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"New political Sectarianism in Times of Economic hardship in Saudi Arabia"

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New Political Sectarianism in Times of Economic Hardship in Saudi Arabia

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16604 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MIDDLE EAST - ECKART WOERTZ

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New Political Sectarianism in Times of Economic Hardship in Saudi Arabia

Agenda:

I. Introduction

On 2 January 2016, Saudi Arabia unanticipatedly executed the Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr an-Nimr, a prominent critic of Saudi authorities and vocal leader of the anti-government protests against the marginalisation of Shia that had erupted in the kingdom's Eastern Province in 2011. The cleric had been put to death for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government alongside 46 individuals mainly alleged to be members of al-Qaeda or its affiliates. He was depicted merely as yet another "terrorist" and as a hazard to the kingdom's security.[1] The tenor of immediate domestic and international reactions was rather predictable: While Western human rights organisations[2] and missions[3] strongly condemned the execution, expostulating the political nature of the allegations held against an-Nimr - among them "participating in demonstrations", "disobeying the ruler" and "inciting sectarian strife" - and expressing their concerns over the fairness of the process, many Saudi Sunnis welcomed the act as they equated the Sheikh's demand for a fairer share and recognition for Shia in Saudi Arabian political and economic life with religious heresy. The beheading prompted riots in Iran, Bahrain, and Iraq, where protesters stormed the kingdom's

1 *Al-Jazeera*, 2 January 2016, "Iran condemns Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr an-Nimr", http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/1/2/إيران-تدين-إعدام-السعودية-للشيخ-نمر-النمر, accessed on 19 November 2016.

2 *Amnesty International*, 15 October 2014, "Saudi Arabia: Appalling Death Sentence Against Shi'a Cleric Must Be Quashed": https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/10/saudi-arabia-appalling-death-sentence-against-shi-cleric-must-be-quashed/, accessed on 19 November 2016.

3 United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon as quoted in 'Statement attributable to the Spokesperson of the Secretary-General on executions in Saudi Arabia', 2 January 2016: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2016-01-02/statement-attributable-spokesman-secretary-general-executions-saudi, accessed on 19 November 2016.

consulate in Mashhad and its embassy in Tehran which was set on fire.[4] These violent events precipitated the already tense diplomatic relation between the two regional adversaries. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, declared an-Nimr a "martyr", cautioning that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would endure "divine revenge" for its execution of an "oppressed scholar".[5] Saudi Arabia consequently broke off diplomatic ties with Iran, recalling its diplomats from Tehran.[6]

Only a week before an-Nimr was put to death, on 28 December 2015, Saudi Arabia as the world's leading oil producer declared it would raise domestic energy prices by as much as 40 percent alongside massive cuts to subsidies for goods such as water, electricity, diesel, and kerosene over the next five years, after announcing a record $98 billion budget deficit for 2016.[7] Although this shortfall was not as high as projected by the International Monetary Fund ($130 billion), it compared to 60 percent of the envisaged state income. Scholars claimed that in an environment of slumping oil prices and rather sinister predictions for the future market, Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)[8] would no longer be able to sustain the decades-long demanding economic and social assistance and concessions given to their citizens, being confronted with the inconvenient struggle to curb public spending and to introduce economic reforms to counteract the trap of diminishing resource incomes.[9]

This paper seeks to establish a correlation between these two events in exploring the relationship between the political economy of Saudi Arabia as a rentier-state and sectarian identity and its implication for the kingdom's domestic policy. Although some aspects of sectarianism can only be addressed by taking into account a larger regional perspective in a Persian Gulf system, sectarian

4 *New York Times*, 2 January 2016, "Iranian Protesters Ransack Saudi Embassy After Execution of Shi'ite Cleric": http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-executes-47-sheikh-nimr-shiite-cleric.html, accessed on 19 November 2016.

5 As quoted in *BBC News*, 3 January 2016, "Iran: Saudis Face 'Divine Revenge' for Executing al-Nimr": http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35216694, accessed on 19 November 2016.

6 *BBC News*, 4 January 2016, "Saudi Arabia breaks off ties with Iran after al-Nimr execution": http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35217328, accessed on 19 November 2016.

7 *Al-Jazeera English*, 28 December 2015, "Saudi Arabia Hikes Petrol Prices by 40% at the Pump": http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/saudi-arabia-hikes-petrol-prices-40-pump-151228154350415.html, accessed on 19 November 2016.

