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## **Becoming Saudi Arabia**

### **Abstract:**

This paper introduces the reader in the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from its inception to modern times. It highlights the interplay of religious fervor and tribal affiliation that led to the formation of the Kingdom but also the power politics and changing of alliances between the elites that managed to sustain the ruling dynasty. The paper also discusses how the discovery of oil has changed the relationship between citizens and the state.

**Keywords:** House of Sa'ud, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ikhwan, Wahhabism, OPEC, Vision 2030

Saudi Arabia is one of only two states in the contemporary world that derives its name from that of the ruling dynasty—the Al Saud, or “House of Saud” (the other state that borrows its name from the ruling dynasty is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, commonly called just Jordan). That the names of the ruling dynasty and the state overlap is not trivial. It points to the centrality of the dynasty in Saudi history. The kingdom was created by a member of the Al Saud, and his descendants—in fact, his sons—have ruled it ever since, holding as close to absolute power as is possible in the modern world.

Besides the occasional push back from one or another faction in the royal court, there is one other constraint on the king’s power. Since the adoption (by royal decree, of course) of the Basic Law in 1992, the political system specifies that the king “shall rule the nation according to the sharia.” Sharia refers to the broad principles according to which Muslim clerics believe Muslims should live their lives. Those clerics derive sharia from two sources. The first is the Quran, which they believe to be an emanation of Allah. The second is the hadith, which are collections of the sayings and acts of the prophet Muhammad and his companions.

This is straightforward enough, but interpretations of these two sources differ, and some are more restrictive than others. Those that guide governance and behavior in Saudi Arabia represent a strict interpretation of the sources. It is known as Wahhabism, a current within Islam named after Muhammed Abd al-Wahhab and borne of the eighteenth century. The espousal of Wahhabi Islam as official doctrine marks a second defining characteristic of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia stands out for a third reason as well: it sits atop the second largest proven pool of oil in the world (the first is Venezuela, although the two may switch positions in the future). Just as it is impossible to understand Saudi Arabia without understanding the Al Saud and Wahhabism, it is impossible to understand Saudi Arabia without understanding the role played by oil, both in terms of Saudi society and Saudi Arabia’s position in the world. Oil revenues have come to define the rights and benefits of citizenship in Saudi Arabia, and have shaped the labor market and worsened social and economic inequities in the country. The shift in the control and pricing of oil that began in the 1960s and culminated in the “Oil Revolution” of 1973 also enabled a moderately sized member of the Global South to play an outsized role on the world stage.

Let’s look at these in turn.

## **Muhammad ibn Saud and the Wahhabi Mission in Arabia**

The Najd is a barren and inhospitable region of north-central Arabia. During the eighteenth century, it was sparsely populated, mainly by bedouin and townspeople who lived in oases-settlements. This is the environment into which Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1703.

Although the Najd was hardly a center of Islamic learning like Cairo or Damascus, Abd al-Wahhab belonged to a family of Muslim clerics. He studied the religious sciences in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and, according to some, elsewhere as well. Somewhere along the way, he began a mission to restore Islam to what he took to be its original, pure form.

Revivalist movements are not uncommon in Islam, or, indeed, in many religious traditions (think about Martin Luther's campaign to purify the Catholic faith). Abd al-Wahhab believed that time was ripe for such a revival because, according to him, Muslims had, over the course of their history, abandoned the foundational beliefs and practices that the prophet Muhammad had exhorted in the seventh century. Some looked to soothsayers, sorcerers, and amulets in an attempt to manipulate supernatural forces. Others appealed to holy men, saints, and spirits of the dead to intercede for them with Allah. Still others were lax in performing their religious obligations and adopted foreign innovations. In sum, Abd al-Wahhab believed his contemporaries lived as their ancestors had lived before the advent of Islam; that is, in ignorance. It was the goal of his mission to change that.

For Abd al-Wahhab, the tenets of a purified faith were clear. True Muslims were not those who merely recited, "There is no God but God"; true Muslims were those who forthrightly renounced any other object of worship but Allah, including those objects of veneration that stood between the believer and Allah. They were to shun encounters with non-Muslims and those who did not practice Islam as Abd al-Wahhab taught. And they were to spread the true faith through proselytizing. Muslims who did not accept Abd al-Wahhab's mission were "idolaters," and true Muslims would be justified pronouncing them apostates and warring on them. Needless to say, this did little to endear Abd al-Wahhab to those who believed otherwise.

