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Saudi Arabia

The Islamic State

Frederick W. Axelgard

In the two decades since Iran's Islamic revolution, the rapid pace of change in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa has focused attention on the societies there that proclaim loyalty to Islam. Is Islam on a collision course with Western civilization? Can adherence to its principles be reconciled with living and governing in a modernizing world? How will extremists that speak in the name of Islam affect the future of the Middle East and neighboring regions? These and many similar questions have been debated at length. Yet, after volumes of political, social, and doctrinal analysis, the impression remains that exaggerated fears and misperceptions, rather than understanding, continue to dominate our view of Islam.¹

The opportunity to encounter Islam in a close and immediate way came to my family by means of a diplomatic assignment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia several years ago. This assignment provided the occasion to see and experience firsthand the personal devotion of Saudi citizens to their Muslim beliefs. At the same time, it involved looking at the Kingdom through the prism of the long-standing U.S.-Saudi relationship and the Kingdom's place in extensive U.S. interests in the Middle East. It also meant trying to assess Islam's internal social and political significance to Saudi Arabia and studying the Kingdom's role in the broader phenomenon of Islamic resurgence. Accordingly, this article seeks to shed light on Islam and Saudi Arabia by drawing on personal as well as professional perspectives.

Saudi Arabia is a remote land of insular geography, a land which is also set apart by its cultural and spiritual uniqueness. This differentness yields a great potential for distancing, misperception, and misunderstanding by non-Muslim outsiders, Westerners in particular. This is unfortunate, because there is so much at stake. The Kingdom is the birthplace and heartland of one of the most rapidly growing religions in the world. About one-fifth of the world's people turn toward Saudi Arabia to pray several times each day,² and they (and their governments) feel they are directly affected by what takes place here. Saudi Arabia owns one-fourth of the world's crude oil,³ which makes the Kingdom's stability and security vital to the health of the global economy. Therefore, to begin to grasp what this country is about has far-reaching significance—and this effort inevitably points us in the direction of Islam (fig. 1).

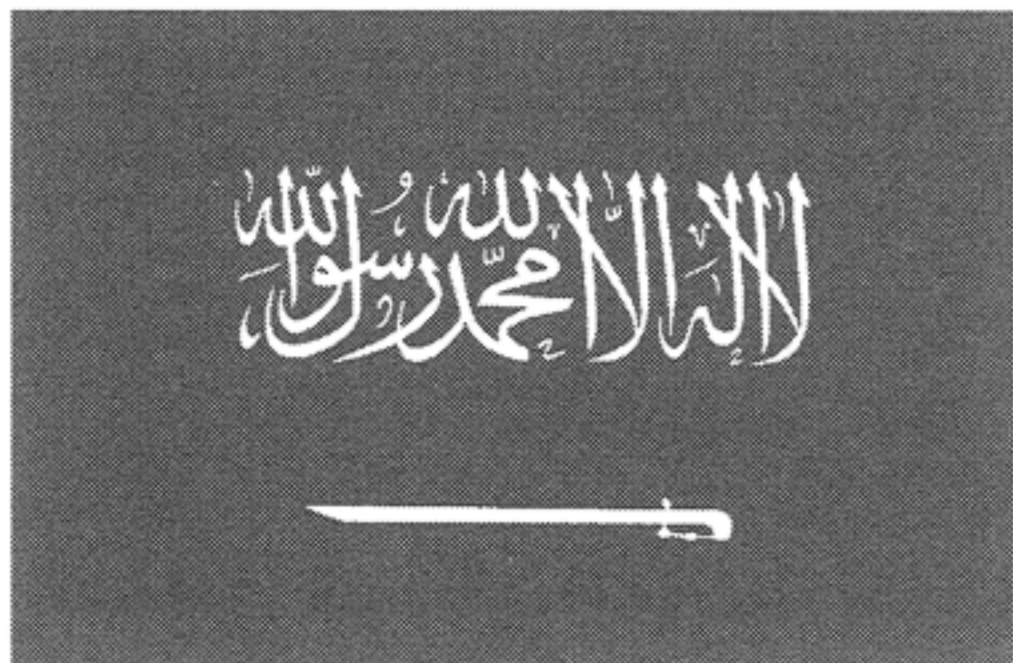


FIG. 1. Flag of Saudi Arabia with green background and white figures. Adopted in 1973, the Saudi Arabian flag symbolizes the country's devotion to religion. The Arabic inscription reads: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." Green, thought to have been a favorite color of Muhammad, is prominent in the flags of many Islamic countries. The sword is that of King Abd al-Aziz, the national hero who fought to establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Jihad at Home

Jihad is a widely misunderstood and even fearsome concept to most non-Muslims, who perceive it as signifying "holy war" conducted against others in an aggressive and even military manner. But to Muslims, the primary sense of *jihad* is personal, and the phrase "jihad at home" is intended to convey the earnestness and totality of effort that Saudi society expends to put Islam first in every dimension of life. Indeed, "the term *jihad* has a number of meanings, which include the effort to lead a good life, to make society more moral and just, and to spread Islam through preaching, teaching, or armed struggle. . . . It is the lifelong struggle to be virtuous, to be true to the straight path of God."⁴

Saudi society has been configured to provide Muslims the opportunity to actualize this effort at virtually every turn and in every hour of their daily lives.

