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The history of Arabia from the time of Jahaliyyah (pre-Islam) to that of Mohammad bin Salman and the present day is long and complex. It does, however, manifest consistent tropes, social and political patterns, which are clearly discernable. This article offers an introduction to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from both a historiographic perspective and, at times, from personal observation, having lived in the Kingdom in the two key periods of its recent history: the era of the Mecca Mosque seizure in 1979 and in the present day era of reform.

Introduction

Arabia is the birthplace of Islam, and this heritage shapes the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The most important title of the Saudi kings is 'Guardian of the Two Holy Mosques', referring to the Grand Mosque in Mecca which houses the *Qa'ba*, the sacred center of the Islamic faith, and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Saudi Arabia hosts the *Hajj* or Pilgrimage which brings millions of Muslims from every part of the world to the kingdom annually, as well as the *Umrah* or Lesser Pilgrimage which brings many more pilgrims to the Kingdom. According to the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, some seven million visitors came to the Kingdom, which included 4 million visas for Umrah in 2022.[1] With the lifting of COVID restrictions, the ceiling on hajj visas has been lifted for 2023, meaning that many more pilgrims will come to the Kingdom. This alone would give Saudi Arabia a degree of primacy in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world that its population of only 36 million citizens would seem to merit.[2] However, in addition to its historical and religious significance, Saudi Arabia's crude oil production, at 10,319,000 Barrel/Day in Jan 2023, makes it the world's top oil producer, giving the Kingdom a degree of wealth undreamed of in simpler times.[3]

Yet Saudi Arabia has until recently drawn a sharp dividing line through its history, seeing the period before the Prophet Mohammad (570-632 CE) as a time of darkness or Pre-Islamic Ignorance which Arabs call *Jahiliyyah*. For much of its existence, *Jahiliyyah* was rarely discussed in Saudi Arabia and the rich history of pre-Islamic Arabia was left largely unexplored.[4] Yet patterns of *Jahiliyyah* society continue to define contemporary Saudi society and for that reason any discussion of Saudi Arabia must begin there.

***Jahiliyyah* Arabia**

Any examination of Arabian history must begin with the physical environment. Modern Saudi Arabia occupies much of the Arabian Peninsula, encompassing five distinct climatic and geographical regions.[5] At the heart of the Kingdom is the Nejd, a scrub desert region in the geographic center of the country. Riyadh, the Saudi capital, is located in the Nejd and thus a disproportionate amount of political and economic power concentrates there to the benefit of the Nejdi tribes and the Saudi Royal family. The Hijaz in the west is also arid, but it houses the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina as well as the most cosmopolitan port city, Jeddah. The Asir in the south on the Yemen border is the most pleasant climatically, with mountains that make for cooler summers and colder winters. East Province along the Arabian Gulf coast is vital for two reasons: it is the home of the Shi'ite population which has never been assimilated into the life of the Kingdom and it is where the vast oil reserves lay. Finally, in the southeast there is the Rub al-Khali (the Empty Quarter), the vast sand sea that forms the largest contiguous sand desert in the world.

In sum, the harsh climate and stark geographic setting belied the name given to the region by the Romans, *Arabia Felix* or Happy Arabia.[6] Even as cities rose and camel-driven trade expanded, poverty was the order of the day for most tribes, necessitating a harsh set of decisions to facilitate survival. From this early period of *Jahiliyyah* history, the concept of the good of the tribe holding primacy over the interests, or even the lives, of

individuals, was of paramount importance. A disparity of resources and thus wealth marked Arabia. Wealth in these times was measured in stark terms. In order of importance, prosperity was perceived as 1) male fighters; 2) territory; 3) camels; 4) women; and 5) gold and other forms of disposable wealth. This would change with the rise of caravans and the pilgrimage trade, which brought wealth-bearing pilgrims from throughout the region to Mecca where the *Qa'ba,* or central shrine, hosted the cults of numerous deities. The Quraysh tribe had the good fortune to control Mecca and thus the wealth that the pilgrims brought accumulated largely with them. Quraysh power reduced outlying tribes to a stark choice between becoming clients or brigands preying on the caravans for what they could extort or steel.[7]

What made *Jahiliyyah* times so difficult for contemporary Saudis to acknowledge however were the primary patterns that marked the era.[8] These were:

- Constant warfare
- Idolatry/Polytheism
- *Gazwa* (Raids)
- Female Infanticide

In a land without central government, conflicts morphed quickly into feuds that pitted clan against clan, tribe against tribe, often for generations. Honor was then and is now the most important characteristic of individual, family, and tribal life in Arabia. Out of this flows the hospitality and generosity that marks Arab culture, but from this too came the endemic violence that engulfed Arabia. Lacking a central government, court system, or military force, grievances could be settled by negotiation and the payment of a blood debt (*diya*) or clan warfare. Most often, it was the latter.

Idolatry or the worship of idols representing pagan gods was common in Arabia (as in the rest of the world at the time), and it provided the Quraysh tribe with considerable wealth and power.[9] Islam forbids idolatry in the strongest terms—so much so that when the Islamic polity was established in 630 CE monotheistic communities of Christians and Jews were to be tolerated and protected but pagans were forced to leave or be killed. There was a great reservoir of shame in the contemporary Saudi worldview for Arab pagan history.

