

Legitimizing Transformation without Calling it Change: *Tajdīd*, *Iṣlāḥ*, and Saudi Arabia's Place in the Contemporary World

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Sean Foley¹

Abstract

For decades, many scholars have contended that Saudi Arabia is a fixed political system, where a conservative monarchy uses advanced technology, oil revenues, and religion to dominate the people. Such a system is often portrayed as inherently unstable, a seemingly never-ending series of collisions between an unchanging traditional political structure seeking to hold on to power at any cost and a dynamic modernity—a view encapsulated in a phrase expressed at virtually every public discussion of the Kingdom in the West: ‘you must admit that Saudi Arabia must change’. Ironically this phrase confirms what this article argues is a secret to the success of Saudi Arabia in the contemporary era: *the ability to legitimize transformation without calling it change*. No society is static, including Saudi Arabia. Throughout the Kingdom’s history, the defining social institutions have repeatedly utilized *Tajdīd* (Revival) and *Iṣlāḥ* (Reform) to respond to new technologies and the changing expectations of a diverse society. While Muslim scholars are most often entrusted to arbitrate this process, ordinary Saudis use this process to guide their actions in the various social spaces they encounter both at home and abroad. Critically, this process reflects the response of King Abdulaziz and the founders of the third Saudi state in the early twentieth century to the factors that had brought down previous Saudi states in the nineteenth century.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, *Tajdīd*, *Iṣlāḥ*, King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, modern Islam

¹ Associate Professor, Middle Tennessee State University, US.

Corresponding author:

Sean Foley, Department of History, Middle Tennessee State University, Peck Hall 262, MTSU Box 23, Murfreesboro, TN 37132, US.

E-mail: Sean.Foley@mtsu.edu

Introduction

Just beyond the north-western outskirts of Riyadh is Diriyah, the capital of the first Saudi state, the Emirate of Diriyah. In 1744, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud (r. 1744–1765) and the Sunni Muslim cleric Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–1792) forged an alliance and founded a state in Diriyah that ruled much of what is now Saudi Arabia. In 1818, an Egyptian army leveled the city. Riyadh became the new capital of both the second and the third (current) Saudi state. For decades Diriyah remained abandoned, a community Robert Lacey likened to ‘a sand-blown Pompeii’ (Lacey, 1982: p. 62).

But in the late 1970s, the kingdom’s Pompeii came back to life. The Saudi government founded a new town at Diriyah, a community that is now the seat of a governorate by the same name of 60,000 people. The governorate is contiguous with the rest of Riyadh—a wealthy and technologically advanced city of five million people which is part of a metropolitan region of more than seven million inhabitants. A large Saudi flag overlooks the vast highway interchange at the edge of Diriyah and serves as an informal entrance to the community. The King Abdulaziz Military College, which trains officers for the modern Saudi army, and regional branches of key government ministries are situated in the town as well.

For decades, foreign journalists and scholars in Riyadh have visited Diriyah, one of the few historic tourist attractions in the modern city and a short drive from the Diplomatic Quarter in central Riyadh. In Diriyah, they visit the palm groves and ruins of the old city, which are now being restored on a massive scale under the supervision of UNESCO. The historic site provides a picturesque backdrop for television documentaries and a good place for discussion of the Kingdom’s politics, which are widely seen to still be shaped by the alliance forged between the Al-Saud family and Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb in 1744.¹

Strikingly, few Westerners and others contemplate contemporary Diriyah or talk to its residents, many of whom are either recently resettled tribesmen or foreign workers. Nearly a third of the city’s population—much like that of other Saudi communities—is foreign-born or the children of immigrants from Africa or Asia. Along the town’s main street, stores feature signs in Hindi and Bengali along with Arabic and English. One can find outlets for major foreign and Saudi brands, such as Al-Rajhi Bank, McDonalds, and the large telecommunications company, STC. Neighborhoods with vast new villas are a short distance from more modest homes that date from the late 1970s.

The focus on historical rather than contemporary Diriyah reflects the willingness of many scholars to maintain *too much* intellectual distance from their subject when writing on Saudi Arabia. Scholars often focus on how they imagine or want Saudi Arabia to be rather than how it is either today or was in the past. This practice in part reflects the fact that few scholars spend an extended period in the kingdom or travel beyond Riyadh, Jeddah, or the coastal communities of the Eastern Province. But it also reflects an assumption—in part forwarded by some Saudis—of the continuity of cultural practices, institutions, and principles without which the state and the kingdom would collapse. Indeed, when one asks some Saudis what is the starting date of their kingdom, they struggle to respond and refer to different dates at once.

