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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Tablet Goes to Saudi Arabia

'Everyone here has their Jews now'

BY THE EDITORS

For or nearly a half-century, American Jews understood the Middle East as a product of the Cold War, in which two external powers—the U.S. and the Soviets—tried to flip individual states in the region to one side or the other. After 1967, Israel proved its worth to Washington by demonstrating that it could defeat Soviet proxies in the Arab world, and also help bring countries like Egypt into the U.S. camp by ceding land as part of peace deals. In the wake of that success, Israel became a linchpin of American foreign policy, playing two roles: that of the U.S.-dependent military power, and of the U.S.-dependent peace partner.

That world ended with the dissolution of the Soviet empire, though we understand it that way only in hindsight. The period between 1990 and 2010 was merely an interregnum, in which U.S. hegemony ensured a semblance of continuity in the lives of its allies, while former Soviet clients seemed to lose their great power patron.

But a new era—the current era—was about to begin.

As president, Barack Obama not only withdrew U.S. forces from Iraq but overturned the old Cold War alliance structure by sidelining traditional status quo allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel and moving closer to the regime in Iran. The decision to demote U.S. alliances in the Gulf in particular was supported by the illusion that fossil fuels would soon be phased out of world energy markets, to be replaced by renewable energy technologies primarily manufactured in China.

Obama largely succeeded in creating a new geopolitical reality in the Middle East, which is largely the one we see today. In it, there are only three major powers: Israel, with the region's only technological and military capacity to combat all security threats; Iran, too militarily weak to remake the region in its image, but strong enough to break formerly sovereign countries through mass violence; and Saudi Arabia, with the natural resource capacity to swing global energy markets

and the cash to pay for social stability at home.

Each of the more populous Arab states that was seen during the Cold War as potentially more stable and influential than Saudi Arabia—Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Lebanon—is now a shattered wreck. Only the Saudis have emerged from the bloody 20th century with a young population and young political leadership unscathed by the experience of either communism or fascism; Pan Arabism or Islamist fanaticism; civil or sectarian war. It also retains the Sunni world's greatest claim to religious legitimacy, with the House of Saud seen as the most responsible available stewards of the holy sites in Mecca and Medina.

The future of the Middle East will therefore largely be determined by the technological and military capabilities of Israel on the one hand, and the economic resources of Saudi Arabia on the other—and the extent to which they can cooperate together against their common existential enemy in Iran. Although Israel's military power and Saudi Arabia's economic power dwarf all regional competitors, they can do very little independently—Saudi Arabia because it cannot defend itself, and Israel because it lacks the legitimacy to operate in an explicit leadership role within the Arab Muslim world. The future of the Middle East, in other words, will be determined by how much Israel and Saudi Arabia are able to work together to pursue their own interests. Failure to cooperate will leave the region vulnerable to even more chaos and violence than it's experienced to date.

The future of the Middle East will also continue to be shaped by external great powers, but it remains unclear which one will predominate. The United States is now in its third consecutive administration that has publicly vowed to reduce U.S. interests and engagement in the Middle East. China is a very eager suitor, not least because its economy will clearly continue to depend on fossil fuels for the next 50 or 100 years. India and Russia are wild cards. Regardless, to the extent that Saudis and Israelis will succeed in cooperating with each other, their entente will

“So the world’s only Jewish state wants an alliance with Mohammed bin Salman’s Saudi Arabia. The question is: Who are these people?”

likely require some external guarantor. It is not a foregone conclusion that Washington is the right choice, as the dominant cultural and political ideology in the contemporary United States has cast both Zionism and the House of Saud as enemies.

So the world's only Jewish state wants—needs—an alliance with Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia. The question is: Who are these people? Are the far-reaching reforms initiated by MBS—which include an end to the religious police and compulsory hijab, the repudiation of the fundamentalist Wahhabi ideology the state once exported around the world, and the legalization of women driving—merely scaffolding for a larger repressive project that's destined for catastrophic failure? Or are they real changes that will actually make Saudi Arabia a freer and more normal country?

As with every big, unanswerable question about any foreign society, the only way to begin to find the answer is to go there, which is what Tablet did—the first time a delegation from a Jewish, Zionist publication was given permission to report freely (and entirely on its own dime) from the kingdom.

As we learned while the magazine decamped for a week to Riyadh and Jeddah, we weren't exactly alone.

Hardly a week goes by these days without leading Jewish communal figures, pro-Israel professionals, and hawkish think-tankers visiting Saudi Arabia's two biggest cities. “Everyone here has their Jews now,” explained a well-connected Saudi whose Jews we probably were.

Perhaps an inflated perception of Jewish power has led Saudi elites to accessorize with members of the tribe. Perhaps entrepreneurially minded Jews believe they have their own vital part to play in some future Saudi sequel to the Abraham Accords. Perhaps the dreams and egos of Jews and Saudis are especially compatible at this specific moment in history, and no deeper affinity is at work. All of this is more speculative, and inevitably less important, than the fact that a wealthy, populous, and internally stable Arab country that rules over the birthplace of Islam and whose government used to be a global exporter of anti-Jewish poison has discovered a certain philo-Semitism.

It turns out that in 2023, Saudi Arabia is a place where you can be at the same party as Will Smith and where no amount of money will buy you a beer, at least not in public. It is a country of young Snapchat and anime addicts where the taxis have digital kiblals in the dashboard, pointing toward Mecca, and the airplanes and coffee shops often have prayer rooms in the back. There is a traditional public dress code—white robes for the men, black abayas for the women—that is still widely observed, but isn't mandatory.

Under MBS, Saudi Arabia has experienced what one Riyadh-based artist described to us as a “harsh enlightenment,” a managed revolution in the social and economic spheres that leaves the state's powers and privileges intact. It is possible to hear criticism of the government in Riyadh, but this only happens behind closed doors, in the untouchable domain of a private home.

Saudi Arabia is a tribal desert society moving toward a more open future, which means it is also hurtling toward developments that no one, including MBS, can predict at the moment. Could one of them be peace with Israel? Diplomatic recognition

from the most stable large country in the Middle East would be an era-defining boon to both the Jewish state and U.S. strategic planners. Saudi Arabia is the only populous Arab country that hasn't been destroyed by an ethnic or religious bloodletting, self-immolating ideological project, or foreign intervention sometime in living memory. It has a young and educated population and a quarter-trillion barrels of oil. Peace between Saudi Arabia and Israel, arguably the two most powerful and highest-functioning countries in the Middle East, would backstop a chaotic region.

Alas, a Saudi-Israeli breakthrough

looks unlikely in the near term. The Saudi leadership believes it has little to gain from making peace with Israel absent a major concession on the Palestinian front. On the other hand, Saudi officials hint that they are willing to recognize Israel even before a Palestinian state is established if the right commitments and formulations can be agreed to. There is frequent talk that if Riyadh is going to be a global center of finance, technology, air travel, and a dozen other sectors in which the city may or may not achieve worldwide significance, no one can be kept out—including enemies like Iran and problematic partners like Israel.

Saudi Arabia's leaders believe they are riding a hot streak of national success and are in no mood to bend to anyone else's agenda. They see Washington as hectoring and ungrateful, Ankara as unserious, Tehran as annoying, and Jerusalem as an issue for another day. Still, the era of national assertion kicked off under MBS has frequently brought about the unthinkable, including a total reversal in the former relationship between Saudi Arabia and the world's Jews. History is happening quickly here, and more surprises are in store. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

The New Saudi State Sets Off Into Uncharted Geopolitical Waters

Far from being uncooperative, Saudi Arabia under MBS is playing precisely the regional role that Obama and Biden have long demanded—only more so

BY TONY BADRAN

A huge Saudi flag flies over the approach to Diriyah, the first capital of the al-Saud dynasty and the site of one of five massive national development projects that are re-making the socioeconomic and even the physical geography of Saudi Arabia. Local pride in these strenuous nationalist enterprises is palpable. But alongside the excitement and self-confidence in the country's internal trajectory, there is a parallel sense of geopolitical anxiety and bafflement. Reemerging as a global actor after decades of relative isolation, Saudi Arabia has thrown

open the shutters to find that the world outside its windows has changed.

Ever since Barack Obama upended America's stance in the Middle East, realigning the United States with Iran and consigning the Cold War American security structure to the dustbin, regional allies have been scrambling—first to understand what hit them, and then to try and make accommodations to survive the chaos unleashed by the American empire. After the better part of a century founded on the rock of a mutually beneficial, rational alliance with the United States, Saudi Arabia now finds itself without a geopolitical anchor or compass, but with no choice other than to chart a new course.

Syria was the fulcrum on which the American reorganization of the region, contrary to the interests and wishes of the Saudis and other traditional U.S. allies in the region, turned. First Obama recognized the war-torn country as an Iranian "equity" and worked with Russia to block the moves of Tehran's rivals in the Syrian theater, thereby pitting U.S. policy against that of the Saudis, the Gulf states, and Turkey. With Russia parked on its border with tacit U.S. cover, Turkey had to adjust its relationship with the Russians while dealing with Kurdish separatists inside Syria who now operated with open American backing. Similarly, Israel now had to factor Russian interests into its calculation in order to interdict Iranian troops and weapons moving from Syrian airfields and ports to threaten Israel from the Golan and Lebanon.

On the eve of Obama's nuclear deal with Iran—that is, at the moment of peak Iranian expansion and triumphalism in the region—the Saudis were confronted with a threat that came closer to home: Iranian backing for the Houthi war in Yemen. In fighting the Houthis, the Saudis were acting not only out of self-interest by protecting their own borders and national security, but also protecting a key energy chokehold from coming under the thumb of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. They were acting, in other

words, as a pillar of the post-World War II American alliance system, according to the common playbook that both the Saudis and the Americans had faithfully been using for the better part of the previous century.

American opposition to the Saudi military operation against the Iranian-backed Houthis, however, turned out to be just as vehement as it was with regard to the intervention of U.S. regional allies in Syria, if not more so. As the civil war in Yemen dragged on, the Saudis found themselves facing Iranian cruise missiles and drones, some launched from Iranian territory, that targeted Saudi airports and oil facilities. Left unchecked, such attacks clearly posed an existential threat to the Saudi state, thereby providing a potent reminder of the fact that the country on which the Saudis had historically relied on for protection against such threats—the United States—was now positioning itself as having interests on both sides of the conflict.

After the Iranians attacked strategic oil installations in September 2019, then-President Donald Trump did offer retaliatory options to the Saudis, who instead opted to absorb the hit, fearing a wider escalation to which American commitment would be sketchy at best. Sure enough, while Trump stood by the Saudis as Democrats introduced anti-Saudi resolutions in the Senate and as members of his own party criticized the kingdom, he then lost reelection. One of the very first actions the incoming Biden administration took—within days of taking office, in fact—was to remove the Houthis from the State Department’s list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

No one in Riyadh should have been surprised. Hostility toward and contempt for Saudi Arabia was a hallmark of Joe Biden’s campaign platform, and a reflection of the prevailing attitude among Democrats that also resonated with some Republicans, a portion of whom continued to see the Saudis as a fount of radicalization and as the “cause” of 9/11. In March 2022, the Iranians pushed further, via the Houthis, targeting Saudi Aramco installations in Jeddah.

“The Saudis are projecting onto China the rationale and the rationalism of their old arrangement with the United States, which they always hoped would continue.”