The *Gazwa* has been described by some historians as the national sport of *Jahiliyyah* Arabia.[10] The *Gazwa* combined raiding other tribes with a male coming-of-age ritual whereby young men hoping to pass into adulthood and access to marriage would raid a weaker tribe for their goods—which were not greatly valued—and for their marriageable females which were greatly valued indeed.[11] So embedded in Arab culture was the *Gazwa* tradition that rather than try to discourage the practice, the Prophet directed that Muslims were not to raid fellow Muslims, thus turning the raids outside of Arabia and playing an important role in the stunning expansion of the faith and the empire that spread the faith after the death of the Prophet in 632 CE.

The gazwa tradition carried on well into the 20th century, but the object of the raids was for camels rather than women. As we can glean from the poetry of Jahaliyyah and the early Islamic period, camels had rather more value, economic and sentimental, than women in any case.[12]

The darkest pattern of *Jahiliyyah* history however was the practice of the poorest tribesmen to expose infant girls on the desert sands.[13] Female infanticide was a last resort—a decision necessitated by poverty in which males who would grow to be fighters were deemed vital to family survival while girls represented a liability in that they consumed resources, would eventually become part of their husband's family, required a dowry, and thus not able to support aged parents while commanding too small a bride price to balance the resources she has consumed, and were difficult to protect from the *Gazwa* thus reflecting on family honor. It is this more than any of the other factors that made *Jahiliyyah* times so shameful. Female infanticide in this period was not uncommon globally—it was a persistent evil in imperial Rome in this for example—but that does not lessen the shame of the practice in Arabia.

The Prophet Mohammad put an end to the practice in a way that would have no equal in any other part of the world, and it is this that perhaps most marks the transition from *Jahiliyyah* to Islam. Mohammad attacked the problem in both religious and economic terms. In apocalyptic *suras* (verses) of the *Qu'ran* such as At-Takwir, Divine judgment was promised on those who killed girl children: "When the female infant buried alive is questioned [after death], asks for what crime she was killed, When the scrolls are laid open, When the world on high is unveiled, When the blazing fire is kindled to fierce heat…" (8-12). In addition to hellfire however, Mohammad mandated *zakat* (alms or charity) as one of the primary pillars of Islam. No Muslim should ever again be so poor as to be faced with such a dreadful decision.[14] The millennia-old practice ended within a generation.

The introduction of charity to Arabian society perhaps marks another key element in the transition from *Jahiliyyah* to Islam in Arabia. Yet many of the patterns of *Jahiliyyah* history, suitably Islamized, continue to define the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abdul Wahhab and the House of Saud

Although Saudi Arabia did not become a recognized state until 1932, the roots of the Kingdom date to the early years of the 18th century CE when the ultra-conservative religious scholar Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-92) allied with the princes of the House of Saud.[15] The al-Saud was at the time a minor noble family who controlled the Nejd settlement of Dir'iyyah but who lacked the tribal status or surplus wealth to have greater ambitions. Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765) was the Emir at the time. His alliance with al-Wahhab would change not only the fortunes of the al-Saud, but would impact the fate of the Arabian Peninsula to this day.

Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was a member of the Banu Tamim, a Nejdi tribe that remained settled rather than nomadic. He was poor and is remembered as having a garden, date trees, a small herd of cows, and three wives. As a young man, he pursued a religious education before returning to the town of 'Uyaynah where his father was a judge (*qadi*). It was at this stage of his life that he began to spread his religious message.

The central focus of his teachings was on the evils of *bid'a* (innovation). In his view, Islam had drifted far from the teachings of the Prophet and what was needed was a return to the original purity of Islam as it was practiced under the Prophet and the first of his Rightly Guided successors. Also central to his teachings was a strict interpretation of

tawhid (the oneness of God), the importance of giving *zakat* (alms) in as great an amount as possible, strong opposition to Sufism and the practice of venerating saints and tombs, and of greatest importance to the future of the al-Saud, an embrace of *jihad* against anyone who did not accept his teachings. *Jihad* against fellow Muslims is no easy thing, and in this, he came to embrace *takfir*, the right to judge which Muslims were true to the faith and which were not.[16] Those found wanting in the faith were to be at first admonished and if this is not heeded, to be punished. This is in keeping with an interpretation of the Qu'ranic imperative: "And from among you there should be a party who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong, and these it is that shall be successful. ('Al-i-'lmran, 3:104).

Al-Wahabb's harsh rulings alienated many. The dissent reached a peak when he organized the stoning of a woman accused of adultery. The town was appalled by the act and he was asked to leave 'Uyaynah. He then took his family to Dir'iyyah and the embrace of the al-Saud. This was in 1744 CE and the history of Saudi Arabia really begins at this time. Mohammad ibn Saud welcomed him, granted him protection, and saw in his religious zeal a power that would move the minds and hearts of men, and in the process vastly improve the status of the al-Saud. The agreement they made as it comes down to us today has al-Wahhab stating that in return for a promise to wage *jihad* against all unbelievers (whether Muslim or not), Mohammad ibn Saud would become the *imam* of all of the Muslim community and al-Wahhab would serve as his religious authority. This alliance between the political might of the al-Saud and the religious vision of al-Wahhab would bind each of their descendants and hold sway over the territories controlled by the al-Saud for the next 250 years. Al-Wahab's changes began immediately with the building of a new mosque for his use and a new law that all men and children had to attend prayers or pay a fine and have their beards shaved.

What followed was the recruitment of a military force from among the Nejdi tribes. In another pattern that would mark Saudi history, Wahabbi support came almost exclusively from settled tribes living in towns and villages. It had little appeal to the nomadic Bedouin who needed no lessons from the soft city dwellers on a religion or a life practiced without complexities or obfuscations. Soon the twin forces of preaching (*da'wa*) and military raids both spread the faith and expanded the lands under al-Saud control. The success of the alliance could be attributed to many factors, but perhaps paramount is the fact that both the political and religious aspects of the movement were in keeping with Nejdi tribal character and religious beliefs. The Nejd is a harsh physical environment, and the environmental conditions could not but spawn a faith and a political style that reflected the kind of hard decisions and austere lifestyles that made survival in such a place possible.