8 The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

9 Gengler / Lambert 2016: 321.

politics in Saudi Arabia as the "*de facto* leader of the Sunni camp"[10] have their own distinct dynamics. Firstly, I will argue that in times of economic hardship in the kingdom, sectarianism serves as a tool to deflect popular attention to internal enemies as mediate scapegoats to distract from unwelcome economic reforms, such as sweeping cuts to subsidies to a population which is willing to choose stability over personal prosperity. Secondly, I claim that the seismic events in 2011 brought about new forms of political sectarianism as a concrete short-term tool in domestic policies, given the emergence of a new generation of Shia who are less willing to accept their political and economic marginalisation than their predecessors. The new sectarianism in the Gulf, and especially in Saudi Arabia, is characterised by rulers deciding increasingly on the basis of a sectarian evaluation of politics, thinking strategically in sectarian paradigms, hereby shaping their foreign and domestic policies accordingly.[11] Post-Arab Spring sectarianism in Saudi Arabia is moreover characterised by an innate dimension of political economy in alignment with the question "who gets what, where, when and from whom"[12]. Moreover, bigger than the fear of a mainly Shia-led uprising is the fear of an opposition who would unite Sunni and Shia and bring about a cohesive civil society.[13]

II. Sectarianism in the Persian Gulf

A definition of sectarianism is well-known to be difficult. It draws on the idea of groups (sects) with distinctive religious, political, and philosophical faiths.[14] Sectarianism has come to have a religious connotation, denoting a minor group that has disaffiliated from mainstream beliefs. When describing a small group breaking away from a mainstream society, hereby raising tensions, the expression is most often linked to a negative connotation. Religious and political strife within and between groups, such as between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq, Muslims and Hindus in India, or Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, has often been subsumed to the notion of sectarian conflict.[15] Haddad observes that "sectarianism" does not have an ultimate or precise meaning,

10 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 143.

11 Matthiesen 2013: xii-xiii.

12 Matthiesen 2013: xiii.

13 Matthiesen 2013: 19.

14 Potter 2013: 2.

15 For Ireland, see: Silva / Mace 2015.

rejecting the term as such as it would arouse too much negativity and suggesting to consider such groups as "competing subnational mass-group identities" whose "dynamics are in essence very similar to other such competing groups, be they racial, national, ethnic, or even ideological".[16] It is indeed important to mention that religious sectarian identities have coexisted along the side of other competing social and political identities - class versus class, generation versus generation, tribal versus non-tribal, indigenous versus immigrant, et al. While sectarian mistrust and violence have been detrimental to the nation-state and national unity, they are, however, intrinsically linked to, if not even furthermore a product of, the notion of nationalism and the nation-state.[17] Sectarian identities are furthermore subject to constant change and renegotiation.[18] In this essay, "sectarian relations" shall be used to refer to Sunni-Shia relations, rather in order to denote my research interest than to take a definitional stand.

The study of sectarianism anywhere as well as sectarianism as a political tool in Saudi Arabia and in the current Persian Gulf context requires gentle, even prudent approach. In spite of the widely recognised salient presence of religious and ethnic groups in forming political life in the region, until now sectarianism as a political phenomenon lacks an objective analytical framework with respect to how it materialises under different institutional circumstances.[19] At the same time, the logic and drivers of sectarian conflict in the Middle East and Persian Gulf have been at the heart of a growing body of research.[20] At its core lies the question whether sectarianism is an eternal or rather modern phenomenon.[21] Hostility toward Shia Islam has always been inherent to Wahhabism which regards the Shia as a political sect and denies its adherents Islamic qualifications.[22] However, religious explanations do not suffice, as the divide between Sunni and Shia based on a doctrinal separation is not an "*a priori* determinant of conflict"[23]. Arab scholars and commentators have often rooted the region's susceptibility to sectarian conflict in the meddling of foreign powers, such as the

16 Haddad 2013: 71.

17 Haddad 2013: 72.

18 Smith 2000: 24, Haddad 2013: 75.

19 Gengler 2013: 33.

20 Potter 2013; Matthiesen 2013; Wehrey 2014; Gengler 2015.

21 Potter 2013: 4.

22 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 144.