It’s not difficult, then, to understand why, facing a resurgent Iran, and absent any clear U.S. backing, Saudi Arabia wants to close the book on Yemen. The post-World War II arrangement with America, while by no means over, is broken, as American policy toward Iran remains on the realignment path set by Obama. An inward-focused Saudi Arabia needs a period of quiet and stability in order to proceed with its massive domestic restructuring venture, Vision 2030.

The Saudis, in other words, are playing for time. A war that regularly results in missile attacks inside the kingdom is not something that the Saudi leadership can afford or is likely to win. Their goal is therefore some form of an agreement with Iran that will allow the Saudis to focus elsewhere. To achieve that goal, the Saudis turned to China.

On Tablet’s recent visit to the country, shortly after the Chinese-brokered deal was sealed, our Saudi interlocutors made the point that they did not view China as a security guarantor that could replace the United States. Still, Saudi Arabia needed to buy time, as one well-placed Saudi analyst explained, and an agreement under Chinese auspices could well achieve that objective.

Explanations from Saudis we spoke with of how such an agreement would

buy them the time they need often sounded like exercises in solipsistic rationalism: The Chinese are not ideological, they care about the secure flow of oil. The Iranians are dependent on them. It stands to reason, therefore, that Iran will not wish to upset China, and that the latter will therefore be able to uphold the agreement.

The Saudis are clearly projecting onto China the rationale and the rationalism of their old arrangement with the United States, which they always hoped would continue. Yet that former arrangement was backed by America’s overwhelming regional military power on air, sea, and land, which neither the Chinese nor their Russian proxies come anywhere close to wielding.

Nevertheless, it is unclear that the Chinese will need to police Saudi Arabia’s own Iran deal anytime soon. With its position in Yemen secure, Iran can afford to lay back, pocket its gains, and watch as Saudi Arabia and others pour resources into rebuilding the war-torn country, which is now dominated by its proxy. And with America set on its realignment path, the vulnerabilities of Iran’s Gulf neighbors remain, should the need to exploit them arise down the road.

Since the Chinese-brokered deal was signed, there has also been a rapid change in the Saudi posture toward another Iranian satrapy: Syria. The kingdom has agreed to readmit the Assad regime into the Arab League, as part of a broader process of normalizing relations with Damascus.

What is curious about both the reconciliation agreement with Iran and the Saudi policy shift in Syria is how this behavior conformed to what Team Obama-Biden has been pushing Saudi Arabia to do for the past decade. Indeed, the administration could not contain its giddiness at the reconciliation with Iran, regardless of its Chinese sponsorship. As far as it was concerned, Saudi Arabia needed, as Obama had long demanded, to “adapt to change,” and learn to “share the neighborhood” with—or “integrate,” in the updated parlance—Iran. And now, behold, it was doing so.

The same went for Syria. Senior administration officials, like the National

Security Council's Middle East coordinator Brett McGurk, have been encouraging the Arab states to reach out to Assad, especially after the recent earthquake that hit northern Syria. The Saudis accommodated a request they previously would have scorned.

I asked some of our Saudi hosts whether this marked a return to an older, pre-Mohammed bin Salman approach, when the kingdom would throw good money after bad, including into hostile Iranian holdings, in line with the parameters that Team Obama-Biden have set for the kingdom—now within a new political and security architecture centered around the U.S.-Iran relationship. In three separate encounters, my interlocutors were dismissive of this possibility. They pointed to the kingdom's policy in Egypt, where the Saudis have dropped the old blank-check approach, and now require clear deliverables and reforms. No more free money. And that's in Egypt, a close ally. Never mind Syria or the Levant more broadly, which has been written off as an Iranian sphere of influence.

A recent news report citing pro-Syrian sources claimed that the Saudis had offered to pay off Assad to curb the trade of a cheap amphetamine pill popular in the Gulf. That story, and its sourcing, appears to reflect Assad's wish, and his typical extortionist posture, more than anything else. A senior Saudi official quickly denied the report as pure fiction. It remains to be seen whether this Saudi financial posture toward the Levant in particular endures, especially when the Biden administration presses the Saudis to pay up.

One area in which the United States has already been almost pathologically enthusiastic about pressuring Riyadh into underwriting Iran's regional empire is Lebanon. For three years now, Biden administration officials have not relented in trying to get the Saudis to resume signing checks to fund the "regional integration" project, including by underwriting structurally pro-Iranian pass-along projects like funding the Lebanese Armed Forces or infrastructure projects. The Lebanese, like Assad,

"This feeling is expressed with the bitterness of a scorned wife, who sees her husband throw away their hard-earned savings for an infatuation with a floozy psycho."

are salivating over the possibility of renewed Saudi funding. The French, who are deeply invested in Lebanon, are also working hard to convince the Saudis to spend money. It doesn't take much imagination to see that the administration will use the pretext of combating drug smuggling from Lebanon, for example, to renew pressure on the Saudis to underwrite the Lebanese security sector—a priority pet project of the Biden team.

The Saudi position remains one of disinterest. The Saudi view has been that Lebanon is an Iranian holding; there are no Saudi stakes there. This view seems to be sticking, for now at least.

One possible explanation for Saudi steadfastness on the Lebanese question struck me while we were in Jeddah. All around the so-called Yacht Club and Marina, a series of brand new swanky restaurants and shops have been built, with the apparent effect of making Beirut redundant. They were all bopping, full of music and young people smoking hookah. Who needs to relive memories of old-time Beirut, long accessible through a Hezbollah-controlled airport and a highway peppered with placards of Ali Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah, when Saudis have their own version, complete with functioning electricity and minus the smell of

burning garbage? It makes sense that old emotional attachments don't quite resonate anymore, especially for a younger generation that never actually experienced Beirut as anything other than a hostile hellhole.

One particularly interesting, well-connected Saudi insider I spoke with contrasted what he dubbed the arc of misery—from Lebanon in the west to Syria, Iraq, and all the way to Iran in the east—with what he described as the arc of stability running from north to south: Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia. What distinguishes these three countries is that, unlike the Levant, they are real states. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have the added advantage of also being geographically large states. Even as the Saudis have balked at doing so elsewhere, in March they deposited \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank.

So what about Israel? After winning the most recent election, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu conducted a historic interview with the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya news channel, in which he repeated what has become his mantra: Peace with Saudi Arabia is the prize he's after. Much has happened since then, including an American pressure campaign against Netanyahu—who is yet to even be invited to Washington. U.S. pressure has been amplified by Iranian low-intensity warfare against Israel through Palestinian instruments. In turn, the U.S. pressure campaign has made a formal partnership with Israel a less attractive proposition for the Saudis.

Perhaps the most realistic answer I received in the kingdom to questions

COLLECTION

The Kingdom

Tablet covers the past, present, and future of the world's swing oil producer, the leading ideological force in the Islamic world, the leader of the Sunni powers in the Middle East, and perhaps, one day, Israel's partner in peace.

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about the likelihood of any formal Saudi-Israel alliance was that, while contacts and cooperation with Israel will continue, it's perhaps best that they remain short of an official agreement for now. This response, while not reflecting any official position, had a ring of truth to it. After all, what would be the point of an American-sponsored deal with Israel, if the United States continues to realign with Iran and is preemptively broadcasting its acceptance of Iran having nukes so long as they're not "fielded"?

Unless Israel demonstrates the independent ability and will to wipe out the Iranian nuclear threat, then it is simply an extension of U.S. regional policy, which officially tolerates and even facilitates Iran's nuclear program. Israel cannot deliver for Saudi Arabia what it wants from America when Washington is set on realignment with Iran.

And how will all the rationalist analysis about Chinese behavior stand up if Iran does get the bomb? My interlocutors had no clear answer, other than

to acknowledge this eventuality as the elephant in the room, or to fall back on well-known official positions that all bets would then be off, and that the kingdom would acquire its own nuclear program.

Ultimately, the Saudis' deepest geopolitical wish is for a time machine that brings back an America that no longer exists to run the region through its traditional allies in the pursuit of sane goals like power, profit, and stability. This feeling is expressed with the bitterness of a scorned wife, who, after decades of marriage, sees her husband throw away their hard-earned savings for an infatuation with a floozy psycho, leaving her with the children.

As a consequence, Saudi Arabia is quite naturally focusing inward on the Saudi national project, while politely ignoring the occasional awkward moments when her American ex-husband shows up outside her window to hurl curses or demand that she bake his favorite apple pie. If America no longer wants its alliance system, what can we

do? We'll step aside. We'll look for a *modus vivendi* in Yemen, but we'll hand that deal to an eager and willing Chinese broker. The Levant belongs to Iran now. It's not our business. Our future is elsewhere. (The Palestinians were never even mentioned.)

From facilitating Russia's return to the Levant, to increasing China's stake in Iran and now with the Saudis, the regional trajectory has remained the same since 2013, when Barack Obama inverted the American alliance structure in pursuit of a deal with Iran. What we saw in Riyadh and Jeddah was another legacy of Obama's realignment: a Saudi state that can no longer stake its future on American support and must set out on its own as a midlevel geopolitical player to make the best alliances it can, in order to secure its future. After a brief and tenuous interlude during the Trump years, Obama's vision for the Middle East appears to have won out—at America's expense. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

A Jilted Lover Seeks Comfort in Beijing

A China-brokered agreement with Iran shocked and dismayed Washington, whose mercurial policy gyrations are getting harder for the Saudis to understand

BY LEE SMITH

The competition between the Saudis and the Iranians," Barack Obama told *The Atlantic* in 2016, "requires us to say to our friends as well as to the Iranians that they need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."

What current U.S. Middle East policy, which was designed by Obama, means in practice for America's friends is difficult to pin down. From one side of its mouth, the administration led by his former vice president has pledged to "recalibrate our relationship with Saudi Arabia," threatened to "sideline the crown prince in order to increase pressure on the royal family to find a

steadier replacement," and promised to "make [the Saudis] pay the price, and make them in fact the pariah that they are." From the other side, it has attempted to persuade Mohammed bin Salman to pump more oil and help disguise the ill effects of the White House's domestic energy policy. Now Biden administration officials and associated influencers in the Washington foreign policy community are dangling a Saudi-Israeli peace deal, which promises to reward Riyadh with the arms it was previously refused when the kingdom was merely trying to defend itself from Iranian-backed militias on its southern border.

That the Saudis themselves don't know what to make of these seemingly conflicting signals is hardly surprising. "The Biden White House thinks they can treat us like garbage and we have no choices but to accept it," a Saudi media consultant told me in the register of a jilted lover, which I heard repeatedly

U.S. and Saudi: Two Great Moralizing Powers

From Robert Lacey's *Inside the Kingdom*, 1981

Slavery was a flourishing institution in Arabia in the 1920s, and for several decades thereafter. It was not formally abolished in the Kingdom until 1962. The pilgrimage was the main source. Nigerians and Sudanese would sell their children in Mecca to help pay for their journey home, and the slave trade was one traditional source of the shareef's wealth.

In Nejd every emir and sheikh had at least one black family living in his household, and their children were assigned as playmates to the children in the household of their age and sex, growing up with them and often becoming their close companions in adult life.

When Prince Faisal ibn Abdul Aziz visited New York in 1944, the management of the Waldorf Astoria were shocked that he brought his slave Merzouk with him. But they were still more horrified when the prince insisted that his companion should eat, as he always did, at the same table as his master—for this involved admitting Merzouk to the Wedgewood Room, and no black had ever been allowed in there before.

during Tablet's recent reporting trip to Riyadh and Jeddah. "We were America's partner in the Cold War," he continued. "The world looks the way it does because we worked together."