Daily Prayer. This "holy warfare" begins anew every morning in each neighborhood with the predawn call to prayer. Four more prayers—at midday, midafternoon, dusk, and midevening (fig. 2)—connect more than disrupt the flow of the day. It is a memorable experience to be on an official errand in the Saudi Defense Ministry and find a vast hallway blocked, filled with prayer rugs and kneeling figures. Similarly, personal errands, such as shopping and eating out, must all be calibrated to the rhythm of Saudi prayer life to avoid being locked in or out when the doors close for prayer time.

Religious Programming on Television. There is a conscious, official dimension to the rhythm of Saudi religious life. The Saudi government clearly tries to foster an atmosphere of public religiosity. National television stations broadcast a consistent stream of religious programming, much of it devoted to discussing the Qur'an. Night after night, television screens are alight with images of kneeling masses surrounding the Holy Ka'ba in Mecca.

This government promotion of religion has led some observers to interpret Islam in Saudi Arabia in top-down terms—as a tool in the hands of a ruling authority seeking legitimacy. This preoccupation with the "official" dimension of Islam in the Kingdom tends to discount the personal, spiritual authenticity of the faith of the people. Those who come from societies that

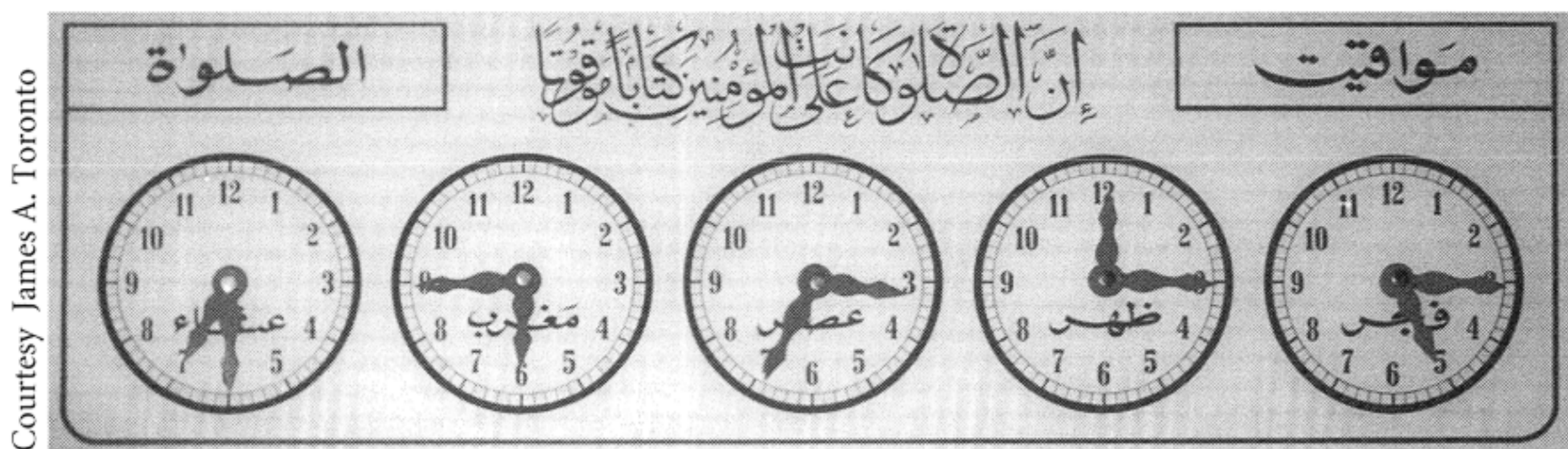


FIG. 2. Prayer clocks on wall of a mosque in Bahrain. Read right to left, these clocks indicate times of the dawn, midday, midafternoon, sunset, and evening prayers.

emphasize individual freedom as a first principle will reflexively doubt the sincerity of group devotions expressed in a society where pressures to conform are so great. But what is one to think of an inpromptu conversation with a general who beams as he speaks of taking his young son to the mosque for dawn prayers? Or the innumerable times that the subject of religion creeps into official meetings, where policy exchanges are often superseded by the basic questions “What do you know about Islam? Would you like to know more?” Such spontaneous experiences reveal a personal quality of faith alongside the outward, collective submission to Allah, and both must be appreciated to capture the depth and breadth of Islam’s influence in Saudi Arabia.

