

Title: "Prophets and Princes - Saudi Arabia from Muhammad to the Present"

Author: Mark Weston

# INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is both the economic and spiritual center of the Middle East, and a crucial ally of the West. It has a quarter of the world's oil; America has just 2%. Forced to rely on its own resources, the United States could run out of oil in less than five years.

Three families control over 40% of the earth's oil reserves: the al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, the al-Sabah of Kuwait and the al-Nahayan of Abu Dhabi. By far the most powerful of these families is the al-Saud, the rulers of Saudi Arabia, the world's only country named after a family. Their desert kingdom is almost as large as the United States east of the Mississippi River.

Saudi Arabia is also the cradle of Islam, the monotheistic but misunderstood faith of almost a quarter of the world's people. When one and a half billion people from Morocco to Indonesia kneel down to pray, they pray facing Mecca, Islam's holiest city, in western Saudi Arabia. There are 25% more Muslims than Catholics, three times as many Muslims as Protestants, and more than eighty Muslims for every Jew.

The Saudi kingdom is a paradox. It has been a breeding ground for al-Qaeda, but it has also been a reliable American friend for over sixty years. After September 11, 2001, for example, when oil buyers were nervous, Saudi Arabia pumped millions of barrels of extra oil to keep the price down, and it did the same in March 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq. The kingdom has also been a force for moderation in the Arab world, periodically proposing a plan for peace between Israel and Palestine, and denouncing Hezbollah as "irresponsible" when the militia's guerillas crossed into Israel and killed eight Israeli soldiers in July 2006.

A balanced view of Saudi Arabia is vital if Americans are to avoid more of the miscalculations that so often lead to violence in the Middle East. The kingdom's duality needs to be acknowledged and explored, but many recent books about the country have been polemics. In fact, since 2001 it has been open season on Saudi Arabia in newspapers, magazines and especially books with titles such as Hatred's Kingdom, Princes of

Darkness, and The Two Faces of Islam, The House of Saud from Tradition to Terror. Most of these attacks are one-sided and written by people who have never been to the country.

Saudi Arabia is easy to criticize. Women cannot drive, or work with men, or travel without a man's permission. The religious police, though less assertive than they used to be, still harass women if they see the slightest bit of hair, arm or ankle, but never arrest a Saudi man for abusing his Indonesian or Sri Lankan housemaid. In business, corrupt princes have taken "commissions" on large contracts and squandered the money on luxuries even while 30% of the nation's young men are unemployed. In schools, students spend almost a third of their time on Islamic Studies, and often graduate without the skills they need to compete with the nine million foreigners who live in the kingdom and do much of the country's work.

Worst of all, until 9/11 the Saudis sent millions of dollars abroad to schools that taught Muslim extremism and to charities that turned out to be fronts for al-Qaeda. Even today, 10-20% of the members of al-Qaeda are Saudi, including its leader, Osama bin Laden. On September 11, 2001, as everyone knows, nineteen of bin Laden's followers hijacked four U.S. passenger jets and slammed three of them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing almost 3000 people. Fifteen of these murderers were from Saudi Arabia, eleven from a single region.

Yet Saudi Arabia has also been a steadfast ally of the West since 1915, first of Britain and then of the United States. The kingdom has huge oil reserves, but is dependent on America for its security, and for decades it has kept its end of the energy-for-security bargain. The Saudis often pump much more oil than their own need for income requires in an effort to keep both the price of oil and the world's economy stable. If the Saudis did not provide this cushion of extra oil, oil supplies would be much more prone to disruption, and markets would be a lot more jittery. Americans might easily be paying a dollar or two more for a gallon of gasoline than they already do.

After 9/11, it took the Saudi people more than a year to fully appreciate the fact that homegrown terrorism had become a major problem. Since 2002, however, the Saudis have killed over 150 terrorists and captured over 800 more, shared valuable information with the FBI and CIA, stopped all Saudi charities from sending any money abroad, fired 1300 extremist clerics and forbidden them to preach at their mosques, and begun the lengthy process of replacing millions of schoolbooks in the one subject, "Monotheism," in which the textbooks contained numerous hostile references to Christians and Jews.

In spite of these efforts, two thirds of Americans have an unfavorable view of Saudi Arabia, according to one Gallup poll. Misunderstanding, of course, is a two-way street. In Riyadh, an old man waiting on line at a bank asked me, “Why are you in Iraq? Why do you help Israel? You are a great people. You make planes. You make cars. Then I watch television and see what you are doing nearby, and I don’t understand it.” (I just nodded, having learned within days of my arrival that it was futile to try to change Saudi minds about Israel.)

