

RIYADH REVISITED by Alan Munro

'Inside the Kingdom' by Robert Lacey

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'The Kingdom', Robert Lacey's magisterial study of the history of Saudi Arabia and her powerful ruling dynasty, the Al Saud, has for nigh on 30 years provided a definitive introduction to one of the world's most wealthy, yet most secretive, states.

That chronicle, built upon contacts and confidences patiently established by the author with Saudis in all walks of life, revealed the inhibitions and tensions within a deeply conservative and pious society emerging from isolated seclusion to face the challenges of the secular cultures and international upheavals of the contemporary world. By lifting the country's heavy veil the book gave rise to some offence and was promptly banned; yet its candour helped to establish a better and more balanced understanding, not only abroad but also among Saudis themselves, of prevalent perceptions, and misperceptions, about their singular and paradoxical society.

The author has now come up with a timely and worthy sequel. 'Inside the Kingdom' is the product of three years spent reconnecting with old haunts and contacts, and new faces too, to take stock of the process of adaptation and reform that has been gathering pace through the reigns of three Al Saud monarchs - notably during the eventful 23-year rule of King Fahd and with new impetus under the direction of King Abdallah, acting first as regent following his half-brother Fahd's incapacitating stroke in 1997 and for the past four years on the throne himself. Thirty years ago it was said that Saudi Arabia was being dragged reluctantly into the 14th century. Things have since speeded up; the 19th could be today's benchmark - and counting. The author rightly gives credit to the Al Saud as the engine of change here.

But there is yet a way to go. This remains a society that operates by consensus and where public attitudes are conditioned by an entrenched clerical establishment. The revivalist foundations of Wahhabism, with their origins in Arabia's harsh desert environment, induce bigotry; yet they do not advocate violence. Lacey understands this and avoids the common misconception that they provide direct inspiration for the political terrorism of Usama Bin-Laden's al-Qa'ida movement and its associates in Afghanistan and elsewhere. He does, however, bring out the extent to which the creed's narrow intolerance, reinforced by a predominance of religious instruction within the school curriculum, can foster the emergence of pockets of fanatical jihadist idealism among the country's susceptible youth.

The book's absorbing narrative opens where its predecessor left off, with the shock caused by the seizure in late 1979 of Islam's most holy shrine, the Grand Mosque in Mecca, by a group of fanatical revivalists under the messianic leadership of a young bedouin, Juhaiman al-Otaibi, and the bloody battle that ensued to end their suicidal occupation. The author traces with shrewd perceptiveness the extent to which the tensions which this crisis created in the partnership between the regime and the religious leadership led to an enhancement of religious influence over the social environment and put a retrograde brake on the process of modernisation.

The book goes on to unroll a wide canvas of social and political dynamic, covering events and matters of record as well as breaching significant taboos. The scene, much of which is based on interviews with individuals, some wielding authority and others under the scrutiny of authority, is elaborated through the eyes of a journalist rather than an historian. This gives a first-hand authenticity to a narrative that, while sometimes bordering on the factitious, encompasses an extensive review of the pressures which are affecting the Kingdom's prosperous yet complex society. These include; divisions within an outwardly united ruling dynasty and the outlook for the succession; steps towards wider public consultation; the role of the media; the predicament of a Shi'a minority seen as heretical by some Wahhabi divines; the evolving status of women in the face of tenacious male pre-eminence; the polarisation between piety and secularism among a frustrated youth; and terror vs counter-terror. Beyond her borders, Saudi Arabia faces: the consequences of a misguided dalliance, now terminated, with militant Islamist elements in Afghanistan; the peaks and troughs of the crucial relationship with the United States - ultimate guarantor of the nation's security yet capable of producing "chaos and jeopardy"; the confusing Saudi dimension to al-Qa'ida and the events of 9/11; threats from a militant Shi'i Iran and a destabilised Iraqi neighbour; the politics of the oil market; and a growing taste for regional diplomacy including Palestine. It all amounts to a tour de force; the author has once again succeeded in getting inside the carapace of this shielded society - a considerable achievement.

It may seem churlish to pick holes; occasional inaccuracies are to be expected. The re-establishment of relations with a post-Soviet Russia in 1991 following the Gulf War was preceded by a judicious financial loan designed to pre-empt any inclination to back her client Saddam Hussein. Negotiations over the valuable, if tediously controversial, al-Yamamah air-defence contract with Britain were initiated in 1983, two years prior to the blocking of the supply of F-15 aircraft by the US Congress. The overall picture also contains broader gaps. Repeated highlighting of the strands of sedition, while adding drama, can suggest a country ripe with discontent; this is not the case. Nor is due recognition given to the contribution to reform made, albeit with characteristic caution, by King Fahd, notably in taking advantage of the flux that followed the Gulf War to bring forward a new constitutional order. I wrote at that time a despatch to the Foreign Secretary with the title "Never the Same Again", and so it has proved. The firm resolve which Fahd, rather than his American allies, demonstrated in sustaining the disparate international coalition that evicted Saddam Hussein from Kuwait also deserves more credit.

It is a pity, too, that more is not made of the Kingdom's ongoing attachment to her long-established relationship with Britain. Its significance is borne out by the recent contract to provide a new generation of air defence support, concluded despite ongoing irritation over investigations into al-Yamamah and the voluble presence in London of opposition figures. Robert Lacey has, nevertheless, provided a fascinating and readable insight into a Kingdom engaged in catching up with the world, albeit on its own terms; he finds its coffee cup to be half-full, not half-empty.