While al-Wahab's story of preaching, rejection, exile and eventual triumph resembled in some senses that of the Prophet Mohammad, the conquest of Arabia also paralleled in miniature that of the expansion of the Empire. Within sixty years, the al-Saud was in control of the Peninsula, with Mecca and Medina coming under Saudi/Wahabbi control by 1804 CE. Indeed, by this date, the *jihad* had exploded out of Arabia into Iraq and Syria. With this expansion, the first years of the 19th century revealed another aspect

of the Wahabbi *jihad*—an extreme intolerance of the Shi'a. Violence against Shi'ites was intense in al-Hassa in the east but would be of particular import when the *jihad* reached the Shi'ite holy city of Kerbela in Iraq where Imam Hussein met his martyrdom and the history of Shi'ism as an underground opposition began.[17]

In the early years of the 19th century, the basic outlines of the modern state of Saudi Arabia had taken shape. What was missing, however, was a mechanism of governance that would allow for centralized control. Traditional tribal alliances, reinforced with constant raiding, allowed the al-Saud to hold sway but boundaries were as shifting as tribal alliances. This would not change until the twentieth century when a world of nation-states had fully emerged and the vital importance of petroleum—Saudi petroleum—brought about the birth of the nation of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Unification and Statehood

The roots of the modern history of Saudi Arabia can be traced to 1905 when King Abd'ul Aziz ibn Saud returned from exile in Kuwait to begin the conquest of the lands that would constitute modern Saudi Arabia. His native Nejd came first in 1905, followed by Hail (1921), and finally the Hijaz with its holy cities in 1924. He did this with full Wahabbi support, keeping the traditional alliance between the al-Saud and al-Wahab very much in tact. However, tribal unrest continued making the centralization of the Kingdom impossible.[18]

To complete the process of unification and to make passivation a reality, in 1912 he allied with the *Ikwan* (Brotherhood), a Beduin tribal unit that he imbued with Wahabbi beliefs and a zeal to renew the Islamic faith which was seen as having regressed into superstition and laxity.[19] To accomplish this religious mission, the Bedouin increasingly abandoned their nomadic traditions and settled into small agricultural settlements *(hujra*). Within three years, the *Ikhwan's* numbers exceeded some 60,000 and whatever moderating influence Abdul Aziz could exert on them was soon lost. The *jihad* that followed was focused on the elimination of *bida* and was *takfiri* in nature, seeking to purge anything that did not exist at the time of the Prophet and anyone who might oppose their beliefs.

Basing the movement on Bedouin tribes rather than the settled tribes who were the backbone of Saudi support was a considerable risk. Their internal *jihad* took on a ruthless character and would culminate in considerable violence against the Shi'ites in the East. But it was successful in at last unifying Arabia under central control.

Yet for all its success in creating the space to govern Arabia, Bedouin austerity and antipathy toward the trappings of modernity soon created a crisis within the newly consolidated Saudi state. This was inevitable. King Abdul Aziz, having traveled relatively extensively for his time, had developed a taste for such common features of the modern world as telephones, telegraphs and radio—necessities to 20th century governance—which were seen as *bida* (innovations) by the *Ikwan* and many Wahabbi religious scholars as well. Worse, the *Ikwan* were just as ill-favored toward the oil industry, which required the technological and managerial involvement of foreign states, in particular Great Britain.

By 1926, these tensions culminated in a rebellion by members of the *Ikwan*. The roots of the rebellion were many, largely centering on the issue of *bida* in a developing state structure. The regime was forced to confront the internal *jihad* which had brought it to power but was now spiraling out of control. At stake were the al-Saud's efforts to bring in the British both as a bulwark against neighboring regimes and to develop the oil industry, but at a much deeper level what was really at stake was the immemorial conflict between the Bedouins and the sedentary tribes of towns and cities.[20] Rallying tribal levies from settled Nejdi tribes who were joined by tribal units from the Asir, the *Ikwan* were crushed and many died. The *jihad* was over. King Abdul Aziz was free with Wahabbi support to begin the work of building a modern state based on the twin pillars of Wahabbi Islam and oil, which he did with great success.[21]

From this period we can see several patterns that mark Saudi history to this day. The most obvious is the Saudi oscillation between action and reaction. Whether the reaction is against too rapid a modernization/westernization, or against a turn toward Wahabbi austerity that is deemed too extreme outside of the Nejd, Saudi Arabia would always maintain a rough sort of stability through flexibility in a way that has preserved al-Saud rule when other regimes in the region would fall to coups or revolutions. Indeed, after yet another unsuccessful attempt on his life in the 1970s, King Hussein of Jordan quipped that soon there would be only five kings left in the world; those in a deck of cards and the king of England.[22] He did not reckon at the time with the tenacity and flexibility of the al-Saud dynasty.

