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Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (RAVENDRAN/AP/GETTY IMAGES)

THE KINGDOM

BY GRANT HOLLY, Ph.D.

CONSIDER THE WORD, "KINGDOM." EVEN MORE THAN A political category, it is a concept that dwells in the timeless forms of myth and fairy tale, as well as, and significantly, in religion. Unlike the word "empire" that glories in earthly power, "kingdom" aspires to eternity. Its pomp and ceremony, its cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces, its wise kings and courageous princes represent the forces of good that protect its inhabitants from the encroaching darkness that lurks beyond its borders. "Kingdom," resides deep in our psyches as an emblem of a perfect world, a bit of heaven on earth.

And so it is that Saudi Arabia, the only significant absolute monarchy on the planet, has styled itself "The Kingdom." It touts its national religion, Wahhabism, as the purest form of Islam. More than a mere king, its monarch refers to himself as "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," indicating that the Kingdom is not a mere country, but hallowed ground. And, as if a sign from above, beneath the Kingdom's barren sands, lay what promised to be the guarantee of a Kingdom without end, an apparently limitless treasure of black gold.

JK: And for the past five years you were in Saudi Arabia writing this book?
KEH: Yes. I'd been going to Saudi Arabia since 1978 when I began as a diplomatic correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, but for the book I went intensively for five years — from 2007 until it came out in 2012. It takes a long time to see people in The Kingdom, so it was more time consuming than I'd anticipated, but it was a lot of fun.

JK: Is it correct that as a foreign woman you had an advantage in the interviewing process?
KEH: Yes, because I could meet with both Saudi men and Saudi women. Saudi men are more prepared to meet with a foreign woman than to have their families meet with a foreign man. A western male writer would find himself shunned by half the population.

JK: About the separation of men and women, I remember you saying: "Men obey Allah. Women obey men."
KEH: Allah is always distant, and men are very present. Women are required throughout their lives to have a male guardian. There was a young woman this week quoted in the Arab News as saying: "I used to change my brother's diapers and now I have to answer to him."

JK: That's a remarkable situation. Thinking about control and fundamentally, religious control, the Sunnis, and specifically the severe form of Sunni Islam, the Wahhabis, are in control in The Kingdom. Is that correct?
KEH: Yes, that's true.

JK: From various editorials I've read and your book, it seems clear that the Saudis think of Iran as their "arch-enemy" because Iran is Shia and The Kingdom is Sunni.
KEH: Yes, the Al-Saud family sees itself as the guardians of Sunni Islam, and they see the Shias in Tehran as fomenting trouble on their borders — in Bahrain, Yemen, and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia where the Saudi Shias reside...and also where the oil is.

JK: What other countries besides Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria represent a serious threat to The Kingdom?
KEH: I do not know. Clearly there are wealthy Saudis who do support terrorism. But the government argues this is a very porous society. People come here for the pilgrimage every year. They leave. We don't know who passes money to whom. "We are against terrorism, jihadis have turned on The Kingdom, so it is in our interest to stop them," the Saudis say. But there remains a suspicion that the government turns something of a blind eye towards the funding of Jihad groups.

JK: What's your take on that? Do you agree or disagree?
KEH: I would think there is more the government can do, because they seem to be able to control all other aspects of people's lives.

JK: Exactly. So what about the future? The U.S. and Canada are pumping more oil, the price is going down, and Saudi supplies are inevitably being depleted...
KEH: Outsiders don't know what their reserves are, but I've heard Saudis say: "in about 50 years we won't have any." Clearly U.S. production, and the potential that Iran will do some kind of deal with the U.S. to escape from sanctions on its selling oil, put downward pressure on the price. There are no taxes in Saudi Arabia. The money the government passes out to its people comes from oil revenues whose future is vulnerable. To keep the peace in the last 4 or 5 years, especially after the Arab Spring, the regime vastly increased expenditures to society — to college students, to the religious establishment, to the military.

JK: They literally have to buy loyalty.

JK: You really do hear that all the time?
KEH: Yes. I think from the Saudi point of view, their concern is Iran, Iran, Iran...not Israel. And it's not even so much Iran's nuclear program. It's just the Iranian hegemony they see developing all around them.

Now, however, growing political and religious unrest, diminishing oil reserves, an aged royal family, with no clear line of succession, and a burgeoning population of educated, Internet and social media savvy, disillusioned young people, threaten The Kingdom's future.

Karen Elliott House won the Pulitzer Prize in 1978 reporting on the Middle East for *The Wall Street Journal*. She went on to become the publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*, a position she retired from in 2008. She is chairman of the board of the RAND Corporation and has served on the boards of the Council on Foreign Relations and Boston University. Her recent book, *On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines - and Future*, documents the perils that beset The Kingdom. In this timely interview she talks with *The Private Journey's* James Kerwin about one of the most sensitive and important geopolitical regions in the world today.

JK: Karen, I have to begin by saying your book is fantastic, a "must read" for anyone interested in the Middle East, and given the importance of Saudi oil, that should be all of us. It's a real eye-opener.
KEH: It was fascinating to do.