Ramadan. A major milestone in the year is Ramadan. Ramadan is imposing. For one lunar month, the entire society, including children as young as eight years old, refrains from eating and drinking during daylight hours. Latter-day Saints, who have some experience and belief in fasting, can identify with the spiritual power of such an exercise. One also learns, as the month wears on, to take into account of growing evidence of personal irritability, dangerous driving just before sundown, and late-night feasting and shopping. At the same time, non-Muslims in the Kingdom are very careful during Ramadan not to eat, drink, smoke, or even chew gum in public. As I wrote in 1999,

the images were as memorable as they were brief. The sun had barely set; it was late in the fasting month of Ramadan, and we were driving fast down a isolated road from above Tabuk, in northwest Saudi Arabia. On our left I saw a large touring bus had stopped, and seemed to be heaving in the corner of an asphalt square. The snapshot enlarged. Spreading out slowly and scattering randomly around the pavement, small groups of Muslim travelers huddled on carpets and other makeshift ground covers. Most were couples, but a few had small children. Those who had prayed were eating dates and sipping tea; others were bending and kneeling in prayer. With dusk settling, families finished prayer and broke their day-long fast. This far-off niche of sand and asphalt was softened by the easy and sure manner of these people and their

devotions. They vanished from my mirror before I remembered that strictly speaking, travelers during Ramadan are exempt from the requirement to fast.⁵

With seven to ten days left in the month, the government closes down. One professional contact after another mentions that his extended family will spend some time in Mecca toward the climax of the fasting period. Their anticipation is genuine. They want to be *there, then*, with their families.

Hajj. The other compelling milestone of the year is the month of pilgrimage, or *hajj*. Upwards of two million pilgrims come to Saudi Arabia to participate en masse in the elaborate sequence of rituals that occur in and around Mecca during the appointed days of the month of hajj⁶ (fig. 3). At other times during the year, hundreds of thousands of other pilgrims visit to perform the minor pilgrimage, or *umrah*.⁷ The social and political significance of these massive ceremonies of devotion is difficult to overstate. The ruling family of Saudi Arabia places the highest possible priority on ensuring that the arrival, movement, and departure of worshipers are conducted in a safe and dignified way (fig. 4). In the same way that hajj is a central pillar in the spiritual life of an individual Muslim, successful execution of the hajj is central to validating the Saudi leadership's right to administer the holiest sites of Islam.



Courtesy Information Office, Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia

FIG. 3. The Ka'ba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslim pilgrims, and Muslims worldwide, face the Ka'ba while praying. The Ka'ba, draped in black, is believed to have been built by Abraham and Ishmael. (For a closer view of the Ka'ba, see page 182.) Because Mecca is the holiest site of Islam, only Muslims are allowed to enter and worship in the city.

I agree with scholars who challenge the view that Islam in Saudi Arabia is manipulated for political advantage by the Saudi leadership. Far from being purely a top-down phenomenon, Islam permeates the society in weblike fashion. It is the dominant feature of the common ground between Saudi society and the ruling family. It reaches out and up to shape and restrain government, rather than to license options for capricious action by those in authority.⁸



Courtesy James A. Toronto

FIG. 4. A caravan of Chevrolet Suburbans loaded down with gear and supplies for the long trek to Mecca. Muslims are required to make the pilgrimage, or *hajj*, at least once in their lifetime if they are physically and financially capable of doing so. The modern caravan pictured here is making a rest stop in Khamis Mushayt, a city in the mountainous Asir Province of southwestern Saudi Arabia.

The Challenge of Reform

The Al Saud family has governed most of the Arabian peninsula for almost three-quarters of a century. King Abd al-Aziz Abdulrahman Al Saud proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia an official state in 1932. After three decades of military and political campaigning, he had effectively unified the fractious tribes of Arabia to shrug off the vestiges of Ottoman influence and drive the rival Hashemite dynasty out of Mecca and Medina.⁹ The society he founded was devoted to the application of Islamic law (*shari'a*) and the Qur'an as interpreted by the strict tenets of Wahhabism, an extremely conservative strain of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. Wahhabism dates to the 1700s, when the Al Saud forged an alliance with the fiery reformer Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This alliance has made Wahhabism a power to be reckoned with in central Arabia ever since.¹⁰

Balancing this conservative religious background against the realities of twentieth-century governance has been a constant challenge for the Al Saud. Early on, King Abd al-Aziz had to deal with resistance from his clerics to such basic innovations as the telephone and the automobile.¹¹ Even before formal establishment of the Kingdom, he put down a rebellion by the Ikhwan, a fanatical tribal movement that had been vital to his military success but that decried his entering into a treaty with the "infidel British."¹² Awakened to economic growth by the discovery of oil in the early 1930s and vaulted into international prominence by the oil crises of the 1970s, Saudi Arabia has gone from a destitute desert backwater to a

wealthy regional power with global influence. The changes that have made up this transition border on incredible. In just over two generations, a rural, tribal-based, and basically illiterate society has become substantially urbanized, highly educated¹³ (fig. 5), and deeply enmeshed in global communications and economic infrastructures.

