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Interpreting the Oil Kingdom: Opportunities and Hazards

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doi:10.1017/S002074381700040X

It is telling that Cambridge University Press commissioned two anthropologists to write its histories of modern Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Having escaped the experience of direct colonial rule, these countries do not fit comfortably into the dominant model of modern Middle Eastern history. It follows that the template for modern Saudi statehood cannot be retrieved from the colonial archives, or the postcolonial corporate ones, for that matter. Instead, it must be cobbled out of disparate parts, some Arabian, some Islamic, and some imported. Few modern states defy the reigning scholarly consensuses of economics, politics, history, and anthropology like Saudi Arabia, a place that on account of oil wealth has been transformed almost beyond recognition in the span of two or three generations. As a rentier-based, kinship-organized, orally inscribed, puritanically orthodox Muslim polity, Saudi Arabia poses problems for the best traditions of graduate training in any single discipline.

For researchers today, the vexing and peculiar nature of the Saudi kingdom should be viewed as both a challenge and an opportunity. The transformation of the Arabian Peninsula in the oil age has fascinating implications for the social, political, and cultural life of the Middle East region, and for the broader world of scholarly inquiry to which we are devoted. Whether a consequence of its spare ecology, puritanical religiosity, or oil state clientage, Saudi exceptionalism is a real thing, and it is the enduring challenge for the researcher of our day to deconstruct its unique assemblage with both a critical and a sympathetic gaze.

To be a successful researcher in Saudi Arabia demands rigorous interdisciplinarity. Acquiring fluency with the kingdom's three distinguishing features—its rentier political economy, its Wahhabi religious culture, and its kinship and oral traditions—requires that one be equal parts political scientist, historian, and anthropologist. As an undemocratic state that engages in a more or less vigorous policing of the parameters of public discourse, there is no separating cultural or historical expression from the institutional, personal, and informal politics of the Saudi kingdom. Rentierism has cultural consequences, so understanding rentier theory and its useful amendments (e.g., Steffen Hertog's work) is vital for making sense of the modern history of the kingdom. Vertical patronage networks, socioeconomic hierarchies (both enduring and emergent), and lineage trees (*shajarāt al-nasab*) mutually inform one another. Attention to the social implications of rentierism can help explain why one will sometimes find two lines at passport control in King Khalid International Airport, one for white collar travelers (researchers fall into this category), and one for migrant laborers—those seeking a better wage than might be found in places such as the Indian subcontinent, and willing to endure all manner of indignities to attain it. Understanding rentierism will also help one better make sense of the kingdom's ʿulamaʾ. Saudi religious scholars, while products of Najdi Wahhabism, are likewise shaped by court competition; they are moved by *daʿwa* and patronage alike, both within and beyond the kingdom. The great black

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381700040X Published online by Cambridge University Press

box for the kingdom's intellectual history, and that of the contemporary Islamic world for that matter, is the document collections of Saudi Arabia's religious institutions and ministries (e.g., Muslim World League, Ministry of Islamic Affairs), where the history of Wahhabism's oil wealth driven export to the broader Muslim world awaits the scrutiny of an intrepid researcher. Accessing such collections will require as much determination as good fortune.

A larger question looms over scholarly inquiry into the kingdom: what is the meaning of historical knowledge within a powerful, innately suspicious, yet outwardly benevolent monarchy? For a repressive state that vigorously polices information, Saudi Arabia is awash in historiographical matter, not all of which is to be consigned to pulp. Judicious use of state-sponsored histories can lead the researcher to unofficial narratives or document troves that prove more compelling. Historians working in Saudi Arabia will find their greatest challenge to be accessing large quantities of archival documents, particularly state documents. The best available archives are private collections, and many remain relatively unexplored, particularly the papers of the large Hijazi merchant families. As in any research environment, cultivating relationships of trust with individual stakeholders is essential to one's success in the field.

