

Heavy Lies the Saudi Head That Wears the Crown.  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Although the King of Saudi Arabia does not wear a crown, his head is heavy. His country has problems that may bode ill for the survival of the Saudi royals.

I have written before about cultures that embrace patterns that do not have long survival value. Arabia has many such patterns, starting with the unyielding form of Islam that was part of the deal that won the country's rule for the Ibn Sauds. Nothing is more at war with the currents of modernity than Salafi Islam (Wahhabism), that considers itself the purest form of Islam, modeled after the imagined earliest years of Islam itself.

It is like all fundamentalisms: cherry picking those elements, real or imagined, during the founding years of a religion. This unenlightened sect, emboldened by government payoff with oil money, has spread its message beyond Arabia, establishing schools (madrassas) from Indonesia across Central Asia and into Pakistan, and Afghanistan, and Africa, as well as some schools in Europe and the US. Above all, this sect preaches control over women, who are to be kept as child-bearers and property, with the status of minors. Terrorists created by Wahhabi indoctrination now threaten Saudi Arabia itself.

Women. The Saudi kings themselves had to defy the Wahhabis early in the 20th century to bring automobiles, telephones, and later, television into the country. These were, of course, un-Islamic. Women, however, had no right to drive a car, although many urban women now work and resent having to hire a Pakistani man to drive for them. Some women have defied the state with drive-outs. The most recent five have been arrested for breaking a law not on the books, but enforced by the thuggish religious police anyway.

Women, who must wear the hot black total coverup out of doors, while men dress in loose white cotton robes, have been bought off by money sufficient to escape periodically to Europe or the US (with husbands, of course). The first thing that comes off in the airplane restroom is the hijab, and out comes the world's tightest designer jeans and full makeup. Treated like adolescents, they rebel like adolescents.

Succession. The Saudis have a unique system for succession upon the death or incapacity of the king. The crown passes to brothers of the king, not to sons. The reason for this custom lies in polygamy; the first Saudi king (1932) had numerous siblings and their mother extracted a promise that rule would go through brothers. In other polygamous countries, a new king generally kills all his male siblings (for good reason). The Saudi queen prevented the bloodletting by having rule pass through brothers. What now? Almost all of the original brothers are old and closer to their ends. Will the king be bold enough to select one of his sons and if he does, how will the other sons take it? Bloodletting can be predicted.

Turmoil. The Saudis are not only Wahhabi, they are Sunni Muslims who regard other Muslim sects, such as the Shiites, heretical. Unfortunately, the oil workers in the lucrative eastern Arabian fields are Shiite, and are tired of being abused. There are periodic outbreaks of rebellion, followed by severe military punishment. It would be a minor issue if it were only a troublesome minority but the Shiites have relatives in Shiite Iran, a country that meddles in chaos and threatens the stability of the entire Arab world.

Arab Spring. The supposed freedom movements roiling the Middle East are spreading, and the Saudis may not be able to hold them off forever. These movements reflect the public dissatisfaction with their economies, their dictatorships, and their backwardness in the world. None of these movements will result in a liberal democracy (protection for minorities and women are not in the cards); but they are demanding change of a sort. Arabs value stability more than freedom, but that stability has become too expensive for the young and restless, who would like to live like their western counterparts whom they see on television and movies.

Heavy lies the head that wears the Saudi crown.

678 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of How Do You Know That?  
You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or w