23 Wehrey 2014: xiii.

"detrimental" effect on sectarian relations of the U.S.-American occupation of Iraq in 2003.[24] Others have recognised the seismic effect of the Iranian Revolution, the subsequent fear of Shia rebellion across the Gulf fuelling the establishing of counter-Sunni narratives and the seemingly ever-lasting competition between Iran and Saudi-Arabia for the role of the "Islamic state par excéllence".[25] But while regional upheavals, most notably the Iranian Revolution, the on-going Iraq War since 2003, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the Arab uprisings of 2011 are certainly correlated to sectarianism and while its outcomes have contributed to sectarian strife, they did not cause it.[26] Some scholars continue to refer to the alleged importance of historical events as the main driver of sectarianism or prism through which opinions on contemporary events are supposedly shaped: Although 1400 years old warfare over the Caliphate are sometimes "mourned as if they were yesterday's tragedy"[27] - which could certainly account for part of the persisting antagonism among Sunni and Shia -, sectarian conflict can never be fully assessed and understood without taking into account the role of agency by the authoritarian regimes in the Persian Gulf, namely rulers of rentier-states highlighting and sowing threats from other sectarian factions depicted as enemies - internally as well as externally -, thereby increasing the need among the population for security dampen motivation for uprisings.[28]

Another main driver in sectarianism in the Persian Gulf is to be found in Shia transnationalism. With the exception of Oman, all GCC states are ruled by a Sunni monarchy but have a significant Shia population which has been subject to various levels of political, economic and religious forms of discrimination and marginalisation. The Shia community of the Gulf states have in their defence often turned to outside revolutionary narratives and ideologies - among them Nasserism, Ba'athism, communism and Iranian revolutionary Islamism - to challenge the (monarchical) status quo, by dint of familial and clerical connections between the Gulf Shia and fellow believers in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.[29] Since the 1990s, however, the majority of the Gulf Shia has attempted to invoke their rights within the national political framework, calling peacefully for reform and sometimes even

24 Haddad 2013: 67.

25 Askari 2013: 17.

26 Wehrey 2014: xv.

27 Pelham 2008: viii.

28 Al-Rasheed 2011: 513.

29 Wehrey 2014: xiv.

collaborating with Sunni Islamists and liberals. In spite of these efforts, suspicion of them remains due to their transnational bonds. One of the most prominent features of the transnational clerical bonds of the Shia community in the Persian Gulf is a religious institution and practice *sui generis*, the *marja' al-taqlid* (literally: source of following / emulation) as labels attributed to higher and venerated Shia clerics whose opinions and edicts in spiritual, social, juridicial matters serve as guidance. Their power is theoretically not limited by national borders.[30] This has made the integration of Shia populations in the Gulf difficult: Fear of disloyalty and questions arise whether the transnational authority of the *marja'* is directive or consultative, extending beyond spiritual and social affairs to political matters or not. This has even led to internal debates about reform of the religious institution of *marja' al-taqlid* among Shia.[31] The impact of Shia transnationalism materialises furthermore in Iran's foreign policy and rhetoric: After years of détente under the presidencies of Khatami and Rafsanjani, a newly awakened political rhetoric from Iran for revolutionary Shiite Islam hegemony, such as Ahmadinejad's claim that "even though the revolution took place in Iran, it is not confined to Iran alone"[32], did only embolden the Gulf's Sunni leaders perception of the supposed threat of a Shia uprising.

While sectarianism has played a key role in all GCC countries and has often been treated as a unifying phenomenon of the entire Persian Gulf region, the reality of Sunni-Shia divide in each country is much more nuanced in demographics, regime type, allocation and reciprocation of the two confessional groups. Kuwaiti Shia make up between 20 and 30% of the population, many of whom have allied with the ruling family and thus profiting from their wealth. The case of Bahrain is much more delicate: 60 to 70 percent of the population are Shia under a Sunni ruling monarchy. Contemporary Saudi Arabia is home to 2 to 3 million Shia (10 to 15 % of the population), mostly in the Eastern Provinces around the cities Al-Ahsa and Qatif.[33]

Despite the fact that the roots and intensity of sectarian competition differ extensively athwart the GCC countries, we can pinpoint a set of tools which more or less deliberately enhance sectarian polarisation by adding to a general feeling of instability and insecurity: exclusive national narratives

30 Wehrey 2014: 208.

31 Ibid: 112.

32 *MEMRI*, 2 February 2009, http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/3281.htm#_edn9, accessed on 19 November 2016.

