Review Essay

The Kingdom of Enigma

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The Saudi Enigma: A History
Pascal Ménoret. London: Zed Books, 2005. £55.00/£14.95; $75.00/$22.50. 258 pp.

Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs
Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds. London: Hurst & Company, 2005. £50.00/£20.00. 462 pp.

National Security in Saudi Arabia: Threats, Responses, and Challenges
Anthony H. Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2005. $54.95. 472 pp.

Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis
John R. Bradley. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. $22.95. 224 pp.

Saudi Arabia is a country almost everyone loves to hate. Balanced and sensible discussion of Saudi politics, economic situation, culture and society is rare, and its absence tends to validate hostile and outrageous opinions routinely expressed as truth.

There are compelling reasons why we should understand the people and politics of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest exporter of oil and the only producing state with significant excess capacity. For more than a half century it has aligned its foreign policy with the West on all but a few issues, and despite the battering and strain of recent years continues to value its 'special relationship' with the United States. Many Saudi citizens readily embrace Western (and especially American) products and pop culture even though they disagree with US Middle Eastern policies. For all its faults, the regime has spent huge amounts of its oil income to develop the country and improve the living standards of its citizens, as well as to purchase staggeringly expensive arms packages that have benefited Western suppliers and states beyond simply profit. Why, then, do we know so little about Saudi Arabia and find it so easy to attack?

First, what we 'know' about the country is disconcertingly segmented and frequently superficial. On the plus side of the ledger, the oil industry has been

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Survival | vol. 48 no. 2 | Summer 2006 | pp. 147–156 DOI 10.1080/00396330600771904

examined in minutiae, much has been written about macroeconomics and development, and a cottage industry has grown up to parse concerns about Saudi security. The modern history of the country has also been well represented. Generally overlooked is a rich body of doctoral theses done by Saudi students in the West.

The list of what we don't know about Saudi Arabia is far more daunting. Depictions of Saudi politics all too often have consisted of little more than Riyadhology (the Saudi watchers' version of Cold War Kremlinology) and facile listings of the kingdom's sins (the subjugation of women, the intolerance preached in the mosques and taught in the schools, the waste of undeserved oil income amid widespread corruption, opposition to Israel and championing of the Palestinians, etc.). True, the mechanics of the royal family are often impenetrable, but that should not prevent competent studies of elite politics and the evolution of public administration. Beyond politics, there exists a wide range of under-studied subjects, such as social change in both the cities and the countryside, regional attitudes and the extent of integration into the Saudi state, minorities and the social mosaic that is too often reduced to simply 'Saudis', and confusion over what 'Wahhabism' really means.

One positive consequence of accusations against Saudi Arabia after 11 September 2001 has been an explosion in publications about the kingdom. A plethora of books generally falling under the rubric 'Saudi-bashing' seemed to be first off the press. This flood has waned but not entirely subsided. More importantly, the last few years have seen a growing number of more serious and constructively critical works as well. These newer studies build upon an earlier competent body of literature to expand our knowledge and deepen our understanding of what remains one of the world's most secretive and least-known countries.

Pascal Ménoret has added significantly to this new literature. His contribution sets the scene by decrying the superficial judgements about Saudi Arabia made by many Western writers and media and announces his intention to set the record straight. The book displays both shortcomings and strengths associated with translation from a 2003 French edition. The English version was not updated to include the rise in oil prices or the campaign of domestic terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in the intervening two years. His is a mostly interpretive, rather than analytical or descriptive, account and is based largely on secondary sources, although Ménoret has worked in Saudi Arabia in the 2000s. Most valuable is the author's deconstruction of the popular mythology surrounding 'Wahhabism', itself a Western term, and the supposed emergence of a 'bellicose Islam'. As he notes, Islamism is not a religious movement but a political one. Ménoret contends that many of Saudi Arabia's Islamists,

rather than being solely reactionary, reject the notion that modernity necessarily entails Westernisation. Their opposition is based on their view of how the drive to modernity in the kingdom has become corrupted, culturally as much as financially. His central argument is that a fundamental characteristic of present-day Islamists is their objection not to the modernisation of the country but to the failure of the regime to carry out necessary reforms in an Islamic context. 'Thus, Saudi Islamism should be seen not as an upsurge of obscurantism but as a *revolt of reason*' (p. 129; emphasis original).

Placing the challenge of Islamism in the context of a longer history of opposition to the regime, Ménoret observes that 'whereas the "secular" movements of the 1950s and 1960s were partly integrated through the redistribution of national wealth (more extensive workers' rights, greater prioritization of public services), it was not possibly to solve the problem of Islamism by means of economic prosperity, since it was precisely a revolt against the skewed distribution of oil wealth' (p. 117).