Second, it was clear that modernization/westernization in the Kingdom is impossible without Wahabbi support. This was true in the past when King Abdul Aziz overcame *Ulama* (religious scholars) opposition to radio by broadcasting a *Qu'ran* reading from Riyadh to Mecca to prove that the technology could be used for the Word of God.[23] It is also true today when in 2018 a leading scholar in the Kingdom made the stunning pronouncement that, against all of Saudi history and tradition, there is nothing specifically Islamic to require women to wear the *abaya* or outer garment to hide their 'adornments' from public scrutiny.[24] Finally, the security structure of the Kingdom would be balanced between Nejdi tribes and those from the Asir. In practice, this meant that the military was entrusted to Nejdi elites and the internal security force of the National Guard would be dominated by Asiri tribes.[25]

In foreign policy, King Abdul Aziz laid the foundation for the Kingdom's current reliance on the United States as its economic and security bulwark. It was said that the difference between the United States and the European powers is that, unlike the Europeans, America pays for what it steals. British Petroleum, whose pinch-penny dominance would cause upheavals in Iran, would be largely shut out of the Arabian oil bonanza when major reserves were first discovered in Dammam in 1938. Despite having no diplomatic relations with the US at the time, Southern California Oil Company (SOCAL, today Chevron) had been granted exploratory rights by the King in 1932. World War II prevented significant exploitation of Saudi oil, but in 1944 the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) was formed which linked Chevron with Mobil, Exxon, and Texaco. ARAMCO would go on to build a peculiar state within a state with its compounds for

foreign workers which remarkably replicated life in Texas and, of key importance, gave the Kingdom a partnership in the oil industry that no European power would have considered. As a result, ARAMCO is going profitably strong today.[26]

When King Abdul Aziz died in 1953, the state that he created rested securely on the foundations of religion, oil, and American might.

Development and Expansion 1953-1979

The reign of his first successor King Saud followed the pattern of early Islamic history when a tribal leader, having established a stable government and whose generosity and simple lifestyle attracted the loyalty of the tribes, passed from the scene to be replaced by a leader who reveled in luxury and corruption. Saud's missteps in domestic and foreign policy forced him to cede executive power to his brother, Prince Faisal.[27] Faisal reformed finances, but of greater import to what would follow, he reformed the local Committees for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, who were the Wahabbi religious police or *Mutawa*. Under Faisal, the harmony between king and *Ulama* was restored. With Wahabbi support assured, Faisal laid the groundwork for the creation of the modern Saudi welfare state. Unemployment compensation, pensions, and such social supports as a bank where young men could find interest-free loans for the extremely expensive business of marriage became widely available in the 1970s. Slavery was formally outlawed in 1962 as well.[28]

The 1973 Middle East War induced the Saudis to support the Arab side with its greatest weapon—oil. The oil embargo of that year quadrupled oil prices and resulted in the greatest transfer of wealth from one region of the world to another in modern history.[29] By the late 1970s, the Kingdom was swimming in petrodollars and the state began to conform to the model of the rentier state; a country whose people lived from the proceeds of a single commodity, producing little other than that commodity and thus being held hostage to its fluctuations.[30] Under King Faisal the first steps to diversify the Saudi economy were taken, perhaps most notable among them the formation in 1976 of Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), which would train young Saudis for employment in a modern diversified economy.[31]

Sadly Faisal, a tired and sick old man by 1975, was assassinated by a disgruntled junior member of the royal family, leaving his successor King Khalid to carry on the modernization plan.

King Khalid and Juhayman 1979

King Khalid continued Faisal's modernization policies, seeking both to diversify the Saudi economy and to increase the openness in which Saudi Arabia is governed. In foreign policy, the Kingdom under American prodding established a close security arrangement with Iran, forming what the United States called the Twin Pillars Policy in which Iran and Saudi Arabia would buy advanced American military technology with the objective of taking joint responsibility for Gulf security with the Americans providing over the horizon support.[32]

Everything changed in the Kingdom however in 1979. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran was overthrown in the Islamic Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the Middle East was shaken to the core in the Revolution's wake. The Iranian Revolution roused revolutionary hopes to a fever pitch among Shi'ite and Sunni Islamists alike and Saudi Arabia, host to the holiest sites in Islam, was soon at the epicenter of the conflict.

On November 20, 1979, Juhaiman al Utaiba and a core of almost 500 followers seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca immediately following the Hajj.[33] With about 50,000 pilgrims held hostage in the drama, Juhaiman declared himself the *Mahdi*, an eschatological figure who in the Last Days would be sent to cleanse the world and presage the Final Judgment. Juhaiman found few pilgrims willing to support his claims, but the Saudi security forces were ill-prepared for the challenge and proved unable to dislodge rebels who had prepared weapons secreted in the myriad chambers of the Grand Mosque. After speeches from Juhaiman and his brother Sayid al-Qahtani, the faithful formally withdrew their *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) from the al-Saud family and gave it to Juhaiman. Most non-Saudis were then released. The rebels held about 1,000 Saudis as hostages. In the end, it required a special *fatwa* (religious ruling) allowing non-Muslims to enter the holy precincts to resolve the crisis in the form of French Special Forces paratroops.

As if this were not enough, the influence of the Iranian Revolution on Saudi Shi'ites resulted in a Shi'ite uprising in Eastern Province in November 1979, centered in Qatif.[34] Led by Hasan al-Safar and Tawfiq al-Sayf, Shi'ites defied long-standing bans on Shi'ite processions in the Kingdom. Both al-Safar and al-Sayf were educated in Iran, had formed the Movement for Vanguards Missionaries in 1975, and were heavily influenced by the eminent Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Mahdi al-Shirazi—a key figure in the Iranian Revolution. A bank, the national airline office, and much more were burned and more than 20,000 Saudi National Guardsmen responded with considerable violence, killing perhaps more than a thousand Shi’ites.

