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978-1-107-04304-6 - The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism

Toby Matthiesen

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The stigmatisation of Shia Muslims as Saudi Arabia's internal Other fulfills an important function in Saudi religious nationalism. At times of crisis the 'Shia threat' is used to rally the rest of the population, most of whom are Sunnis of different persuasions, around the ruling family. Shia in Saudi Arabia are confronted with a religious establishment that promotes the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, the religious police, and a state apparatus from which they are often barred. Yet, when they travel abroad they are doing so on a Saudi passport, and are often confronted with the same stereotypes that people all over the world have of "the Saudis". Indeed, they are an important if often misunderstood factor in Saudi domestic and regional policies. And their history in the country that is home to the two holy places of Islam – Mecca and Medina – is relevant to Muslims beyond Saudi Arabia's borders. Shia Muslims all over the world are interested in the fate of their co-religionists in the Kingdom. Some Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, particularly those with *salafi* and anti-Shia leanings, consider their mere existence, and any political claims by Saudi Shia, to be anathema. Together with the fact that Shia live on top of some of Saudi Arabia's largest oil fields, their history and political mobilisation, therefore, have ramifications far beyond Saudi Arabia.

### IN THE SHADOW OF THE WAHHABIYYA

Saudi Arabia is often portrayed as a largely Hanbali- and Wahhabi-dominated country, but a variety of Islamic traditions and all four schools of Sunni religious law can be found across the country. The Eastern oasis

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of al-Ahsa has strong Maliki, Hanafi and Shafi'i traditions. For most of modern Saudi history, these schools were largely excluded from official religious institutions. Only in 2009 were non-Wahhabi Sunni scholars appointed to the highest religious body, the Council of the Committee of Senior 'Ulama'.<sup>1</sup> Shia clerics have unsuccessfully demanded to be appointed to this body and have equally unsuccessfully pushed for the recognition of a higher body of Shia clerics.

Sufis, who make up a large part of the population in the Hijaz, also face suppression of their religious beliefs and rituals. But they have been able to continue their religious traditions through their organisation in semi-clandestine Sufi orders.<sup>2</sup>

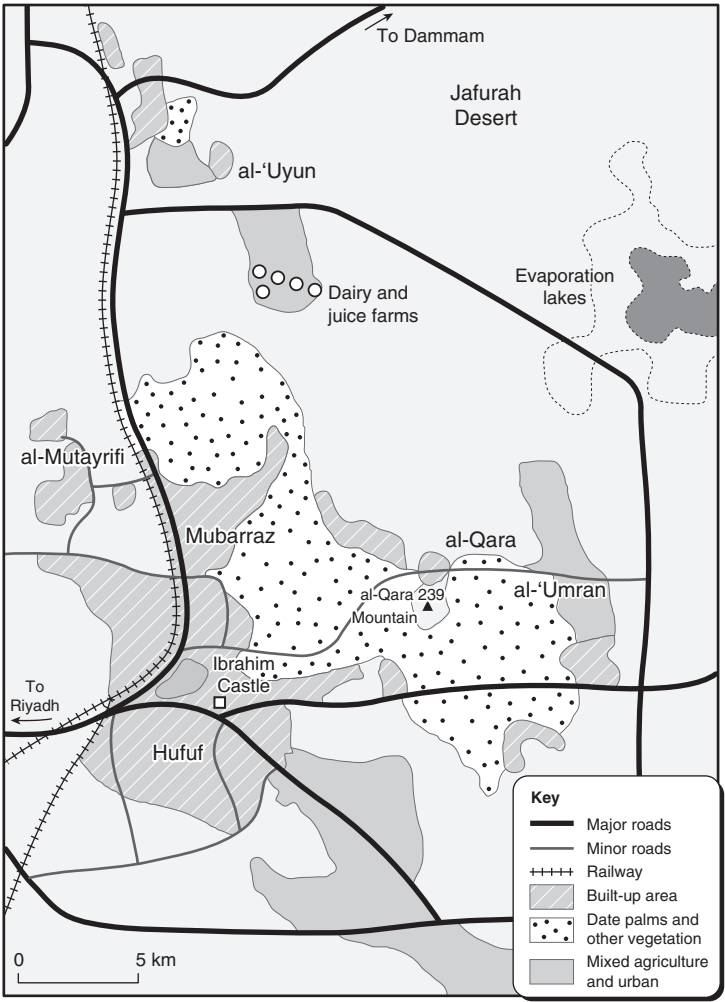
The southern region of Najran near the border with Yemen is home to a substantial Ismaili community. The Ismailis are mainly from the powerful Yam tribe and many of them carry the last name al-Yami. They are led religiously by local religious scholars, the *da'is* from the al-Makrami family. They also face harassment by the religious police. At the same time, however, their socio-political structures differ from the Eastern Province Shia and they have historically had better relations with the Saudi state. This is partly due to their integration into the tribal system and because the Yam tribe was an important ally of the Al Saud in the conquest of the southern parts of the country.<sup>3</sup>

