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ABSTRACT

“Between Conflict and Coexistence: Saudi Shi’is as
Subjects, Objects, and Agents in *Wasatiyya* and *Wataniyya*”

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Saudi Arabia’s minority Shi’i population has long been the subject of academic study, human rights concerns, and government policies, with issues ranging from repression of religious freedom and expression to secondary citizenship status. Since 9/11 and the 2003-2005 terrorist attacks within Saudi Arabia, Shi’is have been variously considered as Iranian agents, terrorists within, apostates, political dissidents, partners in national dialogue, targets of development projects, and aspiring students and citizens. This multiplicity of portrayals suggests that the status and role of Saudi Shi’is fluctuates according to national priorities, domestic and international political concerns, and fluctuations in the economy. This presentation analyzes the interplay between events and trends, on the one hand, and the status and perceptions of Shi’is, on the other, giving attention to both moments of hope, such as the Saudi National Dialogue on dealing with the religious “Other,” the inclusion of Shi’is in the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, and the growing youth activist population creating points of connection and cooperation between Sunnis and Shi’is in social media, and crackdowns, such as during the Arab Spring and the uprising in Bahrain, and concerns about the growing regional influence of Iran in the midst of conflicts in Yemen and Syria. Ultimately, the question is whether Saudi society overall will continue to follow the twin paths of *wasatiyya* (moderation) and *wataniyya* (love of nation) declared by former King Abdullah, asserting a supra-identity uniting otherwise disparate identities, or if regional political instability will result in a resurgence of perceived sectarian strife.