Economic Challenges. The changes of the past twenty years have had a particularly sharp edge, some of which can be conveyed statistically. The price of oil, a key index of Saudi economic health, declined from nearly \$40 a barrel in the late 1970s to approximately \$11 a barrel in early 1998. Meanwhile, the country's population doubled in size. Saudi Arabia's per capita gross domestic product is estimated to have shrunk from about \$28,600 (measured in current dollars), equal to that of the United States, in 1981, to less than \$7,000, not even one-fifth of that of the United States, in the year 2000. In other words, in less than two decades, Saudi Arabia has slipped economically from a high-income state with a per capita gross domestic product rivaling that of the United States to a mid-to-low income state roughly on a par with Mexico.

During the same two decades, the Kingdom's population explosion has fundamentally altered the profile of society: Fully one-half of the country's citizens are now less than eighteen years of age. And while the population has grown at an estimated 3.5 percent per year, economic growth in the past decade has limped along at about 0.8 percent, which means there is significant unemployment in a growing and potentially restive segment of Saudi society. The need for economic reform is widely recognized in the Kingdom, and Crown Prince Abdullah is spearheading efforts to bring about reform.¹⁴ Although Abdullah is the most revered and credible senior member of the Saudi royal family, it remains to be seen whether he can bring about the efficiencies and openness needed for economic growth.

Regional Political Challenges. These economic challenges, it should be noted, evolved within a persistently hostile regional political climate. Earlier Saudi tensions with Iran continued through the 1980s, despite Iran's war with Iraq. After Iranian pilgrims had several bloody confrontations in Mecca, Iranian participation in the hajj temporarily lapsed at the end of the 1980s. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and attacks against Saudi Arabia triggered the largest crisis of all. The military dimension of the crisis is perhaps most memorable to Western minds and those outside of Islam. But almost as troubling to the Saudi leadership was the widespread criticism and vitriol from Arab and Islamic sources who rejected the Kingdom's decision to admit foreign, non-Muslim troops into the land of Islam's holiest sites. Some of this criticism came from inside the Kingdom itself, and the royal family invested considerable effort to persuade its citizens of the Islamic rightness of its decision. Those efforts included obtaining rulings (*fatwas*)



Courtesy James A. Toronto

FIG. 5. Young Saudi schoolboys lined up for physical exercises and chanting the Qur'an before starting class for the day. Most are wearing the traditional *thobe*, a long gown still preferred by most men in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Following World War II and the end of colonialism in Islamic countries, Muslim government officials have placed heavy emphasis on developing the school systems, which were severely neglected by colonial powers. Today, education is generally mandatory at least through elementary school for both boys and girls (who normally attend segregated public schools in compliance with Islamic tradition). As a result of these reforms, literacy rates have risen dramatically, as have the number of college graduates and new universities.

from Saudi religious authorities to support both the presence of foreign troops in the Kingdom and the counterattack against Iraq.¹⁵ Nevertheless, discontent from extreme conservatives in the Kingdom continued after the war. Over the following few years, this discontent resulted in a surge of religio-political activism, which the Saudi government countered by arresting a number of influential preachers and, amid the subsequent protests, detaining a large number of the preachers' followers. Attacks against U.S. military installations in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996 arose from this dynamic.¹⁶

Political violence of this kind is highly uncharacteristic of Saudi political culture. For this reason, these attacks raised fears that perhaps the limits of political, economic, and social forbearance had been reached. To date, however, there have been no further incidents on Saudi soil. Instead, despite significant challenges, the Kingdom has maintained the basic contours of the shari'a-based society King Abd al-Aziz founded. The pulse of conservatism and religiosity remains palpable. Saudi women are uniformly

veiled and covered in black *abayas*. Saudi men are dressed almost without exception in the egalitarian white *thobe*, although younger males occasionally exchange the traditional red-and-white *gutra* for a baseball cap (worn backwards, of course). Meanwhile, ambitious *mutawwa'iin*, bearded guardians of the faith, roam at will both through the flashy shopping malls and through the mud-brick souks in their calf-length thobes to enforce the closing of shops at prayer time and bark out commands for unsuspecting Western women to cover their heads. All in all, this strange amalgam of conservative Islam, tribal culture, and immense, oil-fed infrastructure has demonstrated remarkable survivability in a volatile and rapidly changing environment.