The U.S.-Saudi relationship dates back to 1945, when Franklin Roosevelt struck a deal with the founder of the modern Saudi state, King Abdulaziz: protection in exchange for cheap oil. The alliance struck by the two men, in one of FDR's last significant acts which shaped the postwar order before his death, helped forge a mighty empire on two oceans that underwrote the global economy. Cheap energy was also the linchpin of U.S. economic and national security, fueling the U.S. Navy's constant

patrol of vital international shipping lanes, and guaranteeing the Pentagon's ability to deploy massive forces in the event of a Soviet incursion on allied territory in Europe and beyond.

In exchange, the check for American security guarantees was cashed by the Saudis against nearly every adversary the kingdom encountered during the Cold War: the Soviets, revolutionary Iran, Saddam Hussein, and then Middle East terror groups. Many of the latter were bred on Saudi soil and incited by Saudi preachers who were tolerated, if not sponsored, by the government itself—a relationship that helped foster the September 11 attacks and led to U.S. demands for sweeping reforms in the kingdom. It took several years, but many of those reforms finally began in earnest under King Salman. They have gone into hyperdrive under his son, MBS.

I was struck during our trip to the kingdom by the relaxed atmosphere nearly everywhere we went—reminiscent, as my Tablet colleague Tony Badran remarked of the country where he grew up, of Lebanon in better times. The restaurants and coffee shops at a seaside mall in Jeddah were filled with families and couples, an environment markedly different, I was told, from just a few years ago, when the religious authorities still policed public morals. At one private dinner, a tech entrepreneur told me that the two oud players serenading our large party wouldn't have been there before the era of MBS. "The religious police would have come in and busted up the instruments and ordered all the guests to leave the house," he said.

My dinner companion, who like all of my Saudi interlocutors requested anonymity, is sending his child to the same college on the West Coast of the United States that he attended. He is part of a Saudi elite that is confident in MBS's ability to successfully implement his reforms, and which can't understand why American policymakers don't see the new Saudi Arabia as a success. "They asked for reform and they have it. It's a win for them," he said. "What do they want from us?"

That question is crucial to understanding Saudi foreign policy—and what the region may look like under Obama's

vision of an America with neither allies nor enemies in the region. Our visit began shortly after the announcement of a Chinese-brokered diplomatic normalization agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Riyadh's regional nemesis since the Islamic Revolution began in 1978. A typical U.S. press report called it "another diplomatic victory for the Chinese as Gulf Arab states perceive the United States slowly withdrawing from the wider region." Beltway foreign policy experts—both supportive and critical of President Biden—expressed surprise, with White House critics aghast that the administration had let U.S.-Saudi relations sink so low that Riyadh had chosen Beijing as its favored mediator.

The Saudis I spoke with in Riyadh claimed that the agreement is narrowly intended to restore diplomatic ties severed after the Iranians allowed local mobs to sack two Saudi diplomatic outposts in 2016. One prominent Saudi print and broadcast journalist told me that Riyadh's goal with the deal was simply to buy time. "MBS is focused on his domestic reform agenda," he said. "If the Chinese can keep the Iranians on a leash until the Americans come to their senses, it's to his benefit."

Other Saudis I interviewed have little confidence that Beijing would be in a position to actually guarantee Saudi security interests, or would even want to. "They are traders, dealmakers," said another Saudi journalist. "The leadership here is well aware they're not going to stick their necks out for us, or anyone."

Nonetheless, the China deal appears to have unnerved some Biden officials, who worried that Saudi disengagement

 **TABLET RECIPES**



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from the United States had now gone too far. In April, CIA Director William Burns visited Riyadh to voice concerns that the Saudis were playing a double game. In addition to the agreement brokered by Beijing, Riyadh also moved toward reconciliation with Damascus after a decadelong freeze that began with Bashar Assad's murderous campaign against Syria's Sunni population. The chosen mediator for these talks was Moscow—Assad's longtime patron, which furnished him with troops and arms during the Syrian war.

Burns expressed frustration with the Saudis, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. "He told Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that the U.S. has felt blindsided by Riyadh's rapprochement with Iran and Syria."

Burns' tough talk seemed like evidence that the Biden administration genuinely believes it's engaged in a renewed era of "great power competition" with China and Russia. The stakes of this conflict are too high for U.S. allies to be playing footsie with American adversaries, Burns seemed to be saying. And yet in a meeting with Chinese officials in Vienna earlier this month, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan praised Beijing's mediation between Riyadh and Tehran, noting that, according to *The Washington Post*, the United States "could not have played a similar role because of its mutual antipathy with Iran."

It's worth remembering that the Biden administration officials who delivered contradictory messages regarding China's role as mediator between Saudi and Iran—Burns and Sullivan—were the two deputies in the Obama administration who met secretly with Iranian officials in 2013 for preliminary discussions about what would become the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Iran nuclear deal was the centerpiece of Obama's vision of a new Middle East, with Riyadh and Tehran as two co-equal pillars of the new American-brokered order.

But as Saudi journalists close to the royal court told me, Riyadh has never seen itself as even a regional hegemon. The kingdom projects cultural and religious authority as the guardian of the

"MBS is focused on his domestic reform agenda. If the Chinese can keep the Iranians on a leash until the Americans come to their senses, it's to his benefit."

Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina. Despite its tremendous wealth, however, Saudi Arabia remains, at its core, a client state—and for most of its modern history, an *American* client state. Obama and Biden have therefore demonstrated either what Israeli strategist Dan Schueftan has called "a frightening combination of surrealistic misreading of basic regional realities and sweeping strategic incompetence"—or something worse. Alternately, the entire purpose of Obama's Iran deal, and the realignment strategy that has continued under Biden, is in fact to dismantle America's regional position, and consequently to rid itself of its traditional commitments and interests in the Middle East, all out of the belief that the game is no longer worth the risk of America being drawn into future a Mideast war.

If that's the case, as many Saudis seem to believe, then there isn't really a new Cold War pitting the United States against China and Russia after all. If there was, America wouldn't be jilting its most consequential strategic alliance in the region that produces the bulk of the world's oil.

The future of oil, as imagined by U.S. policymakers and the Democratic Party, is likely to provide the answer to this apparent conundrum. With Biden and the

Democrats determined to phase out fossil fuels—with legislation earmarking trillions of dollars for renewable energy infrastructure—the Saudis and their natural energy resources are therefore no longer seen as worth fighting for.

On the American side, the plan is apparently to replace Saudi Arabia with China—the manufacturer and supplier of the bulk of the world's green energy infrastructure, from solar panels to wind turbines to rare earth minerals for electric vehicles. The irony, of course, is that China will only be increasing its own fossil fuel imports from Saudi Arabia, which is historically Beijing's top oil supplier. Meanwhile, the United States will substitute dependency on Saudi Arabia—a client state—for dependency on China, its purported rival. How any of these policy gyrations will make America safer and more prosperous, or reduce the burning of carbon-based fuels, is hard to imagine.

Taken together, the changes in the U.S.-Saudi-China triad do seem likely to enrich the Chinese and their U.S. partners, particularly those in renewable energy and related technology businesses, who form a large part of the financial base of the Democratic Party. American businesses that depend on fossil fuels, which tend to donate to Republicans, will meanwhile be out of luck. Paradoxically, partnership with the Chinese may therefore be the best way for the Saudis to prolong and secure their relationship with the United States. In aligning with China, Saudi Arabia isn't breaking with America; rather, it is continuing to follow America's lead—into a future in which the Saudis are likely to exert less leverage but enjoy greater freedom of action within their relationship with a mercurial great power ally. ■

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SCIENCE

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Birth of a Nation

Reporting from the front lines of Mohammed bin Salman's stupefyingly ambitious mass experiment in modernization, reform, and control

BY ARMIN ROSEN

It is impossible to tell how long Saudi Arabia's Formula 1 course is, where it goes, or how it's shaped. Whatever's taking place down below the carving stations and espresso bars inside the soundproofed Paddock Club at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, down on a floodlit straightaway of asphalt so eerily pristine that it seems impossible a car has ever touched it, remains an auto-racing-themed abstraction even during a potential outbreak of real excitement. When defending world champion Max Verstappen's engine failed mid-lap on qualifying night this past March, sending him to the back of the starting grid for the next evening's grand prix, the image of his stalled race car on an overhead TV screen barely distracted the club level's courtiers, VIPs, and professional schmoozers from their wagyu steak.

In contrast, cheers sometimes erupted from the opposite grandstand, where a more modest, more sports-focused, and seemingly unrelated event was taking place. That event could be visited by forsaking the wonders of the club lounge and stepping outside. Every few seconds an aeronautical sound-wave would suction the still desert air and a jet engine enclosed in insect skin, piloted by an international sporting celebrity whose face was impossible to see, zoomed by just long enough to hold a flickering perception of the vehicle's brief physical presence. The brain-pinching whoosh entered through the right ear long before its origin appeared; by the time the whoosh exited the left ear its source was already deep into the unknowable frontier that lay beyond Turn 1. The smell of perfume overwhelmed whatever faint suggestion of combusting organic

matter accidentally floated up to the loggia. It was a specifically Saudi perfume, arboreal instead of florid, and like the race car exhaust it had the nose-flooding sweetness of something burning.

The men all wore the perfume, and they were dressed almost exactly the same, in ankle-length, button-up white robes and red-on-white checkerboard headdresses held in place by a scalp-hugging black ring. One of the men I met, I was told, controlled \$6 billion in real estate and commercial assets. Another was the son of a very senior diplomat, a man responsible for cutting deals with various problematic neighboring states.

Thanks to one such agreement, a Chinese-negotiated thaw in relations with Iran announced just eight days earlier, there would be no repeat of the ugliness surrounding last year's grand prix, when Iranian-backed militants launched missiles at Jeddah shortly before the race and nearly succeeded in canceling it. The peace dividend was right here at the Paddock Club—I was told Will Smith was somewhere nearby. A white man with a sweater tied around his neck looked especially lost. Most of the white people on hand, like the European wagyu-slicers and the pair of young blond hostesses speaking Russian to one another, were there to wait on the Saudis, who might have traveled to Sochi or Monaco for an event like this before the race premiered in 2021.

In another reversal of decades of national precedent, the Saudi women were dressed with far greater individuality than the men. Their hair was often worn in long black tresses that streamed below the shoulders of tastefully concealing gowns. In a not-so-distant past, a pricey handbag was a Saudi woman's only means of flaunting any higher

status in public, a realm she could only enter when covered head-to-toe in a black abaya. The abayas are optional now, as are the hijabs. "We'd never imagined we'd be here from five years ago," said Tala al Jabri, a Riyadh-based and U.S.-educated investor in Saudi-based tech startups, who, like most of the other younger women on hand, looked like she was dressed for a cold day in Beverly Hills.

Among the identically costumed men there is still a Saudi vision of egalitarianism on display, one that obscures everyone's role and wealth in order to maintain a hierarchical reality. In photos on display at the Murabba Palace museum in Riyadh, King Abdulaziz, also known as Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi state, is dressed in almost the same robes as his servants. Abdulaziz and his six successors are buried in graves that are nearly unmarked and barely ever visited, in accordance with Salafi practice.