In America, harm is done by grossly misleading magazine articles such as “The World’s 10 Worst Dictators,” a piece David Wallechinsky updates each year for *Parade*. In 2006 he put Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah seventh on his list, although as this book makes clear, Abdullah has been an excellent monarch, and a Saudi king is not a dictator. The king is subject to Muslim law, receives many petitions, and seldom makes a decision without the support of his brothers, the senior clergy, and experts with Ph.D.s.

Thomas Lippman, a former Middle East bureau chief for *The Washington Post* and the author of *Inside the Mirage*, an excellent book on America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia, correctly called *Parade*’s inclusion of King Abdullah on its list of the world’s worst dictators “ridiculous,” and asked “What planet do these people dwell on?”

Yet in a sign of how deeply suspicious many Americans are toward the kingdom, *Parade* ignored Lippman’s criticism and moved King Abdullah up to fifth place in 2007, ahead of Burma’s Than Shwe and Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, two brutal tyrants who kill their opponents and have robbed their people of a generation of economic progress. (*Parade*’s four worst dictators were the leaders of Sudan, North Korea, Iran and China.)

Saudi Arabia’s unfair ranking comes from the fact that the kingdom justifiably gets a “zero” in religious freedom. Non-Muslims are forbidden to build houses of worship in Saudi Arabia, and can only hold services inside their homes. This is because when Muhammad was dying, he said, “Let there not be two religions in Arabia.” Today, the Saudis say, building a church in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam, is as unthinkable as building a synagogue would be in the Vatican City.

Like an “F” on a report card, the kingdom’s “zero” in religious freedom pulls down what is otherwise is a fairly decent human rights record. Even Amnesty International, one of the kingdom’s harshest critics, concedes that no one has ever disappeared in Saudi Arabia, as so many have in Iraq, and estimates that the number of political prisoners in Saudi Arabia, a nation of 27 million people, is fewer than 200. While the Saudis

are not free to demonstrate against their government, their right to petition the royal family is absolute, because the Quran commands rulers to seek advice. As a result, clerics and professors routinely sign petitions, with impunity, that ask the king to give up his power and form a constitutional monarchy.

In the last decade, the Saudi people have begun to speak freely, but out of residual caution most of the Saudis I met still asked me not to use their names in this book. I never heard anyone make fun of the king or crack a joke about the senior princes, but people did not hesitate to call some uneducated, although most Saudis see them as conscientious administrators who consult many experts before making a decision.

King Abdullah has worked especially hard to integrate his country into the world economy. Recently, Saudi Arabia has signed thirty-eight trade agreements and enacted forty-two commercial laws so that in 2005 it could be the 149<sup>th</sup> nation to join the World Trade Organization, and exchange goods and services more freely and cheaply with the other 148 countries.

By then, 91% of the Saudis had satellite television, with access to over 150 Arabic-language channels. Saudis today get their news from many sources, and have also begun to see how women live in less gender-segregated societies. Nearly every Saudi agrees that women, who outnumber men almost three-to-two at Saudi universities, will have more rights soon. But even educated young women seem content to move cautiously, because the goal, many say, is not to free themselves from men, but *with* men.

Although Saudi Arabia is a U.S. ally making genuine social progress, many Americans, from right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch to left-wing film director Michael Moore, want the House of Saud to fall. They ignore the fact that unlike Iran, where the people are more progressive than their rulers, in Saudi Arabia the royal family is more progressive than its people. Day after day, I asked almost every Saudi I met the same question: if three political parties competed in elections tomorrow – one representing the royal family, a second representing conservative clerics and the third representing Western-educated reformers – how would the Saudi people vote? The answer was always about the same: 50-55% for the royal family, 35-45% for the Islamist clerics, and just 5-10% for the Western-oriented reformers.

The alternative to Saudi Arabia's royal family today is not some Arabic-speaking version of the Swedish parliament, but a militantly Islamist regime, which even if it were democratically elected, would almost certainly be far more troublesome and anti-Western than the royal family.

(In Kuwait, Muslim fundamentalists won 45% of the seats in parliament in 2006, and the Saudis are more devout than the people of Kuwait.)

The Saudi princes “are the only ones in the position to stop the extremists from controlling our lives,” a blogger, Saudi Jeans, wrote me, “and liberals need them to implement the reforms they are looking for.” Even Patrick Buchanan, the ultra-conservative American columnist, has rightly asked, “Can anyone believe that should the 7000 princes go to the wall, 7000 liberal democrats will replace them?”