Saudi Arabia in the Middle East

While Saudi Arabia may appear to be the epitome of Islamic belief and practice, it is by no means typical of other Arab or Muslim societies. Indeed, the Kingdom is unique even among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. One need only drive a few kilometers east, over the King Fahd Causeway into Bahrain, to feel immersed in an entirely different culture. In Bahrain, women drive themselves to work, whereas in Saudi Arabia women (including the estimated 5 percent who work) must rely on husbands, brothers, or drivers to transport them, with the women hidden behind heavily tinted windows in the backs of Suburbans, Caprices, or (increasingly rare) Mercedes. In Manama, Bahrain's capital city, offices, restaurants, and government ministries remain open during prayer time, while in the Saudi Arabian cities of Riyadh, Dhahran, and Jeddah, the muezzin's call to prayer means the end to office calls and turns thousands of downtown and neighborhood mosques into hives of activity. An evening drive in Bahrain past hotels, pubs, and bars will reveal people enjoying beer and liquor openly. Back over the bridge in Dhahran, fast-food parlors dim the lights and bolt the doors during prayer, leaving locked-in patrons to sip fruit juices and soft drinks in the dark. What is true in Bahrain also applies in large part elsewhere on the Arabian side of the Gulf. Although all the small Arab principalities of the southern Gulf are led by royal families who espouse Sunni Islam, nowhere in the Gulf area is Islam practiced with the intensity found in Saudi Arabia.

Regional Conflicts. Saudi Arabia's unique standing even within this small swathe of the Arab world is symptomatic of its singular position in the broader Middle East, where the Kingdom's politics have repeatedly placed it at odds with prevailing regional currents. Indeed, when Saddam Hussein launched troops, scud missiles, and vehement rhetoric against Saudi Arabia in 1990 to 1991, he was by no means the first regional revolutionary to threaten the Kingdom in this manner. Egypt's Gamal Abdul

Nasser, speaking in the voice of secular Arab nationalism and Arab socialism, had targeted the conservative Saudi regime in his day. As a result, Saudi Arabia and Egypt fought a debilitating proxy war in Yemen that lasted most of the 1960s and that included Egyptian air strikes against Saudi villages and gas attacks in Yemen.¹⁷

The November 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran also provoked a serious challenge to Saudi legitimacy. It began with Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the overthrow of the Al Saud regime, directly challenging its right to rule in the name of Islam. Later that month, a group of Sunni extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. After two tense weeks, Saudi forces moved in and ended the crisis amid significant bloodshed. This clash was soon followed by rioting among Saudi Shi'ites in the eastern province of the Kingdom, a disturbance which also had to be put down with force.¹⁸ Although the unrest sparked by the Iranian revolution was contained, this chain of events posed perhaps the sharpest challenge in decades to Al Saud governance of the Kingdom.

There is an intriguing pattern in this brief historical overview. Three of the most powerful regional figures of the postwar Middle East have seen fit to directly attack the legitimacy and security of the Saudi system. Each did so at the height of his regional influence. But each time, the threat and the demagogic figure behind it receded while the basic features of the Saudi state that had provoked each attack remained basically unchanged.

Just why Saudi Arabia has been on the receiving end of such attention is worthy of a separate discussion, but perhaps a few useful points can be made briefly here. One concise explanation of the Gulf crisis suggests that it sprang from envy of Saudi oil wealth, resentment over the perceived corruption and hypocrisy of King Fahd and other Saudi leaders—the “custodian[s] of the Holy Places,”¹⁹ and outrage that the Al Saud would admit into the country the polluting influence of foreign troops to fight against fellow-Muslim and fellow-Arab Iraq.²⁰ No doubt, such factors as these came into play in 1990 to 1991, but there is probably a deeper explanation as well.

Saudi Arabia has from its inception been on a different historical timetable and a different social and political wavelength than the other major powers in the region. Unlike many of the core countries in the Middle East, the Kingdom did not derive its existence or political culture from the sequence of events associated with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the creation of British and French colonies, and the nationalist movements that threw off these arrangements.²¹ Instead, King Abd al-Aziz had a fifty-year head start in putting his stamp on the Arabian Peninsula before secular nationalist movements began to sweep into power in the Arab world of the 1950s.²² In the decades that followed, the Kingdom—having produced its own wealth through oil reserves—avoided those pitfalls of foreign

ideologies and economic programs and sidestepped those dilemmas of national identity and political legitimacy that, together with the demoralizing Israeli victory in the 1967 war, spelled the failure of Arab nationalism and socialism.²³ Much the same can be said of the resurgent and revolutionary Islamist movements that later spread throughout the region. While we have seen that revolutionary movements initially posed a serious challenge to the stability of Saudi Arabia, twenty years later the Kingdom appears by and large to have laid claim to the key objective—a political, social, and economic system founded on agreed Islamic principles—that has eluded so many of the national and subnational Islamic experiments that now operate in the international arena. The lethal weakness of lacking an enduring national consensus on a basic ideological direction and governing format is evident in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Algeria, Afghanistan, and Indonesia.