Significant numbers of Ismailis moved to the Eastern Province in the twentieth century to find work in the oil industry and some became active in the labour movement there. In the Eastern Province, they faced similar religious discrimination to the local Shia, with whom they inter-

<sup>1</sup> This included Qays bin Muhammad bin 'Abd al-Latif Al Mubarak, a Maliki scholar from al-Ahsa. Roel Meijer, "Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender Segregation Debate," *Middle East Policy* 17, no. 4 (Winter 2010), 80–100.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a Sufi leader from the Hijaz, Cairo, 2013. Identity in possession of the author (this comment will not be repeated in subsequent footnotes where interviewees are cited without names). Mark J. R. Sedgwick, "Saudi Sufis: Compromise in the Hijaz, 1925–40," *Die Welt des Islams* 37, no. 3 (1997), 349–68; *al-tasawwuf fi al-su'udiyya wa-l-khalij* (Sufism in Saudi and the Gulf) (Dubai: Markaz al-Misbar li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Buhuth, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> John R. Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 73–6; Farhad Daftary, *The Ismailis: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 295–8; Fuad Hamza, "Najran," *Journal of The Royal Central Asian Society* 22, no. 4 (1935), 631–40; Guido Steinberg, *Religion und Staat in Saudi-Arabien: Die wahhabitischen Gelehrten 1902–1953* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 484.



MAP 2. Map of al-Ahsa Oasis.

acted and shared their experiences. Any attempt to organise politically as Ismailis or Najranis has been suppressed harshly.<sup>4</sup>

The Twelver Shia are mainly concentrated in and around the two old population centres of al-Ahsa and Qatif in the Eastern Province, but there is also a small Twelver Shia community in Medina called *nakhawila*. Unlike the Shia in the Eastern Province, the *nakhawila* are partly tribally organised and are members of key Hijazi tribes. While intermarriage and

<sup>4</sup> Interview with 'Ali al-Yami, Washington, October 2013.

religious links exist between *nakhawila* and Eastern Province Shia, the *nakhawila* are more quietist and did not join Shia political movements. Before the oil era, many *nakhawila* were hired to work as agriculturalists on fields belonging to local Sunnis and many Hijazis still associate the *nakhawila* with this.<sup>5</sup> They also face significant sectarian discrimination, which, like with the Ismailis, is facilitated by their common last name, al-Nakhli.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Ahsa is an oasis located about 140 kilometres inland from the Gulf. Around 180 square kilometres of gardens, palm trees and villages surround its two main towns, Hufuf (see Picture 0.1) and Mubarraz, which throughout the twentieth century developed into one single urban settlement. Al-Ahsa was used as the name for the whole province until 1953, when it was renamed Eastern Province (*al-mintaqa al-sharqiyya*) and the provincial capital moved from Hufuf to Dammam. Thereafter, the name al-Ahsa was only used for the oasis, which is made up more or less equally of both Sunnis and Shia (see map of al-Ahsa).

