

Dossier on Saudi Arabia

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August 8, 2011

Saudi Arabia is a harsh land with a relatively small population. The country can be roughly divided into four regions—the Hijaz, consisting of a strip of land in the west running along the Red Sea from north to south and containing the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah; the land of Najd, consisting of the central portion where Riyadh is located; the eastern oil-producing region along the Persian Gulf; and the Empty Quarter, consisting of the southern desert along the undefined border with Yemen and Oman.

Since the days of Lawrence of Arabia, Saudi Arabia was thought of by westerners as being similar to the American wild-west—a country of gunslingers where the toughest gang seized control. To a large degree that picture was accurate, as the Arabian Peninsula had long been ruled by semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes who fought each other for dominance. Those who are unfamiliar with Arabian history are often surprised to learn that despite the ancient civilizations all around it, the current Kingdom, named after the tribe who finally conquered all of Arabia, is very young and did not fully come into existence until 1932.

Even more surprising is that the country's history is intimately associated with Wahhabism, the “purest” and most intolerant of all of the sects of Islam. In the eighteenth century an influential Muslim cleric named Ibn Abd Al-Wahab had taught that a return to the pure teachings of the Prophet in the Quran was necessary for all of Islamic society. He came from Medinah, and due to his condemnation of some of the local rulers, he became unpopular in Medinah, and for protection he moved to Najd and aligned himself with Muhammad bin Saud, the leader of the House of Saud, one of the Arabian tribal groups and ruler of the area around Riyadh.

Saud was intrigued by the notion of purifying the entire Arabian Peninsula and bringing it entirely under his control, and the two of them made plans to do so; Al-Wahab gave his daughter to Saud's son as a wife to cement their alliance. Al-Wahab became the founder of Wahhabism, a small Saudi Arabian branch of Islam that called for a militant jihad against all impure versions of the faith (i.e., those that were not Wahhabist), particularly the Sufis and the Shiites, as well as against all non-Muslims.

Thus, like Muhammad himself, bin Saud cleverly used religion in order to seize and maintain power, and in 1744 he established what became known as the First Saudi State in a small region around Riyadh, which at the time was a mere oasis in the desert. His son later conquered more of the surrounding tribes, taking the title the “Sultan of Najd,” and in the early 1800s, his grandson went even further, seizing the Hijaz and capturing the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah in eastern Saudi Arabia. Like today's Taliban in Afghanistan, the Saud family also carried out Wahhabi-inspired campaigns in Iraq to destroy Shiite shrines in Karbala and Najaf in order to purify those cities.

However, those aggressive actions brought the Saudis to the attention of the Ottoman Empire which considered them to be simply one more band of pesky desert

rebels. Troops from Egypt were sent in, the Hijaz was retaken, and eventually Riyadh and all of Najd fell to the Ottoman Empire by 1818. The House of Saud was crushed, and the land was then ruled by the Ottomans under the House of Rashid, the most formidable of the competitors to the Saud tribe.

But the Saud line continued in exile, and in 1902 Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, who still called himself “The Sultan of Najd,” retook the Fortress of Masak in Riyadh with only twenty men—hence the comparison of the Riyadh fortress to the Alamo in Texas. Over the next ten years he fought a series of inconclusive battles with the Rashidis until World War I. The British, who were the enemies of the Ottoman Empire, supplied Ibn Saud with cash and weapons. Ottoman support for the House of Rashid ceased as their empire was dismantled in the aftermath of WWI, and Ibn Saud, assisted by the British, conquered all of Najd by 1922. In 1925 he retook the Hijaz, including both Mecca and Medinah.

For centuries the holy sites in Mecca had been administered by the Hashemite dynasty of Jordan, but Ibn Saud declared that from that point on Mecca and Medinah would be under the suzerainty of the House of Saud. By 1932, Ibn Saud had finally subjugated all other tribes on the Arabian Peninsula. He then renamed the combined lands of Najd and the Hijaz as “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” after his tribal name, and proclaimed himself as the king. The Royal Family of the House of Saud grew from there. Ibn Saud had many wives and concubines and a large number of children, somewhere between fifty and two hundred.

Saudi Arabia was mostly desert and therefore poor and undeveloped until oil was discovered in 1933; later it was determined that the country had the largest oil reserves in the world. Through the influence of the British agent John Philby, Ibn Saud formed a partnership with Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company. This partnership became the largest joint venture in history, bringing immense wealth to the Kingdom, and eventually resulting in gargantuan construction projects in the 1970s and 1980s which transformed Riyadh, the Saudi capital, from a small backwater town into a major metropolis.

The huge inflow of dollars brought many other benefits to Saudi society—all of the basic services such as education and health care are provided free by the government and there is no taxation. But the political system was still an absolute dictatorship run by the Saud family, and the increased wealth also introduced new tensions. Wahhabists began to turn against the Saud family that had brought them to prominence. They claimed that the House of Saud had become a bunch of playboys corrupted by the West, and should therefore be swept away and replaced by clerics, such as the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. The cautious Saudi rulers adopted a stick-and-carrot philosophy, repressing dissent, but also co-opting the Wahhabists by giving billions to their cause and imposing the Wahhabi version of Sharia fundamentalist Islamic law on their country and exporting it to the rest of the world.

Thus Wahhabism, an obscure and extreme sect of Islam, also become the wealthiest one. Wahhabi leaders used the billions of dollars at their disposal to promote their sect of Islam on a global scale by building mosques and madrasses (religious schools) all over the world, including in Europe and America. Wahhabists established the Taliban in Afghanistan and funded militant Muslim groups in Palestine, Africa and elsewhere, exhorting them to jihad and providing money and weapons to overthrow the existing governments and to impose strict Islamic rule. A number of African wars, such

as the genocide in Sudan, were Wahhabi investments in action, and Saudi Arabians were especially active in funding Yassir Arafat and the PLO.

The term “Wahhabism” has become increasingly associated with “Islamic terrorism” throughout the world by the actions of Usama bin Laden and others. This is not completely accurate, as Usama was actually a follower of Sayyid Qutb, a radical Egyptian ideologue who was executed by President Nassar in 1966. Qutb taught that to be totally pure, Muslims must not only withdraw from modern society, but fight it to the death. “Qutbism” was thus one of the well-springs of the culture of hate embraced by Wabbists and Muslims from other Islamic sects. Qutbists dedicated their lives to jihad and martyrdom, and tried to inspire the Islamic world with the degree of their devotion to Allah.

The main customer for Saudi oil is the United States, and the association of the term “Wabbabism” with Muslim terrorism became an embarrassment to the Saudi government. Saudi rulers have thus downplayed their Wahhabi roots and have tried to substitute the word “Salafi” instead (Salaf is a term referring to the Prophet Muhammad), emphasizing their connections to mainstream Sunni Islam. But regardless of the name, an uneasy partnership of Saudi petrodollars and Muslim terrorism has been created.