih," in which a country is led by a single religious leader, and "shura al-fuqaha," in which a council of religious leaders should lead the state. Al-Nimr, who conducted religious studies for approximately ten years in Tehran and "a few" years in Syria, stated that all governance should be done through consultation, but the amount of official power vested in the hands of a single official should be determined based on the relative quality of the religious leaders and the political situation at the time.

----- Al-Nimr on his Loyalties -----

4. (S/NF) When asked by PolOff as to whether his tough talk promoted violence or simply warned of it as a possible repercussion of continued discontent in the Shi'a community, al-Nimr responded that if a conflict were to occur he would "side with the people, never with the government." He RIYADH 00001283 002 OF 004 continued by saying that though he will always choose the side of the people, this does not necessarily mean that he will always support all of the people's actions, for example, violence. Religiously, al-Nimr said that he is first a Shi'a, then a Muslim, then a member of the Ahl al-Bayt (literally People of the House; the phrase refers to Muslims, Christians and Jews), and finally a member of humanity. He quickly followed by saying that politically, he is on the side of justice, wherever or with whomever it may preside. He provided the example of Iraqi politics, saying that he does not support the aspirations of any Arabs - be they Sunni or Shi'a - or Turkomen who would aspire to power in northern Iraq. In al-Nimr's view, as the Kurds are an undoubted majority in the region, it would be unjust if they did not exercise a majority of power.

----- Al-Nimr on Iran, the United States -----

5. (S/NF) Much of the attention recently received by al-Nimr is due to his comments in sermons and an interview with IslamOnline website perceived as supporting Iran, including defending Iran's nuclear aspirations and complimenting the people and government of Iran on their piety. In a July 26 follow-up letter to IslamOnline, Al-Nimr attempted to distance himself from Iran, saying that piety is only God alone, and that all nations act in their own interests. It was this sentiment that continued in the meeting with PolOff, as al-Nimr stated that his fundamental view of foreign powers - including Iran - is that they act out of self-interest, not out of piety or religious commonality. Al-Nimr said he was against the idea that Saudi Shi'a should expect Iranian support based on some idea of sectarian unity that supersedes national politics.

6. (S/NF) In addition to supporting Iran, al-Nimr's recent sermons have been laced with anti-American rhetoric, for example that America "wants to humiliate the world." In this meeting, the sheikh distanced himself from these ideas, saying that he has great affection for the American people. Al-Nimr stated that in his view, when compared with the actions of nations such as Britain, the European colonial powers, or the Soviet Union, the "imperialism" of the United States has been considerably more benign, with better treatment of people and more successful independent states. Al-Nimr said that this was evident in comparing the fortunes of West and East Germany, where the American-supported West was clearly more successful than the Soviet-supported East. The Sheikh also cited Japan as another case of America properly compensating and building a nation. The Sheikh believes that U.S. efforts in the Middle East are also better intentioned than previous imperial powers in the region, but that the U.S. has made tremendous mistakes in Iraq.

7. (S/NF) Al-Nimr also stated that Shi'a Muslims, even more than Sunnis, are natural allies for America as Shi'a thought, as reflected by the Imam Ali, is based on justice and liberty, ideas central to the United States. Al-Nimr cited as proof of his logic the fact that Sunni sheikhs regularly issue fatwas calling for violence and defending murder in the name of God. Meanwhile, in his view, proper Shi'a religious leaders would never advocate such tactics, as they directly contradict the spirit of Shi'ism. In addition to giving his comparison Shi'a and American ideals, al-Nimr showed significant historical knowledge of U.S. foreign policy - for example, speaking positively of the spirit of Middle Eastern initiatives during the Carter administration - and was well-informed regarding the state of the U.S. Presidential campaign.

8. (S/NF) Though al-Nimr moved away from Iran and spoke somewhat positively of America in the meeting with PoOff, he did not change course regarding his previously stated conviction that it is the right of the Shi'a people of Saudi Arabia to avail themselves of help from a foreign power should they become involved in a conflict. Citing Kuwait and Saudi Arabia employing the U.S. military to defend themselves against a fellow Arab force from Iraq, and the people of Darfur relying on foreign intervention to stop their countrymen in the Sudan, al-Nimr stated that the Shi'a community had the right to search for foreign assistance in the case of conflict against other Saudis. Al-Nimr did not invoke Iran in detailing where this foreign assistance might come from, and did not delineate regarding at what point in RIYADH 00001283 003 OF 004 hostilities foreign intervention would be justified.