The Shi’ite uprising was suppressed, but combined with the takeover of the Mecca Mosque created the greatest internal crisis ever to confront the Kingdom. It was clear that while the modernization and westernization process played well with Saudi elites and Western countries, it had stirred a serious backlash in key regions, especially the Nejd which remained the core of al-Saud power, and Eastern Province that provided the bulk of its wealth. Beyond religious reaction, however, Saudi Arabia had since the influx of oil wealth suffered from strong regional resentments based on the way the wealth was distributed. In the early 1970s, a cartoon was circulated in the Kingdom depicting a camel standing astride a map of the Kingdom. The camel grazed in the oil-rich Eastern Province, defecated on Jeddah on the West Coast, and gave its milk to the Nejdis in Riyadh.[35] For religious, social, and economic reasons, radical change was deemed necessary to regain stability in the country.

Reassertion of Wahabbi Control and the Question of Women

It would be a mistake to suggest that the real conflict in post-1979 Saudi Arabia was between westernizers and religious conservatives. This was the dominant

interpretation in the US government at the time.[36] Wahabbi support has always been critical to the al-Saud and even the most ardent modernizer in the royal family was committed to the Wahabbi interpretation of Islam. Rather, the debate was between what would come to be called the Islamic awakening (*al-sahwa al-Islkimiyya*) and the rejectionists who would be called the Wahabbists or *Salifiyya*. The former were western educated, pragmatic, and elitist, the latter the kind of popular religious movement that had brought the al-Saud to power. The Wahabbists had long had control of the Kingdom's massive *da'wa* campaign that spread Wahabbi Islam to poorer Muslim countries such as Pakistan, and after 1979 they became the dominant voice within the Kingdom as well.[37]

This debate mirrored quite closely the debate between what would be called the Islamic Modernists who sought to Islamize Western science and culture and the traditionalists who saw this as both bida and what the great Iranian intellectual Jalal ali-Ahmad would call trading our culture and resources for the 'chicken milk of the West'. This was in the early 20th century and the traditionalists won out, although one of the Modernists' innovations, schools for girls, did find general acceptance and exists to this day.[38]

Religious reformers of any Western faith focus first on women, believing that they are both the primary embodiment of culture and, through the way they raise their children, the key to the future of society. For this reason, the most visible social changes in the Kingdom after 1979 involved women. The *Mutawa* or religious police quickly became ubiquitous in Saudi cities and towns and their attention was focused first and foremost on the appearance and behavior of women in the public sphere.[39] Islamic dress in Saudi Arabia meant an *abaya* or loose robe and a *niqab* or veil that covered the hair and face. These were common before 1979 but now became mandatory on all women, often including foreigners. No female body part, including hands and arms, were to be visible to the public. In some of the most conservative towns such as Buraidah in the Nejd this was taken so seriously that *Mutawa*, equipped with spray cans of black paint, helped women to remember the rules by spray painting any visible appendage black. More stringent was the necessity that all women appearing in a public space were required to have with them a *maharam* or male guardian at all times. Again, this was not new but before 1979 had become increasingly lax, with women accompanied by a son old enough to walk often being deemed sufficient in many cities.

Employment opportunities for Saudi women in these years were few save in the women's sector of the economy such as the women's banks and in markets in which clothing or other items for women could be obtained. King Fahd, who came to power following King Khalid's death in 1982, issued a reminder to Saudi employers that no woman was to be employed in any capacity that might bring her in contact with men. At the same time, a rigid policy of segregation of the sexes, enforced by the *Mutawa*, was mandated not only in every facet of Saudi life but for the first time on compounds housing western foreigners as well.

While the increased emphasis on the public behavior of women was striking to outsiders, it was for Saudis more a public reflection of the structures of private life in the Kingdom. In much of the country, private homes, invariably surrounded by a wall to

maintain privacy more than security, have always been divided between a men's side and a women's side for guests. Men would visit the men's *majlis* (sitting room), and women the women's *majlis*, with families fully together only when surrounded by close family. Similarly, public spaces like restaurants and waiting rooms in airports or hospitals had spaces for men and families where women could sit with their *maharam* and children. The *Mutawa* were thus enforcing a status quo seen as being challenged rather than imposing harsh new restrictions on the country.

In reality, the conservative wave that eventually impacted all aspects of Saudi life was applied differently in the various regions. The Nejd of course was the most stringent, as was Eastern Province due primarily to the conservative wave of post-Revolutionary Shi'ism emanating from Iran and the massive Saudi security presence in the region. Jeddah however remained the most liberal city in the Kingdom while Abha and the Asir remained perhaps least affected. But from 1979 through the 1980s, Saudi Arabia turned inward and the Wahabbi/Salafist interpretation of Saudi Islam prevailed.

From the 1990s-2018, Cautious Reform

The reins of Kings Abdallah (1993-2008) and Salman (2009-present) were marked by a gradual but steady loosening of the restrictions that marked the country after 1979. This was inevitable. The generation seared by the events of the Mecca Mosque seizure and the Shi'ite uprising were rapidly passing from the scene, giving way to a new generation steeped in the confidence wrought by the development and expansion of the opportunities afforded by the success of the Kingdom. More fundamentally, however, what made the post-1979 retrenchment possible was the relative isolation of the Kingdom. Computer technology and the internet combined with the advent of cable and satellite television now brought the world—especially the Western world—into every Saudi home and there was no going back to a time when broadcasting could be tightly controlled and Western entertainment had to be enjoyed illicitly on smuggled VHS tapes, pirated music cassettes, or proximity as in Eastern Province to television channels which played Western fare in such dens of iniquity as Bahrain. Moreover, the appearance of vast shopping malls made the *maharam* tradition obsolete as few men had the free time or, truth be told, the patience to accompany their wives and daughters on these expeditions. The malls thus became a free-range zone where maharamless women could wander about unchaperoned.