How did Saudi Arabia get to the situation in which it finds itself today? Ménoret argues, in a nutshell, that

> during the period from the 1920s to the 1970s, a technocratic supratribal state established its hegemony over a less and less tribal, more and more governable society, by means of a monopoly at once political (conquest of Arabia and subjugation of its tribes), social (suppression of 'Bedouinism', annexation through marriage of the Najdi tribes, triumph of the urban model), religious (international recognition of Saudi guardianship of the holy sites) and economic (gradual extension of control over oil resources and the national economy). (p. 212)

Much of Ménoret's corrective is common sense to those already familiar with the country. For example, he notes that the primary problem of education in Saudi Arabia – and therefore the key impetus for educational reform – is not the alleged promotion of extremist tendencies but of adequately preparing the growing legions of school leavers for competition in the labour market. Similarly, he contends that the 're-Islamisation' of the younger generation is not due to the government or the school curriculum but to a multiplicity of causes as in other social movements. He also observes that the state's role in modernisation has been reversed in recent decades: 'In 1960 the state could impose exogenous modern norms on society, but twenty years later it was forced to take up and utilize the norms of society itself – that is, tribalism and Islam' (p. 175).

Ménoret attacks authors for portraying Saudi society as deriving solely from a bedouin tradition (although scholars have repeatedly emphasised the

error of this approach) but then attributes the rise of the Ikhwan – the powerful tribal forces imbued with Wahhabi fervour that were used to provide the muscle in the modern conquest of what was to become the kingdom – as a creation of King 'Abd al-'Aziz (Ibn Sa'ud) when the movement's origins seem to be considerably older.

Also grating is Ménoret's adoption of a distinctly superior attitude, implying that he is the only 'expert' imbued with true understanding, in counterpoint to other 'well-known experts, who having published texts on Arabia from afar and above, feel they have to visit the country to check what they have put together behind doors of their office in New York or Paris' (p. 40). This should not obscure the occasional apt turn of phrase, such as calling Najd 'the Prussia of the Peninsula' (p. 73). These criticisms should serve only to point out that a worthwhile and competent book could have been better.

Saudi Arabia in the Balance is a collection of conference papers that provide a healthy alternative to prevailing American scholarship on the country: most of the 15 authors are British or European, although one American, one Israeli and two Saudis are included. Although many of the contributions tread well-known ground, some do delve into lesser-studied terrain. Coincidentally or not, the most original essays in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* also deal with the phenomenon of Wahhabism. Guido Steinberg furnishes a detailed, authoritative account of the often problematic relationship between the political leadership embodied in the Al Saud family and the religious establishment. Over time, both sides learned the value of pragmatism and compromise, leaving mainstream Wahhabi leadership co-opted and radicals isolated. Steinberg contends that the Saudis of al-Qaeda 'have remained staunch Wahhabis, with the sole difference between them and the Wahhabi religious establishment being that they regard the rule of the Al Sa'ud as illegitimate' (p. 12). Also in this section, Stéphane Lacroix reprises his earlier work on 'Islamo-liberals', documenting their efforts to capture the middle ground of Islamism in Saudi Arabia, while Michaela Prokop elaborates on her evaluation of education as a 'war of ideas' between the forces of reform and those of resistance to any change.

Only the rise of oil prices in the last few years has enabled Saudi Arabia to escape nearly two decades of budget deficits. The country remains heavily dependent on oil income, despite determined attempts at diversification. Monica Malik and Tim Niblock provide a straightforward review of economic reform efforts and add their checklist of additional steps that the government needs to undertake. Two papers on political economy by Steffan Hertog and Giacomo Luciani are largely devoted to theoretical exposition and classification; the question of whether Saudi Arabia is still, or even was, a rentier state looms large in their discussion.

It is widely held that institutionalisation in Saudi Arabia is weak and the dependence on a large, unwieldy and often unreliable Al Saud royal family saddles the country with a doubtful future. Madawi Al-Rasheed divides leadership within the family into a panoply of five circles, each aspiring to rule the country through the effective manipulation of its own power base. These circles comprise the immediate families and allies of King Fahd (writing was completed before his death in 2005), Crown Prince (now King) Abdullah, Minister of the Interior Nayif, Minister of Defense and Aviation Sultan, and Governor of Riyadh Salman. Al-Rasheed concludes that the royal family no longer inspires due respect and loyalty, thus forcing the state into direct coercion along with time-tested strategies of co-optation and superficial reform. Elsewhere, Iris Glosemeyer and Abdulaziz Sager provide detailed surveys of trends and factors in leadership and opposition respectively; the latter paper includes numerous useful charts, such as a listing and chronology of opposition groups and an explanation of major reform petitions. Roel Meijer zooms in with considerable detail on the wave of terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula since 2003 and analyses the backgrounds of key members.