The Saudi State has a readymade and consistent response to this question: King Abdulaziz (1880–1953) is the founder of Saudi Arabia, a process that began when he and his followers seized Masmak Castle and regained Riyadh for his family in 1902. On national day (celebrated annually on September 23) there are public pictures, lunch boxes and other consumer items with pictures of the castle. Today it is flanked by a massive flag similar to the one at Diriyah and inside there is a museum that documents King Abdulaziz's 1902 raid on the building, the capture of Riyadh, the reunification of the kingdom, and his long reign. There is also a painting of the King in which he holds a large Saudi flag. He towers over a group of Bedouin warriors on horseback; they are pictured beside Masmak with the holy cities, Mecca and Medina, in the background. Strikingly, at the bottom of the painting there is an inscription in Arabic and English, 'min huna al-bidaya', 'from here is the beginning' of contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Even scholars who recognize the importance of 1902 generally argue that the Kingdom's political culture has been largely static since that time: according to this argument, a 'peculiar' arrangement in which the Al-Saud's control of the environment, technology, religious leadership, petroleum, and links to the global economic system gave them 'just enough capital' to resist 'popular pressure' and maintain power in a 'devil's bargain' with the people.² Some Western scholars have highlighted the status of the Saudi people 'as captured' by referring to them as 'subjects'³ rather than using the term that has been in official use since the 1950s: *muwāṭin*, or citizen.⁴ Such diction reinforces an argument regularly made by Saudis and non-Saudis alike that there is not an organic or real Saudi national identity⁵ and the kingdom will one day collapse into a series of smaller parts,⁶ thanks to an inevitable future collision between a 'traditional' structure of power⁷ and an increasingly dynamic and modern society—a view encapsulated in a statement expressed in many public and media discussions of the Kingdom in the West: 'You must admit that Saudi Arabia must change'.⁸

Ironically, the prevalence of this sentiment confirms one of the central successes of Saudi Arabia in the contemporary era: *the ability to legitimize transformation without calling it change*. No society is static, including Saudi Arabia, where most aspects of life and politics have changed massively over the past century. Institutions, principles, and social practices of the pre-1902 era largely remained in place but their relative position and power changed in response to international balances, social needs, and new technology. King Abdulaziz sought to alter the meaning and privileges of his society's institutions to prevent the re-emergence of the factors that had led to the collapse of states in the past. By adopting this approach—one that altered structures of authority that had been in place for over a century—the Saudi state adopted a central premise of modernity in the West: rejecting traditional (that is, preexisting) modes of authority.

The foundation of the Saudi process of transformation and the rejection of traditional authority is the application of Islamic knowledge and its core principles to contemporary political or socioeconomic questions—*Tajdīd* (revival) and *Iṣlāḥ* (reform). This process, which provided legitimacy to government action, was carried out by scholars schooled in the Islamic sciences and allowed for Saudis to reconcile non-Muslim institutions, social practices, and technology with

Islam. The Saudi approach differed from those of other societies in two respects: it did not (a) adopt Western conceptions of a unitary form of administration; and (b) jettison personal forms of governance in favor of impersonal and ideological forms of administration. Instead, the Saudi approach blended different structures of authority with mutual obligation and reciprocity.

State, Religion, and Tribe

That process began with the relationship between state power and religious power. Before King Abdulaziz came to power in Riyadh in 1902, religious scholars in the city routinely switched allegiance between different brothers in ruling families and extended their recognition to whoever was the ruler of Riyadh regardless of the origin of their family. Mindful of that practice, King Abdulaziz provided these scholars enormous latitude to manage social order in his domains—a social order he was personally beholden to as the leader of the community. On several occasions, the King, an outwardly pious man, personally subjected himself and his closest aides to their authority in public, including allowing them to cut a shirt that was seen as too long (al-Rasheed, 2010: p. 50).

King Abdulaziz also entrusted his religious elites to make judgments on *Tajdīd* and *Islāh*—a process essential to military expansion and socioeconomic development, plans that could not be fulfilled without Western technologies and concepts. These elite responded by using a host of intellectual frameworks in their rulings that were widely known in the Muslim world at the time (comparative reasoning, conceptions of general interest, and conceptions of the ruler's interests) but that were not part of traditional Hanbali jurisprudence, especially in the Najd (Ménoret, 2003: p. 100). Out of the judgments grew a network of obligations in which a wide variety of peoples could live and benefit from Western institutions or technology.

King Abdulaziz further guaranteed his power by providing religious elites with state salaries and cash in kind, a highly unusual practice in central Arabia but one that established implicit limits for the religious authorities and power (Ménoret, 2003: p. 54). By the early 1920s, religious elites could occasionally limit the King's political authority or his use of a given technology but they could not switch their allegiances or ban a new technology or concept from being used (Ménoret, 2003: p. 80).