Saudi-style equality—namely, the equality of shared subjecthood, applicable to royals and commoners alike—reigns in one other obvious way at the Paddock Club. No amount of money or power will buy you a single drop of alcohol. "The beer is coming," an official assured me as we drank guava juice out of sleek glass stemware. "We need it for business, for tourists." The possible introduction of alcohol into a conservative tribal monarchy of 35 million whose government is responsible for overseeing the two holiest sites in Islam seems a prospect with no easily predictable outcome. But my interlocutor, like the government he worked for, was confident in his read of the current national mentality. "Most Saudis are convinced the alcohol ban is not for a religious reason," he claimed. "In some schools of Islam, under 5% [alcohol by volume] is acceptable."

The question of just how much change the Saudi crown can declare without threatening the integrity of the system it built has been dramatically answered in recent years. Since 2016, the palace, under the leadership of 37-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, widely referred to as MBS, has embarked on a bold program of social and economic

reform. As Syria and Libya burned, ISIS consolidated control of northern Iraq, and the Egyptian military crushed the country's brief spell of elected Muslim Brotherhood rule, Saudi women saw the rapid disappearance of such mainstays of national policy as the driving ban, compulsory hijab, male guardianship laws, and employment prohibitions. A nationwide ban on cinemas was lifted in 2018. The once-ubiquitous religious police still technically exist, but they are almost never seen in public anymore and have lost all of their formal powers. Saudi Arabia no longer exports fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam, long its state ideology, and has largely ceased the promotion of Wahhabism even within its own borders. The country began offering tourist visas for the first time in 2019, reversing a long-standing official fear of the contaminations of the outside world.

The palace has courted even greater dangers in the economic realm. The government introduced a value-added tax, essentially the first tax regime in the country's history, and then raised the rate from 3% to as much as 15% while slashing subsidies on energy and food. The government's sovereign wealth fund has led a massive shift in state investments, pivoting the public sector away from its usual focus on extractive industries and into new realms like tourism, real estate development, entertainment, logistics, and hazily innovation-related projects involving things like cryptocurrency trading and the construction of a cube-shaped Sim City arcology in central Riyadh.

Old trading families and the once-influential import sector have lost much of their former prominence. "Economic power in the private sector is changing hands," explained Mohamed Alyahya, a Saudi political commentator and fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

MBS's reforms, whose effects are plainly visible in every area of Saudi life, amount to a wholesale rewriting of the kingdom's social contract. The days of the palace using endless supplies of oil money and religious conservatism to drug Saudis into a mutually reinforcing culture of indolence and obedience

are over. In its place, the population is now meant to derive its sense of direction and meaning from a rebooted idea of Saudiness, while its wealth will now come from exciting new economic sectors. It will be possible for the government to create these sectors now that it has purged the kleptomania of the former order, mostly through the detainment of over 400 allegedly corrupt members of the royal family at the Riyadh Ritz-Carlton in late 2018.

With many of the old subsidies and handouts eliminated, the relationship between the state, the subject, and the market is no longer mediated through oil-financed social bribery: "It is a big mind-shift we're trying to induce, of becoming productive citizens," explained a young Saudi woman who worked on the reform package during her career as a private consultant, and is now studying for a graduate degree in the United States. "A productivity mindset, which is the essence of the vision, has been achieved," she claimed.

The population has thus far accepted MBS's changes with astounding equanimity—a possible result of having been trained for decades in obedience. There have been no tax riots or bread riots. There was no visible rearguard action by the old order, or at least none that inflamed or incited any divisions within society at large. Saudis went to work as shopkeepers and Uber drivers with little apparent complaint—not that public complaining is socially tolerated or even all that legal in Saudi Arabia—with some treating participation in the new economy as a kind of patriotic duty.

MBS is gambling that the fruits of openness and modernity can be reaped on Saudi terms, and that prosperity, stability, and a recharged, secularized sense of national purpose won't shatter existing norms or generate dangerous civic appetites. The reforms have created a rising class of ambitious executives, entrepreneurs, and artists, and for now almost everyone seems to accept the idea of a national horizon defined by the wisdom and vision of a single family, and perhaps even a single man. His program has created an atmosphere muggy with floating potential, as the palace carries out an uncertain experiment on tens of

millions of people. MBS's subjects could be the engine and the beneficiaries of the only successful 21st-century governance project in any populous Middle Eastern state—or they could mark the disastrous limits of utopia declared from on high.

The young former consultant who worked on the reforms described them as "fast-paced social nudges, rather than shocks." Some nudges are less subtle than others, and one of them comes in the form of a vast and mostly empty construction site surrounding an isolated gray slab south of the Jeddah race track. "Here they are building the world's tallest tower," a young government official told me, referring to the slab. "Here is the megaproject, downtown Jeddah. It is one of the five megaprojects."

The word "megaproject" fails to fully capture the awesome scope of reform-era Saudi ambition. Saudi Arabia has become perhaps the only country on earth where the term "gigaproject" is employed without irony. Behind the future downtown was a glorious sunset, yellow fire turning palm trees into arching shadows, with the light breaking through a sky of soft neon blue. There were no human beings anywhere near the deserted base of the future tower, in the empty center of a city of nearly 4 million.

Who will live and work in this high-rising city-within-a-city an hour-and-a-half from Mecca and 10 minutes from the excitement and inconvenience of an annual Formula 1 grand prix? The answer, broadly speaking, is young Saudis, the roughly 40% of the country that's under the age of 25. "This is going to have a very young population," promised one official who showed off a model of Diriyah, a city-size planned sector of Riyadh built in traditional clay-colored crenelated north Arabian architecture. If completed, Diriyah will have 500 times the square footage of Manhattan's Hudson Yards project.

Significant portions of Diriyah, including an attractive dining and retail district opposite the ruins of Turaif, the place where the Saud dynasty was launched in the 18th century, have already been built. The

neighborhood-in-progress is where nationalism, development, and high-end consumption have already merged into a tangible whole. An Ivy League-educated Saudi financier in his mid-20s I met suspected that 10 years from now most of his social circle will have relocated to Neom, the futuristic megacity-by-decree planned for an empty stretch of Red Sea coastline 100 miles south of Eilat.

There have also been policy “nudges”: For instance, the Saudi government has implemented a new requirement that any company whose largest regional client is the Saudi state must have its Middle East headquarters somewhere inside of Saudi Arabia itself, which is part of a broader attempt to force large corporate offices to relocate from the United Arab Emirates. Other nudges have come in the form of capital, much of it from the government’s \$620 billion Public Investment Fund. In another bid to keep young people engaged and employed, the state has taken a marked interest in every manner of tech play, pouring money into online retail and ride-sharing. The Central Bank has started its own “fintech sandbox,” which will make it easier for nontraditional financial institutions to operate in the country, explained Tala al Jabri, the startup investor. “I would not be investing in startups if I didn’t think they had a culture to disrupt markets,” she said as we both ignored the action below us on the Corniche Circuit. “Startups believe the government has their back,” al Jabri continued. “They think they can succeed because they think the government wants them to succeed.”

Many of the big winners of the reforms are private companies working in sectors that the government now prioritizes. This includes defense manufacturing. When I met Hmoud Alshethre, the youthful and modest executive director of alliances at the Riyadh offices of Intra Defense Technologies, he was dressed in the standard-issue white robe, with a model of a handheld drone perched behind him. A succession of large, white South African men came in to briefly interrupt a generously long discussion held over dates, nuts, and an endless supply of lightly spiced Gulf-style coffee. Intra’s small unmanned aircraft can

“Mohammed bin Salman doesn’t pretend to be a Jeffersonian democrat, and nobody pretends to have voted for him.”

survey the country’s isolated desert frontiers and oil pipelines, which are often the targets of Iranian-backed sabotage.

“We have a very reasonable government here,” Alshethre explained. The ultimate proof of the government’s “reasonableness,” in Alshethre’s telling, was that it had sensed an incipient popular urge for a different kind of life: The reforms are working, he said, because “people are willing to change.” As evidence, he showed me a government smartphone app called Tawakalna, which aggregates every imaginable official document and service. Tawakalna lists your passport information, traffic violations, and vehicular paperwork; the ownership of a car can be transferred through the app, as can power of attorney and commercial registrations. It has copies of your birth certificate and your real estate deeds, your health information, your international travel record, and a digital kiblah for locating the direction of Mecca during prayer. This is a level of government power over the individual that few democratic citizens would tolerate, merged with a logic and seamlessness that few democratic governments seem capable of delivering these days.

But the most important thing about Tawakalna is that it proved Saudis could rapidly accept a digitally based

and state-controlled civic existence. “The government could launch an app and assure that 80% of the population would use it,” Alshethre claimed.

Citizens in a democracy, including the elected leadership, must resign themselves to the wondrous and horrible reality that public space is basically unmanageable, and that the state probably can’t forcibly eliminate things one might think are unspeakably evil, like gun ownership or abortion or the fentanyl trade. The Saudi government takes the opposite approach: The state exerts a tight grip over the public realm while respecting its subjects’ traditional sovereignty over the home. Private spaces are still considered sacrosanct—the police don’t go hunting for alcohol or sexual deviancy beyond locked doors, and unless you’re a jihadist, there is no Mukhabarat that seeks to penetrate the inner spaces of your true self. “There are consequences for expression here,” as one Riyadh intellectual put it, “but not for thought. You can think whatever you want.”

The system’s essential clarity explains why the Saudi leadership is so convinced that the population will continue to trust in its guidance and vision even as society becomes freer and more exposed to the outside world. There is mass deception at work in most autocracies, which retain the ceremonies of democratic procedure and other performances of civic openness in order to hide which section of the regime or the security services actually holds power—or to create the constant sense of terror that comes with living in a place where the rules are strategically obscured. There are no comparable lies at play in Saudi Arabia, according to Al-yahya. “Mohammed bin Salman doesn’t pretend to be a Jeffersonian democrat, and nobody pretends to have voted for him,” he explained.

The system functions not only because of what it can provide, but because the expectations and lines of authority are so clear. They have only gotten clearer lately. I asked Tariq Alhomayed, the former editor of the Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper and a host on Saudi television, about what first made him think the reforms weren’t an illusion or

a ploy. There was the consistency of the government's messaging, Alhomayed replied, along with the speed of new development projects. "But the main thing was the Ritz," he said.

In the fall of 2018, the new crown prince detained 400 of his relatives at the Ritz-Carlton in Riyadh and pressured nearly all of them to turn over billions of dollars that they had allegedly embezzled from the state. At the time, the Ritz gambit seemed like an arbitrary and maniacal power grab. But much was accomplished. MBS broke the old economic elite, allowing a new one to arise in its place. The Ritz was part of the crown's indigenization push: The crackdown fell hardest on figures who had expatriated the people's wealth, spending their money on yachts and fancy real estate far beyond the kingdom's borders.

The Ritz gambit showed that the crown prince could act decisively against perceived enemies, including within his own family. Some of them had publicly aligned with U.S. intelligence agencies that saw the reforms as a threat to their own longstanding, quasi-corrupt relationships inside the kingdom. The Ritz also encapsulated the sensitivity to the public psyche that has made the reforms so risky and yet successful so far: MBS was announcing to his subjects that their own government had been stealing from them for decades with total impunity—and, by implication, with the blessing of the crown—while also assuring them that the problem was on its way to being solved.