33 Matthiesen 2013: 2-3.

focussing on the different characteristics of the identity groups in the population, legislative and electoral legal frameworks systematising cleavages based on descent as well as the containment of (Shia) opposition. These mechanisms are complemented by an invigorated foreign policy adding to regional insecurity and promoting national militarism in some GCC countries and, more recently, the appearance of innate economic restructuring in light of diminishing gas and oil revenues.[34]

III. Sectarianism in Saudi Arabia

Since the birth of the country in 1932, Saudi Arabia's Shia community has been widely oppressed and marginalised from the economic and political life of the country by the ruling Al-Saud monarchy and Wahhabi religious establishment.[35] Saudi Shia face severe restrictions on their political mobility and freedom of religious worship.[36] Shia have furthermore been denied access to sensitive military and intelligence posts as well as from well-paid employment opportunities in the public sector. Moreover, they have been discriminated against with regards to their access to valuable government subsidies provided to the general population.[37] They also suffer from an unequal access to health-care services and education. Sectarianism in the kingdom has been described as a "damaged ruling bargain"[38] in light of the massive legitimacy deficits of its rulers, weak or dysfunctional political institutions and unequal access to economic and political capital. The containment of Shia opposition is not an end in itself but serves the broader purpose of blocking the rise of popular opposition movements. The Shia population and their activists have often been depicted as local agents of regional foes such as Iran or Hizballah in order to isolate them from liberal Sunnis and Islamists willing to implement reforms.[39]

With the emergence of a revolutionary Shiite Islam in the course of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia witnessed its first major confrontations with mobilised Saudi Shiites. Inspired by the events in new Islamic Republic, Shiites in the Eastern Province staged popular uprisings contesting

34 Gengler 2015: 67.

35 Askari 2013: 39.

36 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 145.

37 Askari 2013: 40.

38 Wehrey 2014: xii.

39 Wehrey 2014: xii.

their second-class citizenship - which saw the deaths of more than 20 people due to the intervention of Saudi security forces.[40] However, the death of Khomeini in 1989 brought about the fading of revolutionary passion and Shiites had to seek arrangements with the ruling elite to enhance their status.[41] The beginning of the Iraq War in 2003 had led the Saudi Shias to adopt a more conciliatory stand: Fearing more oppression due to the suspicion that they would follow suit to the recently empowered Iraqi Shia, there had been no shortage in efforts to prove otherwise. Shia activists overtly demonstrated their loyalty to the state and the House of Saud, repeating that their calls for reform would comply with the territorial integrity of the kingdom, locating the institution of the *marja'* in a national context to dissociate themselves from Iran, and participating in municipal council elections.[42] Due to U.S.-American pressure, Saudi Arabia took certain steps to calm the tense situation, initiating a National Dialogue in order to build bridges among factions. However, these efforts were perceived as rather superficial, contributing little to détente between the factions.[43] Shiite hopes that the kingdom would concede larger social and political rights were thwarted.

IV. Post-Arab Spring: New political sectarianism?

Most of media and academic coverage of the Arab Spring in the Persian Gulf have focused on Bahrain, where uprisings were incited by the massive marginalisation of a Shi'ite majority. But similar circumstances apply to Saudi Arabia, where social unrest which began in March turned into violent clashes between the Wahhabi and Shi'ite establishment in the Eastern provinces.[44] As the Arab Spring in 2011 generated massive protests in Bahrain, Saudi Shia - mostly young people - in the Eastern Provinces once again took to the streets. In spite of the fact that the Shia riots never came near to actually intimidating the regime, for the first time the Shiites were equipped with weapons in popular protests. The Saudi Arabian interior minister swiftly blamed a "foreign country" - Iran - as the culprit, assuring the kingdom would beat anyone endangering internal security "with

40 Askari 2013: 17.

41 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 144.

42 Wehrey 2014: 106.

43 Askari 2013: 17.

44 *BBC News*, 13 January 2012, "Shia protester 'shot dead' in Saudi Arabia": http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16543013, accessed on 19 November 2016.

an iron fist".[45] The funerals of those killed became a symbol of strength and unity among Saudi Shia hitherto unknown in the region since the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[46] Due to internal migration, hundreds of thousands of Shia now live in the main urban centres Riyadh and Jeddah. While they did not present an imminent threat of a Shia revolution, the hitherto active sense of provincial marginalisation has rendered the Shia a less compact minority.