Saudi Arabia was increasingly thrust into a leading role regionally as a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the American security embrace, while still tight, was less visible to the public. The country was still awash in foreign workers, but increasingly westerners moved into isolated compounds where they enjoyed the kind of Western lifestyle, including homemade alcohol, that had once been the exclusive purview of ARAMCO employees.

The *maharam* requirements became largely disused in many parts of the Kingdom, although the *Mutawa* could still wield authority, sometimes violently, to suppress public behaviors or private performances of such events as plays or public gatherings. But this too lessened until in 2015 King Salman revoked their authority to make arrests or to inflict

ad hoc punishments on the streets. This was quietly initiated by deftly removing the head of the Mutawa (the organization's formal title is the Commission for the Promotion of Public Virtue), a scion of the prominent Wahhabi al-Sheikh family, and replaced him with Dr. Abdul Rahman al-Sanad, who was publicly encouraged by the king's son [Mohammad bin Salman] to moderate the conduct of the religious police.[40]

By the 21st century, Saudi Arabia had achieved stability and economic diversification that would have amazed King Abdul Aziz. Saudi success could be largely attributed to the careful and always delicate balance between government and religion, which was the design that brought the al-Saud from minor desert chieftains to the rulers of one of the richest countries in the world. Yet this balance is always in flux and the action/reaction pattern remains deeply ingrained in the fabric of the Kingdom.

Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Rapid Reform

Mohammad bin Salman, often known by the shorthand MbS[41] within the Kingdom, became the heir apparent by 2015 and was formally named Crown Prince in 2017.[42] His mission is clearly to effect a rapid modernization and westernization in the Kingdom by a thorough going series of measures that have impacted every aspect of life in the Kingdom. Abroad the most visible measures are the anticorruption campaign that have seen the arrests and financial dunning of senior members of the royal family who have profited from what many have always seen as much as a family business as a modern nation state.[43] Western governments have also applauded a ruling that would allow Saudi women to drive by June 2018.[44] But there is much more.

In 2016 the Saudis unveiled a four-stage Saudization plan titled Vision 2030 that hopes to replace foreign workers with Saudis in key sectors of government and the economy.[45] This has always been a vague goal of the Kingdom, but what makes it more possible today is the appearance of women, suitably garbed in *abayas* and *niqabs*, in public workspaces such as shops, stores, and hospitals. Without women working, there are simply not enough adult male Saudis to fill the needed jobs. By 2020, great strides in this area were visible. Women in abayas and niqabs served as clerks in stores and in offices which put them in contact with men. Break rooms however were separate for women and their access and egress to the premises were somewhat controlled.[46]

In both religious and security terms, the Kingdom now champions, and claims to have always championed, 'moderate Islam' which now marks its pronouncements internally and externally. The much-expanded security services are now engaged in both a battle of ideas as well as a war of weapons with religious extremists in the country, which oddly echoes the effort to curb the enthusiasm of the Ikwan for killing Shi'ites and other undesirables in an earlier era. In concrete terms, Saudi Arabia sponsored and largely paid for the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) which held its initial meeting in 2016. The IMCTC, with 42 member countries, states that its core mission is to: "Coordinate, unify and support efficiently and effectively the efforts of the IMCTC member countries in counterterrorism in the domains of ideology, communications, counterterrorist financing as well as in the military domain in partnership with friendly countries and international organizations."[47] Along with the efforts of the World Muslim

League, which also benefits from Riyadh's largess, the term 'moderate Islam' has become the official watchword of the day.[48]

The hopes, dreams and goals of the reforms are contained in the ultra-ambitious Vision 2030 which envisions a top-to-bottom modernization and Saudization of the nation in the next decade. How much of this will be accomplished, and whether the widespread unease with the pace of reforms will manifest in a 1979-style reaction or will eventually win the approbation of the populace, will define Kingdom into the middle years of the 21st century.