The harshest critics of Saudi Arabia are ill-informed. They ignore the country’s long traditions, pro-Western history and undeniable recent progress, and treat the whole kingdom as if it were a rogue state where everyone supports terrorism. The truth is that the overwhelming majority of the Saudi people, including all but one of the Saudis I talked with, hate terrorism, and the police have been able to raid dozens of terrorist hideouts because of tips, as one officer said, from “disgusted neighbors.” A 2005 poll of 10,000 Saudis found that only 4.7% of them wanted Osama bin Laden to have political power. Ninety-two percent thought it was a “bad idea.”

Critics of Saudi Arabia face a dilemma. If the majority of Saudis are Islamic militants, then we are lucky the House of Saud is in power because the alternative would be an anti-American theocracy with billions of petrodollars to spend opposing U.S. interests. But if most Saudis oppose extremism and most princes and police officers want to help us fight terrorism, then it is foolish and counterproductive to demonize their country just because their culture is so different from our own.

It is easy to disparage the Saudis. It is harder to try to see them as they see themselves: as champions of monotheism and modesty, under a monarchy subject to Islamic law. Saudis know their royal house has many corrupt princes, but the al-Saud family also has a 260-year tradition of ruling the country, a sixty-year alliance with the United States, and a current king, Abdullah, who is widely considered to be accessible, prudent and broad-minded.

As for Saudi women, few of the ones I talked with would trade places with their American sisters and give up the protection of their extended families. To women in Saudi Arabia, the possibility of raising children as a single mother without any money from siblings, uncles and cousins seems as demeaning as having to wear a full veil and not being able to drive seem to us.

Appearances are deceiving in Saudi Arabia. “Outside, everything is dusty,” said an American nurse who has lived in Riyadh for years. “The

only colors are beige, brown, tan and cream. But inside, everything is air-conditioned, well-furnished and beautiful.” Similarly, “Western journalists covering our kingdom only show extremists and the royal family,” a petrochemical salesman complained, “but everyone I know just wants to make money, raise a good family and live a peaceful life. We are more like the Americans than different.”

Riyadh is dusty because it is surrounded on every side by hundreds of miles of desert, so if there is the slightest breeze, the blue sky turns half-brown, particles of sand brush against one’s cheeks, and contact lenses become hard to wear. The cities and towns of Saudi Arabia are oases in an unrelentingly harsh desert, where vast seas of off-white sand reflect so much sunlight that without dark glasses it is difficult to see until about five in the afternoon. There is not even much scrub in Saudi Arabia. Compared to the almost lifeless Arabian Desert, the American Southwest is a garden. In fact, much of the kingdom looks more like Mars than the Mojave. It is amazing that anyone ever settled Arabia’s interior, and not surprising that until the twentieth century, fewer than a dozen Europeans had ever been to Riyadh.

As late as 1950, Riyadh and every other Saudi city except Jeddah were just clusters of mud-walled homes, with no restaurants, parks, electricity or running water. Saudi Arabia did not have a high school until the 1930s, or a girls’ school until the 1950s. Today, in many Saudi families, although the grandmothers and great-grandparents are illiterate, the grandfathers attended only elementary school, and the parents have just a high school education, the sons and daughters are attending universities. It is easy for an American to think Saudi Arabia is backward, but the Saudis themselves feel like they are rocketing into the future.

My curiosity about Islam began in 1990, when I was writing my first book, The Land and People of Pakistan, a few years after I had made some Pakistani friends at the London School of Economics. Two things struck me about the Muslims: their numbers and their fervor. While churches in America may fill up once or twice a week, mosques in Pakistan (and Saudi Arabia) fill up five times a day.

In Islamabad, Pakistan’s capital, there was a wonderful store called “Mr. Books” that sold biographical pamphlets about the early Muslims for ten rupees, about fifty cents. The booklets told the stories of not only Muhammad, but also his immediate successors, favorite wives, smartest daughter, son-in-law, and two grandsons, among others. Historically, these men and women are as important to Muslims as Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Peter and Paul are to Christians.

I realized that the prophets, saints, rulers and martyrs the Muslims learn about in childhood are alien to us. Yet if we in the West are to understand the thinking of our allies and the motives of our adversaries, it is important that more of us begin to know some of these dramatic Muslim stories. Greedily, I bought twenty of the pamphlets. "Someday," I promised myself, "I will write about them."