Qatif, on the other hand, is an almost exclusively Twelver Shia port town on the shores of the Gulf (see map of Qatif). The coastal towns Safwa to the north and Saihat to the south have become suburbs of Qatif. Connected to Qatif via two causeways lies the island of Tarut (see Picture 0.2), which has four Shia quarters and one Sunni quarter. Population estimates of these areas, and particularly the numbers of Shia, are a constant source of politically inspired debate, as there has never been a census detailing sectarian affiliation. The number of Shia in al-Ahsa and Qatif totalled somewhere between 30,000 and 40,000 in the early nineteenth century<sup>7</sup> and grew to between 50,000 and 60,000

<sup>5</sup> Mishary Abdulrahman al-Nuaim, *State Building in a Non-Capitalist Social Formation: The Dialectics of Two Modes of Production and the Role of the Merchant Class, Saudi Arabia 1902–1932* (PhD, University of California, 1987), 133, 143f.; Werner Ende, “The Nakhawila, a Shi’ite Community in Medina, Past and Present,” *Die Welt des Islams* 37, no. 3 (1997), 264–348; al-Shaykh Salih al-Jad’an, *Ayatallah al-Shaykh Muhammad ‘Ali al-‘Amri: sira wa-‘ita’* (n.p.: n.p., 2011); Yousif al-Khoei, “The Marja and the Survival of a Community: The Shia of Medina,” in *The Most Learned of the Shia: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid*, ed. Linda Walbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 247–50, 249f.; Hasan bin Marzuq Rija’ al-Sharimi al-Nakhli, *al-nakhawila (al-nakhliyyun) fi al-Madina al-Munawwara: al-takwin al-ijtima’i wa-l-thaqafi* (The Nakhawila in Medina: The Social and Cultural Formation) (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Intishar al-‘Arabi, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike in the Eastern Province, there is no Shia court in Medina. Interview with Shia from Medina, Riyadh, October 2008; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report: Saudi Arabia* (July–December 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Report by Major Colebrook about the Persian Gulf littoral, 10. 9. 1820, quoted in Jerome Anthony Saldanha, and C. H. Gabriel, *The Persian Gulf Précis*, 8 vols., vol. 5: Jerome

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PICTURE O.I. Market and Ottoman fort in Hufuf.

Source: Nestor Sander Collection/Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA.

towards the end of the century.<sup>8</sup> By the second half of the twentieth century these figures rose to several hundred thousand and estimates in the early 1980s varied between 300,000 and 440,000.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of

Anthony Saldanha, *Précis of Turkish Expansion on the Arab Littoral of the Persian Gulf and Hasa and Katif Affairs* (Simla: 1904, reprinted Gerrards Cross: Archive Editions, 1986), 2. In 1865, the population of al-Ahsa was estimated at 20,000 and was said to provide 270,000 MT\$ (Maria Theresa dollars) while Qatif, with a population of 6,000, was said to provide 130,000 MT\$ of a total revenue of 692,000 MT\$ of all realms under Saudi control. L. Pelly, *Report on a Journey to Riyadh in Central Arabia 1865* (Cambridge: Oleander Press, reprinted 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Lorimer estimates the Shia population of al-Ahsa and Qatif as 56,000 as part of an overall population of 284,000 on the eastern side of the Gulf. John Gordon Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, 'Oman, and Central Arabia*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1908–15), vol. 1, Appendix R, 2. In the 1920s, the Secretary of the Saudi Palace put the figure of Shia in al-Ahsa, which at the time referred to the whole Eastern Province, at 30,000 when asked by the Lebanese traveller and writer Ameen Rihani. This probably underestimates their size. Ameen Fares Rihani, *Ibn Sa'oud of Arabia: His People and His Land* (London: Constable, 1928), 235.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Anderson, *Differential Urban Growth in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Historical Interaction of Economic Development and Socio-Political Change* (PhD, Johns Hopkins University, 1984), 302–31; Ghassane Salameh and Vivian Steir, “Political Power and the Saudi State,” *MERIP Reports* 91 (1980), 5–22, 21; Abdulla Mansour al-Shuaiby, *The Development of the Eastern Province with Particular Reference to Urban Settlement and Evolution in Eastern Saudi Arabia* (PhD, University of Durham,

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PICTURE 0.2. Tarut Island.

