

Shias are doing better in Saudi Arabia

As long as they don't cross the crown prince

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LAST year Saudi Arabia's young and powerful crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, pulverised Awamiyah, a rebellious Shia town near the eastern coast. Throughout the summer Saudi forces shelled its 400-year-old neighbourhoods and erected siege walls to trap some 200 gunmen. But in February, when the rebels stopped shooting, he sent in his engineers, diggers and cranes to clear up the damage. Six months on, new roads, shopping centres and a small hospital are rising from the ruins of the levelled town. A new highway, stretching across Eastern Province, runs past Awamiyah, which had been largely isolated. By next March the \$64m facelift will be complete.

Prince Muhammad hopes the reconstruction will send multiple messages. In exchange for absolute loyalty, he is offering to treat his 2m-3m Shia subjects much like his 18m Sunnis. He has curbed the religious police, who enforced Sunni supremacy and derided Shias as *kuffar* (infidels). He has also appointed Saudi Arabia's first Shia cabinet minister (albeit without a portfolio). The board of Neom, a planned \$500bn high-tech city, has a Shia member, as does the national football team. Anti-Shia vitriol has been removed from school textbooks and television networks. "We're going to be an integral part of the kingdom as full citizens for the first time," says a well-connected Shia businessman. He predicts that Riyadh, the capital, will have its first Shia mosque within three years.

Awamiyah's reconstruction is also meant to entice Shia Arabs in the

region. "We can rebuild impoverished southern Iraq too," says a Saudi official, referring to the Shia portion of the country. Previous Saudi rulers backed Iraq's Sunni minority, but Prince Muhammad has courted its Shia hoping to lure them away from Iran's ayatollahs. He has hosted Shia clerics from Iraq, plans to send planes full of Shia pilgrims to the country's holy cities, and dangle billions in investment to revive industry in the south. While Iran pulls at the Shias' religious sinews, Saudi Arabia appeals to their sense of Arab nationalism—and suspicion of Persians. Shiism flourished in the Arab world a thousand years before Iran, says a Saudi prince involved in the effort. (Iran only converted to Shiism under the Safavids in the 16th century.) "We used to use Islam to resist nationalism," he says. "Now we do the reverse."

Well-to-do Shias praise Prince Muhammad for ridding Awamiyah of a slum infested by gun-toting criminals, drug-dealers and a Shia cult, called the Shirazis, which appealed to landless peasants in Eastern Province. Some Shirazis took up arms and called for the death of the Al Sauds after their rabble-rousing preacher, Nimr al-Nimr, was executed in 2016.

But Awamiyah's redevelopment also has critics. Bulldozers have carved thoroughfares through a honeycomb of ancient alleyways, used as hiding places by the Shirazis. The old souk has been demolished, replaced by shops in an open plaza. Palm groves have been levelled. Entering Awamiyah now feels like entering Palestinian towns in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Residents and visitors must pass through multiple checkpoints cut into the siege walls. Armoured cars patrol the town. "The price of integration is a loss of identity," says a man living nearby.

Others don't think the position of Saudi Shias has improved much under Prince Muhammad. There are still no Shia members of the top religious authority. No Shia judges sit on national courts. Nor are there Shia police officers or ambassadors. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen's

Houthis, a group of Shia rebels, stirs sectarian tensions.

The previous Saudi king, Abdullah, launched a dialogue with Shia leaders in the kingdom. But Prince Muhammad is uncompromising. All of his changes have come by decree. He refuses to talk to Awamiyah's rebels, insisting they turn themselves in. In August the royal prosecutor called for the first time for a Saudi woman to be sentenced to death for the crime of protesting. She is Shia. That disloyalty will be harshly punished is another message the crown prince hopes to send, to Sunnis and Shias alike.

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