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

Toby Matthiesen

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The Other Saudis

Toby Matthiesen traces the politics of the Shia in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia from the nineteenth century until the present day. This book outlines the difficult experiences of being Shia in a Wahhabi state, and casts new light on how the Shia have mobilised politically to change their position. Shia petitioned the rulers, joined secular opposition parties, and founded Islamist movements. Most Saudi Shia opposition activists profited from an amnesty in 1993 and subsequently found a place in civil society and the public sphere. But since 2011 a new Shia protest movement has again challenged the state. *The Other Saudis* shows how exclusionary state practices created an internal Other and how sectarian discrimination has strengthened Shia communal identities. The book is based on little-known Arabic sources, extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, and interviews with key activists. Of immense geopolitical importance, the oil-rich Eastern Province is a crucial but little known factor in regional politics and Gulf security.

Toby Matthiesen is a Research Fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge.

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To my parents

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Acknowledgements

This book is the product of countless conversations, extensive fieldwork and a close reading of textual sources. During my main period of fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, in 2008, discussing the histories and contemporary manifestations of being Shia in Saudi Arabia was possible in a way that it would not be for much longer. The mid-2000s were characterised by national dialogues and a public recognition on the part of King Abdullah that the Shia are an integral part of Saudi Arabia. Unlike in previous decades, particularly the most confrontational phase between 1979 and 1993, the history of Shia dissent, and of discrimination against them, was a topic that some Saudis were willing to discuss. When I finished the doctorate on which this book is based in 2011, what is often simplistically called ‘the Shia question’ in Saudi Arabia was framed very differently, however. Shia in the Eastern Province had staged mass protests for more rights, which undermined the notion that Saudi Arabia was somehow exempt from the fallout of the Arab uprisings. Research on Saudi Arabia, and particularly on a sensitive issue such as Shia politics, is extremely difficult and sources are hard to come by. While I had the opportunity to carry out fieldwork across Saudi Arabia, including in various cities and villages of the Eastern Province, I broadened the geographical scope of my fieldwork considerably. I interviewed Saudi Shia, opposition activists but also clerics, intellectuals, journalists and less politically active people in Europe, the United States, Bahrain, Kuwait, Syria and Lebanon. Across these countries I also searched for opposition publications and local historiographical books on Saudi Shia history. I found some on the outdoor book market in the Eastern Province city of Qatif, where one can buy books that are banned in Saudi Arabia for discussing Shia religious

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beliefs or promoting historical narratives that contradict those of the rulers. I found them in Bahraini village bookshops; the owner of one of these bookshops has since been tortured to death as part of the crackdown on the 2011 uprising. I found them in the bustling alleys that lead up to the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab outside of Damascus, then still a preferred holiday location for Gulf Shia and now a site of fierce fighting. I found some of the books in the Shia libraries in Kuwait, in the vast second-hand bookshops off of Beirut's cosmopolitan Hamra Street and in the Shia publishing houses of Beirut's southern suburbs, where most Saudi Shia historical books are published. I found them on London's Edgware Road, and in libraries and private archives in Britain and the United States. I have written about some of the fieldwork trips that led to this book elsewhere, particularly in *Sectarian Gulf*.¹ In many ways, the two books complement each other, *The Other Saudis* outlining the historical struggle of the Shia in Saudi Arabia, and *Sectarian Gulf* detailing the protest movements and sectarian politics across the Gulf since 2011.

Many people have made this research possible; this list will inevitably be incomplete. Some of the Saudis and other Khalijis who shared their memories with me asked to remain anonymous but I hope they will recognise their voices in the book. Charles Tripp, the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation, and Laleh Khalili, my second supervisor, have been a tremendous source of support. In Saudi Arabia, I am indebted to Awad al-Badi, Sadiq al-Jubran, Habib Al Jumay', Kamil al-Khatti, Ja'far al-Shayib and many others. Several friends and colleagues have commented on earlier versions of this manuscript, and have in some cases read it several times. Their comments have significantly improved this book, and I am beholden to them: Khalid Abdallah, Safa Al Ahmad, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Werner Ende, Thomas Hegghammer, Claudia Honegger, Laurence Louër, Laetitia Nanquette, James Piscatori, Anees Alqudaihi, Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Glen Rangwala, Madawi al-Rasheed, Adrian Ruprecht, Tawfiq al-Sayf, Roger Tomkys, Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Marc Valeri, Max Weiss and Alice Wilson, as well as the Cambridge reviewers. Louis Allday deserves a special mention for coining the term that became the title of this book, and for reading this manuscript over and over again. 'Ali al-Ahmad, Hamza al-Hasan,

¹ Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). On Sayyida Zeinab see also Toby Matthiesen, "Syria: Inventing a Religious War", *New York Review of Books Blog*, 12 June, 2013.

