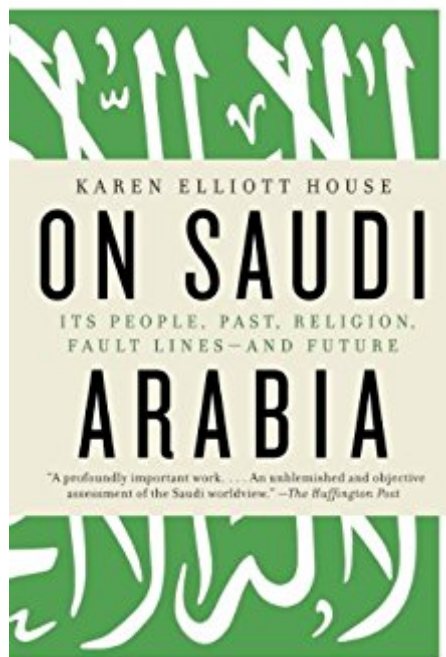




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On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines - And Future



Synopsis

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who has spent the last thirty years writing about Saudi Arabia—as diplomatic correspondent, foreign editor, and then publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*—an important and timely book that explores all facets of life in this shrouded Kingdom: its tribal past, its complicated present, its precarious future. Through observation, anecdote, extensive interviews, and analysis Karen Elliot House navigates the maze in which Saudi citizens find themselves trapped and reveals the mysterious nation that is the world's largest exporter of oil, critical to global stability, and a source of Islamic terrorists. In her probing and sharp-eyed portrait, we see Saudi Arabia, one of the last absolute monarchies in the world, considered to be the final bulwark against revolution in the region, as threatened by multiple fissures and forces, its levers of power controlled by a handful of elderly Al Saud princes with an average age of 77 years and an extended family of some 7,000 princes. Yet at least 60 percent of the increasingly restive population they rule is under the age of 20. The author writes that oil-rich Saudi Arabia has become a rundown welfare state. The public pays no taxes; gets free education and health care; and receives subsidized water, electricity, and energy (a gallon of gasoline is cheaper in the Kingdom than a bottle of water), with its petrodollars buying less and less loyalty. House makes clear that the royal family also uses Islam's requirement of obedience to Allah—and by extension to earthly rulers—to perpetuate Al Saud rule. Behind the Saudi facade of order and obedience, today's Saudi youth, frustrated by social conformity, are reaching out to one another and to a wider world beyond their cloistered country. Some 50 percent of Saudi youth is on the Internet; 5.1 million Saudis are on Facebook. To write this book, the author interviewed most of the key members of the very private royal family. She writes about King Abdullah's modest efforts to relax some of the kingdom's most oppressive social restrictions; women are now allowed to acquire photo ID cards, finally giving them an identity independent from their male guardians, and are newly able to register their own businesses but are still forbidden to drive and are barred from most jobs. With extraordinary access to Saudis—from key religious leaders and dissident imams to women at university and impoverished widows, from government officials and political dissidents to young successful Saudis and those who chose the path of terrorism—House argues that most Saudis do not want democracy but seek change nevertheless; they want a government that provides basic services without subjecting citizens to the indignity of begging princes for handouts; a government less corrupt and more transparent in how it spends hundreds of billions of annual oil revenue; a kingdom ruled by law, not royal whim. In House's assessment of Saudi Arabia's future, she

compares the country today to the Soviet Union before Mikhail Gorbachev arrived with reform policies that proved too little too late after decades of stagnation under one aged and infirm Soviet leader after another. She discusses what the next generation of royal princes might bring and the choices the kingdom faces: continued economic and social stultification with growing risk of instability, or an opening of society to individual initiative and enterprise with the risk that this, too, undermines the Al Saud hold on power. A riveting book—•informed, authoritative, illuminating—•about a country that could well be on the brink, and an in-depth examination of what all this portends for Saudi Arabia—•s future, and for our own. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This is a most important and timely book for all of us to read. It is amazing how little we knew about the countries so important in the world today. House has long experience of the kingdom, and she paints it in very negative terms. She describes it as a theocratic dictatorship in which the rulers are only interested in maintaining their power while the population twists in the wind. According to her,

the young population is unhappy and struggling to modernize, while the rulers traditionally trade goodies for the populace in return for obedience at home. As far as the USA goes, we give security while they supply oil. It's truly terrible that we support such an evil regime without even understanding what we do.

Thorough, thoughtful and pretty fairly balanced look at what has happened in Saudi since the al Saud family has ruled since the 1930s. The conflict between modernizers and religious conservatives is stalling reforms. Can a new, energetic leader emerge or will one geriatric Prince after another die on the job before solidifying reforms. The book is well written and engaging

Perhaps the most stunning thing about *On Saudi Arabia* is the ability the author had to really get inside the culture and provide the reader with such great detail. Most people as hard as they try will never have a chance to visit Saudi Arabia as they don't offer tourist visas. So when I saw that it made it to the NY Times 100 Notable Books of 2012, I quickly picked it up and devoured it in a day. I liked how the author gave the reader a very detailed look at the struggles women face in the Kingdom as well as the dearth of opportunities available for the 20-24 year old citizens. The Kingdom really has a lot of challenges on its hands as it continues to realize the majority of its revenues from its massive oil business led by ARAMCO. I also thought it was interesting to see how on one hand the Al Saud leaders let ARAMCO run its own show even to the extent of letting people on its compound have religious freedom and turn an eye to satellite television while the rest of the country suffers under much more stringent laws. Overall a very good overview of the country and a must read for anyone wanting to know more about this very hard to visit part of the world.

This is a truly enlightening book. For those, who used to think that in SA, rich oil princes do nothing but support terrorism. The reality is much more complex and the governing dynasty faces a true Catch 22. It is all the more necessary to read this book in order to understand what is taking place in SA, where so many of the current problems, originate. The book is extremely readable, clearly written, and presents views of all layers of the Saudi society, ranging from poor conservative shepherds to progressive members of the governing elite.

Apparently the author is a Wall Street Journal editor or used to be and was stationed in Saudi Arabia, and she came to my attention when she did an op-ed in the WSJ after the King died. The Middle East is in such flux, and obviously Saudi Arabia is a big player, and I really didn't know much

about it, because, although it's in the news a lot, most of that is shallow or worse. The book was actually kind of eye-opening. Assuming what she says is true, Saudi Arabia is a mess from a Western perspective. As a Westerner, it's almost hard to believe how different its society and politics are. It's non-fiction, so it's not a page-turner, but she writes well, and it seems to me that she does a good job doing what the book was meant to do.

Great book. I was living at Saudi Arabia when I order this book (hard copy) from USA and asked a friend to bring it. However before he attempted to carry it, he was freaking out after reading the back cover and the first few pages, worried that custom officer will catch him with the book at airport and throw him to jail. It was kind of funny but at the end I arranged the shipment differently. My long waiting was actually worth it. I really enjoy reading this book and agree with most of Karen's observation and opinion.

Amazing book - recommend for anyone interested in the Middle East and/or Arabia. I read it as research for novel I'm writing, but even if I hadn't done it for that I would tell everyone to read this book. It really gives insight into Arabia and how the west should deal with it. Hopefully Western leaders are reading this book and learn from it - so we don't have another Iraq.

Greatly helped me understand Saudi Arabia as well as women's rights, labour issues, the royal family, and Wahhabi Islam. The book is also great in that it is written in a way anyone can understand. Too many of the books on Islam and the Middle East are written by professors in an ivory tower.

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