A political-science view of determinant factors in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy by co-editor Gerd Nonneman precedes a sceptical view of Prince Abdullah's Arab–Israeli peace initiative by Joseph Kostiner and a chronicling of the ups and downs in US–Saudi relations by Rachel Bronson. Co-editor Paul Aarts concludes that the 'special relationship' actually was an 'artificial honeymoon' and opines that it is headed to a more 'normal relationship' still focused on the inescapable pillars of energy and security.

There is considerable meat to chew on in these pages and collectively the authors have done much to answer the question of why we know so little about Saudi Arabia and find it so easy to attack. They also give substance to the concepts more loosely sketched by Ménoret.

Tony Cordesman's latest book on Saudi Arabia, this time co-authored with Saudi security analyst Nawaf Obaid, arrives just two years after his two-volume tome on the country.[1] One could almost say that if you miss one Cordesman book, not to worry, another one will be along in a minute. The title is reminiscent of another study of nearly 30 years ago, published by a rival Washington think tank: *National Security Challenges to Saudi Arabia*.[2] The earlier volume tackled the same subject but in about as many pages as an Adelphi Paper. *National Security in Saudi Arabia*, on the other hand, is very much a nuts-and-bolt approach – what are the threats, what are Saudi capabilities to deal with them, and what more does Saudi Arabia need to do? – coupled with massive detail on specific threats, military and internal security capabilities, and reforms undertaken, promised or untackled.

Several authors in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* address the frequently observed but seldom carefully analysed subject of security, but they do not reach the depth of analysis displayed in this work. Cordesman and Obaid begin by examining two types of threats: external and 'asymmetric'. Iraq is regarded as not a threat at present but the possibility of a hostile state on the kingdom's northern borders cannot be ruled out in the mid to long term. Similarly, the Yemeni threat is seen as having changed from the possible use of direct military force to terrorist infiltration along the porous border (complicated by Saudi vulnerability to other threats emanating from the Red Sea region).

Iran, on the other hand, is more serious and the kingdom's only significant external threat. Despite the two countries' rapprochement of the last decade, the authors observe that Iran remains militarily active in the Gulf and has stopped evolving towards a more moderate and democratic regime. As a result, nearly one-quarter of the book is devoted to discussion of Iran's varied military capabilities and weaknesses. This necessarily includes an examination of the Islamic republic's record on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and production of long-range missiles suitable for their delivery. The authors note that eventually Iran is likely to produce nuclear weapons at about the same time as it produces medium-range ballistic missiles. This would dramatically change the strategic balance in the Gulf, inasmuch as the Arab Gulf states are 'one bomb' countries (p. 106). At the same time, however, uncertainty regarding Iranian intentions and accomplishments make a quotation from a 1997 Department of Defense assessment read as if it were written yesterday.

A chapter on 'external strategic pressures' looks at the albatross of the continuing Arab–Israeli conflict and outlines economic, demographic and political pressures that impact Saudi Arabia and its smaller neighbours. While the chapter decries the lack of effective military and security coordination among the GCC states, it surprisingly omits perhaps the single most important reason for this: the smaller five members are well aware that each step taken towards closer cooperation also results in greater control by Riyadh.

Turning to internal security, the authors outline what the Saudi government has done to counter domestic terrorism, and also what it hasn't done. Their conclusion is that 'the Kingdom's most urgent security threats ... no longer consist of hostile military forces; these threats have been replaced by the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism' (p. xxi).

The heart of the book revolves around minute examination of the Saudi security apparatus and features Cordesman's trademark of long lists and evaluations of services and units, personnel and equipment. It reads rather like *The Military Balance* on steroids. Incidentally, the use of the term 'security'

throughout the book invites confusion amongst Arabs, since Arabic, unlike English, clearly distinguishes between 'defence' (*difa'*), national defence from external threats, and 'security' (*amn*), internal security. In addition to examining the principal services and the myriad of forces within the Ministry of the Interior, Cordesman and Obaid address the question of Saudi missiles and nuclear weapons aspirations. The former (Chinese CSS-2) are ageing and not very effective, while allegations of the latter are judged to consist of 'far more rumor than fact' (p. 249). The authors note that, should the kingdom decide to acquire nuclear weapons and suitable missiles, it would not only bring a likely end to US and other Western supplies of conventional arms but would effectively cancel the 'special relationship' with the US and make Saudi Arabia a target for Israel.

The authors point out the division within the Al Saud of responsibilities for the various forces and mention the differences of opinion inside Saudi Arabia about the effectiveness of Prince Nayif, the powerful minister of the interior. As Madawi Al Rasheed and others stress in *Saudi Arabia in the Balance*, the role of personalities at the top of these organisations is vital. This is illustrated by the rapid deterioration in the performance of the General Intelligence Directorate/Presidency (foreign intelligence) after the dismissal in early September 2001 of Prince Turki al-Faisal, now ambassador to the United States. Unfortunately, the authors decline to offer their interpretation of why Prince Turki was fired. As a consequence, the kingdom has been forced to rely heavily on the General Security Service (internal security) as the only 'truly professional security service' (p. 296).

