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Book Review

Saudi Clerics and Shi'a Islam. By Raihan Ismail. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

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Raihan Ismail, from the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies published a book, which is very interesting for scholars specialising in Shi'a Islam in general, or in Shi'a in Saudi Arabia. The topic of Shiism in the Wahhabi state has many dimensions, from religious beliefs and politics to economic and security aspects. It has been three years since the prominent Shia cleric, Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, was executed by the Saudi government leading to a reaction from Shi'a communities all around the world. The Saudi embassy in Tehran and the Saudi consulate in Mashhad were burnt down. So, it is a very significant issue, and Ismail has made a very relevant move to introduce the topic to the expert community and its scholars.

The book is structured in six main chapters, plus an introduction and a conclusion. The first chapter explains the emergence of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the relationship between the *'ulama* representing the religious part of Saudi society and the ruling family of the House of Saud. This chapter helps the reader to understand the religious and political background in the Saudi Kingdom. The second chapter is about the history of the development of the Muslim sects in Arabian Peninsula, dealing mainly with the topic of the Sunni-Shia division during the Umayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman Caliphates continuing to the time of the Safavid and Qajar dynasties. The sub-chapters connected to modern history, religion and politics in the region

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are especially interesting. In one part the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah, the founding father of Sunni Salafism, are explained, with attention paid to their impact on the Shia minority.

Both general public and scholars on Shi'i faith would appreciate the third chapter. For the first group of readers, the basic beliefs of the Shi'a belief is well. The second group can be interested in this chapter due to its focus on theological convictions of the Saudi *ulama* towards Shi'ism in general. From the perspective of comparative religion studies, it is important to read about the Wahhabi's perspective towards Shia beliefs and their prejudices towards it. Chapter four explains how and why the Saudi '*ulama* consider the internal Shia minority as a threat. This chapter is the most important part of the book because it describes and analyses the situation of the Shi'a community in the Saudi Kingdom from the level of state politics down to the level of common people suffering from discrimination by state authorities. There is also a debate over Shi'a's loyalty towards the Saudi state, their demography, access to education, discrimination in the labour market, and forbidden religious activities. Especially in this chapter, it is very important for the author to be as objective as possible because politics and prejudices can easily influence these topics.

Chapter five is aimed at Saudi '*ulama*'s attitude towards the external Shia threat, namely Iran. A reader can learn about mutual relations between the Saudi Kingdom and the Islamic Republic. The Islamic revolution in 1979 and the alleged Iranian effort to export the revolution as perceived by Saudi '*ulama* and politicians is an important part of the chapter helping to understand the current security dynamics in the Persian Gulf. However, the author is not stuck in this region and also focuses on the Levant. It examines the position of Hezbollah as an important Iranian arm and the Syrian government as a crucial ally of Iran in the region. The last chapter deals with the same topic, but in the region of the Persian Gulf, with case studies of the Shi'a communities in Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen and the Saudi attitude toward those countries.

In conclusion, Raihan Ismail offers a summary of identified issues between Sunnis and Shiites in the Kingdom and surrounding regions Ismail provides a security analysis where the state of Saudi Arabia is considered a referent object of his security analysis. . He speaks about internal and external threats the Shi'a poses to the Saudi Kingdom. However, the word 'threat' can be very tricky in this case, as the Shi'a minority is the one threatened by Saudi oppression. The Saudi perspective is relevant for under-

standing the rivalry between the two leading states of the Islamic world. Hence, the explanation of the position of the Shi'a in the Kingdom is an important contribution to understanding the religious, political and security situation in the Middle East.