In a domestic perspective: In response, the kingdom issued a ban on all forms of protests and marches, sending a five-digit security personnel to the Eastern Province to quell the unrest, leaving many arrested - mostly without due process - and jailed.[47] In anticipation of the Arab Spring's domino effect, the Saudi regime drew upon Wahhabi interpretations to halt the emergence of "national politics" bridging gaps between sectarian, ideological and tribal barriers.[48] It explicitly capitalised on the population's instability concerns by overemphasising Iran's expansionist vision and role in the events, denouncing the 'Day of Rage' on 11 March as a "Shia conspiracy".[49] Although this 'Day of Rage' failed entirely, for the first time Sunni opposition groups supported Saudi Shia activists. Hitherto, due to a lack of organised national civil society with trade unions, political parties or professional associations, opposition groups had collaborated - if even - only on rare occasions.[50] New youth groups emerged, calling for further protest against the regime on the internet, such as the National Youth Movement and the Free Youth Movement, formulating demands of inherently non-sectarian nature (the end of corruption, injustice, release of all political prisoners and overall political freedom).[51] Mainly the new generation of Shia activists seemed to be disenchanted from and disappointed of the pro-dialogue, conciliatory approaches of their predecessors in the previous decades - also because they had to suffer from violent post-Arab suppression.[52] In part, they disaffiliated from them, establishing their own post-revolution non-ideological narrative, formulating demands of strictly political and social, but not sectarian nature,

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45 *Jerusalem Post*, 9 October 2011, "Sectarian Rifts Erupt again in Saudi Arabia": http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Sectarian-rifts-erupt-again-in-Saudi-Arabia, accessed on 19 November 2016.

46 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 144.

47 Askari 2013: 17.

48 Al-Rasheed 2011: 514.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid: 522.

51 Ibid: 517.

52 Wehrey 2014: 148.

while adhering to the principles put forward by Shia cleric Nimr an-Nimr, who had gained more and more momentum since the 1990s as an advocate of peaceful reforms.[53]

In a regional perspective: The seismic events of 2011 brought about the toppling of several leading Sunni statesmen. Alongside the continuous regional instability and a Western "post-Iraq and Afghanistan fatigue", they have been regarded by scholars as an unprecedented golden opportunity to the Shi'ite Islamic Republic of Iran - Saudi Arabia's greatest regional foe -, much willing to fill any regional power gap. The distinct features of sectarianism in Saudi Arabia are also linked to the kingdom's role as "*de facto* leader of the Sunni camp" in the region in light of the war in Syria.[54] If Assad were to be overthrown, Iran would not only lose an important regional ally but would be pushed back in its aspirations at filling potential regional power vacuums. The need of containment vis-à-vis Iran in the war in Syria fuelled further sectarian strife in Saudi Arabia's narrative of the Sunni-Shia divide. If the Saudi Shia had never come near to actually threatening the Saudi regime, it still uses the war in Syria to sow fear of external threats of Shia invasion to re-establish the loyalty of its reform-minded citizens and dampen motivation for uprising among younger liberals.

Saudi Arabia's regime thus reacted with their own Sunni counter-revolution, mobilising their complete media apparatus, launching social media campaigns depicting the alleged meddling of Iran as the source of all protests, indirectly sponsoring anti-Shia Facebook pages and slogans such as "May Allah Blacken Their Faces".[55] Moreover, economic measures were taken: preemptive subsidies and a massive campaign of social and economic aid to appease dissent were launched, which included the salient concession of unemployment benefits and scholarships to Saudi students.[56] They furthermore called open the Salafi clergy to publish fatwas undermining the ruling family's legitimacy.[57] Coming under pressure to reform their power, Saudi rulers hit back by portraying themselves as the unique guaranteer of the Sunni majority's security, deflecting popular attention to a purported threat presented by Saudi Shias as Iran's local agent in the kingdom - an infamous, but mostly effective move for non-democratic regimes in rentier-states to enhance their legitimacy.

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53 Ibid: 149.

54 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 143.

