

Review of David Commins, *Islam in Saudi Arabia*

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In his book, *Islam in Saudi Arabia*, David Commins provides a historical account of the role of religion in the Saudi state. After a brief description of the early three distinct sects of Islam (Sunni, Shiite, and Kharijite), he describes the four Sunni jurisprudential schools, while focusing on the Hanbali school, which was adopted by Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Commins describes the rise of the movement led by ibn Abd al-Wahhab, known as "Wahhabism," not only as a religious movement, but also as a system of ethics and traditions that sets itself as the representative of the true Islam that judges other Muslims based on its ideology. Commins describes the strong relationship between the Saudi royal family and Wahhabi clergy since the agreement between Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and the Emir of al-Diriyya Muhammad ibn Saud in 1744. The book then describes the role of Wahhabism and its interpretation of Islam as it has been applied to everyday life in Saudi Arabia as the Islamic legitimization of everything.

A central goal of *Islam in Saudi Arabia* is to account for the growing significance of Islam as the dominant basis for state and social identity. Recounting the history of Saudi Arabia could be seen as a useful method by Commins to explain the role of religion in state and society as a cumulative account of cultural and political creeds passed from one generation to another. At this point, the details of the conflict between zealous youth and government serve as good examples of how to use history to explain current events. The siege of Mecca in 1979 (pp. 129–131), the rejection of Western troops that came to protect the Kingdom during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990

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(pp. 145–147), and al-Qaeda's operations against Saudi and American interests (pp. 147–153) are historical examples of the Wahhabi resistance of the Saudi rule when the Saudi royal policies do not fit with the fundamental Wahhabi doctrine.

Most of the historical accounts of Saudi Arabia narrated by Commins in this book add little for readers familiar with the subject. However, Commins contributes a noteworthy point on the relationship between Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the Muslim Brotherhood figures who came to the Kingdom as refugees from Egypt and Syria. The role of the Brotherhood in developing the Islamic curricula and shaping the educational system of the Kingdom (pp. 131–138) is very interesting, especially when examined alongside Salafism and the *Sahwa* (pp. 138–147). These sections serve as a good introduction – for Western readers – of the post-Afghan war and the rise of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. Commins addresses how both movements (Wahhabism and Muslim Brotherhood) cooperated to shape contemporary political (Sunni) Islam in the post-Soviet-Afghan War, when the *mujahideen* (known as the Arab-Afghans) returned back from Afghanistan to their home nations after defeating the Soviet army in February 1989.

For the most part, however, *Islam in Saudi Arabia* echoes David Commins' previous book, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (2006), which raises the question of the need for another book on Islam in Saudi Arabia by this author, instead of an update of his earlier book. Certain chapters have the same title in both books, such as "Chapter Four: Wahhabism in a Modern State" (2006:104–129) and "Chapter Three: Wahhabism and the Modern Saudi State (2015: 37–70). There are also similarities between Chapter Five (2006) and Chapter Seven (2015).

Nevertheless, the most important addition of *Islam in Saudi Arabia* is the book's discussion of the recent problematic politics in the Kingdom after the death of King Abdullah and the new epoch of King Salman and his two assistants Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Commins does not envision any potential major changes in the role of religion in the country (p. 182). Yet recent activities by Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in 2016 – one year after *Islam in Saudi Arabia* was published – suggest a departure from past policies as the young prince introduces more entertainment activities that are not favored by the conservative clergy. In May 2016, the government established the General Authority for Entertainment, the institution responsible for entertainment in Saudi Arabia, including carnivals and mixed-gender festivals. The introduction of these activities coincides with reducing the role of the religious police within the society.

Islam in Saudi Arabia is a useful text for undergraduate courses and for other readers looking for a general introduction to Saudi Arabia. Commins' approach of summarizing the history of the Wahhabi movement beginning with the eighteenth Century effectively explains the conservative roots of twenty-first Century Saudi Arabia.