

Collapsing House of Saud

Sunday 27 February 2011, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 25 February 2011).

"King Abdullah had at least two phone conversations with President Obama to convey his concerns in the weeks before Mr. Mubarak's ouster, and the last conversation ended in sharp disagreement" The New York Time's Robert Worth, writing about Saudi worries over Arab revolutions, reports how 'the Saudis felt that Mr. Mubarak should have been allowed to stay on and make a more "dignified" exit' and "King Abdullah had at least two phone conversations with President Obama to convey his concerns in the weeks before Mr. Mubarak's ouster, and the last conversation ended in sharp disagreement" (NYT Feb 19).

However, delineating his wishes as journalistic analysis, Mr. Worth informs us: "Saudi Arabia is far less vulnerable to democracy movements than other countries in the region, thanks to its vast oil wealth, its powerful religious establishment and the popularity of its king". He even has access to 'analysts' who believe Saudi "people are cushioned by oil wealth and culturally resistant to change".

In these times, it definitely takes a fanatical orientalist courage to stick by notions of popular Arab kings and Arab world's cultural incompatibility to democracy. Ironically, the House of Saud itself is not ready to buy Mr. Worth's worthless boasts. Hence, on Feb. 22 when popular Sultan of Arabia, King Abdullah returned to his country after three months abroad, his first decree was to announce lavish economic concessions for Saudi citizens.

The Saudi Sultan knows that Libya, Yemen and Bahrain are showing all the symptoms of the Tunisia syndrome. He is fully aware that "Two down, Twenty to go" is a slogan gaining currency on Arab streets. A demonstration in Jeddah is making the rounds in the blogosphere. Will the virtual spark in Jeddah set the whole desert on fire? Apparently, the ingredients necessary for a revolt (parties, unions, social movements) are missing. However, Saudi history is replete with mutinies, attempted coups d'etat, regional unrest, and struggles for reform. But the present Saudi dynasty has survived subversion every time. Will the House of Saud weather the storm?

In January 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, not merely wrestled back Riyadh from rival clan, Rashid, but re-established the Al-Saud dynasty, for the third time (Holden and Johns 1981:1-7). The first was established in the 18th century, but the Ottomans defeated it before it could extend its rule across the Arabian Peninsula. Revived in the 19th century, the second dynasty collapsed mainly because of internal strife.

True, the camel riding Sauds have become a family of jet-setters, their commitment to Wahabism, a revivalist cult attributed to 18th century preacher Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahab, has not foundered. A revivalist zealot from oasis-town of Uyyayna, ibn Wahab was appalled to see Arabia sunk into corruption. The solution, he concluded, would be a return to, by force if necessary, puritan Islam (Lacy 1984:59).

Present Saudi state would not have come easily had ibn Saud not courted army of Ikhwan (Brothers). Started in 1912 (Holden and Johns 1981:69), Ikhwan were Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of Wahabism and abandoned their life to live in the Hijrah built by ibn Saud. Ikhwan would flog all persons who were caught procrastinating in their religious duties (Madawi 2002: 57-59).

However, British subsidies also played a key role in defeating Saudi rivals (Madawi 2002: 43). When ibn Saud had subdued all the rivals, Ikhwan began to become a challenge. As many as one hundred Ikhwan settlements by 1926 across the country and ability to mobilise 50000 to 60000 armed men, they were a threat indeed. Thus, in a series of battles, Ikhwan were defeated in next two years. Again, motorised transport provided by the British proved a great help in subduing Ikhwan (Halliday 2002:57). British Royal Air force also played a role (Madawi 2002: 69).

With these victories, ibn Saud on 22 September 1932, proclaimed Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Madawi 2002:71). Islamic fundamentalism for the first time in modern history had built itself a state. By the time, puritans subdued the country, they had staged public executions of 40,000 people and carried out 350,000 amputations: in a country of four million (Unger 2004: 68). On 14 February 1945, came the historic meeting between Roosevelt and ibn Saud, during this meeting oil-for-security relationship was initiated (Ibid 2004:3).

On 9 November 1953, ibn Saud died. Coronation of crown prince Saud was smooth. (Madawi 2002:76-109). However, in 1954, there was an isolated mutiny in army. Communist-inspired pamphlets were found circulating in Hasa in 1955. Anti-monarchy slogans were even found on palace walls in Riyadh. In 1956, Aramco workers were on strike for three days. Strike was crushed mercilessly, 200 were arrested while three activists were beaten to death (Holden and Johns 1981: 183-88). Those were the days when Nasser's Arab nationalism and socialist ideas had caught hold of Arab imagination. Saudi Arabia was no exception.

When in September 1956, Nasser visited Riyadh (Madawi 200:116), in the run up to Suez war, thousands turned up to welcome him. Reluctantly, during the Suez crisis, for the first time Saudi oil was used as a weapon. This was Saud's last major decision. By March 1958, power was passed to crown prince Feisal under pressure from the USA (Halliday 2002:55).