----- Al-Nimr on the SAG -----

9. (S/NF) In addition to his unswerving belief in the right of the Shi'a community to receive foreign assistance, al-Nimr also unflinchingly continued to denounce the Saudi government and its actions. One of the al-Nimr's overriding messages in this meeting was his view of governments as reactionary institutions. For example, al-Nimr stated that Eastern European countries gained their independence through agitation and Soviet failure, not due to any plan by the Russians to offer greater liberty. This fundamental belief affects his thinking generally and is at the foundation of why he advocates tough talk and is not averse to tough action. The Sheikh believes that the SAG is particularly reactionary and has been throughout its history. Al-Nimr stated that whether it is the Holy Mosque takeover, Iranian Revolution and EP Shi'a uprising of 1979; the realities of external pressure after September 11, 2001 and internal panic after the Saudi Arabia attacks of 2003 and 2004; or the advent of satellite television and the Internet, the Saudi government has never introduced change but has instead always been forced to change.

10. (S/NF) The examples given by al-Nimr were numerous: increased laxity in prohibiting the entrance of religious materials into the Kingdom is only due to current technology making it impossible to stop access to religious information; minor freedoms recently gained by the Shi'a of Qatif - for example, greater ability to celebrate Ashura - are a result of tensions building due to rising Shi'ism in both Iraq and Iran; municipal councils are a response to America's talk of supporting democracy and liberty over stability in the Middle East. Al-Nimr also cited a very personal story, saying that when he was detained in 2006 by the Saudi Mabathith, he was beaten by authorities and treated quite poorly. The people of Awamiyya, per the Sheikh's account, received no response to letters and formal pleas to the EP Governor for leniency. It was only when citizens began to advocate community demonstrations and a "no fear" attitude toward the SAG that al-Nimr says the authorities' abuse ended, and he was eventually released from detention.

11. (S/NF) With regards to specific SAG policies, the Sheikh believes that the Interfaith Dialogue initiative is a sham, a public relations exercise for audiences external to the Kingdom. He cited as evidence the crackdown against EP Shi'a that accompanied the high-level talk of dialogue (Reftel B). Additionally, he believes that the early June anti-Shi'a statement issued by 22 Salafi sheikhs was published with the consent of SAG officials. In the opinion of al-Nimr, many of the 22 are too close to the SAG for the statement to have been issued without government knowledge or approval. When asked by PoOff if he considered some members of the royal family to be truly committed to greater tolerance, al-Nimr responded that he does not distinguish between different members of the al-Saud, but only judges the government by its actions within the Kingdom, which he feels belie any sign of greater moderation or openness. He did, however, mention that there is a small amount of hope that younger generations, as

they continue to study abroad in larger numbers and are exposed to more tolerant societies, will bring more tolerant attitudes back to the Kingdom.

12. (S/NF) While supportive of the idea of elections as a positive development in Saudi society, al-Nimr dismissed municipal councils as non-political, ineffective institutions with purview over only basic functions, and an inability to exercise authority over even those issues. He cited the fact (unconfirmed by post) that Diriyah, the ancestral home of the al-Saud, receives a larger municipal budget than Qatif despite Qatif having several times the population of Diriyah, as proof that municipal governance is simply another area in which the regime's discriminatory policies manifest themselves.

----- COMMENT -----

13. (S/NF) Al-Nimr's private remarks were consistent with his previous public statements in their disregard for the SAG, RIYADH 00001283 004 OF 004 their support of foreign intervention on behalf of the Saudi Shi'a, and their inferences that the Sheikh at the very least will not denounce the idea of violent uprising. On the sensitive topic of Iran, however, the Sheikh eagerly attempted to divorce himself from the image of being an Iranian agent. Likewise, the Sheikh was much more complimentary of the U.S. - perhaps even somewhat disarming in his recounting of U.S. foreign policy in World War II, the Cold War, and the Carter administration - than he has been previously portrayed. Though it is certainly possible that al-Nimr changed his tune on these issues for the company of a U.S. diplomat, the pace, passion and certainty with which he spoke seemed to reflect true belief, and not cold political calculation or manipulation. In any case, his ideas seem to be internally contradictory. While it might be possible at a theoretical level to distance himself from Iran while also arguing the right of Saudi Shi'a to seek foreign assistance, at the de facto level Iran is certainly the only country at this time that might work with the Saudi Shi'a to undermine SAG control - a future Shi'a Iraq being the only other actor of any possibility. It is perhaps this reality that leads some local analysts to believe that al-Nimr would not hesitate to join Iranian agents in a possible uprising.

14. (S/NF) Also notable for the purpose of predicting al-Nimr's future behavior was his recognition of his own growing popularity, an observation supported by many in the community. Post contacts have described al-Nimr as someone who in previous years was largely an apolitical religious figure, and is still a secondary player in local politics. These contacts point to the death of Ayatollah Shirazi as the moment when al-Nimr began to take more political stances, his politicization a product of desire for greater community influence. Assuming al-Nimr's primary goals are greater rights for Shi'a and greater personal influence, it would seem his plan will be to continue forcefully calling for reform and creating unrest, endearing him to the disaffected, and fitting with his vision of instability as being the only catalyst for real change in the Kingdom.

(APPROVED:JKINCANNON)

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