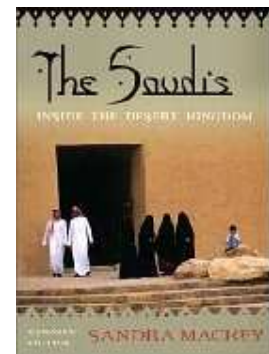


The Saudi's – inside the desert kingdom

By Sandra Mackey

Published by Norton, 2002

Reviewed by Vincent Slood



During her 4 year stay in Saudi Arabia (1978 – 1980 and 1982 – 1984), Sandra MacKey was, as far as the authorities were concerned, the wife of an American doctor. However, defying the rules that were set to make interaction with local Saudi's impossible; Sandra managed to travel to places seldom seen by an outsider. By doing so and by sharing her observations and analyses, she provides us with a unique window into one of the most secluded countries in the world.

The Saudi's is really an in-depth analysis of the incompatibility between the xenophobic Saudi society - where live gravitates around clan, family, religion, traditions and honour- and the inescapable modernization as a consequence of the oil wealth.

From a cultural perspective, this book provides an insight into a clash between a very collectivist, high uncertainty avoidant society and the Anglo Saxon dominated –very individualistic and laissez faire- outside influences.

In the wake after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the House of Saud found itself right in the middle of a schism. Fifteen out nineteen hijackers were Saudi and it also became known that recruitment, financing and planning actually took place on Saudi soil. At the same time the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia goes well beyond oil trade. Saudi Arabia possesses one-fourth of the world's known oil reserve and it of strategic importance to the United States, hence the strong military alliance, much to the resentment of an increasing portion of –traditional- Saudi society.

Whilst this book was first published in 1987, the opposing dynamics within the kingdom; pressure to modernize and the urge to recover and uphold deep-rooted traditions, still continue.

MacKey starts her book by describing her arrival in 1978 in Saudi Arabia during the lift-off of the oil boom. She finds a country that lacks even the most basic infrastructure common known to western man (roads, airports, hospitals, banks, government). In the beginning of the oil boom (early 70's) Saudi Arabia was in many ways a country in medieval times and was perfectly happy about it.

However, by mid seventies things changed dramatically. In the wake of the oil embargo, Saudi Arabia propelled itself from being an ignored albeit increasingly wealthy country into a world power. A very traditional Saudi Arabia needed to define itself in a new world. Moreover, this deeply traditional society

found itself in a schizophrenic battle between economic progress and maintaining the traditions that have been in place since the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed, some 1400 years ago.

Saudi Arabia is the cradle of Islam. The Prophet Mohammed was a Saudi native and the country possesses two of the three holy cities of Islam, Mecca and Medina. For this reason, the Saudi's see themselves as the true defenders of the faith. As a consequence, the Saudi's must be the most pious and faithful to the Prophet's teachings. Muslims from other countries are seen as inferior and non-Muslims are seen as infidels and are treated with contempt. The Saudi's are followers of Wahhabism, an Islamic stream that is among the most fundamental and rigid. It demands from its follower's strict compliance to the dictates of the Prophet.

As vast amounts of money poured into Saudi Arabia, the demand for infrastructure in the broadest sense of the word increased. In lieu of skilled labour and know-how, a great number of expatriates, especially westerners and Indian, started to come in. The Saudi's desperately tried to control the foreign influences. Starting at the airport, luggage of the incoming expatriate is searched extensively. Besides the obvious contrabands like pork, alcohol, pornography and anything that propagated another religion, almost anything entering the country was suspect and could be seized at the customs agent's discretion with no chance of appeal.

The puritan Saudi society is based on the Bedouin tribal structure. For the Saudi, the concept of individuality is next to non-existent. The Saudi sees himself in the context of his family and, to a lesser degree, the tribe [p. 109]. His loyalty to the family must be unquestionable in exchange for protection. In the nomadic days of the Bedouin, this was undoubtedly the strongest defence mechanism in the harsh desolate desert.

Special note here is the ever existent hospitality, which is a matter of deep honour to the Bedouins. To the ignorant observant, this hospitality may seem like a mere expression of the collectivistic attitudes of the Bedouins, but it is much more than that.

Whilst the Bedouin hospitality is without doubt rooted within their highly collectivistic values, there is also a considerable element of status / prestige involved. MacKey describes in her book the lavish meals in women's quarters in the most beautiful Bedouin tents seated on the most exquisite carpets.

Saudi's harbour a strong sense of patrilineal descent. A man is a descendent of his father and paternal grandfather, as Saudi names reflect. The prophet's full name tells the story: Abdulqasim Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim (Abdulqasim Mohammed son of Abdullah son of Abd al-Muttalib son of Hashim).

Sandra Mackey gives us a unique look into to heart of a country that is struggling between traditions and modernization. A country that has found itself in a battle to reconcile seemingly incompatible extremes:

- ✓ To modernize, it depends on much hated foreigners.
- ✓ To produce its own skills and know-how, Saudi's need to go abroad to acquire the needed skills, exposing them to the loathed and decadent influences.

- ✓ Upon their return, the educated Saudi's find it hard to adjust into the traditional Saudi society.
- ✓ To remain in power, the house of Saud depends on western support, alienating them even more from the proud Bedouin society.
- ✓ The loyalty of the Bedouin tribes and other –religious- groups (such as the Matawain or the religious police) to the house of Saud comes with a prize. Large amounts of oil dollars are being transferred to these groups to secure loyalty.

As Saudi Arabia remains the world's leading petroleum exporter, the country is still in the middle of battle to define itself between the extremes of modernization and recovering traditions so deeply rooted in the Bedouin culture and the holy faith of Islam.

In all likelihood, Saudi Arabia has already found that their vast oil reserves are as much a blessing as they are a curse. *The Saudi's – Inside the desert kingdom* is a masterpiece. It reads like a suspense drama and yet, it gives you so much more. Not only does the reader get a window into one of the most secluded countries in the world, but it also gives a lot of context to one of the biggest religions in the world, Islam. And that is the bonus.