Foreign Policy. Saudi Arabia's unique position is also evident in its foreign policy, where its singular history and view of its interests have often made for unique alliances and initiatives. Consider, for example, its relationship with the United States. Behind the high drama of United States intervention in the Gulf War lay a fifty-year-old relationship of remarkable consistency and trust. Whereas the Cold War, Arab nationalism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Islamic fundamentalism have at one time or another severely damaged U.S. relations with every major party in the Middle East (Israel excluded), this has not been the case with Saudi Arabia. Indeed, U.S.-Saudi relations in the twentieth century have been marked by many important milestones. These include the discovery and development of Saudi oil resources by U.S. companies in the 1930s; Franklin D. Roosevelt's historic meeting with King Abd al-Aziz shortly before Roosevelt's death in 1945; and, in a foreshadowing of the Gulf crisis, the dispatching of U.S. planes, paratroops, and a naval destroyer in 1963 to deter Egyptian attacks against Saudi Arabia early in the Yemen conflict.²⁴

Close as they are, official U.S.-Saudi relations also have their limits. The Saudi royal family manages its relationship with the United States carefully, with an eye to Saudi sensitivities about the Kingdom's position in the Arab and Islamic world. Despite fifty years of close military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, active U.S. military forces had rarely played a direct operational role in the Kingdom before 1990 but had been confined to a beyond-the-horizon presence. As previously stated, when Iraq's aggression made it necessary to bring U.S. forces into a more visible role, the Saudi leadership felt compelled to seek out the public blessing of religious authorities, the *ulema*, both for troops to enter the Kingdom and for the counterattack against Iraq.²⁵ The Saudi leadership similarly declined to be drawn into a written agreement formalizing the terms under which these

outside military forces could operate in the Kingdom.²⁶ This cautious approach deepened in the late 1990s, when Saudi leaders began to describe the U.S. forces that remained in the Kingdom to help contain Iraq as United Nations forces enforcing United Nations resolutions rather than as U.S. forces operating in defense of Saudi Arabia.

Nor has the Saudi leadership hesitated to chart a course that diverges significantly from Washington, D.C.'s when Saudi interests seem to require it. This was the case several years ago, when Crown Prince Abdullah undertook to rebuild Saudi relations with Iran in the wake of President Mohammed Khatami's victory in the 1997 elections. Abdullah, who is well known for his keen appreciation of regional political dynamics, appeared eager to seize that moment as a prime opportunity to end almost twenty years of Saudi-Iranian hostility and Iran's alienation within the region as a whole.

At the time, U.S. policy struck a much more cautious note, saying that the new Iranian regime would need to prove its moderation by changing its policies on terrorism, the Middle East peace process, and the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. Under Abdullah's leadership, however, Saudi Arabia moved ahead. In a bold gesture, Abdullah accepted Iran's invitation to travel to Teheran for the 1997 summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference, thereby offering Saudi Arabia's implicit validation of Iran's importance to the international Muslim community. But in his address to the Organization of Islamic Conference, Abdullah raised a chastising voice against those who would blame the outside world for the difficulties facing Islam. He spoke specifically against parties who were causing fragmentation and sowing hatred through acts of violence carried out in the name of their Islamic beliefs. He courageously challenged those assembled that the time had come to "rearrange our Islamic house from inside" and called on the conference to dissociate itself clearly and unequivocally from those who "commit the most appalling crimes and acts in the name of Islam."²⁷

Political and economic contact between Saudi Arabia and Iran has expanded in the wake of Crown Prince Abdullah's initiative. The lingering uncertainty as to whether moderate forces will gain the upper hand in Iran is troubling to the Kingdom, as it is to most other interested observers. Nevertheless, Abdullah's notion of engagement with Iran seems to have gained a listening ear in Washington and may even have influenced the United States to take its own initial steps toward renewing a dialogue with Iran. In its own quiet way, the Kingdom has thus been at the forefront of the most significant development in the Muslim world in recent years: the move to reintegrate the Islamic Republic of Iran into the regional and international communities.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has entered the twenty-first century firm in its role as one of the most deeply-rooted Islamic societies in the world. Its historic trend of stability stands in sharp contrast to that of most of the Islamic societies and movements that now operate on the international stage. They lack what the Al Saud family labored for more than a century to achieve: a national consensus on the objectives of an Islamic society and an acceptable governing structure under which to pursue them. Nevertheless, there is little room for complacency. The Saudi leadership faces perhaps its most difficult internal dilemmas since the Kingdom's birth. Their resolution will likely determine whether Saudi Arabia can preserve its unique, conservative way of life and still provide the needed economic and political outlets for its people—outlets commensurate with the scale of resources and the international role that the Kingdom commands. Those inclined to be pessimistic about Saudi Arabia's domestic future should bear in mind the many difficult transitions through which the Kingdom has already passed with its identity and society intact.