Source: Dorothy Miller/Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA.

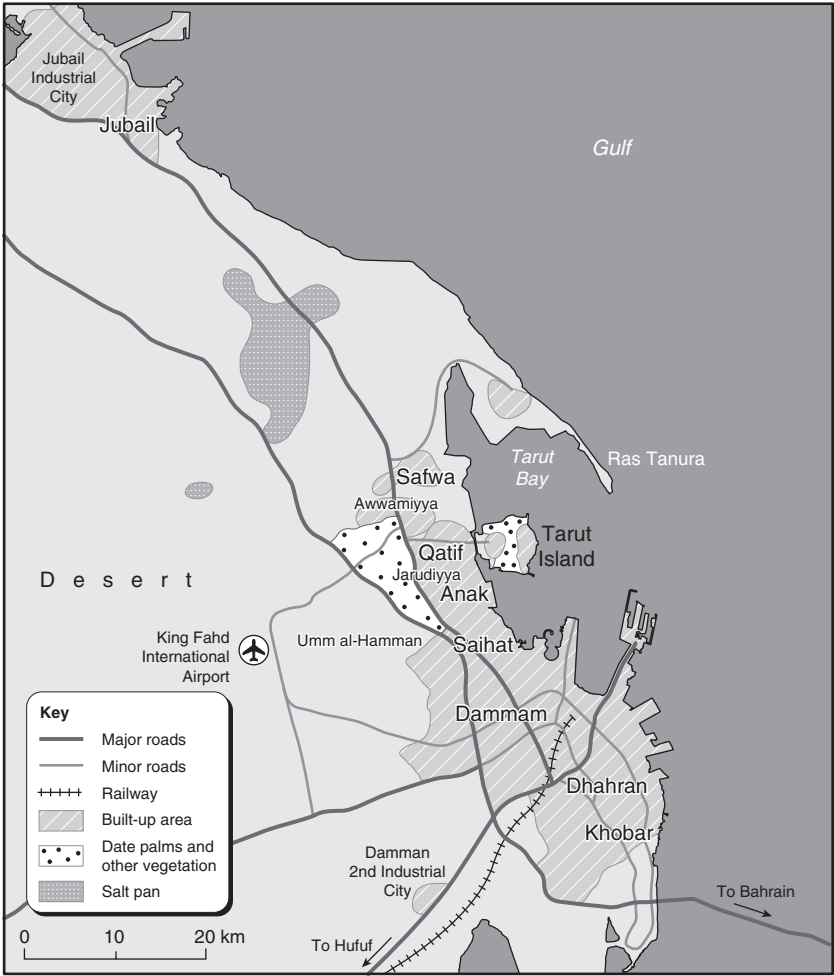
the twenty-first century, consultants for the Saudi government put the figure of Shia in the Eastern Province at around 1 million with the overall number of native Shia reaching around 1.5 million in Saudi Arabia, including an Ismaili population in Najran of around 250,000.<sup>10</sup> Figures provided by Shia activists are significantly higher and range between two and three million native Shia including the Ismailis, or between 10 and 15 percent of the Saudi citizen population.<sup>11</sup>

1976); Peter N. Woodward, *Oil and Labor in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and the Oil Boom* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 93.

<sup>10</sup> They estimate that Saudi Arabia had 1,319,541 native Shia in 2005–6. Email correspondence with Nawaf Obaid, May 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Various interviews with Saudi Shia, 2007–11.