Formalizing a viable relationship with religious elites and integrating new technology, however, paled in comparison to King Abdulaziz's success at addressing a question that had vexed rulers in Arabia for centuries: tribal power. At the turn of the twentieth century, tribal peoples were nomadic or semi-nomadic, stretched over international boundaries, and autonomous of most state power. There were over 250 tribes in Arabia alone (al-Mouallimi, 2011: p. 14), and tribes were a power in their own right and had their own hierarchies. Their raids on settled communities revealed the scarcity of resources in Arabia but were also a threat to the livelihoods of the people in Riyadh, al-Hofuf, and other communities that were the core of the Saudi state. The high walls with guard towers that surrounded the towns and farming villages of the al-Ahsa Oasis were a testament to their power (Dickson,

1920: p. 263). Many tribes were also indirect threats to any government in central Arabia: Bedouin raids from Arabia on Karbala and other communities justified the Egyptian military intervention that had destroyed the first Saudi state in 1818.

Nor was it just a problem for governments in the central region of Arabia in the 1920s. The fourteenth-century writer, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), speaks of the power of tribes vis-à-vis settled governments in his landmark work, *The Muqaddimah*. It had been a challenge for the Ottoman Empire, while Western governments faced similar problems after they took control of large regions of the Arab Middle East away from Istanbul after World War I. In the early 1920s, British and French officials in the Arab World were forced to deploy advanced weapons—including airplanes and machine guns—to defeat tribal rebellions in the Middle East. The 1920 revolt in Iraq alone cost the British government 40 million pounds, a vast sum for the time, but provided a model that the leaders of independent Iraq would utilize to suppress rebellions among tribal Arab populations, Kurds and others for the rest of the twentieth century (Simon, 2004: p. 46).

Settling the Tribes

Following a similar approach was out of the question for King Abdulaziz. He lacked the financial and military resources of European colonial administrators. Instead, he focused on convincing Arabia's tribes to give up their foremost asset, mobility, and to join his military forces through a process of dialogue, persuasion, reciprocity, and, at times, force. Scores of religious activists, or *muṭaww'a*, met the tribes to convince them they could escape what they portrayed as the injustice, insecurity, poverty, and violence of nomadic life by moving to new settlements of 1,500 to 3,000 people (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 130). The settlements, called *hujjar*, invoked a key turning point in Islamic history well known to all tribesmen in Arabia: the *hijra* (migration) of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers in 622 from persecution in Mecca to the first Islamic community in Medina (al-Rasheed, 2010: p. 57). Even the names of actual settlements were chosen with care. For instance, 'Artawiyya near Riyadh invoked the 'Arṭa, a shrub that is abundant in the area and a favorite of camels, their most prized possessions—possessions they were asked to sell upon settlement (Abū 'Aliyaa, 2010: p. 205; al-Rihani, 1923: p. 130).

From the founding of the first settlements in 1913 until the early 1930s, tens of thousands of tribesmen and their families moved from the desert to nearly 170 new villages (US Department of State, 1931: p. 114). These settlements were mixed to break down tribal divisions and build loyalty to a national administration and its leader, King Abdulaziz (Abu 'Aliyaa, 2010: p. 209). Some rebellious tribes were divided into smaller units.⁹ Tribes received plots of land near *hujjar* settlements, and their leaders received land and property in Riyadh.¹⁰ There they were also integrated into the command of the Saudi military, where ordinary tribesmen served in an irregular force, the Ikhwan, that increased the military power available to King Abdulaziz and allowed him to realize his dream of unifying Arabia under his family's banner (Abu 'Aliyaa, 2010: p. 208).

In the new communities in a unified Arabia, prosperity, peace, and religious morality were linked. As the Arab American traveler and writer Amin al-Rihani

noted during a visit to the Kingdom in the 1920s, the *muṭaww'a*, taught tribesmen 'that farming, trade, and industry, did not contravene religion, and that the rich believer was superior to the poor believer' (Abu 'Aliyaa, 2010: p. 206). Under the careful watch of the *muṭaww'a*, tribesmen could simultaneously enjoy the material benefits of a settled life and use new technology, and could be comfortable that they were doing both in a peaceful physical space in which the teachings of Islam were upheld. A century later, a film about this process at the National Museum in Riyadh observes that it 'brought universal benefits: unity after division; prosperity after poverty'. The gun, it concludes, had become a weapon 'of celebration' and was no longer a symbol of 'anarchy and bloodshed'.¹¹

That phrase about the new role of the gun in a sedentary environment points to the power of the settlements to serve as a place of *Tajdīd* and *Iṣlāḥ*. Tribesmen and other Saudis would come to understand the urban environment in a way very different from that common in the West and other parts of the world. There, cities are wealthy and technologically advanced spaces populated by people who are generally strangers to one another and lack direct or regular personal contact with leaders. In these urban spaces, social mores are expected to be far more 'liberal'; there is no expectation that religious morality will be enforced as in small towns and little direct personal relationships with those in power. In cities, parades and public events attempt to generate a sense of the community as a whole, but common connections tend to exist, when they exist, at the level of neighborhoods.

