

Islam and Muslim Societies

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Book Reviews

Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation By Madawi Al-Rasheed, 2007, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Contesting the Saudi State is a very interesting book; ethnography of consent and contestation about contemporary Saudis who debate politics and religion. The book examines Wahabiyya in the 21st century as a contested intellectual, religious and political field, which is currently appropriated by several actors. The book deals with wahhabiya's those aspects which are relevant to the political debate that is continuing in Saudi Arabia and not as a theological body of religious knowledge produced over 250 years, nor is it an exposition of the main teachings of the movement. From the opening pages of the introduction until the last sentence of the conclusion this book is well written, authoritative and insightful. This is a unique and well-timed study. The book is well-organized and clearly written, which reflects the author's clarity of purpose.

The 308 page book has 6 chapters, preceded by Glossary (pp. viii-xx), 21 page Introduction and followed by 9 page conclusion (254-62), Notes (pp. 263-291), Bibliography (pp. 292-302) and Index (pp. 303-308)

In the "Introduction: Debating religion and politics in the twenty-first century" (pp. 1-21) Madawi besides exploring Wahabiyya from its earliest times to present in a comprehensive manner also explores the focus, aim and objective of the book, arguing that the objective is to capture "contemporary debate" about religion and politics (p.21). For her, the book is an attempt to "unveil the debate" of Wahabiyya inside Saudia and in the eyes of "others" (ibid).

The first chapter, "Consenting Subjects: Official Wahhabi Religio-political Discourse" (pp.22-58) deals with the religio-political discourse of those who may or may not be employed by the state but who all endorse interpretations that promote consent and obedience to rulers. Discussing the genealogy and geography of this discourse, it challenges the view that the Saudi state of today is an Islamic Wahhabi state, arguing that while some Saudis continue to regard their "Islamised social sphere" as a reflection of Islamic govt., others are well-aware of the "contradiction" between rhetoric and reality (p.58).

The Second Chapter, "Re-enchanting Politics: Sahwis from Contestation to Co-optation" (pp. 59-101) attempts to explore struggle of some Saudis from the past three decades against the disenchantment to re-enchant politics. The so-called Sahwis represent an attempt to contest the status quo, namely the disenchantment of the world of politics and power. It captures the debate within Sahwa after 9/11 when they came under pressure to reconsider its early positions.

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The Third Chapter, "Struggling in the Way of God abroad: From Localism to Transnationalism (pp.102-133) traces the transnationalisation of Saudi religio-political discourse as it travelled under regime sponsorship to places such as Afghanistan and London, where competing with heavy Saudi spending on religious flows, there appeared the most revolutionary rhetoric that not only challenged the Saudi regime but also accused it of blasphemy. The transnationalising of Saudi religious discourse, argues Madawi, proves that locally produced traditions and individuals "undergo transformation" as they travel to "other destinations" (p.133).

The Fourth Chapter, "Struggling in the Way of God at Home: The Politics and Poetics of Jihad" (pp. 134-174) analyses the Jihadi discourse as presented by dissident 'ulama, activists and laymen, arguing that in the twenty-first century, Jihadism is a performance that captures the imagination of many Saudis (men and women), invoking meanings that are at the heart of the Wahhabi tradition. The debate between those who "support jihad" and those who "denounce" it continues, and will, she argues, probably do so for the "foreseeable future" (p.174).

The Fifth chapter, "Debating Salafis: Lewis Atiyat Allah and the Jihad Obligation" (pp. 175-210) traces (through the life journey of one Saudi) the personal journey of a young jihadi man called Lewis – a Saudi intellectual and Islamic activist. The chapter is based on an analysis of several articles of Lewis that appeared between 2001 and 2005 and is inspired by reading electronic responses to his articles. Madawi argues that Lewis reasserted his Arabian and Muslim identity, while he has multiple identities, he celebrates only one. He interprets the world using a dimension namely faith; and Lewis cannot be understood if we continue to consider "religion and politics as two distinct fields of enquiry" (p. 210)

The sixth (and final) chapter, "Searching for the Unmediated Word of God" (pp. 211-252), examines the Saudi quest for the unmediated word of God. The quest is a product of modernity rather than archaic and obscurantist inclinations and this quest threatens to erode the pillars of authoritarian rule: history, theology and politics. There is no doubt that the process of "undermining authoritarian rule" has already begun; and it is difficult to bring it "to a halt" (p.253).

This is followed by 8 pages "Conclusion" (pp. 254-262), which concludes with the following arguments:

"Many Saudis struggle to dismantle the three pillars of authoritarian rule, the historical, theological and political narratives propagated by the ruling elite and their noblesse d'état. Saudis are beginning to imagine and articulate alternative religious interpretations that promise to free... [and] fully integrated in the world ... as free citizens able to articulate, choose and live narratives of their own making".

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The book is a result of a mixture of methodologies, ranging from classical works (by the early generation of Najdi religious scholars from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab to Abdulaziz Ibn Baz) to the Internet websites, discussions, interviews and E-mails.

The book is written in a different perspective: neither to glorify Wahhabiyya nor to condemn it, but to capture contemporary debate about religion and politics.

In summary, the author- Madawi al- Rashid has proved herself to be a very high level scholar through her unique writing style and his central thesis that Saudis are engaged in debating religion and politics. It is a work that would be of interest to students and scholars of modern Islamic thought in general and of Saudi Arabia in particular. In a word, it is remarkable and an excellent source.

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