The authors regard both military and security reforms as highly necessary to meet evolving threats. With regard to military reform, they emphasise tighter coordination within the GCC and improved procurement procedures. In their view, 'Saudi Arabia faces serious long-term constraints on what it can buy in the future, and that it will often have to make hard choices between the military desirability of standardisation with Western power projection forces and the political need to buy arms from a range of friendly states' (p. 341).

The chapter on internal security reform begins with an 11-page list of requirements (although several pages simply record actions taken against al-Qaeda cells). At the same time, Cordesman and Obaid place equal emphasis on the need for broader reforms in the political, economic and social arenas. While the authors do not shy away from stressing the many problems and weaknesses that the kingdom faces, they are not unduly pessimistic about the future.

While everything you wanted to know about Saudi security and weren't afraid to ask can be found between the covers, the book's organisation is somewhat bumpy, with subjects frequently broken up among chapters. Thus

treatment of capabilities, problems and reforms in Saudi internal security begins in chapter two, continues in chapter six and finishes in chapter nine. There is no index but the thorough table of contents make this absence almost superfluous.

Saudi Arabia Exposed derives from John Bradley's experiences as managing editor of the *Arab News* in Jeddah for several years. Like Ménoret, Bradley seeks to present the true picture of what makes Saudi Arabia tick, but he is far less successful. The book seems best suited to the genre of travel writing. The rambling impressions and anecdotes that make up the substance of the book are often superficial but, nevertheless, frequently entertaining. Along the way, Bradley sheds light on such under-reported subjects as the persistence of regional identities, growth in crime, and the twilight existence of a gay community in the kingdom.

But, fundamentally, Bradley's grasp of Saudi history, society and politics is somewhat wobbly and he would have done well to peruse *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* if he had been able, amongst a number of other studies. He describes an incident during Prince Abdullah's highly publicised visit to a Riyadh slum in 2002, when an old man wagged his finger at and criticised the crown prince, as an example of today's disrespect for authority – without realising that this display of direct and egalitarian behaviour was the norm in decades past. Similarly, he regards the expressed wish of King Fahd's wife to be called Umm 'Abd al-'Aziz (mother of 'Abd al-'Aziz) as an example of how the uttering of a woman's name in public brings shame. In reality, addressing a woman as 'Umm ...' or a man as 'Abu ...' (father of ...) is a form of politeness and acknowledgement of parenthood.

The book is marred on occasion by an air of condescension, despite the author's avowed sympathy, as indicated by his declaration that 'in the wake of the oil boom Saudis had money, and it is perhaps a commonplace that nothing makes a person more narrow-minded and defensive than the sudden acquisition of wealth from nothing' (p. 111). Although Bradley's account begins in a sunny atmosphere full of adventure, it gradually turns darker as the author sharpens his criticism of the regime. One can only conclude that he must be relieved and happy to be outside the country.

As these studies show, Saudi Arabia is a work in progress, very much a kingdom of and for the Al Saud. The path of political change is constantly buffeted by pressures from the liberal left and especially in recent years from the Islamist right. While many in the West demand that the country reform itself along the lines of Western principles, the authors reviewed here remonstrate that the Al Saud are necessarily cautious. A headlong rush to modernisation

was a feature of the 1970s. The following decades brought social as well as economic retrenchment. Domestic conservatism and extremism have been powerful countervailing forces in this century. The royal family finds itself in the unenviable position of being caught between standing pat and provoking increasing opposition from both sides of the ideological divide or forcing substantial rapid change and thus possibly inviting chaos.

The multiplicity of views expressed in these works – embracing scholarship, policy analysis and personal observation – do much to redress the imbalance between hostile opinion and sensible discussion about the enigmatic kingdom. But it might also be noted that the pursuit of knowledge about Saudi Arabia is hampered by a fundamental paradox. Saudi scholars, who in many ways are best suited to conducting such studies, are dissuaded from doing so because of the risk of crossing political red-lines or offending cultural sensitivities. Western (and other) scholars must catapult over the objections of Saudi officialdom and gain the trust of ordinary Saudis, a combination cracked by only a few intrepid investigators. This is a great pity, for the more a country keeps itself hidden from the world, the more grist there is for rumour mills and hostile opinion. Somewhere in the array of necessary reforms that the country confronts there must be one for the freer dissemination of knowledge about the kingdom, warts and all.

Notes

1 Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003).

2 Dale Tahtinen, *National Security Challenges to Saudi Arabia*, AEI Studies no. 194 (Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1978).