Abd al-Wahhab's mission would have passed unnoticed, as have the missions of hundreds of others before and after him, but for his fortuitous encounter with a local chief in the oasis town of Diriyya, Muhammad ibn Saud. They struck a deal. Abd al-Wahhab asked ibn Saud

to undertake jihad to spread the true faith. In return, he received the patronage of an ambitious warlord. For his part, ibn Saud got religious sanction for his battles of conquest, not to mention the spoils of war he and his fighters could make off with. Those battles continued after the deaths of the two founders, and leadership of al-Saud's forces passed on to his descendants.

The conquests of the Al Saud began in the Najd. They soon spread beyond the territory's borders. In 1800, the forces of Al Saud raided the city of Karbala, in present day Iraq, killing thousands of Shii Muslims (members of a different branch of Islam that Wahhabis consider heretical), destroying the dome on the tomb of a grandson of Muhammad venerated by Shiis (Wahhabis believed domes mark the sites of idolatrous behavior), and making off with offerings of gold and carpets that had been left there. After Karbala, they turned their sights west, first to the city of Taif, where they slaughtered the men and sold the women and children into slavery, then to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

Although the Al Saud took measures to prohibit such "un-Islamic" behavior as smoking in public in the holy cities, and destroyed the domes over the tombs of the prophet Muhammad's descendants, their army did not engage in the same bloodlust that had marked the sacking of Karbala and Taif. Nevertheless, their conquest of Mecca and Medina was enough to force the hand of the "Guardian of the Two Holy Cities," the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul. The sultan called upon his vassal, the governor of Egypt, to mount an invasion of Arabia to repulse the occupiers. The Egyptian army did so, chased the army of the Al Saud back to Diriyya, expelled the population of the town, razed all its structures, and cut down the trees of the oasis.

This marked the end of what historians call the "First Saudi State," but, of course, this is not the end of our story. As we shall see, a new Saudi state would emerge on the Arabian Peninsula in the twentieth century, ruled by the same dynasty partnered again with Wahhabi clerics. Many of those clerics are descendants of Abd al-Wahhab. Although Wahhabism is hardly the only school of Islam in Saudi Arabia, it has official sanction, and therefore colors much of the life there.

The Wahhabi establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia controls education, law, religious life, and morality. It dominates the court system, which applies the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law and imposes penalties (amputation of hands of thieves, beheading for a number of crimes) jurists derive from the Quran and hadith. It deploys the so-called "religious police"—the "Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong"—to ensure compliance with mandatory business

closures during prayer, segregation of men and women who are not close relatives, “proper” dress for women, and rules forbidding alcohol and regulating smoking. Under the “male guardianship system,” a woman requires the permission of a male “guardian”—usually a girl’s father, then a woman’s husband—to marry, work or start certain types of businesses, apply for a passport or travel or study abroad, leave prison and even shelters for abused women. The Wahhabi interpretation of sharia governs inheritance, divorce, and child custody. Polygamy is permitted, albeit only up to four wives.

The domain of jurisdiction the Wahhabi establishment managed to carve out is immense but not all encompassing, however. According to Wahhabi jurists, Islamic law recognizes the right of rulers to issue decrees and regulate those areas about which the sharia is silent, such as economic development and commercial law. And for all the influence the Wahhabi establishment might wield in other areas, the dynasty has held on firmly to such portfolios as foreign affairs and defense, which, in an earlier age, might have been handled through religious prescription. This came to pass at the behest of Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, a descendant of Muhammad al-Saud and founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is to his legacy that we now turn.

### **From the Wahhabi Mission to the Saudi State**

Descendants of Muhammad ibn Saud managed to carve out a second state in 1824. At its zenith, it stretched from central Arabia to the Persian Gulf. Although the state lasted almost seventy years, bickering among family members weakened it, and it ultimately fell to a rival tribe. The fact that it lasted so long was more a consequence of the fact that its nucleus lay in the Najd—territory that even the once expansive Ottoman Empire eschewed—than a testament to its vitality.

While the Al Saud’s second attempt to found a state ultimately failed, the third time was a charm. In 1902, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud (as Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud is more commonly known) retook control of Riyadh, the capital of the former Saudi states, and drove out competing tribes from the region.