There are similar challenges to be faced in Saudi relations with the United States. It seems likely that many of the common economic and security interests that have underpinned these ties for the past fifty years will retain their validity. But important differences will be difficult to ignore. There are fundamental policy issues where U.S. and Saudi approaches diverge and will probably continue to do so. These issues include human rights (including women's rights), freedom of religion, and a host of other democratic values where the search for common ground has just begun. For now, one can hope that convergence in such areas might result from economic reforms that could produce more transparency in and, consequently, greater understanding of Saudi society.

The challenges to mutual understanding on a personal level are also daunting. Here, however, the key to greater understanding of Saudi Arabia by American and other non-Muslim societies can be turned by those who are willing to grant Saudi society the room to work through its national exercise in communal devotion to God, undertaken in an unstable and demanding region. Opportunities to build such understanding can always be found, with memorable results. In recent years, a significant number of U.S. military personnel of the Muslim faith who were stationed in Saudi Arabia and the surrounding countries took advantage of their time in the region to perform umrah or the entire hajj itself. The reaction to this undertaking was fascinating. It opened the eyes of the Saudis and the Americans involved to a possibility that had not seriously been considered: that their two nations share some important values, such as a belief in prayer, fasting, and devotion to family as a centerpiece of religious devotion. On the cornerstone of such recognition a future of greater understanding between nations can be built.

At the time this article was written, Frederick W. Axelgard was Counselor for Political-Military Affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He received a B.A. in University Studies from Brigham Young University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. Currently, he is Senior Advisor to the Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, U.S. Department of State. The views expressed in this paper are his alone and do not represent the official views of the United States government or the U.S. Department of State.

1. An important voice in this debate is John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2. Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 4.

3. As of 1999, Saudi Arabia's oil reserves were estimated at about 261 billion barrels. Estimates of global oil reserves range from 967 billion to just over one trillion barrels. Energy Information Administration, *Annual Energy Review* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July 2000), 277.

4. Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 32–33.

5. My personal experience in northern Saudi Arabia, December 1999.

6. This is an estimated figure but one which is widely accepted. See "Prayer at the Arafat Marks Haj Climax," *Arab News*, March 16, 2000.

7. Some 400,000 pilgrims from Egypt alone performed umrah during Ramadan December 1999–January 2000. See "Egyptian Umrah Traffic to Drop 60 Percent as Cairo Slaps New Restrictions," *Arab News*, October 15, 2000.

8. Among scholars whose views I share are Madawi and Loulouwa Al-Rasheed, who present similar ideas in their article "The Politics of Encapsulation: Saudi Policy towards Tribal and Religious Opposition," *Middle East Studies* 32 (January 1996): 115.

9. Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability: Saudi Arabia, the Military Balance in the Gulf, and Trends in the Arab-Israeli Military Balance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984), 92.

10. For a good summary of Wahhabism and other relevant historical information from this period, see Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985), 21–32.

11. One incident of Wahhabi opposition to cars is described in Gary Troeller, *The Birth of Saudi Arabia: Britain and the Rise of the House of Sa'ud* (London: Frank Cass, 1976), 237.

12. Troeller, *Birth of Saudi Arabia*, 237. See also pages 237–39 for a discussion of the saga of the Ikhwan, a fascinating chapter in twentieth-century Saudi history.

13. Literacy rates in Saudi Arabia, for example, have increased phenomenally since 1970, when they were among the lowest in the Middle East—15 percent among Saudi men and 2 percent among Saudi women. By 1990 these figures had climbed to 73 percent and 48 percent respectively. See Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1993), 96–104.

14. This digest of the Kingdom's economic outlook is based on U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, *Saudi Arabia: 2000 Economic Trends*, February 2000.

15. James Piscatori, ed., *Islamic Fundamentalisms and the Gulf Crisis* (Chicago: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1991), 8–10. Several of these regional developments and the internal religious politicking precipitated by the deployment of foreign troops to Saudi Arabia are discussed in chapter one of this book, pages 1–27.

16. For a summary of the tensions of this period, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 37–43. Cordesman's analysis does not include a discussion of the more lethal of the two

anti-U.S. attacks, the June 1996 assault against a residential complex housing U.S. military personnel.

17. For a uniquely Saudi academic perspective on the war in Yemen, see Saeed Badeeb, *The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over North Yemen, 1962–1970* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1986). For a shorter summary of the conflict, see Cordesman, *Search for Strategic Stability*, 462–67. Both authors mention Egypt's use of chemical gas (Badeeb, 40–41, and Cordesman, 111, 462–64).

18. For a concise summary of these events, see Cordesman, *Search for Strategic Stability*, 231–39.

19. Piscatori, *Islamic Fundamentalisms*, 7.

20. Piscatori, *Islamic Fundamentalisms*, 6–12.

21. Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 75, sums up the first half-century of Middle East politics in this manner, but the summary clearly excludes the experience of Saudi Arabia.

