

wieder zur Disposition. Es bleibt zu hoffen, dass Mlodoch in Zukunft weiter die Überlebenden von Anfal begleiten kann und auch die Scientific Community über ihre Publikationen daran teilnehmen wird lassen.

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Souid, Sihem: *L'Arabie saoudite, ce pays méconnu*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016. 110 pages. ISBN 978-2-343-08821-1. € 15,00.

Since the early 2000s, a new generation of Francophone scholars has authored major books on the history and politics of Saudi Arabia. Some of the best of these books, which draw on extensive fieldwork and Arabic sources, have also been translated into English. They include Pascal Ménoret's *L'énigme saoudienne* (*The Saudi Enigma*), Stéphane Lacroix's *Les islamistes saoudiens* (*Awakening Islam*) and Nabil Mouline's *Les Clercs de l'islam* (*The Clerics of Islam*).¹ Unfortunately, Sihem Souid's book, *L'Arabie saoudite, ce pays méconnu* (*Saudi Arabia, this unappreciated country*), makes little reference to these monographs. In her introduction, she explicitly questions the value of offering 'yet another book on Saudi Arabia utilizing the same methodology.' Instead of building on academic literature, she mostly cites French newspaper articles and webpages. She undertook her own fieldwork, however, and claimed to have 'met key people from civil society, ordinary citizens and officials' (p. 10). Her research seems to have been sponsored by the Saudi government, which has entrusted Souid's consulting business with public relations work.²

Souid's consultancy work makes it not surprising that her book is more an apologia for the kingdom than a critical analysis. It seeks to counter an 'unjust and unfounded demonization campaign' in French and other Western media as well as within certain 'intellectual and political circles'. At a time, when Saudi Arabia faces accusations of sponsoring extremism and violating human rights, the author hopes to promote a less 'civilizing' and 'moralizing' approach among 'French elites'. She attempts to convince readers that 'in the fight against terrorism, as in the recovery of the economy, Saudi Arabia can be a valuable ally' for her country (p. 9, 11).

In eight short chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion, Souid defends Saudi Arabia's recent record in the spheres of politics, society, the economy and culture. The first chapter calls the kingdom a 'scapegoat', an 'enemy that is easier to represent and identify than Daesh' (p. 13). Chapters two and three then seek to dissociate Saudi Arabia from violent extremists, describing the kingdom's struggle against both Al-Qaeda and the

¹ Pascal Ménoret, *L'énigme saoudienne: Les Saoudiens et le monde, 1744-2003* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003), *The Saudi Enigma: A History*, translated by Patrick Camiller (London: Zed Books, 2005). Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens: Une insurrection manquée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, translated by George Holoch (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Nabil Mouline, *Les Clercs de l'islam: Autorité religieuse et pouvoir politique en Arabie Saoudite (XVIII^e-XXI^e siècles)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011), *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia*, translated by Ethan S. Rundell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

² Benjamin Barthe, 'Riyad lance une opération séduction en France,' *Le Monde* (25 March 2016), http://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2016/03/25/riyad-lance-une-operation-se-duction-en-france_4890155_4497186.html.

Islamic State. Chapter four explains Saudi fears of Iran, whose reawakening poses a 'threat to the stability and survival of the Arab world' (p. 72). Chapter five complains that French media have paid more attention to arrests of Saudi bloggers and journalists than to long-term 'positive social advances' (p. 76). The sixth chapter focuses on Franco-Saudi economic relations, claiming that they have 'preserved thousands of jobs' (p. 85). The penultimate chapter describes Saudi investments in culture, including the *Routes d'Arabie* (*Roads of Arabia*) exhibition in the Louvre in 2010. The final chapter reinforces the kingdom's importance as a 'key ally for France'. In this context, Souid claims that the current Saudi intervention in Yemen 'is a success' (p. 103).

During her fieldwork, Souid collected interesting statements from a variety of interviewees, including a guide in Riyadh's National Museum and a schoolteacher. Her material allows for valuable observations especially of social and cultural developments. She concludes that 'a genuine civil society has formed, and intellectuals from various backgrounds (liberal as well as religious) have appropriated the religious field and formulated an eminently modern project' (p. 108). This conclusion fits even with the well-researched views of critics of the Saudi government, such as Madawi Al-Rasheed.³

Yet, despite her interviews with 'ordinary citizens', Souid's treatment of current affairs seems mainly informed and guided by the Saudi government and debates in French media. Ignoring much of the academic literature, her book is superficial even when compared with other works by other Saudi-sponsored consultants, such as Joseph Kéchichian.⁴ Readers of French who are looking for fresh and deeper insights into Saudi society should rather go to books by other young researchers, such as Amélie Le Renard's *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* (*A Society of Young Women*).⁵

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³ See Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴ Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Legal and Political Reforms in Sa'udi Arabia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

⁵ See Amélie Le Renard, *Femmes et espaces publics en Arabie Saoudite* (Paris: Dalloz, 2011), *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁶ I thank Jeanne Juliana Vaz for her kind comments on the manuscript.