MAP 3. Map of the coastal areas of the Eastern Province.

The inhabitants of the oases of Qatif and al-Ahsa have been sedentary for centuries and largely engaged in agriculture, trade, fishing and pearl diving. Politics often amounted to ensuring the safety, economic wellbeing and survival of the community in a hostile environment. Some members of the urban notable elite were integrated into the Ottoman bureaucracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But since the Saudi conquests of the Eastern Province in 1913 the Shia of al-Ahsa and Qatif have been subjects of a political entity that does not treat Shia Muslims as

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equal citizens. Shia from all backgrounds have prospered comparatively less than others.

The Wahhabi clergy has from the mid-eighteenth century onwards seen Shia Islam as one of its main, if not *the* main, enemy. While relations between Shia political leaders and individual members of the Saudi ruling family have fluctuated, and have improved at times, the attitudes of the Wahhabi clergy towards Shia Muslims did not change and have remained adversarial.<sup>12</sup> When ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Saud, called Ibn Saud, conquered al-Ahsa in 1913, Shia religious practices were forced to move underground, and Wahhabi clerics and the religious police sought to prevent public displays of the Shia faith, such as the processions during Muharram or gatherings in mourning houses, so-called *hussainiyyat*, the building of which was also officially banned.

Contrary to other cases of sectarian discrimination, the problems associated with being Shia in Saudi Arabia are therefore not just about political economy or identity politics, they are also about religious beliefs per se. For the acceptance of Shia Islam as a valid school of Islamic law is anathema to the Wahhabi clerics. In 1927, they and the *ikhwan* even demanded that Ibn Saud ensure the conversion of all the Shia in Qatif and al-Ahsa. The ruling family has tried to position itself as an arbiter between the Wahhabis and the Shia. To the Shia, the ruling family implicitly promised protection from the most extreme Wahhabi demands for the conversion or execution of Shia. To placate the Wahhabis, the bargain ensured that Shia religious practices were kept largely out of sight, at most tolerated in Shia majority areas where Sunnis could not be “molested”. This also implied that the ruling family would not accede to Shia demands, since the Wahhabis are certainly stronger than the Shia in this triangular bargain. As a result of this, anti-Shia fatwas, polemics and books have been tolerated if not openly supported by the ruling family for a century. Under Crown Prince and then King Abdullah this practice eased slightly as Shia were invited to a National Dialogue that acknowledged religious difference in the country. From 2009 onwards, however, there has been a marked resurgence of sectarian writings and statements by Wahhabi clerics. Anti-Shia incitement is also given space in Saudi-owned media, especially at times of crisis and when tensions with the local Shia flare up, such as after 1979 and since 2009.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Raihan Ismail, “The Saudi Ulema and the Shi’a of Saudi Arabia,” *Journal of Shi’a Islamic Studies* 5, no. 4 (2012), 403–22, 404.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Werner Ende, “Sunni Polemical Writings on the Shi’a and the Iranian Revolution,” in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri



Anti-Shia treatises by Saudi scholars (not to mention those by foreign Sunni clerics residing in Saudi Arabia) are too numerous to be discussed here in detail. Many of these texts focus on the refutation of religious beliefs and practices of Shia Muslims per se, and on a historical rejection of Shia Islam. But some specifically attack Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia. *The Situation of the Rejectionists in the Lands of Monotheism* by the prominent salafi cleric Nasir al-‘Umar is one of the most notorious anti-Shia pamphlets. Written in 1993, it aims to analyse the politics and religious rituals of Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and brands them as infidels and a danger to the nation and the Islamic umma. One of al-‘Umar’s main aims is to identify and name prominent Shia in business, education, and the administration in order to prove that the Shia are proselytising and taking over key sectors of the country.<sup>14</sup>