The Ritz itself is an opulent and isolated megacomplex towering over the beige desert fringes of the downtown sprawl. It is built in a Louis XIV aesthetic, the look of late European monarchy, with filigrees and columns and porticos damming the invisible floodwaters. The interior is clad in especially severe Islamic patterns, stark and eye-straining networks of latticed domes and interlocking geometries. Statues of four white horses on their hind legs rear over the junction between the lobby and the main dining room, proclaiming an innocent tribute to the Arabian stallion as well as the apocalypse.

A Saudi friend who took me to the hotel explained that it had originally been built as a royal guest house, to accompany the pineapple-domed conference center located one compound over. The palace that contained the actual Saudi royal court was nearby too, though it was far enough off the main highway to be unseeable to a casual visitor. In a more-than-symbolic demonstration that the crown didn't consider itself exempt from the market-bound logic of the reform package, MBS ordered that the free VIP hotel instead be used as a for-profit facility, with the future operator paying a royalty to the government.

It was lunch inside the dining room, where armies of uniformed Filipino and Pakistani migrant laborers, almost all of them men, attended to a cornucopia of global cuisines arrayed across a vast mileage of bars and buffet tables, with the dull desert light pouring through the back windows of a space too massive to see all at once. A bass and guitar murmured while a woman without a hijab sang in French, every element of it a violation of Salafi injunctions regarding music, art, and gender roles. My friend pointed out a middle-aged couple, a woman in a black abaya across from a man whose headdress lacked the usual black ring. This omission symbolized humility before God and served as the local way of announcing yourself as a committed Islamic fundamentalist. A tall glass of a ruby-colored substance accompanied his expensive lunch.

For my friend, this surreal mix of the forbidden and the permitted at the site of MBS's greatest administrative masterstroke summed up Saudi Arabia's entire present situation. "The religious guy with fake sangria and a band playing," he summarized, as he noticed me tapping away at my iPhone notes. "There's your scene."

Yet the Ritz turns out to be one of the least representative places in the entire city. Riyadh is the epicenter of the reform era's goal of reorienting the Saudi economy around technology, services, and internal consumption. As a result, the young people moving back from Dubai or newly returned from Harvard actually have places to go and things to

do now—hookah lounges, which offended the sensibilities of the religious conservatives who ran Riyadh for decades, were finally legalized in 2019. There is remarkably good arrabiata and risotto on offer for \$30 a plate, along with English speakers in their mid 20s to eat it with.

"There's so much more drama in American social circles than in Saudi social circles," one lunch companion, a recent Ivy graduate now working in the newly sprouted forest of sky-high squiggles and cantilevers that forms Riyadh's King Fahad Financial District, recalled of his time back in America. Dressed in the usual white robe, he blamed it all on American dating culture. We were joined by a woman in discrete Western-style dress and no hijab, who was also back from a fancy education stateside and working for an investment bank in Riyadh. "In America," she said, "you have to watch what you say ... we have to give them tolerance, but there was no tolerance back to us." Everyone in America, she said, "is super sensitive." The young man agreed: Educated Americans were in fact so sensitive that they didn't have the ability to debate anything except by indirection. "In American society you can never say something is bad: You say that it's bad for children. In Saudi you'd appeal to religion, not to children's welfare." In another city we might have been drinking a white wine made for dry and sunny afternoons. At this restaurant our best option was a mysteriously ash-clouded lemonade infused with charcoal. I pointed out that New York City banned activated charcoal as an ingredient in foods and beverages in 2018.

Today, Riyadh is the second-largest city in the Arab Middle East by population, smaller than permanently dysfunctional Cairo and slightly larger than war-rattled Baghdad. After a brief 1960s flirtation with density and walkability overseen by a Greek urban planner, the infinite space of the desert was divided into giant kilometer-by-kilometer squares and the new oil economy ballooned the city into its current endlessness of shopping malls, walled villas, and eight-lane roads. The old downtown, the one place in

Riyadh with lively street life, is now a bustling neighborhood of Filipino and Pakistani migrant workers. Everywhere the traffic design verges on the vindictive: The main arteries are split between a tangle of service lanes, protected turning lanes, underpasses, exits, and entries that dismay, flummox, and terrify people who are familiar with it all. Because these highwaylike streets lack any logical turnaround points, it is common to wind up on the wrong side of the road and have 20 minutes added to your journey.

Given the psychic stress of just getting around, it is a miracle, or perhaps a triumph of tribal-based desert social solidarity, that the people of Riyadh are so unflinchingly easygoing and so lacking in any visible suspicion or aggressiveness once they're off the roads. It is perhaps the only major Middle Eastern city where bargaining in the souks feels impolite.

In Riyadh the current lack of dedicated public space, along with Salafism's hostility toward any shared public aesthetic experience, has displaced much of the artistic energy into interior design. Riyadh is glutted with sleekly decorated coffee shops that don't open until the early afternoon, and sometimes not until the late afternoon, since the city is nocturnal even in the winter. There are a conspicuous number of kitchen supply stores; the souks offer elaborate jewelry that's barely ever worn in public, along with oceans of perfume and incense. It is an economy set up around things a visitor will not see unless they're invited into a private home.

The public Riyadh is a pale outer layer of the private city, which is an almost complete inversion of life in New York, or even in Cairo. The homes themselves are inscrutable from the outside, walled-off domains with servants, endless coffee services, and *majlises*, courtlike traditional living rooms where friends and family lounge for hours on elegant floor cushions. Among the Riyadh elite, it is common to have an entire separate, villa-size *majlis* where nobody actually lives.

The visible security presence in Riyadh is light both by regional standards and any standard, although things like

the total public absence of alcohol or the state-mandated calorie counts on every single restaurant menu confirms the authorities' thoroughgoing control. There are plentiful signs of an enduring conservatism, like separate women's entrances for banks (newly optional), curtained-off booths at restaurants, and a relative lack of mixed company even at the hipper and newer coffee houses. The reforms have not yet destroyed the existing social system. And yet, they are meant to turn Saudis into workers and taxpayers, and to change their attitudes toward everything from romance to art to foreign travel.

Perhaps MBS's project goes even further than that. In JAX, a government-created arts warehouse district near Diriyah, there is an elaborate exhibition previewing Neom, the planned city under construction on the northwestern coast of the Red Sea. Most of its millions of projected inhabitants will live in The Line, a single 100-mile structure, 660-by-1,500 feet, extending into the desert. What will be contained within it is scarcely imaginable, even by teams of world-renowned architects. The concept models at the JAX exhibition are baffling entanglements of walkways, staircases, upside-down skyscrapers and parkland stretching toward an uncannily indoor vanishing point. "This is a cognitive city that will not only adapt to your needs but learn to anticipate them," a soft and robotic female voice promised during an introductory video. It is "a portal connecting the digital and the physical, conceived by the visionary mind of his highness, Mohammed bin Salman."

Charlie Puth and Swedish House Mafia concert, 2023 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix after-party, Jeddah Andrea Bruce

There were no houses of worship depicted in The Line, no women in hijabs, no men in robes walking among the indoor rivers and hanging towers. Present-day Saudi Arabia is car country, but in Neom the whole city is on a single train line, and everything is meant to be walkable within 15 minutes. In The Line, your community would be defined by the people you lived near, not by your family or your origins.

"In essence, we are building a newly

composed biome," one video informed me. What, if anything, did this mean, and was it meant to mean anything? Would the cantilevered parks become a suicide hazard? There couldn't be anything less Saudi than The Line, I thought, a place with no walled villas, a dream in the mind of an obscured, humanized God, the god of architects or urban planners, or maybe of especially grandiose kings. Even Diriyah, despite its traditional-style architecture, represents a stark rejection of spacious homes walled off from forbidding highways—the kinds of places where the children might stick around until they get married—in favor of denser blocks of apartments and single-family houses. Diriyah will be connected to downtown Riyadh by a thick greenbelt planted with 20 million trees, which will have a pedestrian and bicycle highway named after the crown prince. Six million of those trees have already been planted, I was told.

In my discussions with Saudi officials, they always emphasized the speed of the reforms: The idea is to fund a massive economic and social transition while oil is still in high demand, and then build an entirely new economy in time for the 40% of the population that's now under 25-years-old to actually have something meaningful and productive to do with their lives. Part of the reason Saudi Arabia signed on to the recent Chinese-brokered diplomatic normalization with Iran was to pause the onslaught of Tehran-supported drone, missile, and cyber attacks against the kingdom, securing the peaceful conditions under which the crown's development package could be implemented. Several officials pointed out to me that speed was important because it meant the changes could rapidly become tangible to ordinary Saudis. This marked another curious instance of the monarchy showing a kind of backhanded concern for what its subjects think: The government recognizes that its citizens will not automatically trust that the country is changing unless they can see the changes themselves.

In Riyadh, Saudis can experience the permanence and seriousness of the reforms at Boulevard World, an Epicot-like circuit of nationally themed

zones circling an ameboid artificial lake. I walked around it gobsmacked for hours, listening to tabla players at the fake Taj Mahal, watching a costumed procession through fake Morocco, dangling in a cable car over the robin's egg domes of fake Greece, and perusing the Naruto figurines in fake Japan. I considered eating at the Nathan's Famous in fake America, beneath the Golden Gate Bridge. In Dubai, the malls and theme parks are pitched at tourists, but at Boulevard World I went long spells without seeing even one other Westerner. Entire large families were out together, the adults in robes and abayas. Any dating was so discreet as to be invisible.

At AREA15, an amusement park version of a warehouse rave located a few buildings over from a fake Mayan pyramid, women in abayas and their robe-clad husbands watched a hijab-less female DJ bop to a bass-heavy mix of an Arabic wedding song. Strobes and lasers flashed. The turntable podium helpfully read "AREA15 Riyadh," perhaps so that Instagrammers might broadcast to their countrymen and to the rest of the world that yes, this really is happening—the changes are real, or else this wouldn't be possible.

Like so much else in reform-era Saudi Arabia, Boulevard World is credited to the unique vision of some prince or another. It was built in a mere 81 days according to Ahmed Al Mehmadi, the chief marketing and communications officer for the Saudi Arabian government's General Entertainment Authority. We met in the back of a hotel conference hall that had been converted into a vast office during Riyadh Season, an annual series of events focused on the capital during the milder winter months. There were "14 zones of activation" during Riyadh Season, Al Mehmadi explained. Behind him was row after row of young adults in a mix of Western and Middle Eastern business-casual dress whose age seemed to average out to 25 at most.

Al Mehmadi, raised partly in London and educated in Riyadh, wore a long white robe, and had a prayer rug and a small statuette of a white Arabian stallion on his desk. Boulevard World, he said, was home to the world's largest statue of Grendizer, a character from a

“The Saudi system has brought newfound normalcy to 35 million people in a time when every regional democratization effort foundered, backslid, or failed.”

globally popular anime franchise that he'd loved as a child in Saudi Arabia in the '90s.

I asked Al Mehmadi if there was some deeper message to Boulevard World. Maybe the place is telling Saudis not to fear other nations or cultures after a long spell of paranoid conservative governance? It was much simpler than that, Al Mehmadi replied. "We're telling people you can enjoy your life, you can enjoy being here."

Saudis didn't have to travel to Dubai to go to a theme park anymore. And no one had forced anyone to go to Boulevard World—this was something Saudis had apparently already wanted, and the government had now given it to them. By this point, "People are used to a certain way of living," Al Mehmadi said of the reforms. "It can't go back."

