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HIGH VISIBILITY, LOW PROFILE: THE SHI‘A IN OMAN UNDER SULTAN QABOOS

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, one of the most popular reading grids of Middle East politics has been the increased impact of the Shi‘i issue on the national political agendas of Arab states. This article focuses on the place of one of the less studied Shi‘i groups, the Shi‘a of Oman, who represent around three percent of the national population, in the nation-building project initiated by Sultan Qaboos since 1970 to maintain political stability and legitimize his power. I argue that the special relationship the Shi‘a have maintained with the ruling elite in Oman and the prominent role some of them are enjoying in the Omani economy help explain their weak insertion into transnational Shi‘i networks in the Gulf and the fact that they have never questioned the validity of the Omani nation under Qaboos as a political framework. But the socioeconomic changes caused by the end of the rent-based welfare-state model has led recently to an increase in mutual prejudices and social grievances. The Shi‘a, because of their high socioeconomic visibility, are likely to find themselves at the center of other groups’ complaints.