By contrast, Saudi Arabia's urban life (and by extension advanced or modern social settings) combined urban and rural social expectations in the West. The settled spaces in the kingdom were wealthy and technologically advanced but public morality was enforced. Today one can see the influence of this framework in malls featuring the latest global brands: they close for the five prayers and are policed by the *muṭaww'a*. Trips on airlines or trains in the kingdom begin with the entire Muslim travel prayer, and tickets contain a warning that travelers may be reseated to meet the needs of other travelers, who presumably may not wish to sit next to a passenger of the opposite sex. Public spaces from elevators to schools to major highways feature verses of the Quran or calls to remember Allah. Here it is worth noting that the name *muṭaww'a* derives from the Arabic root to *flatten* or *push down*. The sense of public morality has its effect: Saudi Arabia has a relatively small official police force per capita, much smaller than that of Japan or most European states (Foley, 2010: p. 3).

At the same time, both politics and a sense of community retained personal ties based on shared kinship—even between people who did not know each other. Anyone, no matter their rank or social status, must say *salām 'alākum* (peace be upon you) when they enter a space with other people. Other tribal values, such as prioritizing the group over the individual and generosity toward visitors, became the norm in the kingdom and a key factor in unifying a highly diverse society.

Personal Politics

These values were incorporated into municipal politics. Saudis could expect that they could meet with senior leaders in the urban centers and seek redress for their problems, no matter how minor. That personalization of power extended to the top

leadership, where King Ibn Saud assumed a central ceremonial and personal role. The Arab-American scholar Amin al-Rihani noted that advisers, without exception, were 'but an echo of the royal will and a tool of its command' (al-Enazy, 2009: p. 19). Tribes and their leaders made personal allegiances to him, allegiances that the descendants of tribesmen saw as fully viable decades later (Vassiliev, 2000: pp. 288–290). He also married dozens of women from the tribes, further investing the tribes in him and his family.¹² These marriages built on earlier ones with the families of religious scholars, sedentary families, and slaves, a process that helped build a new 'Saudi' dynasty (al-Enazy, 2009). Abdulaziz personally assumed the tribute payments that had long been made by weak tribes to stronger ones.¹³ He and his government provided food, tea, sugar, clothes, and other gifts to tribes as well (Foley, 2010: p. 22).¹⁴ In 1931 alone, he gave 4000 tribesmen a large meal daily and an annual 'allowance' of cash.¹⁵ He also provided free or greatly subsidized food to Saudi towns and cities. Over time, these types of payments became a permanent welfare system, where power, as King Abdulaziz noted to a Dutch visitor, rested in his ability 'to pay, pay, pay'.¹⁶

Critically, these payments were not the same and help us see the contours of a government system in which administration was far from uniform. Not all tribes or communities were taxed at the same rate, and some communities were exempt from military service (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 131). A tribe often split between wings that were always settled and those which spent long periods away from the settlements and only returned for key harvesting days or religious periods (Abu 'Aliyaa, 2010: p. 131). Tribal and other populations that remained settled permanently could easily travel to spaces with other social norms, including desert camps modeled on those of nomadic people with tents, camels and other animals tied to nomadic life. Many residences or businesses were also off limits to the *muṭaww'a*.

The lack of uniformity facilitated social harmony in a diverse Kingdom, and created a patchwork of contrasting social norms which Saudis negotiated on a daily basis—a social milieu recreated at the Uqayro Conference held on the Saudi coast in 1922, where there were three camps: an Arab Bedouin one, a communal area, and a European camp, which had Western furniture, foods, and wine, a drink banned elsewhere in the Kingdom from military service (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 131). One of the American participants was astonished by the European camp and observed: '...we visited each other...and left cards...or spoke about the weather as if we were in London or New York' (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 131).

Alternative Approaches: Home and Abroad

This eclectic approach to society and diplomacy was different from those adopted by other Muslims in the years after World War I when the Ottoman Empire withdrew from the Arab World. The leader of the Turkish Republic, which replaced the Empire in 1922, Mustafa Kemal (1881–1938), sought to sever all ties between the Turks and the Arabs. He saw that division as central to a process of national revitalization which aimed to adapt wholesale both secularism and European economic, political, and social models. Other models, including those that synthesized

Islam and modernity, were rejected as relics of a failed past. Kemal's approach would prove to be a potent model for other Muslim leaders.