For now, the Saudi system has brought newfound normalcy to 35 million people in a time when the Arab republics collapsed into mayhem and every regional democratization effort foundered, backslid, or failed. But even if the reforms stick, at some point, maybe 30 years from now—which is both a long time and also less time than it seems—the majority of Saudis will have no strong memory of how oppressive their country used to be. For the reforms to

have really been successful, those future Saudis will have to believe in the monarchy for reasons other than the half-forgotten opening of an earlier generation. Something larger has to endure.

To that end, a multi-square-kilometer dust pit east of downtown Riyadh, now a construction site of terrifyingly Pharaonic scope, will be the location of King Salman Park. A futuristic collection of museums and cultural institutions called the Royal Arts Complex will run through the park's central axis. The government has already launched two arts biennales, one held under the canopies of the former hajj terminal at the Jeddah airport, and one in the desert city of al-Ula, near a notable collection of ancient Nabatean ruins. A cultural ecosystem, along with a burgeoning local fine art market, has been decreed into existence. "If you're developing an arts sector," one government official pointed out, "a biennale is the end of the value chain."

Art existed in Saudi Arabia before the reforms, just as art has existed in every human context across all of time. As the internationally known Saudi artist Abdunasser Gharem explained to me, a would-be artist in his country used to encounter the paradoxes of the state's fundamentalist ideology even as a young child. "From the first day of elementary school, when they were teaching us to practice the execution of images in schoolbooks," he recalled, "we had to draw a line across the necks of all creatures with a soul, and the heads of images of animals and people. The teachers said: To create an image is the job of Allah. If you leave it to exist, you are going to be punished and go to hell. I was only 6 years old. And I was wondering why I had to do this, because those images were there on the paper. The government had printed them."

Gharem joined the military to "hide from being an artist," he told me. He spent 25 years as an armory and supply specialist and retired as a lieutenant colonel. Then he became perhaps the leading conceptual artist in Saudi Arabia, someone who gained global renown while working within the strict limits of a system he intimately knew, and to which he remained loyal. A decade before the reforms, his ghostly

photographs of the mushroom-topped, nonnative trees that were often planted along city streets became a comment on how unnatural, constructed, and imposed the national commons had become. In another photo from the early 2000s, a Quranic word meaning “path” repeatedly appeared on a bridge where villagers had died during a flash flood, sheltering there on the advice of a local sheikh. Obedience can either rescue you or kill you, the work suggested.

Gharem’s studio is in a high-ceilinged villa in a Riyadh neighborhood that had been trendy in the ’60s and ’70s, during the city’s initial period of rapid expansion. The house has a crystalline wall of high windows, a cactus garden, and that most essential of Riyadh amenities, a wall that blocks any view from the outside. In the studio there are intriguing mounds of found objects awaiting some artistic use. Why the pile of antique luggage? “I was in the military for 25 years,” was Gharem’s full explanation. A multivolume set of religious texts, the ones where the spines combine to spell out a Quranic phrase in Arabic, sat near books dedicated to the works of Richard Serra, Ai Weiwei, and James Turrell. Gharem himself had a wiry frame and bushy gray hair. He wore turquoise shoes and a florid button-up shirt, and smoked liberally.

“I belong to freedom of thought more than freedom of expression,” Gharem explained. “The freedom of thought is a human right, and a person’s free actions occur primarily in the mind and not in nature.

“As an artist,” he added, “you can’t fall back on where you belong.”

Thanks to the reforms, someone like Gharem, who believes that an artist can never become overly captive to their surroundings or to their own identity, is now in the strange position of having to be skeptical of something that’s directly helped him. “You can be an artist—not hiding like before,” he said of the changes he’s seen since 2016. “The government gives us infrastructure we never would have dreamed of when we were young.” In an earlier time, “You never would’ve told your neighbor you were taking your daughter to a private piano teacher.

“Today we are living a grand narrative: The enlightenment that we were waiting for has begun from within,” he continued. “Despite the fact that some perceive it as a harsh enlightenment, there is great progress.”

Dubai, the Gulf’s reigning logistics and financial hub and one of the Middle East’s few real bastions of cosmopolitanism, is often seen as the value proposition for what a more liberal Saudi Arabia could be. But one important commonality between Dubai and whatever Saudi Arabia is becoming is that neither are democratic accomplishments. What disturbs an American visitor about Riyadh, and Dubai for that matter, is the possibility that for the time being, liberal idealism has little it can credibly add to the market-driven vision of order, harmony, and ambition that surrounds them. The enlightenment might be harsh. Did that mean it couldn’t also be real?

After the Formula 1 qualifier was over, there was an after-party where Charlie Puth performed in front of tens of thousands of teenagers cloaked in darkness. No, this wasn’t some different and less-famous person named Charlie, I realized shortly after arriving midset. One of the world’s biggest pop stars and TikTok icons seemed to really be enjoying himself up there, dressed in a red leather jacket with cream-colored sleeves. “Your food is the best food I’ve ever had in the entire world,” he gushed, with visible surprise at how nonmedieval his host country had proved to be. He read signs in the crowd between numbers: “Hii, with two i’s. Yes, hello!” He sang “Loser,” a song about dating and alcohol abuse, here in a dry country where quasi-arranged marriages are still common. “Thanks for being one of the most impressive crowds we’ve ever played for,” he beamed. Next up was Swedish House Mafia, who headlined Coachella last year. “I don’t know how they’re going to dance to Swedish House Mafia without any drinks,” wondered a Frenchman watching next to me on the VIP deck, before correctly predicting that Sergio Perez would win the next day’s grand prix.

The robe people, the well-connected types in their mid-30s, dominated the

sedate and uncrowded club section, which loomed over a festival-sized pit. I set out for the lower shadows, curious as to which Saudis belonged in the less rarified strata of concertgoers. What I saw were thousands of young people practicing at being mirror images of American teens: The boys wore Death Row Records hoodies and fake Balenciaga, and I spotted dew rags, tight leather jackets, cornrows, and a shirt coated in black sequins. Travis Scott, popular in Saudi Arabia, was headlining the post-race show the next night.

The girls mostly wore jeans; exposed belly buttons were about as common as hijabs, which is to say the number of both was noticeably higher than zero. There was plentiful, unashamed mixed company, although I did see a couple jerk their heads away from each other mid-kiss, realizing they were now under the floodlights near the exit of the hulking amphitheater. What will happen in a few years when half the guys here are drunk? I wondered. Maybe half of them were already drunk and their cultural environment had made them adept at keeping it secret. It was awfully dark up front.

Swedish House Mafia was a black outline against a horizon of screens, lasers, and bursts of fire. They played at supernatural volumes, the punishing bass combining with naive peals of melody to induce brief spells of disembodiment. The great majority of Saudis still didn’t know who Swedish House Mafia was, but there were relatively privileged teenagers on hand whose lives would probably never be the same again, and who—perhaps without consciously realizing it—had just felt the exhilaration of seeing their world begin and end in the same flash of light. ■

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Ibn Saud, FDR, and the Future of the Jewish State

American ambivalence and flawed thinking hurt Zionism and helped the Saudis in 1945. In 2023, a similar combination may be preventing Saudi-Israeli peace.

BY MICHAEL MAKOVSKY

On Feb. 14, 1945, President Franklin Roosevelt met King Abdul Aziz Al Saud, or Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, on the *USS Quincy*, a warship parked in the Suez Canal. Together, they transformed the Middle East and ushered in decades of close U.S.-Saudi ties. That conclave remains a cherished lodestar for the Saudis to this day, with pictures of it adorning their government offices, while the United States still calls its ambassador's residence in Riyadh the Quincy House. However, less well-known is that bilateral bonding came at the expense of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's quiet efforts to fashion a postwar regional settlement that included a Jewish state.

Roosevelt's meeting with Ibn Saud on his return from the Yalta conference came at a critical time for Zionism. Through the 1917 Balfour Declaration, Britain had initiated a pro-Zionist policy committed to establishing a Jewish national home in Palestine. As colonial secretary in 1921-22, Churchill implemented policies to fulfil that pledge, marking the zenith of British Zionism. Britain's commitment then waned, and in 1939 Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain effectively nullified it with a White Paper that did not envision a Jewish national home, and limited Jewish immigration into Palestine to 75,000 over five years, restricting a refuge for European Jews facing Nazi genocide.

Churchill fiercely led the parliamentary opposition to the White Paper, despite Chamberlain being his (Conservative) party leader, but when he became premier in May 1940, Churchill shied away from overturning it. Instead, he worked to establish a postwar settlement that included a Jewish state, which he imagined controlling all of Palestine west of the Jordan River. At the same time, he thought it practical that the Jewish state would initially comprise part of a larger Arab confederation headed by Ibn Saud, the tribal leader who founded modern Saudi Arabia in 1932. There had been growing Zionist support for such a structure and Churchill was informed, incorrectly, that Ibn Saud was interested in heading it.

Churchill initially began exploring this postwar vision in 1941. Always philo-Semitic, Churchill became a true Zionist in 1921 while colonial secretary, and while his Zionism fluctuated depending on larger interests, it deepened in the 1930s, when both he and the Zionists languished in the British political wilderness. He was keen to do right by the Jews and redeem their suffering at this most precarious moment in their history. He also became increasingly concerned about German advances in the Middle East, and he hoped his pursuit of a postwar regional Arab confederation that included a Jewish state would rally support for Britain's cause among the Arabs, the Jews of Palestine, and American Jews—with the latter

holding, he believed, considerable influence in then-neutral America.

Churchill's view of Ibn Saud evolved over time. In the 1920s Churchill thought him a Muslim extremist, but now considered him the "greatest living Arab," who should be "Boss of the Bosses" or "Caliph" of his conceived confederation. "As the custodian of Mecca, his authority might well be acceptable," over Iran and Transjordan, who were both ruled by British-allied Hashemites whom Churchill didn't respect. Saudi Arabia's newfound oil wealth evidently influenced his thinking as did, uncharacteristically, the pro-Ibn Saud views of government officials he usually disdained. Those government officials were generally anti-Zionist, and his plan was widely opposed by the Colonial and Foreign offices, and most of the War Cabinet. His own foreign secretary, the antisemitic and anti-Zionist Anthony Eden, thought with good reason that a federation including both Ibn Saud and the rival Hashemites would be unstable.

Despite this opposition, Churchill eventually managed in January 1944 to convince his anti-Zionist War Cabinet to approve "in principle" a postwar plan for an "Association of Levant States" comprising a small "Jewish State," a British-controlled Jerusalem state, a truncated Lebanon, and a Greater Syria encompassing southeast Lebanon, Transjordan, and certain Arab areas of Palestine. This plan was proposed by the Cabinet Committee on Palestine, headed at Churchill's behest by the pro-Zionist Labourite Home Secretary Herbert Morrison. Churchill didn't agree with the entire plan, but it marked a tremendous achievement for his Zionist quest.

In November 1944 the Morrison committee revised the plan. As long as the Hashemite British ally Abdullah headed Transjordan, it recommended that Arab Palestine and Transjordan join an Abdullah-ruled "Southern Syria" that would also include the Galilee. The committee also recommended a Jerusalem-based state controlled by Britain, which would "safeguard forever the Holy City." Britain would also control the Negev. Yet the committee still remained committed to a rump Jewish state.

