

The Power of Geography

Reading Guide for Chapter 3, Saudi Arabia

“During the 1990s and 2000s, Saudi Arabia was a net exporter of vision, but it was a jihadist vision. Fifteen of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudi citizens.”

–Graeme Wood, “Absolute Power,” *The Atlantic*, April 2022

Muhammad ibn Saud founded the Saud dynasty in 1740 that came to almost all of the Arabian Peninsula and name it for his family: Saudi Arabia.

Marshall explains the geography of Saudi Arabia, especially its two vast deserts: An-Nafud (“The Devil’s Anvil”) and the Rub’ al-Khali (the Empty Quarter), called by the Bedouin who live there Al-Ramlah (“The Sand”).

Three population centers: Jeddah, Mecca, & Medina

Saudi Arabia is mostly Sunni but there is a substantial Shi’a minority, mostly in the Eastern Province, which is most open to sabotage because of the hundreds of gas & oil pipelines there.

Riyadh is the capital city, isolated in the center of the country in the arid Najd region—“a backwater without water.”



The First Saudi State
1744-1818.



The second Saudi state
1850.



The Kingdom of Saudi
Arabia after unification in
1932.

In the mid-1700s the Sauds established itself in this area. And in 1744 it made an alliance with the Wahhab clan. In 1744 **Muhammad ibn Adb al-Wahhab** pledge allegiance to Ibn Saud, and Idn Saud thereby allowed the Wahhabi to dictate the religious life.

Wahhabism is an extreme form of Sunni fundamentalism. *Jihad* for them was not an internal struggle against sin but an actual fight to impose Wahhabism on others—violently, if necessary. The Wahabbis saw the Shi’a as heretics (Rafida = “rejecters”)

A brief history of the First & Second Saudi states & the Saudis’ defeat by the Rashidi in the 19th century.

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Faisal bin Turki bin Abdullah bin Muhammad Al-Saud, better known as **Ibn Saud**, assumed leadership in 1901. He joined with the British in World War I to defeat the Rashidi, leading his army of 100,000 ultra-Wahabbi warriors, the **Ikhwan**, who actively sought to fight non-Wahhabi Muslims.



1920 -- Ibn Saud turned on the rival **Hashemite** clan who ruled the Hejaz and took Mecca and Medina from them. Saudis therefor controlled Islam's two holiest cities.

1927 Ibn Saud signed a treaty with the British, naming him as ruler of Najd & Hejaz and assuming control of Mecca & Medina. The Hashemites were given northern Hejaz and Jordan to control.

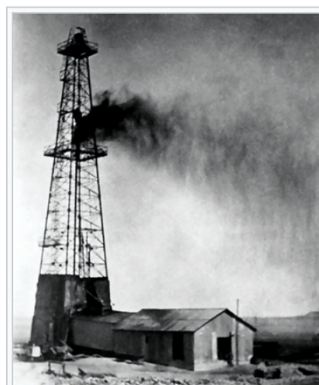
1932 Saud changed his title to King of Saudi Arabia. His 20 wives produced over 100 children by him, "creating a family network that dominates the state."

Is the control of the House of Saud over a country legitimate?

1932 Oil discovered in the Middle East. **Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL)** gets the contract to explore Saudi Arabia for oil in 1933. (SOCAL becomes **Aramco**.) SOCAL becomes **Aramco**.



Percy Cox with **Abdulaziz bin Abderrahman Al Saud** , the first King of Saudi Arabia, in the Arabian Desert during the **Great Arab Revolt** of 1916.



Dammam No. 7 , the first commercial oil well in Saudi Arabia, hitting oil on March 4, 1938.



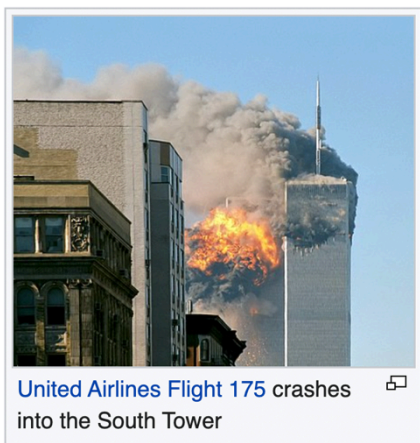
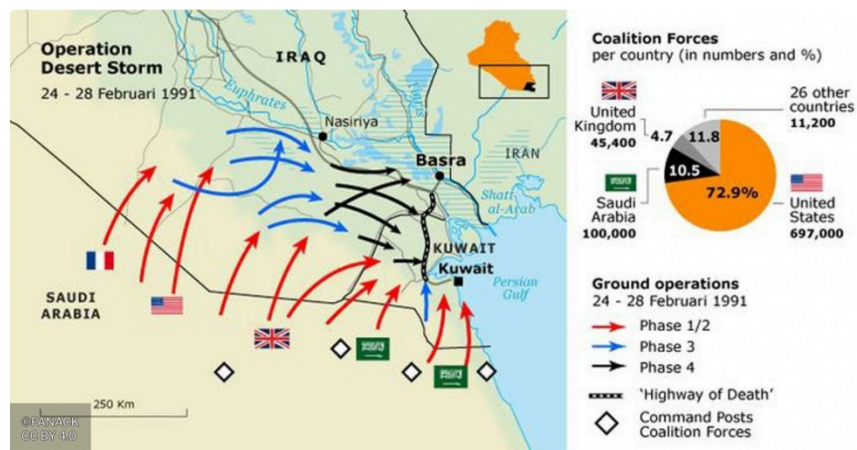
King **Abdulaziz bin Abderrahman Al Saud** with President **Franklin Delano Roosevelt** aboard the USS Quincy returning from the **Yalta Conference** in 1945.