55 Al-Rasheed 2011: 520.

56 Ibid: 145.

57 Wehrey 2014: 144.

In a parallel development and as mentioned before, Saudi Arabia had begun to feel the exhaustion of natural resources and the dwindling of gas and oil revenues. Their status as a rentier-state has therefore been subject to question: As Saudi Arabia had until recently kept the dubious political loyalty of the population via great subsidies and the distribution of resource revenues, it now faces more and more new stress tests such as low oil prices and massive budget shortfalls.[58] Thus, in an environment of economic hardship, a "new political bargain"[59] arises: The need for Saudi leaders to cut back on subsidies to the population - once unthinkable - leads them to capitalise on the fears of their population and tap once again on a divine source of legitimacy, the essential Sunni-Shia divide. One shall not forget the implications of the disastrous and immensely costly war in Yemen which precipitates Saudi Arabia's economy. an-Nimr's execution as relatively cheap operation compared to the permanent provision of expensive subsidies can be seen as the most recent anecdotal measure of this bargain to abort the emergence of a national movement combining Sunni and Shiite groups contesting the new fiscal reality, hereby reflecting a new political sectarianism as a non-economic well of legitimacy to deflect popular attention from economic hardship.

V. Conclusion

As we have seen, Saudi Arabia has heightened the feelings of instability and insecurity with regards to sectarian strife, blaming domestically Saudi Shia activists and externally Iran as scapegoats, to distract from the implementation of unwelcome economic reform and sweeping cuts to subsidies. The recent announcement of economic hardship has fuelled fear of Saudi Arabia's elites that a newly emerged post-Arab Spring Shia generation of activists, less willing to settle for the conciliatory approach pursued by their predecessors, might bridge gaps with reform-minded Islamists and Sunni liberals to question the ruling class's legitimacy. A rather unplanned outcome of the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia has meant for the ruling class to actively operate as a stimulant for existing sectarian identities, inciting strife vis-à-vis a population who subsequently put security over personal wealth or political rights and freedoms on their wish list.[60] The execution of an-Nimr mirrors a bigger pattern of a politically motivated instrumentalisation of sectarian strife, which has emerged in the Persian Gulf since 2011. The ruling elite has chosen to tap both divine and alleged

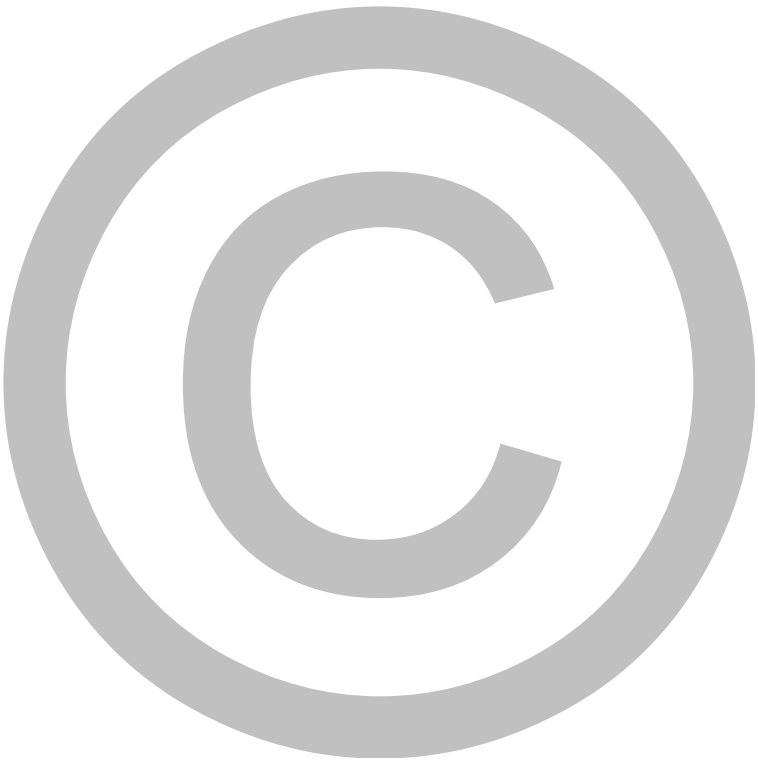
58 Gengler 2013: 19.

59 Gengler / Lambert 2016: 321.

60 Guzansky / Berti 2013: 150.

security policy sources of legitimacy so strengthen the Sunni Islamic establishment by default.[61] It will be crucial to monitor regional developments, especially within Syria, the development of Saudi Arabia's civil society with regards to the new generation of Saudi Shia activists, as well as the domestic economic situation, to assess the further development of sectarianism in the kingdom.

(4.317 words)



61 Peacock / Thornton / Inman 2007: 191.

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