Feisal introduced some social reforms. Slavery was abolished. Girls' education was stressed. Television was introduced in 1965. However, Feisal deliberately prevented armed forces from becoming strong (Halliday 2002:56).

Eclipsed by Nasserism and handicapped by empty exchequer, Saudi dynasty remained marginalised in Arab world until late 1960s. However, six-day Arab-Israel war, proved a landmark by ushering the fall of nationalists and heralding fundamentalism's rise.

Two factors played a decisive role: nationalists' failure to bring about meaningful social and political change. Secondly, an unheard of petro-dollars rush. Between 1965 and 1975, Saudi GDP rose from 10.4 billion riyal to 164.53 billion riyals (Madawi 2003:120).

Saudi Arabia was earning more money than it could absorb enabling Feisal to lavishly increase disbursement of government revenues, stimulating business activity and benefitting merchants. Middle class saw a chance in the system. Petrodollars were not merely transforming desert's social and architectural outlook, emerging billionaires were forging new ties with global capital. As the petro-dollars poured in over next twenty years, roughly eighty-four thousand 'high-net-worth' Saudis invested a staggering \$ 860 billion in American companies' (Unger 2004:28). Texas-based Bush family greatly benefitted from Saudi investments (Ibid:295-98). Oil assigned a new role to Saudis in international politics. Oil weapon used during Arab-Israeli war in 1973 enhanced Saudi image as champion of Arab cause. It, however, annoyed Washington. Kissinger in January 1975 threatened using military force if faced with "some actual strangulation of industrialised world" as a result of oil embargo (Holden and Johns 1981: 373).

This US-Saudi friction was temporary. It in fact proved a chance for rethinking. Already, in March

1974, Saudi threat to leave OPEC was pivotal in keeping prices low (Madawi 2002: 141), demonstrating Saudi commitment to imperialism.

On March 25, 1975 Feisal was killed. His brother Khalid became king. When he was enthroned, economy was doing wonders. By 1975, per capita income was \$6,806 million. Second Development Plan envisaged an expenditure at the breathtaking figure of \$141,000 (Holden and Johns 1981: 390-96). During Khalid's reign 1975-82, contradictions between Islamic facade and affluence started unraveling. Two events symbolised it. Mishal, a prince, eloped with a lover, Muhalla. They were caught while escaping from Saudi Arabia. Both were beheaded. On 20 November 1979, Grand Mosque was taken hostage by armed men led by Juhaiman bin Muhammad Utaibi. His brother-in-law Abdullah al-Qahtani announced in microphone that he was the expected Mehdi. The bloody drama costing hundreds of lives ended on December 5 as Juhaiman's band surrendered or was wiped out (Holden and Johns 1981: 511-26).

Regionally, Saudis played an even important role as US ally. They lavishly funded Iraq against Iran in its war. Saudi financial aid amounted to \$25.7 billion (Madawi 2002:157).

They financed Mujahedeen fighting Red Army in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, Fahad succeeded Khalid on his death. However, he was not as lucky. Oil prices declined. Period of austerity had arrived. In 1985, first time since 1972, electricity and gas prices were increased by 70 percent. Ordinary Saudis resented hike. Also, population explosion at the rate of 3.6 made the king feel pressure. Saudisation started. Islam was forgotten. Deportation of illegal immigrant workers meant that in 1985-86, 300000 were bundled off (Ibid:150-52).

Social and economic divisions began to appear. Wealthy elite consisted of close circle of royalty, tribal nobility, a class of commercially successful educated Saudis. Middle class youth were becoming jobless and frustrated. Some responded to Osama (Ibid:154).

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait. Over 50000 US troops arrived leading to a tense debate. Central questions were: can Saudis get non-Muslims' help against Muslim. Can such a government be Islamic? Mecca University's Dr Safar al-Hawali's taped speeches and Riyadh University's Salman al Awdah's lectures began to find mass hearing. On 6 Nov 1990, 45 women violated driving ban in Riyadh. Mutawa called them 'communist whores.' Ulema blamed this act on the presence of US troops that brought western culture with them.

The groups associated with ben Laden, Advice and Reform Committee (ARC), appeared as the real oppositionist challenge. In 1996, bombs exploded near a US military mission in Riyadh and al-Khobar towers, killing Americans. In 2000, a Saudi airliner en route London was high jacked by two Saudis. Their demands were schools, hospitals, welfare (Madawi 2002:165-85). Having eliminated secular opposition in the 1950s, Saudis were now facing religious fanatics whom they pampered and continue pampering all across the Muslim world. These fanatics point out Saudis corruption and consider further Islamisation of the society as a solution to all the ills. However, a semi-official description of the country goes like this (Yamani 1997:20): "Present day Saudi Arabia is one of the largest market economies in the Middle East. There are no currency controls and no socialist dogma. Emphasis is placed on the private sector and its influence is encouraged to grow every day. This is perhaps due to Islamic doctrine which prevails supreme in the kingdom. Islam prescribes that all wealth is owned by God, and the individual is an agent who is entrusted with portions of that wealth and who is then held by the manner he or she uses it".

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