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The Saudi Evolution

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Fouad Ajami had an odd fondness for Saudi Arabia. He was an Americanized, secular Shiite with European sensibilities who, truth be told, had pretty much burned out on the ugliness of the modern Arab world. He once smiled knowingly at the comment of the late, great Middle Eastern historian Charles Issawi: “Thank God it’s Friday: I can stop reading Arabic, Persian, and Turkish and go home and read Jane Austen.”

And yet even after the secular Arab world had devolved into pitiless tyrannies, after his homeland had become a feeding ground for the Lebanese Hizbollah, after 9/11, the Iraq and Afghan wars, and the hideousness of the Islamic State, Ajami retained a curiosity about and affection for Saudi Arabia. Perhaps because the country was a work in progress (Ajami died in 2014) where he wasn’t certain that everything would end in despair. Professors can get extraordinary entrée into foreign lands through their students; students can excite affection for peoples who seem unappealing in the headlines. Great scholars are often granted special dispensation to observe what others are denied. Ajami had a lot of access in a land that, despite its bedouin roots, doesn’t really have an open, gracious reflex towards strangers, let alone Shiite ones.

While reading *Crosswinds, the Ways of Saudi Arabia*, which he wrote more than a decade ago and then shelved after the turbulence of the Arab Spring, I thought of two books: *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967*, published in 1981, which made Ajami famous among scholars, and its more literary sequel, *Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey*, published in 1998. Though the books differ greatly (*Crosswinds* is smaller in scope, more eclectic and personal), they are complementary: under Muhammad bin Salman, the crown prince, the Saudi Arabia that Ajami knew well is disappearing and becoming a modernizing Arab dictatorship. Until the coming of the Islamic State, this kind of “progress” was the most brutal part of the modern Arab predicament. With the continuing retrenchment of America, the country’s “splendid isolation” is closing.

Ajami would have been surprised by the energetic rashness of MBS: in just a few years, he’s waged war against his own extended family, rounding them up, stripping them of assets, even torturing them. He’s cast aside the old Saudi tolerance for dissent and sentiment for forgiveness, and even engaged in what had been the hallmarks of the Middle East’s nastiest regimes: kidnapping and assassination. For the very first time in Saudi history, MBS has created the foundations of a police state.

And the crown prince’s war against his own family inevitably involves religion. Part of the Saudi genius in ruling over a vast, conservative land, whose central highlands have produced some of the most extreme versions of Islam, has been to have brothers in the ruling family back different currents: one prince could push for reform while another could protect Najdi traditionalism and support the powers of the religious police to “command the good and forbid the wrong.” Or as Ajami put it: “The royals were skilled traffic cops: they held back the religious enforcers when their excesses grew particularly burdensome or notorious. But they gave into them as well.” The Saudi family was a big tent, where the most devout and debauched could find a home. There was a constant balancing act, where the royal family never placed all of its chips on any bet. To quote Ajami again:

It is a big royal clan, and there are princes for all kinds of seasons and casting calls. No outsider fully knew the play among the brothers [the children of Ibn Saud]. Those who talk don't know, those who know don't talk...all hopes are invested in them—the religious reactionaries' determination to keep the orthodoxy intact and supreme, the liberals' expectations that the old way could yet crack and be challenged.

The religious establishment often bends with the wind—in truth, it yields to royal prerogative when it has to, when the will of *wali al-amr*, the custodian of power, is at stake. This introduces a good deal of uncertainty and skepticism....Things forbidden and *haram* are suddenly given a waiver, the gates that had been bolted are thrown wide open.

MBS has put the *wali al-amr* on speed.

The old consensual, somewhat hypocritical, dispensation did allow for the rise of Usama bin Ladin and the kind of millenarian jihadism that Saudi Arabia's founder, Ibn Saud, had used and crushed after it became a threat to his rule. Fifty years after Ibn Saud's death, an organically conservative monarchy still saw its legitimacy inextricably tied to the faith. From the 1950s forward, Saudi Arabia became a laboratory of "conservative" religious militancy. Ideas from Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—the royal family in its efforts to combat the radical Arabism of Gamal Abdel Nasser and communism had given generous support to the Brotherhood abroad and within Arabia—mixed with the native Wahhabism. These ideas were later fertilized by the shocking success of the revolutionary Iranian and Lebanese Shia (it's both galling and inspiring for Sunnis to see Shiites succeed). A particularly toxic brew in the peninsula took shape.