However, Mustafa Kemal's policies, including the abolition of the office of the Caliphate, or the titular leader of the Muslim World community, sent shockwaves throughout the Muslim World. In South Asia, the Muslim community split into two camps: (a) those supporting a separate nation for Muslims; and (b) leaders such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888–1958), who advocated cooperation with Gandhi and Indian nationalism. Azad saw significant common ground between Islam and liberal Western political thought. In his historic statement in a Kolkata Court in 1922, Azad stated 'sovereignty, as defined by the Prophet of Islam and the Caliphs, was a perfect concept of democratic equality, and it could only take shape with the whole nation's will, unity, suffrage, and election'. In his eyes, there was no functional difference between a Caliph and the president of a republic, and it was the 'duty of Muslims' to refuse to acknowledge 'the moral justification' of 'even an Islamic government' if 'full play is not granted in it to the will and franchise of the nation' (Noorani, 2002: p. 116).

By contrast, Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), an Egyptian school teacher, reacted to the fall of the Caliphate very differently. He organized the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization modeled on a Western political party and one dedicated to implementing a vision as uniform as Kemal's in Turkey: to revitalize Egypt and to resist European imperialism by implementing a singular version of Islam to all aspects of life, no matter how large or small. These ideas would go on to impact other Muslims seeking to synthesize Islam and modernity and to respond to the challenge of European colonial power from West Africa to Southeast Asia (Tadros, 2012: pp. 47–50).

Among those who would share this unitary vision were leading members of the tribal levies who had helped make the unification of Saudi Arabia possible under King Abdulaziz, the Ikhwan. They met at the first *hujjar* settlement, 'Arṭawiyya, and voiced their frustration with King Abdulaziz's unwillingness to share political power with them along with what they saw as his and the state's drift away from the core Islamic values in its arrangements with the British and with the people of the Hejaz—values that had convinced them to join the Saudi state and fight for its leader. They were also unhappy with the King's pledges to London not to disturb British-linked territories that bordered his new state. They had hoped to build on the conquests of the Hejaz and gain more territory and rise to the status of partners with the King (al-Rasheed, 2010: pp. 63–64).

Beginning in late 1927, the Ikhwan launched a series of raids into Transjordan, Kuwait, and Iraq, inviting immediate British military retaliation with airplanes and other modern weapons on Saudi territory. For Abdulaziz, the raids challenged his personal authority and the principal argument for sedentarization of tribes: preventing them from raiding surrounding states and inviting military retaliation. If the rebellion succeeded, it would have eviscerated royal authority and two key principles of Saudi reunification: sedentarization of the tribes and neutralizing them as a threat to the Saudi state or to any of its neighbors. The Ikhwan's assertion of a single vision of state and society also threatened the viability of the arrangements needed to govern a diverse and vast Kingdom. At the same time,

killing Muslims, however justified, was a serious matter and could spark others in society to take up arms (Bowen, 2008: pp. 91–92).

In this moment of crisis, King Abdulaziz turned to the religious elites and the *mutaww'a* for support. They could no longer switch allegiances as they had done in the nineteenth century. They were now too invested in the King and his system. At a conference in Riyadh in 1928 they ruled decisively in his favor. They stated that the King, as leader of the Muslim community, had the sole prerogative to wage war (*jihad*). They also confirmed that he was a pious Muslim who faithfully adhered to Islamic principles. With the approval of the religious elites, the King rallied his allies and worked with Great Britain to crush the Ikhwan. By 1930, the rebellion was over—a process aided by the widespread use of wireless (that is, radio) communication, motor cars, and what had become an efficient domestic intelligence service (al-Rasheed, 2010: pp. 64–66).

From Poverty to Prosperity

The defeat of the Ikhwan rebellion, however, proved to be little comfort given devastating economic conditions. The Wall Street crash of 1929 severely lowered the prices of agricultural commodities which fuelled the economies of much of Asia, especially those in India and Southeast Asia. Since Muslims from those two regions made up the bulk of pilgrims on the annual Hajj, the number of people on the Hajj dropped from over 100,000 in the late 1920s to just 38,000 in 1931 (Foley, 2010: p. 24). Critically, the pilgrimage directly or indirectly made up the lion's share of state finances, close to 80 percent of annual revenues. Customs duties, most of which were also tied to Hajj-related trade and imports, usually accounted for another third of government revenues.¹⁷ Those revenues dropped from 1.2 million pounds in 1928 to 400,000 in 1932.¹⁸ Equally importantly, pearling, a mainstay of Saudi communities on the Gulf coast and Jizan on the Red Sea collapsed at nearly the same time, a victim of a Japanese technological breakthrough that led to the mass production of cultured pearls (Commins, 2012: pp. 120–121).