Oil means everything for Saudi Arabia's importance in the world—beginning with World War II. “Players on the world stage.”

Faisal becomes king in a tumultuous time.

November 20, 1979 – Islamic dissidents storm the Grand Mosque in Mecca & denounce the House of Saud for betraying the faith. Bloody & violent. The Saudi response was to move away from social modernization (westernizing?) and toward more Wahhabism, including the education system. **Osama bin Laden** was a product of this era of anti-westernization.

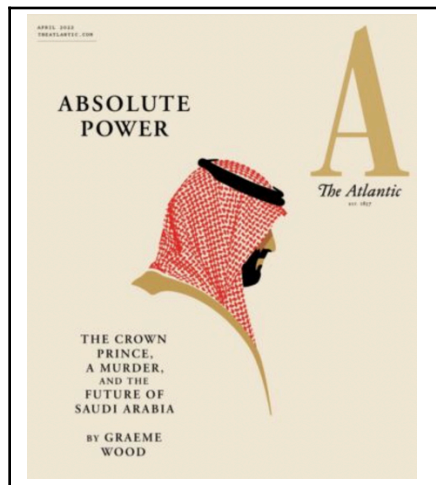
Arabia. Tension between modernization and fundamentalist Islam grew, leading to **September 11, 2001**. 15 of the 19 attackers were Saudi. **Al-Qaeda** is a Wahhabi-inspired organization angry at Saudi Arabia as well as the West.



Fewer than 40% of Saudis are Wahabbis. Saudis responded to the threat of Al-Qaeda with more state repression.

In 2017 **Mohammad bin Salman** (nicknamed MBS in the media) named **Crown Prince**, de facto successor to aging King Salman....15,000 members of the royal family, with 2,000 who most of the wealth and power. MBS was, and is, vulnerable.

Foreign policy under MBS: fight regional enemies through proxy wars so the Saudi can dominate the region. (Shi'a states like **Iran** is the biggest rival, but Shi'a rebels like the **Houthi in Yemen**, Syria's President Assad, and Shi'a militias **Hezbollah** in Lebanon, other Islamist groups like the anti-royalist **Muslim Brotherhood** (born in Egypt) and **Hamas** (Palestinian militia that controls Gaza). **Saudi Arabia wants to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons**. If Iran succeeds, Saudi Arabia will follow suit.



MBS's foreign policy can be heavy-handed and repressive. See: the 2017 "resignation" of Lebanese President Saad al-Hariri and the 2018 murder of journalist **Jamal Kashoggi**.

"The CIA concluded that Mohammed bin Salman ordered the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Kashoggi. Saudi Arabia's own prosecutors found that it had been conducted by some of the crown prince's closest aides."

—Graeme Wood, "Absolute Power," *The Atlantic*, April 2022

MBS is trying to implement some social reforms to open up Saudi Arabia, like allowing women to drive cars, re-opening cinemas, and supporting free-market economics, but he is also very repressive. See: **the purge of his own family members** he deemed corrupt, imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh.

Oil is everything in Saudi Arabia, & its price will determine the success of his **Vision 2030** plan. And the need for **water** in a land without rivers is a challenge.

MBS knows that the Saudis need to **diversify their economy** – dependence on oil is what economists call a "**resource curse**" because it is profitable but makes an economy too dependent on it -- and the Saudis must find sources of renewable energy.

Strategically the Saudis must rely on the U.S. for its security.

Meanwhile, its economic ties with **China** are strengthening. And China's model of “**economic liberalism**” (embrace free-market capitalism always subject to the central government's approval) without “**political liberalism**” (human rights, social equality) appeals to the Saudis.



• Middle East

Poll: Arab nations sour on Western democracy

By YIFAN XU in Washington | China Daily Global | Updated: 2022-07-14 11:10



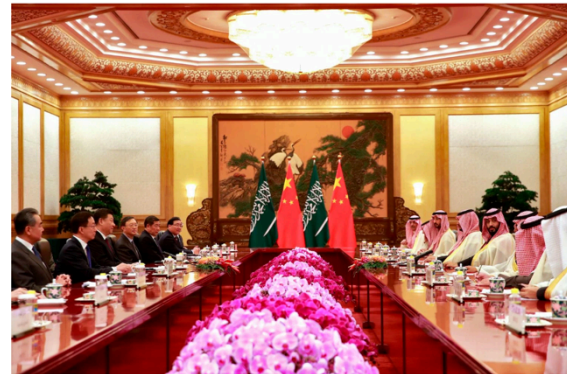
The White House is seen in Washington, DC, the United States, on Feb 15, 2022. [Photo/Xinhua]

ARGUMENT An expert's point of view on a current event.

How Biden Can Reverse China's Gains in Saudi Arabia

Preventing growing Chinese influence in the Middle East is more important than making Riyadh a pariah.

By Dore Feilth, a former special assistant to the deputy administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Ben Noon, a writer focused on U.S.-China rivalry.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (4th R) attends a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping (3rd L) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Feb. 22, 2019. HOW HAWEE YOUNG/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

JULY 7, 2022, 8:17 AM

Historic trends and conditions:

- The Saudis seem ready to normalize relations with **Israel**, a nation the entire Arab World has violently opposed since its inception in 1947 at the expense of the Palestinian people, who are Arab.
- The Saudis continue to oppose **Pan-Arab nationalism**, the idea of a single Arab state spanning the entire region.
- The Saudis have little interest in democracy. “After all, the people might choose the wrong leaders.”

The founding principle of the Saud-Wahhab alliance almost 300 years ago is breaking down.

“The Saudi leadership has to build a new society, a new economy, and a functioning military.”