In my own research, published in my first book *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia,*[1] I identified two threads of historical inquiry into lineages and kinship and tied them together against the backdrop of state formation in the 20th-century kingdom. The first of these threads is the high cultural tradition of genealogy (*ʿilm al-ansāb*), a marginal genre within what Michael Cook has called "the Islamic scholarly tradition," yet one with deep and lasting meaning in the social imagination of township-based Arab and Muslim societies. The inheritor of that tradition in mid-20th-century central Arabia (Najd) was Hamad al-Jasir (d. 2000), whose life and work form the backbone of my study. The second thread concerns the sociological backdrop of premodern Arabian life, in which both bedouin and sedentary communities were organized to a large extent around kinship or genealogical norms. When the literate tradition of genealogical accounting met these informal systems of social valuation and organization in the age of urbanization, oil wealth, and political repression, a new social and political imagination was born, I argued.

Arriving at these findings, and acquiring the evidence that supported them, was not a foregone conclusion. The state is suspicious of all genealogy-related matters, seeing *nasab* as a third rail that must not be touched lest the grievances of one kinship group stir those of others and spiral beyond the regime's control. At the same time, after being confronted with near-universal opprobrium in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the people of Saudi Arabia, I found, possess a strong desire to communicate their fundamental and shared humanity with the rest of the world. It follows that Saudis love to talk about their families, and to demonstrate through speech and documentary evidence their lines of genealogical attachment to the broader kinship groups from which they descend or claim descent. Genealogy in Saudi Arabia was thus a discourse ripe for investigation and interpretation when I identified it as a potential avenue for my research.

Despite the recent work of Toby Jones, Pascal Menoret, myself, and others,[2] Saudi Arabia remains largely a blank slate for researchers, with many new narratives awaiting identification and investigation. Social scientists can take advantage of the kingdom's

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ongoing efforts at liberalization by devoting critical scrutiny to the many prevailing expressions of cultural vitality (e.g., an increasingly assertive women's artistic and cultural scene) as well as the persistent structures of domination and repression, that range from surveillance and policing to patriarchy. Sociologists and political scientists should warm to the Saudi state's passion for data, metrics, and the latest Mckinsey-inspired novelty, customer satisfaction surveys, which trail after practically every consumer experience in the kingdom today, including one's ATM cash withdrawals. Ethnographers, too, will have a field day, but those unfamiliar with the Gulf may be disoriented when their native informants turn out to be many times wealthier than themselves.

From my personal experience as of December 2016, the current climate of conflict in the Middle East region, and in Saudi Arabia in particular, has not translated into prohibitions on field research in the kingdom. At the same time, the south of the country remains an active war zone, and the Eastern Province a site of heightened tension between the regime and the region's heavily Shiʿi population. These facts, while easy to forget from distant Riyadh, most certainly limit the capacity of researchers to explore Saudi regional histories or gather new data sets from the Saudi periphery. In short, the long-term effects of the Saudi–Yemen war and sustained Saudi tension with Iran are unpredictable, though they cannot be favorable for scholarly field research in the kingdom.

In its unequal treatment of women and Shiʿa, in its restrictions on freedom of worship for non-Muslims, and in its seeming lack of regard for the fundamental dignity of guest workers, Saudi Arabia defies the liberal model of social order that animates our humanistic inquiries about that place. For the bold and curious (and reasonably well funded, one must add), these inequalities and injustices can serve as prospective openings for the dispassionate and critical inquiry of the sort that is the mission of Middle East studies. As scholars, we must be wary of acting as unwitting ambassadors or erudite spin doctors for repressive orders. Yet we should also be savvy enough to recognize how our capacity to conduct fruitful fieldwork in repressive countries serves mutual ends, and take advantage of this fact to pursue our research inquiries with open minds and minimal prejudice. That, in my view, is a blueprint for successful research in Saudi Arabia.

NOTES

[1] Nadav Samin, *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[2] Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010); Pascal Menoret, *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism, and Road Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Amélie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381700040X Published online by Cambridge University Press