Under these circumstances, the Saudi government ran up vast debts and scrambled to resolve severe shortages of basic commodities. It sought every source of income, including the pious endowments connected with the territories in the Hejaz in Asia and Africa (Foley, 2010: p. 22). The revenue of the Hejaz and the Najd was cut by a third, while the national currency, the Riyal, plunged in value (Foley, 2013: p. 50). The state's financial situation became so perilous that King Abdulaziz is reported to have told his British confidant, John Philby, 'If anyone... were to offer me a million pounds now, he would be welcome to all the concessions that he wants in my country' (Holden and Johns, 1981: p. 108). This was not an idle comment: in 1932 he sent his son, Feisal, to Western Europe and the Soviet Union to find additional funds and seriously considered Moscow's offer to provide a loan of a million pounds—despite the clear differences between his worldview and that of the Soviet Union (Foley, 2013: pp. 45–46, 51–53).

These initiatives reflected the severity of the crisis confronting the Kingdom. A British diplomatic report from 1931 notes that there were reports of 'half-starved

Bedouins' flooding Saudi cities and they were demanding food from travelers on the main road from Jeddah to Mecca. The report added that as many as 35 Bedouins reportedly died a day in Medina, and that Saudi merchants faced both a seriously depressed economy and 'Government demands for money or in kind, extorted ostensibly on loan but without any definite prospect of repayment of the money or payment for the goods'. Furthermore, prices for most imported goods skyrocketed, while poor monetary policy created a profound feeling of uncertainty, further depressing the economy.¹⁹

In a series of reports written in 1932 and early 1933, the Vice Consul of the United States in Aden, Yemen, W.N. Walmsley painted a picture of the Kingdom as bleak as that of his British colleagues. The American diplomat noted that he and his colleagues had seen 'the first major crack in the Saudi organization' (or its system or *nizām*) (Walmsley, 1933: p. 168). He noted that British and other European interests were finally gaining control of key sectors of the economy and state after many years of diplomacy designed to maintain Riyadh's independence. Furthermore, Riyadh's decision to engage Moscow had further weakened King Abdulaziz's position as the legitimate guardian of Mecca and Medina. According to Muslims in much of India and Southeast Asia, Walmsley argued, the Soviet Union was the enemy of all religion, including Islam (Walmsley, 1933: pp. 172–173). These domestic and foreign factors 'had greatly strengthened' the US diplomat and his colleagues' pessimistic assessment about Saudi Arabia's future and forced him to make an ominous prediction (Walmsley, 1933: pp. 172–173). If the 1933 Hajj ended in failure, it would mark 'the beginning' of King Abdulaziz's 'fall as a world personage' and 'his retirement to the Najd'—an event that would signal the end of his project to reunify the peninsula (Walmsley, 1933: p. 173).

Despite these challenges, however, King Abdulaziz continued to rule Saudi Arabia for twenty years after Walmsley predicted the imminent demise of his Kingdom and withdrawal from world politics, surviving a period even more challenging than that of the 1930s. Although the Hajj of 1933 was far better than those of the previous two years, it was still below the Hajj pilgrimages of the late 1920s and not nearly enough to resuscitate Saudi state finances.²⁰ During World War II, Saudi Arabia had to beg for funds annually from Great Britain and later the United States just to administer the Hajj. Insufficient food supplies were also a serious challenge. In 1941, King Abdulaziz provided subsidies to close to half a million people and fed nearly 30,000 people daily, a number equal to almost the entire population of the Saudi capital, Riyadh (Carter, 1941). By 1943, Saudi subsidies to tribes accounted for 80 percent of the annual budget (Ryan to Simon, 1931: p. 606).

The survival of Saudi Arabia during such a difficult era is a testament to King Abdulaziz's skills as a diplomat and politician but also of the vitality of the system that he had put in place in the opening decades of the twentieth century. That system invested both the political and religious elites in the survival of Saudi Arabia but also brought many peoples of different faiths and backgrounds into the Kingdom's governing system. It also addressed the factors that had led to political instability in the past, notably mobile tribal populations and bad relations with global powers. The settlement of tribes, which occurred in a political framework very different from that of the settlement of tribes in other Arab states,

