

A final concern relates to the fact that, although the introduction and conclusion briefly mention post-2011 developments, there are no sources dating later than 2009. Given the dreadful developments on the human rights front not only in countries like Syria and Libya, but also in one of her two primary case studies—Egypt—in the last several years, the absence in a book published in 2015 of a critical engagement with recent developments is a serious shortcoming. ✂

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BERNARD HAYKEL, THOMAS HEGGHAMMER, and STÉPHANE LACROIX. *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change*, 2015. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. vii + 351 pages, figures, tables, acknowledgements, index. Paper US\$30.00. ISBN 978-0-521-18509-7.

Saudi Arabia in Transition provides a welcome overview of Saudi politics in the twenty-first century. The anthology combines contributions from leading authorities with insights from new Saudi and Western voices. In the introduction, Bernard Haykel states that the book provides a fresh view of Saudi Arabia's present and future, one that avoids the mistakes of past texts that drew on dated and flawed Western conceptions of the kingdom, many of which overemphasized the weaknesses of the kingdom's government (1–2). In contrast, *Saudi Arabia in Transition* draws on the work of scholars with an “intimate understanding of Saudi Arabia, many of whom have conducted extensive fieldwork on the ground” (3).

An intimate understanding of Saudi Arabia is especially needed today, since many recent popular and scholarly texts on Saudi politics have drawn on a popular narrative that is highly critical of the government's foreign and domestic policies, and pessimistic about the kingdom's future and ability to reconcile modernity and tradition. Indeed, widespread pessimism about the Saudi monarchy is nothing new, for William Quandt wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1995 that “there is a cottage industry forming to predict the impending fall of the House of Saud” (“The Rise, Corruption, and Coming Fall of the House of Saud”, Capsule Review, September/October 1995).

By contrast, in *Saudi Arabia in Transition*, the authors assert that Saudi politics is an evolving dualistic dynamic between state and society. The state has the upper hand thanks to its wealth, its control of the media and security infrastructure, and the symbolic power of Islam and the Saudi national myth.

While some women and Islamists have resisted state power, one comes away from the essays in this anthology with the impression that the real threats to the kingdom are the advanced age of national leaders and succession, a growing population, demands for more official transparency, and a turbulent regional political environment.

Notably, *Saudi Arabia in Transition* contains essays by leading thinkers on Saudi politics. Many of these essays can be easily used in advanced undergraduate or graduate classes, for they are concise, well written, and sourced. Among the most useful of these essays are those by Steffen Hertog, Thomas Hegghammer, and Nabil Mouline. While Hertog's essay gives unique insights into the socioeconomic conditions in the kingdom's core and peripheral regions, Hegghammer and Mouline's essays detail how Islam and the kingdom's religious elites have shaped Saudi politics over the last quarter century. There are also original insights from newer scholars in the field, such as Amélie Le Renard whose essay provides much-needed analysis of an understudied but critical area of Saudi daily life: consumer culture. In addition, Abdulaziz al-Fahad's two essays, one on poetry and the other on the intersection of Saudi urbanization and genealogy, are both fine works of scholarship.

But the anthology would have been even stronger had it included a discussion of Saudis working in artistic genres other than poetry. Some of these artists are now well known globally and have publicly defined themselves as political or social activists. When Daesh threatened to kill Nasser al-Qasabi in June 2015 for appearing in a televised skit mocking the organization, the comedian responded in a television interview by using language that does not fit easily into the analytical framework that guides many of the essays in *Saudi Arabia in Transition*: "I'm an artist, and the artist's essential role is to reveal society's challenges." "Warning the people about ISIS is the true jihad," he continued, "because we're fighting them with art not war." A year later, in early June 2016, Al-Qasabi provocatively challenged Daesh's worldview again when his hit television show, *Selfie TV*, aired a comedic skit that poked fun of the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide in the Middle East with a story about two individuals who were switched at birth. Hours after the episode aired, it dominated Saudi social media, generating four million comments on Twitter alone. These examples demonstrate how leading cultural figures can, in certain contexts, shape how Saudis look at seminal political issues.

Of course, no book can cover every topic. There is little question that this anthology should be on the list of any professor looking for a new classroom text or any graduate student preparing for comprehensive exams in Middle

East studies or Gulf politics. As the book's subtitle suggests, the contributions provide important insights. But there is far more to say about Saudi Arabia. It is the hope of this scholar that future anthologies, building on the many original ideas in this rich text, will allow us to delve more deeply into the assumptions and terminology that we use to understand one of the most important countries in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

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