Churchill was not keen on the size or even existence of the proposed British-controlled, Jerusalem-based state. Also, he wanted a larger Jewish state comprising all of western Palestine, including the Negev. He even expressed to Roosevelt and Britain-based Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in 1943 that the Zionists should also get Transjordan. For years, Churchill viewed the initial size of a Jewish state as simply a starting point for Israeli expansion. The report gave Churchill the minimum of what he needed—namely, a War Cabinet proposal for a postwar Jewish polity.

On Nov. 4, 1944, the day after he received the latest Morrison committee report, Churchill had a long lunch with his old friend Weizmann. He mentioned the existence of a pro-Zionist cabinet committee but cautioned it would not lead to any statement about Palestine policy until after the war with Germany and probably not until after a postwar general election, presumably given the plan's political sensitivity. Churchill was unequivocal about U.S. involvement in solving the Palestine problem, asserting, "If Roosevelt and I come together to the Conference Table, we can carry through all we want." He evidently believed American support could overcome Arab opposition, thereby also circumventing anti-Zionists in his own government, as Eden feared.

Yet Churchill also expressed concern that Washington was not sufficiently pro-Zionist. Indeed, he often felt compelled during the war to persuade Roosevelt to be more sympathetic to European Jewish suffering, which gave him cause to wonder if the Zionists had as much political clout in the United States as he had avowed to his anti-Zionist colleagues. Several times during their meeting he expressed his surprise to

Weizmann at the anti-Zionism of some prominent American Jews.

Both Churchill and Weizmann came away from their meeting emboldened. That very day Churchill urged War Cabinet consideration of the new Morrison report. The following day he wrote Roosevelt recommending their upcoming summit with Stalin be held in British-controlled Palestine: "I am somewhat attracted by the suggestion of Jerusalem. Here there are first-class hotels, government houses, etc., and every means can be taken to ensure security." In this setting, Churchill likely would have pressed his plan for a postwar pro-Zionist regional settlement. But Roosevelt demurred, and the meeting was held instead at Yalta in Soviet Crimea.

Two days later, Churchill's pro-Zionist efforts hit a significant roadblock. On Nov. 6, 1944, in Cairo, members of the extremist Zionist organization, Lehi, or Stern Gang, assassinated Lord Moyne, Britain's resident minister in the Middle East. Churchill told the House of Commons it represented a personal betrayal, but he expressed his outrage in measured words and tone. The Foreign Office recommended suspending Jewish immigration into Palestine and the British military requested postponing redeploying troops from Palestine to Italy in order to search for illegal arms held by Palestinian Jews. This wasn't the first time the British military and bureaucrats prioritized confronting Zionists to Nazis. Churchill rejected those requests but decided, given the toxicity of the subject, to postpone War Cabinet debate on the Morrison committee's plan, even though it already was on the agenda and the report had been circulated to War Cabinet members. The War Cabinet never did debate the final plan. Although becoming exasperated with the region—privately noting, "We are getting uncommonly little out of our Middle East encumbrances and paying an undue price for that little"—Churchill turned his attention to persuading Roosevelt and Ibn Saud of his pro-Zionist diplomatic solution.

While intrigued by Churchill's ideas, Roosevelt became aware of Ibn Saud's hostility to a pro-Zionist settlement. In

1943, the Saudi leader wrote Roosevelt that Palestine was a "sacred Moslem Arab country" that "belonged to the Arabs," accused the Jews of seeking to "exterminate the peaceful Arabs," and hoped the Allies would not "evict" the Arabs from Palestine and install "vagrant Jews who have no ties with this country except an imaginary claim which, from the point of view of right and justice, has no grounds except what they invent through fraud and deceit." Roosevelt replied to his "Great and Good Friend" Ibn Saud, expressing his wish for a friendly Arab-Jewish understanding over Palestine before the war was over, and pledging to forgo important decisions about Palestine "without full consultation with both Arabs and Jews."

Two presidential envoys confirmed Ibn Saud's fierce antisemitism and anti-Zionism to Roosevelt. In 1943, General Patrick Hurley conveyed Ibn Saud's opposition to a Zionist state and quoted the Saudi king declaring: "I hate the Jews more than anyone. My religion and my Islamic belief make it inevitable that I should." Roosevelt got a similar report that year from Lieutenant Colonel Harold Hoskins. Churchill was informed of both these reports, but noted, when rebuffing a Foreign Office request to meet Hoskins: "My opinions on this question are the result of long reflection and are not likely to undergo any change."

Roosevelt, who enjoyed the overwhelming support of American Jews in all his elections, remained less enthusiastic about Zionism, and about Jews in general. In the 1944 campaign, the Republican political convention endorsed a strong pro-Zionist plank, and the Democrats, with Roosevelt's support, followed with the same. But as Cordell Hull, Roosevelt's secretary of state, noted, "In general the President at times talked both ways to Zionists and Arabs, besieged as he was by each camp."

Having just won his fourth term, Roosevelt seemingly was not overly concerned about American Jewish opinion. Instead, Roosevelt and other U.S. officials were increasingly preoccupied with Saudi Arabia's promising petroleum potential as American energy reserves appeared to be in decline. He

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The Netanyahu Doctrine

Benjamin Netanyahu, *Al Arabiya* interview, December 2022

I will say this: I think we face a possibility of not merely an expansion of the peace; I think we can have a new peace initiative that will form a quantum leap for the achievement for the resolution of both the Arab-Israeli conflict and ultimately, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. And of course, I'm referring to what could be a truly remarkable historic peace with Saudi Arabia.

Mind you, I'm committed to deepening and strengthening the remarkable Abraham Accords that we've had with our neighbors, but I think the peace with Saudi Arabia will serve two purposes. It will be a quantum leap for an overall peace between Israel and the Arab world. It will change our region in ways that are unimaginable. And I think it will facilitate, ultimately, a Palestinian-Israeli peace. I believe in that. I intend to pursue it.

Of course, it's up to the leadership of Saudi Arabia if they want to partake in this effort. I certainly hope they would.

still hoped and felt confident he could convince Ibn Saud to come to some agreement on Zionism, even as the State Department informed him that the Zionist issue inhibited friendly U.S.-Arab relations. Ibn Saud made clear his frame of mind when he told a U.S. delegation a few days before the Yalta conference, "If America should choose in favor of the Jews, who are accursed in the Koran as enemies of the Muslims until the end of the world, it will indicate to us that America has repudiated her friendship with us and this we should regret. The choice, however, is for America."

Asked by Stalin at Yalta if he intended to make concessions to Ibn Saud at their upcoming meeting, Roosevelt said he might offer to give the Saudi leader the 6 million Jews in the United States. (One journalist writing in these pages argued

Roosevelt was keen that Jews be settled thinly across the world.) Roosevelt made other antisemitic jokes during the war to Churchill, who didn't reciprocate.

When Roosevelt and Ibn Saud finally met on the *USS Quincy* on Feb. 14, 1945, Roosevelt set an accommodating tone by suspending his chain-smoking in Ibn Saud's presence, in accordance to the Saudi king's preference. According to his translator, the ardently pro-Saudi U.S. minister to Saudi Arabia, William Eddy, who remains one of the primary sources for what transpired, Roosevelt expressed hope that Arab countries would permit 10,000 European Jews to immigrate into Palestine after the war. Ibn Saud flatly rejected even that small request, noting, "Arabs and the Jews could never cooperate, neither in Palestine, nor in any other country." He blamed Arab-Jewish turmoil in Palestine solely on Jewish immigration and Jews purchasing land.

Roosevelt then tried ingratiation. He reacted positively to Ibn Saud's recommendation that surviving European Jews return to their homes or move to Axis countries, with the president noting there was now a lot of space in Poland after 3 million Jews had been killed by the Germans. According to U.S. minutes of the meeting, Roosevelt also "wished to assure His Majesty that he would do nothing to assist the Jews against the Arabs and would make no move hostile to the Arab people." The president further distanced himself from pro-Zionist remarks made by other U.S. politicians and suggested the Arabs do a better job of making their case because "many people in America and England are misinformed."

The president also confirmed British suspicions by disparaging America's close wartime ally and now growing rival for Middle Eastern oil. Roosevelt reportedly told Ibn Saud, "You and I want freedom and prosperity for our people and their neighbors after the war. How and by whose hand freedom and prosperity arrive concerns us but little. The English also work and sacrifice to bring freedom and prosperity to the world, but on the condition that it be brought by them and marked 'Made in Britain.'"

Ibn Saud later told U.S. Minister Eddy, "Never have I heard the English so accurately described." Ibn Saud was understandably ecstatic after this meeting and told a prominent sheikh upon his return to Saudi Arabia, "The high point of my entire life is my meeting with President Roosevelt."

Roosevelt gave conflicting reports of his meeting and the conclusions he drew, based on his audience. He told his friend, the American Jewish investor Bernard Baruch, and Rabbi Stephen Wise, that he did not like Ibn Saud and was displeased with the meeting. Yet he also told the anti-Zionist Hoskins that he was unimpressed with Jewish development of Palestine beyond the coastal plain (which he observed from his airplane), that the more numerous Arabs in Palestine and neighboring lands would triumph over the Palestinian Jews, and that he supported a State Department draft plan for making Palestine an international territory for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Perhaps most definitive was his off-the-cuff, post-trip assessment to Congress: "On the problem of Arabia I learned more about that whole problem, the Moslem problem, the Jewish problem, by talking with Ibn Saud for five minutes than I could have learned in the exchange of two or three dozen letters."

Roosevelt's appeasement of Ibn Saud completely undercut whatever Churchill sought from the Saudi leader. Three days after the *USS Quincy* meeting, Churchill arrived in Egypt and drove to meet and host Ibn Saud at a desert oasis hotel for lunch. Churchill immediately raised the issue of the Saudi king's opposition to smoking tobacco and drinking alcohol in his presence. Churchill records telling Ibn Saud with his characteristic humor, "I must point out that my rule of life prescribed as an absolutely sacred rite smoking cigars and also the drinking of alcohol before, after, and if need be during all meals and in the intervals between them." That likely didn't go over well with the fundamentalist Muslim leader.

At risk of compromising some of Britain's interests in Saudi oil, Churchill pressed Ibn Saud to accept a Jewish state, apparently along the lines

of the federation scheme that he had promoted since 1941, even though the Morrison committee did not emphasize Ibn Saud's role. Churchill reported to the War Cabinet that he "pleaded the case of the Jews with His Majesty but without, he [Churchill] thought, making a great deal of impression, Ibn Saud quoting the Koran on the other side, but he [Churchill] had not failed to impress upon the King the importance which we attached to this question." Understandably, Churchill did not want to belabor his failed meeting with Ibn Saud in his War Cabinet report.

We learn more about the meeting from Ibn Saud's account to the American envoy Eddy, Hoskins' cousin, who later worked for the Arabian oil company Aramco. In this telling, Churchill was "confidently wielding the big stick. Great Britain had supported and subsidized me for twenty years, and had made possible the stability of my reign by fending off potential enemies on my frontiers. Since Britain had seen me through difficult days, she is entitled now to request my assistance in the problem of Palestine where a strong Arab leader can restrain fanatical Arab elements, insist on moderation in Arab councils, and effect a realistic compromise with Zionism." Ibn Saud asserted Churchill was demanding "an act of treachery to the Prophet and all believing Muslims which would wipe out my honor and destroy my soul. I could not acquiesce in a compromise with Zionism much less take any initiative. Furthermore, I pointed out, that even in the preposterous event that I were willing to do so, it would not be a favor to Britain, since promotion of Zionism from any quarter must indubitably bring bloodshed, wide-spread disorder in the Arab lands, with certainly no benefit to Britain or anyone else. By this time Mr. Churchill had laid the big stick down."

