



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

*Karen Elliott House*

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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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