Similar polemics also target the Shia in Medina. Sunni authors accuse them of seclusion, of despising Sunnis, and make recommendations about how to confront them.<sup>15</sup> The Ismailis in Najran are described in equally derogatory terms.<sup>16</sup> The former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz (‘Ibn Baz’) (1910–99), issued numerous statements and fatwas against Shia religious practices and Saudi Shia clerics.<sup>17</sup> In 2008, a fatwa forbidding the sale of properties to Shia by another scholar was published in Saudi newspapers.<sup>18</sup> These anti-Shia views of the religious establishment are perpetuated in the media and in schooling, together with historical narratives that centre on the ruling family and leave out

(Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 219–32; Guido Steinberg, “Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi‘is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of Anti-Shi‘ism,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 107–25; Guido Steinberg, “The Wahhabiyya and Shi‘ism, from 1744/45 to 2008,” in *The Summa and Shi‘a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 163–82.

<sup>14</sup> Nasir ibn Sulayman al-‘Umar, *waqi‘ al-rafida fi bilad al-tawhid* (The Situation of the Rejectionists in the Lands of Monotheism), <http://ar.islamway.net/book/3165>.

<sup>15</sup> Abu ‘Abdallah al-Athari, “*babth tafsili ‘an rafidat al-madina al-nakhawila*” (A Detailed Study on the Nakhawila Rejectionists of Medina), <http://ar.islamway.net/book/99>. For more examples see Ismail, “The Saudi Ulema,” 411–13.

<sup>16</sup> “*‘Indama absartu al-haqiqah: haqa’iq la yasa’ ahl najran jahlabah*” (When I Saw the Truth: Facts Can not Help the People of Najran from their Ignorance), <http://maktabah.com/site/itemfiles/AndmaAbsartALhagigah.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi‘is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 35–41; Ismail, “The Saudi Ulema,” 416.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 417.

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the agency and socio-political make up of people in peripheral regions such as the Eastern Province.<sup>19</sup>

Partly as a result of these anti-Shia narratives, some Sunnis fear that an empowerment of the Shia in the Eastern Province could encourage them to try to secede with the help of Iran and deprive the country of its oil income. However unrealistic that scenario may be, it is a recurrent theme in conversations with Sunnis of various political persuasions and decision makers in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states.

Wherever a Shia goes in Saudi Arabia, he will be recognised after a while because of his name, his place of birth, his accent, and his religious practices. Shia are largely absent from top positions in the bureaucracy as well as in the private sector. There has never been a Shia minister and only one Shia ambassador.<sup>20</sup> Shia find it harder to reach the top management of state-owned companies, large Saudi conglomerates and even Saudi branches of multinational companies.

Saudi Shia sought to redress this situation and embraced various revolutionary ideologies throughout the twentieth century. From communism to Khomeinism, Shia have tried most political ideologies in the Middle East but to no avail: The opposition movements failed to change the inferior status of Saudi Shia fundamentally. Many came to realise that the Saudi Shia are too weak to transform Saudi politics single-handedly. At the same time, however, they are too numerous and live in a too strategically important region to be politically quiescent.

## THE SHIA IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Some of the best books on the Shia in al-Ahsa and Qatif are written by Saudi Shia themselves, including by long-time opposition activists such as Hamza al-Hasan<sup>21</sup> and Fu'ad Ibrahim. Ibrahim's book is the only other monograph on Saudi Shia in English and mainly recounts the history

<sup>19</sup> Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Manning the Barricades: Islam According to Saudi Arabia's School Texts," *Middle East Journal* 57, no. 2 (2003), 230–47; Michaela Prokop, "The War of Ideas: Education in Saudi Arabia," in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, ed. Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 57–81; Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House/Institute for Gulf Affairs, *Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance: With Excerpts from Saudi Ministry of Education Textbooks for Islamic Studies* (Washington, DC: 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Jamil al-Jishi served as ambassador to Iran from 1999 to 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Hamza al-Hasan, *al-shi'a fi al-mamlaka al-'arabiyya al-su'udiyya* (The Shia in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), 2 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Baqi' li-Ihya' al-Turath, 1993).