JK: I also can't help but note that starting from your very small hometown of Matador, Texas, accomplishing so much and getting where you are today represents quite a journey.
KEH: People are always asking me, "wasn't it strange going to Saudi Arabia?" but quite honestly, the greatest leap I ever made was going from Matador, Texas, population 900, to the University of Texas in Austin. We had one blinking red stoplight and four churches. That was pretty much it. Growing up I had no TV, no telephone. I had never really been to eat in a restaurant other than a hamburger place, so there were all kinds of things




Doug Meador, Publisher and Editor of *The Matador (Texas) Tribune*, one of *Karen's* first editors

JK: The Iranians are a main supplier of weapons to Syria, aren't they?
KEH: Yes. The Iranians and Saudis are basically fighting a proxy war in Syria. The Saudis are funding Jihadis who oppose Assad, and the Iranians are funding Assad and his Hezbollah supporters from Lebanon.

JK: So the Saudis would love to see Assad out of power.
KEH: Yes, and their angst right now is they thought the U.S. would help them oust Assad, because Obama said he should go. But when Assad crossed Obama's red line, the U.S. backedpedaled. So now the Saudis have their foot on the head of the Bashar Assad rattlesnake, and they can't pick it up, and they can't chop its head off.

JK: Why did Obama backpedal like that? All that hard talk, and then he passes the baton to Congress...
KEH: He didn't want to be involved in another war in the Middle East, and I think he thought his red line warning would keep the Syrians from using chemical weapons. I think the President believes when he speaks it is like E.F. Hutton — people listen. Well, they don't always listen, in this country or around the world.

JK: We're talking about external threats to The Kingdom, what about internal ones? From the beginning the Al-Saud family used religion, it's "magic lamp," as you call it in your book, to unite and control the people. But hasn't religion proved to be a double-edged sword, producing extremists that threaten The Kingdom? How does The Kingdom feel about 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers being Saudis?
KEH: They have a hard time acknowledging it. The father of the current interior minister said it was a Jewish plot. But the government had to acknowledge its homegrown terrorists when in 2003, 2004, 2005 they turned their terror on Saudi Arabia. That is why The Kingdom has removed some of the most virulent imams that preach in mosques. The King is trying to produce, as George Bush would say, "a kinder, gentler, version of Islam."

JK: But isn't it true that the Saudis are funding terrorism worldwide?
KEH: The government insists it isn't, that wealthy individuals are doing it, but it's not government sponsored.

JK: Do you buy that?
KEH: I do not know. Clearly there are wealthy Saudis who do support terrorism. But the government argues this is a very porous society. People come here for the pilgrimage every year. They leave. We don't know who passes money to whom. "We are against terrorism, jihadis have turned on The Kingdom, so it is in our interest to stop them," the Saudis say. But there remains a suspicion that the government turns something of a blind eye towards the funding of Jihad groups.

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JK: Yes, as one Saudi said to me — if you use money to buy loyalty, you have to have a lot of it. So far, the Saudis still do.

JK: So what's the next step for The Kingdom?
KEH: King Abdullah is trying to make the people of The Kingdom understand that they must learn to create wealth, not just consume it. He's focusing on education.

JK: But isn't education in Saudi Arabia driven by religion? It's not preparing people to be part of a global economy.
KEH: That is why the King has sent more than 100,000 students abroad to expose them to an education that involves intellectual inquiry. But it will take more than educational reform to change the work ethic of a society accustomed to dependence on government as a way to assure obedience to the regime.

JK: You've talked about how the stability of the regime depends on what you've called a "somnolent, obedient citizenry." Isn't an education that teaches people to think critically, think outside the box, even to think outside the Kaaba, a potential threat to order in The Kingdom?
KEH: This is precisely the dilemma the Saudi regime faces. In the short run, the regime benefits from having a somnolent and obedient citizenry, but frustrations build and can explode. On the other hand, teaching people to think and act critically and independently — though such a citizenry would provide much greater stability for The Kingdom in the long run — risks unleashing forces the regime fears it may not be able to control. In sum, the regime is on the horns of a dilemma.

JK: When we think about the future of The Kingdom, nothing is more fundamental than succession. The King is very old, and didn't his brother, the heir apparent, pass away?
KEH: King Abdullah is 90 and in poor health. He has outlived two crown princes and the current one is 78 and said to have Alzheimer's; this is reminiscent of Reagan living through the death of three Soviet presidents in 3½ years. Sixty percent of the population is under 20, and the young people, unlike their parents, are connected to information through the Internet, satellite TV, Facebook and Twitter. They don't have either the respect for, or fear of, the royal family their parents or grandparents had. Like the people of the Soviet Union in the '80s and '90s, who realized that the claim of Communist superiority was fundamentally a lie, the people of Saudi Arabia increasingly understand the organizing myth of the Islamic superiority of The Kingdom is just that: a myth. So if they want to perpetuate the monarchy, I think they're going to have to ultimately — and ultimately is not too far off — find themselves a king who is closer to the younger generation that is dominant in the country, or who can, at least, connect with, and persuade, them.

JK: Historically the Al-Saud family has managed to maintain power by constant and skillful negotiation. Do you think they will find a way to survive the current challenges to The Kingdom?
KEH: In the short run, given the chaos elsewhere in the Middle East, ironically the royal family can probably feel reasonably secure. Looking some years out, however, only substantial reform that would offer a brighter future to the country's enormous population of youth, increasingly frustrated by the lack of economic opportunity, and lack of even minimal personal liberties, can secure the future of the royal family. And that means a new generation ruler who has both the vision and the energy to conceive and execute serious economic and social reforms.

And, so The Kingdom, threatened by dark forces from beyond its borders and turmoil from within, manages, like its aging monarch, to survive...as it awaits the emergence of a heroic young prince who can save it. ♣

Above Cover: Illustration of the flag of Saudi Arabia (detail). Exactstock/Superstock. Cover design by Jason Booher.