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A Note on Conventions

This book largely uses the transliteration guide of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). Names and places that have a common English spelling will be spelled accordingly and no diacritic marks added (such as King Abdullah, Al Saud, Shia). Al refers to the larger family of someone, as in Al Saud, and is therefore transliterated differently from the common al- in front of last names. Arabic names are transcribed according to the IJMES system and the article is dropped before common place names unless a different transcription is dominant in English (e.g. Tarut not Tarout, Qatif not al-Qatif, Khobar not al-Khubar, al-Ahsa not al-Hasa or Hasa, Riyadh not al-Riyadh, Awwamiyya not al-‘Awwamiyya, Hufuf not Hofuf or al-Hufuf, Saihat not Seihat). Arabic words are not capitalised, except if they refer to places, names and publications (*hawza* not *Hawza*, *qadi* not *Qadi*). For Iranian names and places I largely use the Persian transliteration.

In some instances there are disagreements about the dating of a particular incident or the birth or death of a prominent figure. Often, the birth and death dates of historical figures are only roughly given in the Islamic (AH) calendar, which means that the date can often be in two separate years in the Gregorian calendar. Therefore, I have chosen sometimes to put both possibilities in the text, such as 1842/3.

The various Web sites cited in this book were last accessed in September 2013 (in some cases also in early 2014) and stored electronically by the author. Therefore, consultation dates of Internet sources have been omitted. The Internet archive was used to retrieve earlier versions of defunct Web sites and can be used in the future to retrieve Web sites cited in this book (<http://web.archive.org>). Full URLs are only provided in cases

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where the title of a Web page is not mentioned in the footnotes. The typing of an English title into a search engine should allow the reader to find the article. In the case of Arabic or Persian Web sites, the titles have been transliterated and translated into English. Using the transliteration, readers familiar with these languages can retrieve the article or a copy thereof even after the original Web site has changed its URL or has closed down by typing the title into a search engine.

Glossary

This is based on the glossary in Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth-Century Iraq: The 'Ulama' of Najaf and Karbala'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235–237.

<i>'alim, pl. 'ulama'</i>	'learned man', cleric
Akhbari, Akhbaryyya	the Shia school of jurisprudence that rejects deductive methodology in the study of law and requires unmitigated adherence to the limited meaning of the <i>akhbar</i> , the traditions (words and deeds) of the Prophet and the Shia Imams as transmitted by chains of narrators
<i>Al</i>	the house of/the clan of
<i>Amir</i>	governor
<i>Ashura</i>	tenth day of the month of Muharram; commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussayn, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson and third Imam in Shia Islam, in 680
<i>ayatallah</i>	lit. sign of God, title for a senior <i>mujtahid</i>
<i>diwaniyya, pl. diwaniyyat</i>	lit. salon, semi-public discussion forum or gathering
<i>Hasawi</i>	from al-Ahsa (Hasa)
<i>hawza 'ilmiyya</i>	lit. territory of learning, refers to a community of learning in a specific location and encompasses the actual sites of learning