created a structure for their social integration and provided Saudi leaders with mechanisms to resolve conflicts with a diverse population that did not depend on violence, revolution, or impersonal bureaucratic governance. Yet few in the West and in the Arab World could see those strengths or would play a critical role in the country's future, especially since it was a monarchy. Leading Western social scientists discussed what Samuel Huntington would call the 'King's dilemma'—or how monarchs would maintain their 'traditional' and absolute authority while also introducing modern ideas and technologies which were fundamentally antithetical to 'premodern' conceptions of power (Huntington, 1968: p. 177). This was a dilemma that a monarch was not supposed to resolve by definition. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1959, the British journalist and expert on Arab Affairs, James Morris, observes that there had never been a monarchy of 'such glittering patrimony' and staggering wealth as the Al-Saud. Although the family was then experiencing 'a moment' of peace, that moment would not last long because the postwar era was 'an age of equality'. The Saudi Monarchy was simply too 'swollen with gold in an area so plagued with poverty' to survive forever. Indeed, Morris concludes, 'it is probably safe to say that, whatever course history may take, within fifty years the kings of the Moslem world will reign no more' (Morris, 1959: p. SM10).

Conclusion

More than half a century after Morris made his prediction, the royal family of Saudi Arabia still reigns. The family has survived multiple waves of revolutions and government collapses in the Middle East in the 1950s, 1970s, and the second decade of the twenty-first century. Not only did their Kingdom subsequently join the global economic and political system, but it also moved millions of its people to technologically advanced cities and integrated them with thousands of foreign workers in a society that had little in common with the ideals of Morris. The Kingdom was further able to accommodate an expansion of the Hajj in the same period, an expansion symbolized by the first 10 riyal Saudi bank note that featured six languages in 1952: Arabic, English, Farsi, Jawi, Turkish, and Urdu (al-Rshaidan, 2013).

That Hajj coincided with the first year that oil revenues became a tangible part of the Saudi budget along with the start of a decade of political instability that would test (but not break) the system of tribal settlement and networks of patron-client relations built by King Abdulaziz. Despite the fierce divisions created in the Arab World by the onset of the Cold War, the Kingdom endured while other monarchies in the Arab world collapsed. The contrast with Iraq was startling: Iraq had as much oil as Saudi Arabia, more water, and more farmland but could not resolve its internal divisions except through violence and toppling of governments, beginning with the 1958 revolution.

The success reflected the country's long history of dealing with great diversity as well as its creation of a unique framework of *Tajdīd* and *Iṣlāḥ*. The framework provided a pathway that legitimized the use of technologies from non-Islamic

societies, resolving a dilemma that plagued many Muslim thinkers: should they retain their authentic cultural and religious identity, completely adopt the ideas of the West, or synthesize the two modes of thought? While these and many other Muslims chose a single path and sought to apply it to all of society, King Abdulaziz and other Saudis chose another approach: they refused to remain bound to a single, monolithic answer.

Rather than synthesizing Islam and modernity at home and abroad, Saudis chose to keep Islam and their traditions in one sphere and the outside world in another. When Saudis have to utilize non-Muslim technology or cooperate with non-Muslims, they enter the appropriate social space (such as an oil refinery, compound, or international conference) fully confident that they will be able to revert to an 'Islamic' social norm when needed. Such behavior is natural for a people used to negotiating among disparate and contradictory contexts, which the Saudis experience as part of the multifaceted reality.

This dual vision and approach to dealing with the contemporary world has deep roots and can be seen in a joke that King Abdulaziz reportedly made at the Uqayro Conference in 1922. Saudis have a rich tradition of humor and irony, both of which utilize multiple messages, add or assert multiple 'truths' simultaneously.²¹ The King was no exception. At the conference, he joked with the Arab American Amin al-Rihani how close the European camp was when they were in a communal area between the Arab Bedouin and the European camps: 'Let us pay a visit to civilization... You see, civilization is not very far from us' (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 125).

The joke reveals one of the greatest accomplishments of the king: He created a kingdom where 'civilization' (contemporary ideas and technology) were close enough to be useful but where sufficient space existed to retain royal authority and its claim to uphold Islamic principles and the values of tribe and Arab society. This vision ultimately created a structure of government that was at once strong and unchanging while also sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of a technologically advanced society in contemporary era.

An American writer cannot help but be reminded of words by the great American poet, Walt Whitman (1819–1892), whose vision of America remains to be fulfilled. These lines from the poet's 'Song of Myself' might be appropriate to at least one aspect of the memory of King Abdulaziz:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)... (Whitman, 1855)²²

Whitman is himself recalling another great American writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who in his essay 'Self-Reliance', famously observed that 'a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds' (Emerson, 1841). For King Abdulaziz it is not a question of 'contradiction' but of the acceptance of diversity, of the avoidance of dogmatism and of 'a foolish consistency'—which is Whitman's ultimate point. This is a matter for another essay, but it seems clear that King

Abdulaziz was far from experiencing diversity as a threat: rather his faith in Islam *enabled* his pluralism—it was the strength of his belief that allowed him to admit so much diversity into his consciousness and his kingdom.