Endnotes

[1] "Ministry of Hajj Offers Services to 7 Million Umrah Performers in 2022," https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2415097.
[2] Worldometer, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/saudi-arabia-population/.
[3] "Saudi Arabia Crude Oil: Production," *ceicdata.com*, https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/saudi-arabia/crude-oil-production.
[4] Jörg Matthias Determann, *Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the state in the Middle East* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013). Cf. Ömer Can Aksoy, "Framing the Primordial: Islamic Heritage and Saudi Arabia," in *The Making of Islamic Heritage: Muslim Pasts and Heritage Presents*, ed. Trinidad Rico (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 67-89. As a personal anecdote, when I first lived in the Kingdom in 1980, the term Jahiliyyah was akin to a curse word, used to denigrate the person, place or organization referred to. When I returned in 2015, the Museum of Saudi History in Riyadh had an entire wing dedicated to Jahaliyyah culture. It was a stunning change in a single generation.
[5] Peter Vincent, *Saudi Arabia: an environmental overview* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2008).
[6] Jan Retsö, "Where and what was" Arabia Felix"?" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies, 2000), 189-92.
[7] Meir J Kister, "Mecca and the Tribes of Arabia: Some Notes on Their Relations," in *Leiden: EJ Brill*, ed. M. Sharon (Leiden: 1986), 33-57.
[8] Valentina Grasso, "Societies, Politics, Cults and Identities in pre-Islamic Arabia" (University of Cambridge, 2021).
[9] Gerald R Hawting, *The idea of idolatry and the emergence of Islam: From polemic to history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Tilman Seidensticker, "Sources for the history of pre-Islamic Religion," in *The Qurʾān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qurʾānic Milieu*, ed. Gerhard Böwering and Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 293-322.
[10] Philip K Hitti, *History of the Arabs, revised 10th edition*, vol. 100 (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 25.
[11] This is a sore point in the perception of western historians, but much less so in the context of Arabian history. This was a period when women would accompany the men to the battlefield. Their role was to charge into the fray and finish off wounded enemies, stripping the bodies of anything of use. They were armed with daggers and knew how to use them. Indeed, they carried and slept with weapons and could have prevented their kidnapping in the gazwa with extreme prejudice. They could have also screamed bloody murder and the culprits would have been sent home much the worse for wear when the men of the tribe had finished with them. In most cases, they chose neither option, and as women were not literate and left no written records, we can only speculate as to why. A good theory might be that women, then as now, are practical and needed to weigh their chances with a richer and more powerful tribe, a marriage to a man of influence and authority in the new tribe if they were sufficiently attractive marriage material, and consequently a better and more secure life for their children. In modern parlance, we might assume they made a business decision.
[12] Louise E Sweet, "Camel raiding of North Arabian Bedouin: a mechanism of ecological adaptation," *American anthropologist* 67, no. 5 (1965): 1132-50. Abdullah al-Udhari, "Poems from the Jahiliyya," *Index on Censorship* 27, no. 2 (1998): 71-76. Muritala Alhaji Busoeri and Maruf Suraqat Animashaun, "Jahiliyyah Arabic Verse: The Dichotomy in Its Poetry," *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics* 31(2017): 27-37.
[13] Aqsa Tasgheer and Muhammad Ishfaq, "Female Infanticide in Pre-Islamic Arab Society: A Quranic and Historical Perspective," *AL-QAWĀRĪR* 3, no. 01 (2021): 1-12.
[14] Avazbek Ganiyev and Sherzodjon Umaraliev, "The role of zakat in the early stages of the islamic civilisation," *EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR)* 25(2020): 441-44.

[15] There is a library of books in English and Arabic on the figure of 'Abd al-Wahhab and Wahhabism. The most recent, and perhaps most comprehensive, is Cole M Bunzel, *Wahhābism: The History of a Militant Islamic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023). For more general histories, Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A history of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 2010). Wayne H Bowen, "The History of Saudi Arabia," (2014). For a popular and very enjoyable history from the perspective of a journalist, Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).
[16] Mohamed Badar, Masaki Nagata, and Tiphanie Tueni, "The Radical Application of the Islamist Concept of Takfir," *Arab Law Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2017): 134-62.
[17] Juan Ricardo Cole, *Sacred space and holy war: the politics, culture and history of Shi'ite Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002). Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: the forgotten Muslims*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).
[18] For a much deeper dive into the cultural currents that defined the collapse of the Second al-Saud kingdom, Joas Wagemakers, "The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State: Quietist and Radical Wahhabi Contestations of al-Walāʾ wa-l-Barāʾ," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2012): 93-110.
[19] John S Habib, *The Ikhwan movement of Najd: its rise, development, and decline* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1970). Joseph Kostiner, "On instruments and their designers: The Ikhwan of Najd and the emergence of the Saudi state," *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 3 (1985): 298-323.
[20] Robert Fletcher and Robert SG Fletcher, *British Imperialism and'the Tribal Question': Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919-1936* (Oxford: Oxford Historical Monographs, 2015). Anthony B Toth, "Last battles of the bedouin and the rise of Modern States in Northern Arabia: 1850-1950," in *Nomadic Societies in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Anthony B. Toth (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 49-77.
[21] Barbara Bray and Michael Darlow, *Ibn Saud: The desert warrior who created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).
[22] Unknown to the amused journalists who were his audience at the time, King Hussein actually pilfered the quote from the unfortunate King Farouk of Egypt, who ruled from 1936 until 1952. Elizabeth M Knowles and Angela Partington, *The Oxford dictionary of quotations*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 307.
[23] Lacey, *The Kingdom*: 244.
[24] "Saudi scholar: Women need not wear abaya robes," *Aljazeera*, February 11, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/11/saudi-scholar-women-need-not-wear-abaya-robes.
[25] This point was driven home in personal communication in Riyadh while teaching at a Saudi military college.
[26] Victor McFarland, *Oil powers: A history of the US-Saudi Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
[27] The reign of King Saud was bizarre even by Middle Eastern standards, but too little has been written about it. For an introduction, see Joseph Mann, "King without a Kingdom: Deposed King Saud and his intrigues," *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 1(2013): 26-40.
[28] Willard A Beling, *King Faisal and the modernisation of Saudi Arabia* (New York: Routledge, 2019). Dana Adams Schmidt, "Saudi Arabian Slavery Persists Despite Ban by Faisal in 1962," *New York Times*, March 28, 1967, https://www.nytimes.com/1967/03/28/archives/saudi-arabian-slavery-persists-despite-ban-by-faisal-in-1962.html.
[29] Rüdiger Graf, "Making Use of the "Oil Weapon": Western Industrialized Countries and Arab Petropolitics in 1973–1974," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 1 (2012): 185-208.
[30] Hannes Baumann, "The transformation of Saudi Arabia's rentier state and 'the international'," *Globalizations* 16, no. 7 (2019): 1165-83.
[31] Moudhi Mohammad Alzoman, "Effective leadership of a culturally diverse workforce in Saudi Arabia Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC)" (University of Portsmouth, 2012).