In 1913, ibn Saud’s forces took al-Hasa, roughly the territory of the present-day Eastern Province. That province, home to the largest population of Saudi Shiis, is also the site of Saudi Arabia’s largest concentration of oil fields. Then, like the original Al Saud, ibn Saud turned his attention westward to the Red Sea coast and the Hejaz, the territory in which Mecca and Medina lie. With the incorporation of the

Hejaz into his realm in 1924-25, ibn Saud's state became known as the Kingdom of Najd and Hejaz, and then, in 1932, as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Ibn Saud owed much of his military success to a group of fighters known as the *ikhwan* (brothers). The *ikhwan* were bedouin whom Wahhabi missionaries had persuaded to abandon their "idolatrous" beliefs and raiding lifestyle and spearhead a Wahhabi-inspired jihad. The missionaries settled them in agricultural hamlets and sent their sheikhs (headmen) to Riyadh for religious instruction. It soon became apparent that the *ikhwan* took all too well to their new dispensation.

As the Al Saud came to learn, it is one thing to steer a mission but quite another to build a state that can fit in with the modern state system. Fitting in means playing by the rules of the game. Those rules include respect for the borders of other states, non-interference in their internal affairs (unless you are strong enough to get away with it), forswearing aggressive behavior against them, and participating in international councils and diplomacy to prevent or resolve conflict.

The *ikhwan* were unwilling to abide by the rules of the game. For example, the *ikhwan*, like ISIS of today, refused to recognize the integrity of national borders. They insisted on continuing their jihad across the Saudi border, raiding into British-administered Iraq. The British would have none of that and responded by unleashing the Royal Air Force against them. If the *ikhwan* did not learn a lesson from this, ibn Saud certainly did.

Failing to persuade the *ikhwan* of the error of their ways, he confronted them. At the Battle of Sabila, ibn Saud's forces, armed with the latest munitions and transport the *ikhwan* considered to be heretical innovation, decimated their opponents. They killed most and drove the remainder into exile. Those with whom ibn Saud could reconcile, he recruited as the nucleus of what became the Saudi National Guard.

Ibn Saud always had an instinct for dynastic survival, which his ancestors lacked. This both served him well and ensured the continuity of his line and the state it dominated. He not only avoided confrontation with the British "infidel," he ignored the admonition of Wahhabi clerics and placed his embryonic domain under British protection during World War I. In return, the British sent munitions and advisors and continued to subsidize him after the war. British subsidies paid for the loyalty of tribes who pledged the Al Saud their allegiance.

The manner by which ibn Saud integrated new territory into what would become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia also testifies to his survival instinct. Rather than treating the Shii population of al-Hasa and the non-

Wahhabi population of the Hejaz as idolators to be persecuted, he recognized that the success of his state-building project—and the collection of revenue from the ports and oases (and later oil) of al-Hasa and from pilgrims to Mecca and Medina—necessitated their compliance. On the other hand, he could not just write off the concerns of the Wahhabi establishment when it came to asserting the needs of the dynasty over the need to maintain religious purity. His solution was to deal with the two territories with a lighter touch (ibn Saud appointed a local Hejazi to oversee the religious police there, for example), and he permitted non-Wahhabis to follow their religious preferences, so long as they did so discreetly.

At first, ibn Saud's kingdom lived off the British dole and religious tithes, custom duties on goods shipped through ports on the Red Sea and Gulf, and taxes on pilgrims. These sources were barely enough to allow ibn Saud's kingdom to scrape by, much less take on all the administrative attributes of a modern state. And things went from bad to worse during the Great Depression, when fewer and fewer pilgrims could afford to make the long trek to the holy cities. But in 1933 ibn Saud had granted an oil concession to an American firm, Standard Oil of California (SOCAL), in the process taking another swipe at the Wahhabi establishment, which had urged him to enjoin the presence of foreigners in his kingdom. In 1938, SOCAL struck oil. At one stroke, money ceased to be a problem for the kingdom.

### **1973: The “Oil Revolution” Revolutionizes the Desert Kingdom**

When ibn Saud granted an oil concession to SOCAL to “explore, prospect, drill for, extract, treat, manufacture, transport, deal with, carry away, and export” petroleum and petroleum products, the oil business was very different than it is today. Besides those enumerated rights ibn Saud awarded to the company, SOCAL and the rest of the “Seven Sister” oil companies that dominated the global industry decided both the quantity of a nation's oil that would make it to market and its price. That changed in the 1970s.

A group of oil exporters had set up the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960 to represent their common interests. When the 1973 October War broke out between Israel, on one side, and Egypt and Syria, on the other, what turned out to be the last round of negotiations about prices between OPEC and the major oil companies had just collapsed. OPEC seized the moment. For the first time in history,

OPEC set the price of oil without any input from the companies.