Eleven years later, after the attacks of 9/11, that time had come. I wrote the first four chapters of this book in 2002, trying to combine the liveliness of the Pakistani pamphlets with the rigor of the more scholarly books on Muslim history that I found in university libraries.

Americans are typically more concerned with the present than the past, and many busy people may only have the time to read my book's final chapters on Saudi Arabia today. But almost every Saudi would agree that if you have time to read just one chapter in this book, you will learn much more about Saudi Arabia by reading the first chapter on Muhammad than you will by reading the last chapter on relations with Iran and the future of the royal succession.

When I lived in Saudi Arabia and had already decided to write a much longer book, I sometimes showed the Saudis my table of contents so they could see what I was writing. They were always pleased that this book begins with chapters on Muhammad and his successors. Once, when I interviewed Prince Abdullah bin Faisal bin Turki, the former director of the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (roughly the equivalent of the Secretary of Commerce) he had originally agreed to see me for fifteen minutes. After taking a long look at my table of contents, he changed his mind, and talked to me for an hour and a half.

The Middle East dominates the news almost every day, yet only 7% of Americans claim to have any knowledge of Islam's core beliefs. Few Americans realize that Muslims revere Genesis, Exodus, Psalms and even parts of the Gospels as holy scripture, and honor Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus as Prophets of God. It is news to most Americans that Muslims believe in the virgin birth, miracles and resurrection of Jesus (for there is no miracle, Muslims say, that Allah cannot perform.) Muslims do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. To them, the Trinity is a deviation from monotheism.

Few Americans know that Muhammad was a reformer who loved the company of women and greatly improved their lives. The Qur'an, the scripture he recited, prohibits the killing of girls at birth and commands that a woman inherit half of what a man inherits, a revolutionary idea anywhere in the world until the nineteenth century. It was also Muhammad's personal opinion that a woman should be educated and have a major say in choosing

her husband. Indeed, his first wife was a businesswoman who proposed to him.

Some influential Americans display an astonishing ignorance about Islam. In 2003 Lieutenant General William Boykin, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, said that the Muslims he fought in Somalia worship “an idol.” Similarly, Franklin Graham, the son of Billy Graham, told NBC News in 2002 that “The God of Islam is... a different God,” and Islam “is a very evil and wicked religion.” Jerry Vines, a former president of the Southern Baptists, told a Baptist convention in 2001 that “Allah is not Jehovah.” In fact, Allah and Jehovah are one and the same. *Al-lah* is simply Arabic for “the God,” and Islam began as and continues to be a movement against idol worship.

Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly compared the University of North Carolina’s assignment of a book about the Quran to incoming freshmen in 2002 to a requirement that they read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and asked why Americans should study “our enemy’s religion.” O’Reilly’s question has two answers. First, America’s enemy is terrorism, not Islam. Second, the growth of terrorism has shown that it is not possible to fully understand the twenty-first century without knowing something about the seventh century, the period when Muhammad began the spread of Islam.

Millions of Muslims, including many Saudis, see the seventh century, when Islam grew so rapidly, as a golden age when saints ruled the world, a utopia that they want to restore. In the “smoking gun” videotape that U.S. soldiers found in Afghanistan in 2001, Osama bin Laden and his black-turbaned Saudi dinner companion discuss their destruction of the World Trade Center, then talk about reviving the spirit of early Islam.

Why are Muslims so fervent about their religion? Muhammad and his followers introduced a way of life that was more just and equitable than anything the Arabs had known before, and this spurred them to spread their faith from Spain to India. Muslim civilization became the most advanced in the world until the time of the European Renaissance. In the 1030s, for example, one Arab scientist, ibn al-Haytham, closely observed the twilight and correctly determined that the air peters out (and space begins) about sixty miles (100 km) up. It would be almost 900 years before Western scientists discovered the ionosphere and reached a similar conclusion.

The many English words that come from Arabic are a constant reminder that for centuries Europeans borrowed from the Muslims – not the other way around. Words derived from Arabic include: coffee, sugar, soda, candy, alcohol, magazine, orange, lemon, lime, rice, spinach, cotton, sofa, mattress, admiral, average, canal, cannon, jacket, jar, sheriff, traffic and zero. Muslims led the world in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and

even home furnishings for over 400 years until a combination of reactionary clerics and Mongol invasions drained Islamic civilization of its dynamism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries

By the time I had finished writing about early Islam, I had also become interested in Wahhabism, the strict Saudi form of Islam that began in the 1740s as a movement against superstition, magic and idolatry. After 9/11, because most of the hijackers were Saudi, some writers began calling Wahhabism a totalitarian ideology, comparing it to Nazism and Communism, and said that it was America's next great enemy. But as chapter 5 makes clear, Wahhabism was simply a puritanical religious revival, rather like Calvinism in our own past.

