Review of
“Najaf: The Gate of Wisdom”

Y. Tabbaa, and S. Mervin, (Paris: UNESCO, 2014).

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The book “Najaf: the gate of Wisdom” which is about one of the most sacred cities in the world includes 120 pictures and is written by the individuals who have the first-hand experiences about this city.

The review of this precious book has been carried out by one of the knowledgeable people in the realm of Islamic works. Following you can find the review.

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Throughout the Muslim shrine cities, Najaf is outstanding in that it has since enshrined the body of the first Infallible Imam Ali. Certainly Najaf has had many other things that have made it so prominent in the world.

The present writer, in fact reviewer, has recently conducted an interview in Najaf with Dr. Sayyid Hasan al-Hakim, a prolific historian of Najaf who is mentioned in the book. The story goes back to a time when he delivered a couple of talks in Paris where the French expert of Shiite world, Dr. Sabrina Mervin, was prompted to follow up the line. "One day I noticed Dr. Sabrina Mervin at the gate of my house in Najaf." said Dr. al-Hakim. The result of a series of academic investigations found expression in a book published simultaneously in Arabic and English.

The book under review deals with Najaf from various perspectives. It tackles the history of Najaf in Islam, and the significance of its unique status in Islamic history. To do so, the story starts with Kufa, now adjacent to Najaf. It gives a thorough topographical description of the region in general and Najaf in specific.

The book also deals with the centuries-long academic status of Najaf. Since the migration of Sheikh al-Tusi from Baghdad to Najaf, the city has been the main seat of Shiite religious scholarship and has attracted scholars from here and there. Although the ex-Ba‘athist regime proved a hard blow on it, it has gained momentum to acquire its former religio-academic prominence.

The book also deals with the fervent Shiite rituals held in Najaf, especially during Muharram. Not that different from similar rituals held in Karbala, Najaf shows the full vigor and zeal of ardent Shiites who make the populace of the city. The city has also been a focal point for Iranian and other pilgrims who take pride in spending a few days there in their pilgrimage to Iraqi shrine cities.

Thought not an encyclopedia of Najaf, the book under review proves a good point of departure for those who wish to gain considerable knowledge of the main gate of Shiite world. This is a promising step, and it is necessary for other Shiite shrine cities, mainly in Iraq and Iran, to receive such worthwhile contributions.

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