Then OPEC members made sure that price stuck. Proclaiming their solidarity with the two Arab belligerents, Arab members of OPEC, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, temporarily decreased production. This limited supplies and buoyed the posted price. The price of oil jumped 380 percent and wealth flowed back into the region from the industrialized, petroleum-importing world. In 1972, Saudi revenues had been \$32.9 billion, the most to date in Saudi history; in 1974, they were \$180.6 billion.

The influx of “petrodollars” into oil producers’ coffers had profound and, in a number of ways, unanticipated effects wherever it took place. That certainly was the case in Saudi Arabia. The influx enabled the government take on many of the fiscal responsibilities associated with the social democracies of northern Europe—without, of course, having to offer the same political and social amenities as did the social democracies.

Currently, the Saudi state employs about two-thirds of the Saudis who work and it pays pensions and monthly stipends to the poor, the elderly, and orphans. The influx of petrodollars enabled the government to subsidize gasoline, electricity, and the water it desalinates. Petrodollars enabled the government to provide free healthcare and education to its citizens, and to underwrite university students studying abroad. It enabled the government to give interest-free loans to expand agricultural production. Parched Saudi Arabia currently exports more food than any other country in the Arab world. And unlike the citizens of the social democracies of northern Europe, Saudi citizens pay no direct taxes.

In return for bestowing financial benefits on its citizens, the government expects their loyalty, or at least compliance. This tacit benefits-for-compliance bargain was rendered less tacit during the wave of uprisings that washed over the Arab world in 2010-11. To ensure that the small protests for human rights and government accountability that broke out in Riyadh in March 2011 did not broaden and deepen, the Saudi government, which had taken in \$214 billion in oil revenue the year before, loosened its purse strings. It showered its citizens with \$130 billion in gifts, including 60,000 new public sector jobs, an extra two-months’ salary for state employees, a half million new units of low-income housing, and rent supports and debt relief. The package also included money to reward the Wahhabi establishment, including the religious police, on whose support the future of the regime depended.

The effects of the influx of petrodollars have, on the other hand, created or exacerbated cleavages in Saudi society. Petrodollar-induced urbanization has fostered the spread of slums woven into the urban



fabric. Twenty percent of the population lives in poverty. The 15 percent of the population that is Shii faces discrimination and is less likely to share in the nation's bounty. And Saudi Arabia ranks among the top ten countries in the world when it comes to income inequality.

Adding to these disparities is the fact that 30 percent of the inhabitants of Saudi Arabia do not enjoy the privileges and benefits accorded citizens. They are guest workers, mainly from South Asia, who work at unskilled and semi-skilled jobs few citizens are willing to take. Guest workers are subject to abuse, live in poor conditions, receive low or inadequate wages, and have few protections under law. Nevertheless, their labor remains essential for the Saudi economy to function.

Inequities aside, will it be possible to sustain a social and political order built on the extraction and sale of petroleum in an age of covid, climate change, competition for energy markets, and free market capitalism? In Spring 2016, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, unveiled a plan titled "Vision 2030." "Vision 2030" provided a blueprint for weaning the Saudi economy from its addiction to oil and turning Saudi Arabia into a free market, knowledge-based economy that is globally competitive. It also envisioned turning Saudi citizens into aggressive entrepreneurs in a mere fourteen years.

The plan called for privatizing government assets, including education and 5 percent of Saudi Aramco, the national oil company; reducing and targeting subsidies on oil, electricity, and water; introducing an income tax; boosting female participation in the workforce; and creating 450,000 new private sector jobs. Many of those jobs will be located in the four new cities that are also included in the blueprint plan.

The results so far have been mixed, and the Saudi state has already backed off from some parts of the plan and had to alter others. This is partially the result of the fact that the Saudi economy shrank close to 7 percent as a result of the global pandemic. But there are other reasons as well. Not only was the idea of an income tax wildly unpopular, the government felt compelled to disburse monthly payments to government workers to offset higher prices sparked by increased taxes and reduced subsidies. Disbursing \$13 billion in handouts to government workers is hardly the path to a free market.

The Saudi state faces a conundrum. Global imperatives compel change, but transforming an economy to current global standards necessitates deep social change as well. It means changing attitudes toward work in a country in which women's participation in the workforce, despite recent gains, still lags behind global norms and foreigners literally do all the heavy lifting. It means unilaterally redefining the link that

connects the Saudi population with its government. Finally, it means discarding the most effective tool the government has to gain the consent of its population—buying it.

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