22. Cordesman, *Search for Strategic Stability*, 91–96.

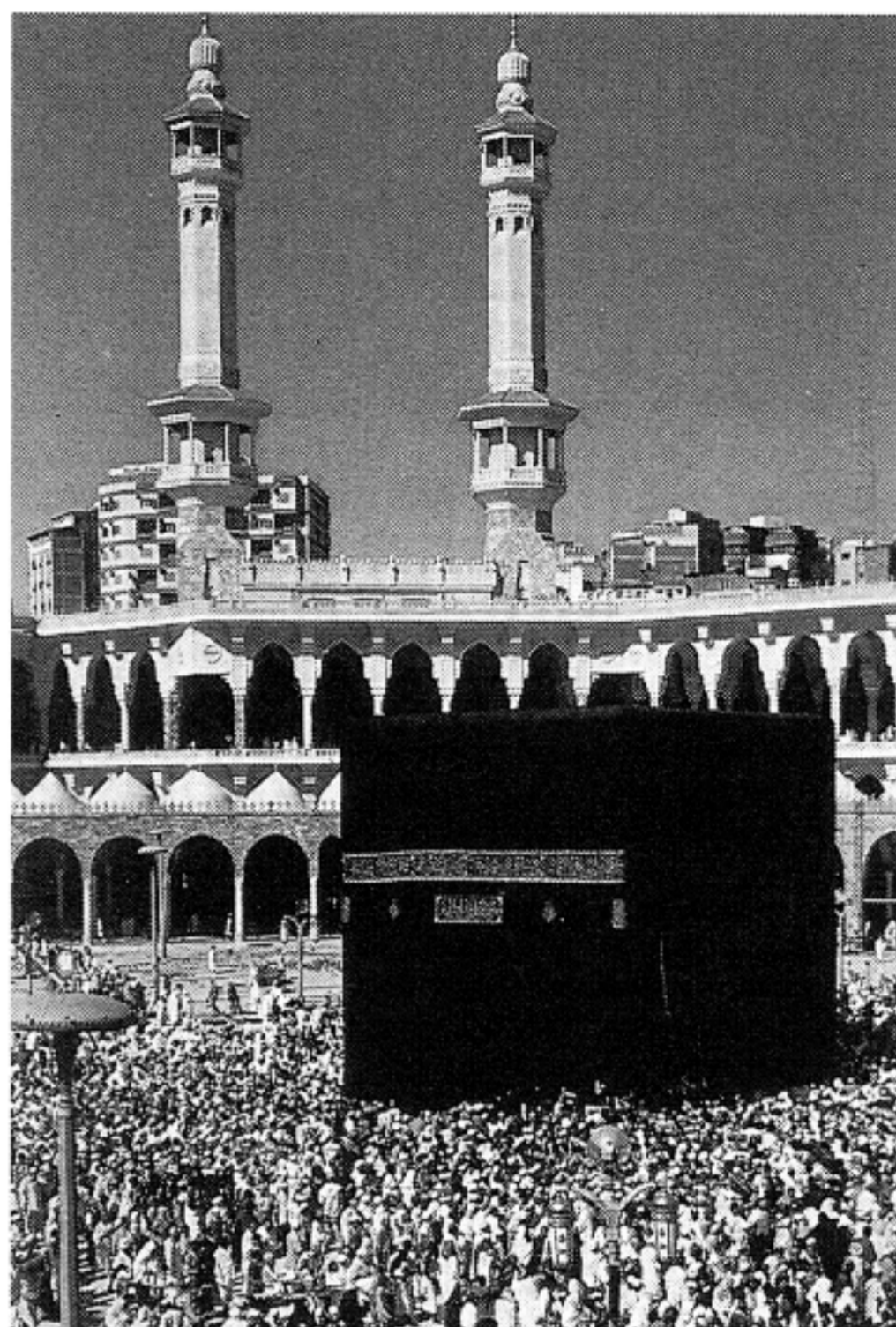
23. For a brief discussion of the state of most of the post-1950s Arab world, see Esposito, *Islamic Threat*, 76.

24. See Cordesman, *Search for Strategic Stability*, 85–121. These pages discuss the evolution of United States–Saudi military relations. The discovery of oil is discussed on pages 92–93, and FDR's meeting with King Abd al-Aziz is on page 95. Cordesman's description of the U.S. intervention to deter Egyptian attacks against Saudi Arabia, an instructive precedent to the crisis of 1990–91, is found on page 111.

25. This Saudi use of religious authorities is discussed in Piscatori, *Islamic Fundamentalisms*, 8–10.

26. For an interesting discussion of the sensitivities and restraints affecting United States–Saudi military relations after the Gulf War, see Cordesman, *Guarding the Desert Kingdom*, 192–93.

27. For a discussion of Abdullah's address, see Saudi Press Agency, "Saudi Crown Prince Comments on Differences among Muslims," December 7, 1997, copy in author's possession.



The Ka'ba in Mecca.