[32] Majid Behestani and Mehdi Hedayati Shahidani, "Twin pillars policy: Engagement of US-Iran foreign affairs during the last two decades of Pahlavi dynasty," *Asian Social Science* 11, no. 2 (2015): 20-31. Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," in *The Middle East and the United States*, ed. David W. Lesch and Mark L. Haas (New York: Routledge, 2018), 309-25.
[33] Cole M. Bunzel, "Toward the Seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca: The Writings and Ideology of Juhaymān al-ʿUtaybī and the Ikhwān," *Die Welt des Islams* (2023): 1-35. Cf. Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-ʿUtaybi Revisited," *International journal of middle east Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 103-22. Nasir Al-Huzaimi, *The Mecca Uprising: An Insider's Account of Salafism and Insurrection in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020). Ali A Alkandari and Theyab Alburaas, "Juhayman al-Otaibi and the interpretation of the first violent Islamic movement in contemporary Saudi Arabia," *Middle Eastern Studies* (2022): 333-52. Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The 1979 Uprising at Islam's Holiest Shrine* (New York: Anchor, 2008).
[34] Toby Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A history of the most radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 2 (2010): 179-97. Frederic Wehrey, "The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia," (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/ceip/0028498/f_98_23177.pdf.
[35] Lacey, *The Kingdom*.
[36] Carol EB Choksy and Jamsheed K Choksy, "The Saudi connection: Wahhabism and global jihad," *World Affairs* (2015): 23-34.
[37] David Commins, *The wahhabi mission and Saudi Arabia* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005). Yousaf Butt, "How Saudi Wahhabism is the fountainhead of Islamist terrorism," *The Huffington Post* (2015): https://www.academia.edu/download/53361564/How_Saudi_Wahhabism_is_the_source_of_Islamist_Terrorism_._.pdf.
[38] Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic modernism, nationalism, and fundamentalism: episode and discourse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi [Weststruckness]* (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 1997).
[39] Louay Bahry, "The new Saudi woman: Modernizing in an Islamic framework," *Middle East Journal* 36, no. 4 (1982): 502-15. Cf. for a wider context, Juliette Minces, *The house of obedience: Women in Arab society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982). On a personal note, I lived with my wife in Dammam during these years and experienced all of the conditions described below through the role of maharam or male guardian, which can be taxing when the guardian discovers that this means getting home from work and then conducting every aspect of public life, including shopping for women's sanitary needs. What maharam of the era could be expected to know that tampons come in different sizes? Plumbing the depths of this mystery was embarrassing to maharam and pharmacist alike. My wife was confined to our flat until I could get her an abaya and niqab (veil), which were sewn to order with the hapless maharam able to give only vague approximations of size. This gave her the right to leave the flat, but only if her legal maharam was with her at all times. It was a strange time even for Saudi women and so distressing for most foreigners that they lived in western style compounds with high walls.
[40] Roby C. Barrett, "Saudi Arabia and Policy under King Salman," *MEI@75*, March 12, 2015, https://www.mei.edu/publications/saudi-arabia-and-policy-under-king-salman.
[41] After the killing of the *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul by Saudi agents, in the Saudi consulate no less (!), the initials MbS, even among some in the military college where I taught, was said to really mean Mr. Bone Saw, after the implement used to dismember the dissident journalist.
[42] Although now something of a persona non grata in the West after the Khashoggi murder, MbS nevertheless has rapidly transformed Saudi life much in the manner Shah Reza Pahlavi did in

1920s Iran. Whether the fate of his reforms will be like that that ended the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 remains to be seen. On his life and works to date, see Ben Hubbard, *MBS: the rise to power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020).

[43] Stig Stenslie, "The end of elite unity and the stability of Saudi Arabia," *The Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2018): 61-82. Even here there is much more than meets the eye. For a taste of it, see Samia Nakhoul, Angus McDowall, Stephen Kalin, "A house divided: How Saudi Crown Prince purged royal family rivals," Reuters, November 10, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-arrests-crownprince-insight-idUSKBN1DA23M. But it goes deeper still. See for a hint of the real import of the changes "Mohammed bin Salman tightens his grip on Saudi military," *NATO Defense College Foundation*, March 31, 2020, https://www.natofoundation.org/gulf/gulf-march-2020/.

[44] Deborah L Wheeler, "Saudi women driving change? Rebranding, resistance, and the kingdom of change," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 11, no. 1 (2020): 87-109.

[45] "New Saudization program unveiled," *Eye of Riyadh*, March 8, 2016, https://www.eyeofriyadh.com/news/details/new-saudization-program-unveiled. Michael Lopesciolo, Daniela Muhaj, and Carolina Pan, "The Quest for Increased Saudization: Labor Market Outcomes and the Shadow Price of Workforce Nationalization Policies," *CID Research Fellow and Graduate Student Working Paper Series* (2021): https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Daniela-Muhaj/publication/353715177_The_Quest_for_Increased_Saudization_Labor_Market_Outcomes_and_the_Shadow_Price_of_Workforce_Nationalization_Policies/links/610c033a1e95fe241ab37199/The-Quest-for-Increased-Saudizatio.

[46] This transitional state of affairs could lead to amusing situations. Larger businesses like supermarkets would proudly post photos of the Employee of the Month in the western style. Female recipients of the honor had to wear the abaya and niqab, making their actual identities hard to ascertain, even for other female employees who, when asked, would confide that they were as puzzled over the identity of the Employee of the Month as were the Kafirs (non-Muslims) who would be so impolite as to ask such a question.

[47] https://www.imctc.org/en/AboutUs/Vison/Pages/default.aspx.

[48] See the website of the World Muslim League, which is strikingly identical to the website of the IMCTC, https://themwl.org/en.

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