	but also the social bonds, the organisation and the finances in a specific <i>hawza</i> : while the main Shia <i>hawzat</i> are in Najaf, Karbala and Qom, the religious schools of Qatif, al-Ahsa, Kuwait, Tehran and Sayyida Zaynab are also referred to as <i>hawzat</i>
<i>hussainiyya</i> , pl. <i>hussainiyyat</i>	Shia mourning house for the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussayn, also community centres
<i>ijtihad</i>	the process of arriving at independent legal judgment in matters of religious law by using the principles of jurisprudence (<i>usul al-fiqh</i>)
<i>Imam</i>	one of the twelve recognised hereditary successors of the Prophet Muhammad in Twelver Shia Islam
<i>intifada</i>	lit. uprising, refers here to the uprising of Saudi Shia in the Eastern Province in 1979/80
<i>khums</i>	religious tax, while it was originally paid to the Prophet, and by Shia Muslims to the Imam, Shia Muslims now pay these taxes to the <i>marji' al-taqlid</i> in his capacity as representative of the Imam, and at the local level to the representative (<i>wakil</i>) of the <i>marji'</i>
<i>leftist</i>	here used as a term describing all broadly left-leaning and secular Saudi opposition groups
<i>Majlis al-Shura</i>	Consultative Council
<i>marji' al-taqlid</i> , pl. <i>maraji'</i>	lit. reference point for emulation, someone who is qualified through his learning and probity to be followed in all points of religious practice and law by the generality of Shia Muslims
<i>marji' iyya</i>	authority, the institution of <i>marji' al-taqlid</i>
<i>mujtahid</i> , pl. <i>mujtahidun</i>	an <i>'alim</i> that reached the level of competence and scholarship necessary to perform <i>ijtihad</i>

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<i>mutasarrif</i>	governor of a <i>sanjak</i> (Ottoman sub-province)
<i>nakhawila</i>	name for the indigenous Shia community in Medina
<i>qadi</i>	judge
<i>qaimaqam</i>	governor of an Ottoman provincial district (<i>kaza</i>)
<i>al-qal'a</i>	lit. castle, Old city of Qatif
<i>Qatifi</i>	from Qatif
Shaykhi, Shaykhiyya	followers of Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (1753–1826), esoteric strand of Shia Islam, sometimes deemed heretical by other Twelver Shia scholars
<i>shirazi, shiraziyya, pl. shiraziyyun</i>	transnational Shia political network, whose name derives from its spiritual leader, Muhammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001)
<i>taqlid</i>	the process of following and emulating the practices and pronouncements of a <i>mujtahid</i> in matters relating to religious law and practices
Usuli, Usuliyya	the school of jurisprudence that emphasizes the use of reason in the study of the principles of jurisprudence (<i>usul al-fiqh</i>)
Wahhabi, Wahhabiyya	followers of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), whose teachings centered on the oneness of God (<i>tawhid</i>) and who wanted to purify Islam from innovations; official form of religious interpretation in Saudi Arabia
<i>wakil, pl. wukala'</i>	local representative of a <i>marji' al-taqlid</i>
<i>waqf, pl. awqaf</i>	religious endowment

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Abbreviations

<i>al-da'wa</i>	Islamic al-Da'wa Party (<i>hizb al-da'wa al-islamiyya</i>)
ANLF	Arab National Liberation Front (<i>jabhat al-taharrur al-watani al-'arabiyya</i>)
<i>Baath Party</i>	Arab Socialist Baath Party in Saudi (<i>hizb al-ba'th al-'arabi al-ishtiraki fi al-su'udiyya</i>)
CDLR	Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights (<i>lajnat al-difa' 'an al-huquq al-shari'iyya</i>)
<i>hizb al-'amal</i>	Arab Socialist Action Party in the Arabian Peninsula (<i>hizb al-'amal al-ishtiraki al-'arabi; al-jazira al-'arabiyya</i>)
IAO	Islamic Action Organisation in Iraq (<i>munazzamat al-'amal al-islami fi al-Iraq</i>), Iraqi wing of MVM
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (<i>al-jabha al-islamiyya li-tahrir al-Bahrayn</i>), Bahraini wing of MVM
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
MAN	Movement of Arab Nationalists (<i>harakat al-qawmiyyin al-'arab</i>)
MVM	Movement of Vanguards' Missionaries (<i>harakat al-risaliyyin al-tala'</i>)
OIRAP	Organisation for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (<i>munazzamat al-thawra al-islamiyya fi al-jazira al-'arabiyya</i>), Saudi wing of MVM
PDPAP	Popular Democratic Party in the Arabian Peninsula (<i>al-hizb al-dimuqrati al-sha'bi fi al-jazira al-'arabiyya</i>)
RMS	Reformist Movement in Saudi (<i>al-haraka al-islahiyya fi al-su'udiyya</i>)



MAP 1. Map of Saudi Arabia.