Notes

1. For a recent example of this, see *BBC News Magazine* (2013).
2. This is a construct Toby Jones uses in *Desert Kingdom* (2010), p. 5.
3. Jones (2010) uses the term over 20 times in the book, see pp. 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 15, 16, 22, 40, 47, 48, 53, 55, 65, 70, 93, 106, 138, 148, 149, 152, 217, 236, 237, and 240.
4. For instance, the 1955 Royal Decree establishing the Board of Grievances specifically uses the word ‘citizen’ and not ‘subject’. See Aba-Namay (1993) and Long (1973).
5. Among those who have made this argument most forcefully are the academic and newspaper columnist, Dr Ali Musa (author in conversation with Dr Ali Musa, October 7, 2013).
6. For a recent example of this argument, see Robin Wright (2013). Another text that has raised doubt about the future of Saudi Arabia is Christopher Davidson (2012).
7. By traditional, I am referring to the idea of ‘traditional authority’ forwarded by the German sociologist, Max Weber, which explains the power of monarchies and other governments as tied to tradition and custom with the simple phrase: ‘it has always been that way and always will be’.
8. For a recent example of this language and framework, see Haifaa al-Mansour, interview by Gavin Esler, *Hardtalk*, BBC World (2013).
9. The Mutair, one of the tribes which resisted Saudi power, were divided into three parts by the Saudi government. See Alexei Vassiliev (2000: p. 294).
10. In keeping with traditions dating back centuries in the Arab world and the Ottoman Empire, the Saudi state retained ownership of the land. Although the 1858 Ottoman Land law had converted scores of land from *miri* (state owned) to *mulk* (privately owned), large portions of the agricultural land in the Arab provinces of the empire remained in state hands as late as 1908. Ravndal (1908: p. 5 and Zürcher (2004: p. 68).
11. Saudi National Museum (Riyadh), *The Unification of Saudi Arabia*.
12. It is estimated that he married over 200 women during his life Ménoret (2003: p. 84).
13. This system of payments built on the wartime practice of dividing booty regardless of class or social rank. Rihani notes: ‘Those who die in battle are happy, and those who escape death are not disappointed. Four fifths of the spoils are divided equally among them, without favoritism, without any consideration for rank or personal worth: the other fifth goes to the state. This is one of Ibn Saud’s ways of winning over the *bedu*’ (al-Rihani, 1923: p. 130).
14. Louis Dame, who visited Saudi Arabia in the 1920s, noted that as many as 70 percent of Saudis lived at the expense of the government (Dame, 1921: pp. 11–12).
15. Calvert to Sir John Simon, ‘Jedda Report for November 1934’, no. 354, E7515/715/25, December 3, 1934, reprinted in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers From the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, ed. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, pt. 2: *From the First to the Second World War, Series B: Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, 1918–1939*, ed. Robin Bidwell, vol. 10: Eastern Affairs, December 1933–June 1935, Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1985, pp. 245–247.
16. Ryan to Henderson, Jeddah to London, May 28, 1931, no. 200, E3267/1600/25, reprinted in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the*

- Foreign Office Confidential Print*, ed. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, pt. 2: *From the First to the Second World War, Series B: Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, 1918–1939*, pp. 207–209.
17. Ryan to Simon, 'Hejaz-Nejd: Annual Report, 1931', E 2429/680/25, Foreign Office, May 18, 1932, reprinted in *Records of Saudi Arabia: Primary Documents, 1902–1960*, ed. Penelope Tuson and Anita Burdett, Vol. 4: 1926–1932, Oxford: Archive Editions, 1992, p. 606.
 18. Ryan to Simon, Jeddah, December 28, 1931, E165/165/25, *Records of Saudi Arabia: Primary Documents: 1902–1960*, ed. Penelope Tuson and Anita Burdett, Vol. 4: 1926–1943, London: Archive Edition, 1992, p. 717.
 19. Ryan to Simon, Jeddah, December 28, 1931, E165/165/25, *Records of Saudi Arabia: Primary Documents: 1902–1960*, ed. Penelope Tuson and Anita Burdett, Vol. 4: 1926–1943, London: Archive Edition, 1992, p. 717.
 20. Ryan to Simon, 'Pilgrimage of A.H. 1351 (1933)', Jeddah, July 29, 1933, E4704/30/25, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, ed. Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, pt. 2: *From the First to the Second World War, Series B: Turkey, Iran, and the Middle East, 1918–1939*, ed. Robin Bidwell, vol. 14, pp. 213–256.
 21. One can see this clearly in poetry, where there are two broad categories of poets: al-Madih poets, who praise and pay tribute, and al-Hija poets, who specialize in satire in critique.
 22. Stanza 51: For a full text of the poem, see http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/song.htm.

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