



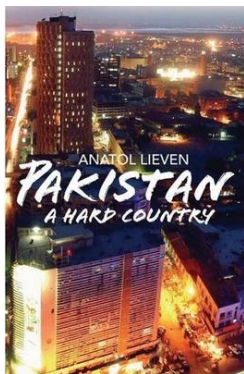
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Current Books on Pakistan, Shiism, and Saudi Arabia: Thinking Beyond Usama Bin Laden

by Youssef Aboul-Enein

I spend a significant amount of time conducting seminars on Islam, Islamist Political Theories, and Militant Islamist Groups to units deploying to the Middle East, as well as to leaders attending the National Defense University. Part of the benefits of teaching, is a requirement to keep current on books recently published about the region. I hope to give you an overview of books I enjoyed and others that were much more challenging and do not garner my immediate recommendation. Three current books will be featured in this review essay, one each on Pakistan, Shiism, and Saudi Arabia. Let us begin with a book that gets my vote as required reading for 2011, Anatol Lieven's new book on Pakistan.



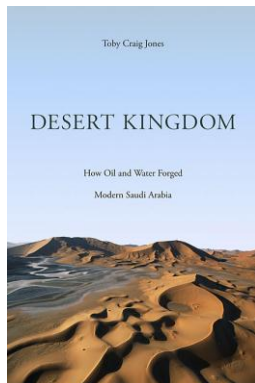
With the killing of Usama Bin Laden, and the debate on the future of U.S.-Pakistani relations, Anatol Lieven has written an excellent book entitled, "Pakistan: A Hard Country," (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011, 528 pages). It is perhaps the one book to read on Pakistan in 2011, and offers a level of nuance required for those wanting to become true specialists on the complexity of Pakistan's political history. Lieven is a professor of international relations and terrorism studies at King's College, London and he uncovers such gems as the true tribal links to certain established political parties and the importance of the ancient and informal ties of kinship that absorbs any attempt by the state to assert control of wide segments of Pakistan. He discusses the uniqueness of Pakistani military coups. Unlike

Arab coups that have come through the ranks of colonel and below, in Pakistan the series of military coups have been top down. The chapter on the Pakistani military offers unique insights into the impact this institution has on millions of Pakistanis from an economic, political, and social perspective. Lieven's excellent analysis includes a discourse on the tribalization of Islam, and dissects why General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), attempts to impose a version of Islam failed utterly in the face of the reality that tribal customs and Islam mix to form a unique blend that varies by region. This tribalization of Islam can also take sinister forms like the Taliban that have merged elements of Wahhabism (Saudi form of Sunni Hanbali Salafi Islam) and Deobandism (North Indian form of Sunni Salafi Islam) and combined them with tribal Pushtunwali (Way of the Pashtun) to create some of the most heinous interpretations of Shariah (Islamic law). This is the kind of nuance needed among Americans interested in counter-terrorism or those wanting an understanding of Afghanistan-Pakistan issues. Lieven's book is 528 pages, but persons with an interest in South Asia must include this volume among their reading list.



Hamid Dabashi, a Professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University published “Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest,” Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 448 pages). This is not a book I recommend for someone without a baseline knowledge of Shiism or Islam, but if you have already read Karen Armstrong’s “Islam: A Short History,” followed by Heinz Halm’s books on Shiism, coupled with Vali Nasr’s “The Shia Revival,” then you are ready to tackle this book. Dabashi offers an intriguing idea, that Shiism when triumphant has problems adapting to a lifetime of theology built upon narratives of persecution, the challenging of oppression, and injustice. The excellent part of his book is the synthesis of collective guilt, the birth of a revolutionary

faith within Islam, and an excellent discussion of major thinkers in Shiite philosophy past and present. Dabashi is highly critical of Vali Nasr and his book, “The Shia Revival,” however I am critical of Dabashi characterizing Vali Nasr’s thesis as an attempt by the United States to divide and conquer among and within Shia and Sunni Muslims by understanding their differences. Instead one can view this as an attempt to understand nuance and complexity inherent in the Islamic faith that encompasses 1.5 billion adherents, and the fallacy of imposing a form of Islam on other Muslims, who do not all share an agreement on interpretations within Islam. In more simplistic terms, if you impose an Islamic government, the question then becomes whose Islam? Dabashi rightly discusses the novelty of Ayatollah Khomeini’s conception of Islamic government and the disagreement this has caused among Shia clergy. The book is not an easy read, but offers the kind of strenuous mental reflection needed to ponder the intricacies of the use of Shiite Muslim symbols in revolutionary protests, a deep read into understanding Iran, Iraq, and the 2011 protests in Bahrain among the Shiite majority population.



The last book is “**Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia**,” written by Toby Craig Jones of Rutgers University, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010, 320 pages). This is a book I could not put down. Having read many volumes on Saudi Arabia, this book takes a clever and innovative look at Saudi history from the vantage point of manipulating oil and water to ensure tribal and sectarian loyalty to the Saudi ruling family. It discusses how American companies played a role not only in providing oil options for Saudi rulers, but also discovered aquifers and planned desalinization plants that allowed the al-Saud family to control whole populations. Policies like settling the Bedouin, to controlling Shiites in the Eastern Provinces are

looked upon through the lens of water, land, farming, grazing, and the benefits of oil from revenue to jobs. The book ends with an epilogue of the current King Abdullah’s efforts to get more Saudis to diversify from the nation’s natural resources which are not infinite. He is taking a gamble through investing in the education of Saudis and opening the first co-ed college, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). The King is directly challenging the clerical establishment in an effort to provide Saudi Arabia with a world-class education at the undergraduate and graduate level for both sexes, and developing science and technology industries. The success of this project remains to be seen, and begs the question of what America’s role should be looking ahead to when Saudi natural resources are exhausted.

All three books should provide the reader an appreciation for ways they have attempted to interpret Islam, modernism, and the constant changes thrust in ever increasing inter-connected world. The 2011 Arab Spring is a product of various factors past and present, with century's old Shiite imagery projected onto Facebook™ and Twitter™ to protest the current Iranian regime.

Commander Aboul-Enein is author of “Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat,” (Naval Institute Press, 2010). He is Adjunct Islamic Studies Chair at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF) and Senior Counter-Terrorism Advisor at the Joint Intelligence Task Force for Combating Terrorism. Commander Aboul-Enein wishes to thank the National Defense University Librarians for directing him to a few of these books. Good teaching demands great librarians. Finally he wishes to thank his ICAF colleague CAPT Chan Swallow, USN for his edits that enhanced this review and more importantly his discussion of these books.

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