Arabia had regressed and become a superstitious backwater when Wahhabism began. People prayed at tombs and sacred palm trees instead of in mosques, and pursued astrology and ancestor worship instead of monotheism. The Saudis themselves call this time a "period of ignorance." Then, in 1744, ibn Abdul Wahhab, a fiery preacher and strict monotheist, joined forces with Muhammad ibn Saud a few miles outside modern-day Riyadh. Together, they formed a military and spiritual alliance that conquered and briefly ruled most of the Arabian peninsula. The kingdom fell, but reappeared in the twentieth century as modern-day Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance, after 260 years, is still one of the key pillars of the royal family's legitimacy.

Today, the most pressing question in Saudi Arabia is whether the kingdom can control its population growth, find work for its unemployed, and create an economy based on manufacturing and services before its oil runs out by the end of the century. If it is left alone, Saudi Arabia will have a bright future. It earns huge oil revenues, has a business-friendly government, and is making slow but steady social progress. Turmoil in the Middle East, however, could easily spill into the kingdom, particularly if a "clash of civilizations" developed between the West and the Muslim world.

Whether the Saudi people choose to be moderate or militant in the future depends on whether they believe globalization can enrich their lives without endangering their faith. Do they feel Islam is secure in the face of the Western world's many influences? Whatever the Saudis decide, their influence on the rest of the Muslim world will be enormous, both because of their immense oil wealth and because of their moral authority as the guardian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

Most of my friends read more fiction than non-fiction, and the art of reading the two genres is quite different. A novel is a work of art that needs

to be taken whole. A non-fiction book is a buffet; the reader has only to read what interests him or her. To make it easy for readers to jump and skip, I have divided each chapter into many subchapters. Some are obviously more interesting than others. The boyhood of Osama bin Laden, for example, is a more interesting topic for most people than monthly fluctuations in the price of oil, and women's issues are generally more interesting than budget cutbacks and petrochemical plants. While a book on Saudi Arabia would not be complete without detailed discussions of the price of oil, no one ever said you have to read every page of a non-fiction book.

When I was a sophomore in college, I was struck by the second paragraph of Niccolo Machiavelli's introduction to The Discourses:

And if my poor talents, my little experience of the present and insufficient study of the past, should make the result of my labors defective and of little utility, I shall at least have shown the way to others, who will carry out my views with greater ability, eloquence, and judgment, so that if I do not merit praise, I ought at least not to incur censure.<sup>i</sup>

At nineteen, I pitied Machiavelli. One of the great political thinkers of all time had to humble himself before his patrons. Now I read the same paragraph with envy. Machiavelli did not have to claim to have written "the one indispensable book on the subject," as so many authors do to sell their wares today. He simply hoped he had done some useful work, as I do with this book.

No one can spend six years on a project without being deeply aware of its deficiencies. The ideal author for this book would have gone to college pursuing a double-major in Arabic Literature and Petroleum Engineering, worked in the Saudi kingdom twenty years, come to know many Saudi families extremely well, and then with a novelist's eye, weaved the history of the kingdom back and forth between the sweep of national events and the daily lives of his friends. If we are lucky, perhaps someone this talented is writing such a book now.

In the meantime, there is room for a new and sympathetic survey of Saudi Arabia that highlights its reforms since 2001 instead of just its shortcomings. Unlike other works about the kingdom, the purpose of this book is not to criticize the Saudis, although often I do, but to try to understand them. In a region as explosive, exasperating and hostile to the United States as the Middle East, America's sixty-year friendship with Saudi Arabia is worth preserving.

---

## ABOUT THE TITLE

People have lived in Saudi Arabia for thousands of years; many Saudis believe that even Adam and Eve spent time in Mecca. It was years after the al-Saud family unified much of the Arabian peninsula, however, before people began calling themselves “Saudi.” The royal family did not call its kingdom “Saudi Arabia” until 1932.

As to “prophet,” dictionary definitions of the word include: “a person gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional powers of expression.” By this definition, at least half a dozen people in the first five chapters were prophets.

Muslims, however, consider Muhammad to be the last prophet, preceded by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus. The leaders who followed Muhammad did not call themselves prophets, but “successors.”

---