The royal family put an end to Saudi Arabia's militant ecumenicalism in the 2000s, when Al-Qa'ida started to target the state. MBS has gone even further and humbled both the princes and the religious establishment that had been equivocal about or sympathetic to such religious ardor. With MBS, what we might call a *laissez-faire* approach to conservative Islam has ended. No dissent, familial, political, or religio-political, would henceforth be tolerated.

I am certain that Ajami would be no fan of MBS, despite his sincere effort to advance the country and grant women a bit more maneuvering room. (Ajami's concern for women, his view that Islamic civilization was crippled, intellectually and spiritually, by its failure to allow women more freedom, runs through much of his work.) Ajami's skepticism of Arabia's boldest prince would likely have little to do with the harshness that MBS has shown to the Shia of the Eastern Province. The prince has been more brutal towards them than any ruler since Ibn Saud. Ajami would view that as a black mark, an example of cruel short-sightedness that can turn understandable dissent into insurrection.

But his primary concern about MBS would surely be this: his modernizing hubris and the contempt for his family and the religious establishment could sink the entire Saudi enterprise. And Ajami would view the survival of Saudi Arabia as a consensual monarchy as a good thing, no matter its manifest faults, because the alternatives would likely be worse.

The modern Arab world is strewn with the wreckage, physical and spiritual, of oh-so-modern men who wanted to make their lands competitive with the West and platforms for greater personal ambition. MBS's attempt to play up nationalism, a fairly fresh idea in a country named for a family, and play down religion would have wryly struck Ajami's sensibilities—it is a well-trodden path for the region's many fascists since the 1930s. Always looking beyond the Arabs to more powerful forces within Islam and the West, Ajami would have highlighted the cultural and religious forces

that made Atatürk a success and all of his Arab imitators cruel, sometimes bloody, failures. He would likely have recalled the Western apologists who've always been there, cheering on the modernizers even as they took Arabs over the cliff.

Today, Ajami would probably caution those who have cheered MBS's more secular, nationalist approach. He certainly knew that Saudi Arabia whether alone, or in conjunction with the United Arab Emirates, could never serve as a counterweight to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which just has a vastly more solid identity, cultural purpose, and sense of accomplishment to throw around. As troubled as the clerical regime is, it can still send young men to die by the hundreds in Syria, and celebrate their deaths. A holy warrior such as Qasem Suleimani, who'd seen hell in the Iran-Iraq War [1980-1988] and later became a (rather self-conscious) paladin for the Shiite downtrodden, could have hundreds of thousands turn out for his funeral procession. There is simply no Saudi, or Emirati, counterpart to this identity, commitment, and pride.

And yet, even with MBS, Ajami might qualify his judgment. What former secretary of state George Shultz said to Ajami about the Saudi royals could still apply to the crown prince, who backed down when the Iranians directly attacked Saudi oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq in 2019 and temporarily knocked offline half of the country's oil production. "The Saudis are second-guessers" observed Schultz. "It was as sure as anything that the Saudis lamenting American passivity in the face of Iran," Ajami observes, "would find fault were America to take on the Iranians. There is a congenital Saudi dread of big decisions. In a perfect world, powers beyond Saudi Arabia would not disturb the peace of the realm. The Americans would offer protection, but discreetly; they would not want Saudi Arabia to identify itself, out in the open, with major American initiatives in the Persian Gulf or on Arab-Israeli peace."

Those days are gone. Seeking America's retreat, Donald Trump wanted the kingdom to step up. If Joe Biden wins, U.S. retrenchment will likely accelerate as defense budgets are cut and the Democratic Party's distaste for MBS and his country, which transcends the ghastly murder of Jamal Khashoggi, expresses itself more efficaciously.

The Saudis can no longer hide behind U.S. aircraft carriers and statesmen who knew that with Riyadh doing less is sometimes more. America's downsizing has encouraged Israeli-Gulf Arab ties to grow. Unintentionally, American hegemony provided a safe space for anti-Zionism and the Palestinian cause. With the clerical regime set to get an injection of tens of billions of dollars through a Biden administration's efforts to seduce Iran back into nuclear negotiations, with restrictions on arms' sales to the Islamic Republic sunset in the United Nations, MBS will discover, however, that Israel simply can't offer much protection from hostile Shiites and members of his own family. Ajami would certainly have some sympathy for this Saudi predicament. Much of the imbroglio has nothing to do with the crown prince. Change in the Middle East is so often so unkind.

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