Churchill thought he could leverage what he considered Ibn Saud's obligation to him and Britain; believed a British-supported Arab confederation headed by Saudi Arabia would offer an important inducement; and, perhaps most importantly, hoped that Roosevelt would press the Zionist cause. The Saudi king was unimpressed with past British

"The ailing American president had other goals, and sold out the Jews, and the British, to appease the Saudi leader."

support, as Britain continued to support his Hashemite rivals in Transjordan and Iraq, and embraced the ascendant United States over the descendant Britain. Meanwhile, the ailing American president had other goals, and sold out the Jews, and the British, to appease the Saudi leader.

Of course, even if Ibn Saud was inclined to agree to Churchill's proposal, it is unclear if it would have mattered much. The Saudi leader had little money (the petrodollars did not roll in until after the war) and only a weak hold over the religious tribes across the vast Arabian desert, let alone over Palestinian Arabs, whom Churchill hoped the Saudi leader would restrain. It might have been more practical for Churchill to focus on achieving American support for a Jewish state, and then impose it on the Palestinian Arabs and the region, as he was willing to do for years. But he was wedded to the 1920s' pan-Arab views of many British officials, even though the Arabs had become more fractured, and less accommodating to Zionism and Britain. But, again, U.S. support was lacking. For Roosevelt, the budding relationship with Saudi Arabia came first.

Churchill's wartime quest to ensure a postwar Jewish state had failed. Several months later in July 1945, he wrote to some British officials, "I am not aware of the slightest advantage which has

ever accrued to Great Britain from this painful and thankless task." He wanted the United States to deal with Palestine, thus extracting Britain from the challenging situation while pulling America into the Mediterranean.

Eight decades later, even with waning influence and appetite, America has become an even more critical country for regional peace and stability than it was in 1945. The Jewish state, which was founded in 1948, has become, as Churchill (and very few others) projected, a strong military, cultural, and economic force closely aligned with the United States and the West. Equally dramatic, Saudi Arabia's current de facto leader, 37-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, is trying to modernize the country, moderate its Islamic orientation, liberalize the role of women, and diversify the state's reliance on oil revenue. And, as authoritative Saudi leaders told me and colleagues last year, MBS is prepared to normalize relations with Israel, with which his country now has many fundamental common strategic, security, and economic interests—if, critically, he gets certain U.S. guarantees related to security, weapons, and a restoration of close bilateral relations. And there's the rub: America is now, alas, chilly to the Saudis, disengaged, fearful of conflict and still keen for an Iran nuclear deal that threatens Saudi Arabia's and Israel's existence.

U.S. ambivalence, flawed thinking, or worse, contributed in the 1940s to delays and complications in the establishment of a Jewish state and in the search for Israel-Arab entente. Ibn Saud's vehement anti-Zionism certainly influenced the U.S. attitude. But nearly 80 years later, with large parts of the Arab world increasingly looking for some kind of accommodation with Israel, and the de facto Saudi leader declaring his readiness to normalize relations, it would be tragic indeed if American ambivalence, or faulty thinking, again contributed to a failure to achieve entente between the world's only Jewish state and the world's leading Arab power. ■

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Who Does Saudi Better: Google or Reddit?

As the kingdom goes digital, the best information is not where you might think

BY KATHERINE DEE

My pre-trip research before arriving in Riyadh was the usual Reddit-Google-TikTok expedition. *What's Saudi Arabia like?* and *safe + Saudi Arabia + Jewish woman*.

The results were mixed. Google suggested that anything and everything is fair game for government surveillance, especially when it comes to Americans, so to be careful. Culture clash, it warned, in bright red letters.

The first page of results was littered with stories about American citizens being detained for edgy tweets and government-owned websites warning about potential “breaches of etiquette” that could earn you a hefty fine, or worse. (“Worse,” of course, was up to the reader’s imagination.)

One such faux pas apparently was using disabled restrooms if you weren’t disabled. Another was bringing in controlled substances—even vitamins required a doctor’s note. A worried Canadian travel blogger implored his countrymen not to wear shorts.

But Reddit and TikTok—more current, perpetually updating—showed a different side of the kingdom.

On Reddit, Saudis laughed at anxious American tourists asking if their social media would be audited upon arrival (“lol u think KSA is a police state?” one user retorted, “we don’t care about some random american, just have fun”). On TikTok, middle schoolers showed off trendy sneakers and weekend trips to Al-’Ula, an ancient Arabic oasis city near Medina, occasionally coming into the camera’s

view to ask their audience which international school they thought was the most toxic. European expatriates, mostly women, vlogged from big cities like Jeddah and Riyadh about how moving to Saudi Arabia had liberated them.

They’re more conservative, the women all seemed to agree, but it’s safer here.

Many talked about the recent reforms—mostly those concerning Western clothing—but just as many preferred to don a hijab and abaya, or even a niqab, even if they hadn’t converted to Islam (though some had done that too).

Social media assuaged some of my anxiety, but you never know until you’re there, do you? I’d been surprised during these types of trips before. Just two weeks prior, I’d had an awkward back-and-forth at a Cuban airport with a customs agent about how I was more of a blogger than a journalist per se. (The conversation ended with the misconception that I was writing a book about penguins. It’s a long story.) But the sort of conversation that was funny in Cuba, I worried, might have legal consequences in Saudi Arabia.

The night I arrived in Riyadh, a friend back home shared a lurid story over the phone about a man she’d slept with the night before. Nothing unusual, a drunken hookup gone awry, the kind of garden-variety pornography that 40 years ago you might have only been able to read about in *Penthouse*, but which today circulates like it’s nothing. Another friend texted me a “politically insensitive” meme referencing the events of the summer of 2020 (you don’t need me to tell you anything else). It sounds

silly now—but I was generally nervous this would trip some kind of switch, and mark me as a disrespectful guest in the country.

So I found myself in Riyadh, excited but cautious, not in the “use-your-best-judgment” casualwear that Reddit assured me would be fine, but in a plain black abaya with a scarf around my neck—just in case Google was right—and anxious about maintaining proper phone hygiene. But the longer I was there, the easier it was to see that the Redditors were right.

The first thing you should know is that all those stereotypes about Middle Eastern hospitality are true. It was hard for me to feel *truly* alone in Riyadh—how I might feel alone on a bad day in Paris or Tokyo. Perfunctory “good afternoons” could extend for as long as you allowed them to. In a salon, arguably the best place in any city for talking to strangers, I chatted about life in Riyadh with a hairdresser in her early 30s for three hours.

“It’s an international city,” she told me, “It’s our New York.”

People come to Riyadh from all over the Middle East, she explained. According to the U.N.’s 2022 World Migration Report, Saudi Arabia as a whole is the third-most-popular destination in the world for international migrants (as you can tell just by looking at a crowd). As my hairdresser described it, there was more opportunity there, more culture. Better art; good food; better jobs; more things to do. Not least, it was *safe*—the

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same thing I kept hearing about from Western expats online.

She felt safe walking alone at night; she felt safe doing just about everything except driving. And that was just because of the traffic, which, in my opinion, competed with American cities like Atlanta and Los Angeles with how unrelenting it could be. (My hairdresser theorized that traffic got worse when women started to drive in 2018.)

She also seemed to think that Riyadh is designed for people who are from the Arab world—that some of its opportunities and enchantments might not be immediately visible to Westerners. Her impression was that I was probably getting the “English menu,” so to speak.

“It’s *our* New York,” she reiterated.

But, she added, if I wanted to learn about the social scene in Riyadh, online meet-up groups were a good place to start—and if I spent enough time there, the city would start opening up to me. She asked if we had those in the United States, and I said yes, but they were seen as a last resort. The kind of people who use meetup.com are usually a little awkward. She said it isn’t the same in Riyadh: “It’s good for immigrants.” She also recommended I check out the Snapchat map to see where people are hanging out.

She was right. There was activity everywhere, showing people hanging out with friends, going to comedy clubs, drinking halal nonalcoholic beer at “pubs” designed to mimic the experience of a Western night out without being *haram*.

“The space was abuzz with youthful sexual tension that felt like it could easily bubble over into telepathy.”

It reminded me of the early days of Craigslist, back when people still used it to find DIY shows or parties. (Also like early Craigslist, there were a shocking number of ads for prostitutes, another story for another time.) As it turns out, Snapchat has a staggering 20 million active users in Saudi Arabia—57% of the population—and its imprint is everywhere. In any long line, any bus ride, any lull in a café or hotel lobby, you’ll see multiple people using it.

Saudis use Snapchat for dating, too, often preferring to swap Snapchat handles to exchanging phone numbers. Less commitment, with the added benefit that messages can disappear. I wondered if that, too, is a result of the country’s recent reforms—if Saudis are using Snapchat with the same implications and connotations of romantic casualness that Americans do, at least in some respect. I didn’t have the guts to ask my hairdresser about that one, though an artist friend who had recently visited Riyadh offered some clues. He described a birthday party he attended in Jeddah where people were “secretly drinking” and showed off the Instagram of a woman he’d met there.

My hairdresser did tell me that some Saudis use Tinder and homegrown Tinder clones, which I found surprising. A part of me wanted to set up a sock

puppet profile to see what the energy was, but I didn’t have the guts to do that either, and I also figured that not knowing Arabic would make it a futile journey anyway.

Some of the dating culture was visible in public, though.

Young couples canoodled in the crowd at a Charlie Puth show in Jeddah, which felt more like a rich kid’s bar mitzvah than a concert. They didn’t kiss, but they brushed up against it; the space was abuzz with youthful sexual tension that felt like it could easily bubble over into telepathy. One look, and you know exactly what your boyfriend or girlfriend is thinking. There were some signs of it at the Saudi Grand Prix, too—young girls, maybe 16 or 17, dressed more provocatively than I expected, chatting carefree with their male peers. Girls who seemed as young as 13 or 14 wore trendy makeup styles I recognized from TikTok influencers. By the way, have you ever seen a hijabi e-girl?

Social media seems to play a big role in the youth culture, even beyond Snapchat’s massive reach. Malls carried all the same fast fashion you’ll see stateside (some were surprisingly provocative), cafes blasted trending songs on TikTok, and teens filmed Instagram reels everywhere they could get away with it.

My favorite example of this was a café called EL&N. In the language of TikTok and Pinterest, EL&N is *barbiecore*. In normie English, it’s whimsical, pink, the very picture of girliness. Most importantly, the menu is organized by which social media platform each dish is best for. There are Instagrammable lattes, hot chocolates designed for Facebook, and TikTok-perfect desserts. The jury’s out on whether the food tastes good, but it was nothing if not aesthetic.

Saudis are interested in more about the internet than just social media, though. Popular streaming platforms such as Netflix enjoy widespread popularity in Saudi Arabia, where shows like *Outer Banks* top charts.

And then there’s anime. The “wee-boo” or “otaku” community in Saudi Arabia is booming. On people’s shirts; on charms dangling from women’s



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purses or kids' smartphones; pins and keychains on backpacks; in grocery store tchotchkes, anime is everywhere in Riyadh and Jeddah. You'll even see the occasional cosplayer if you pay close attention.

While anime has been popular in Saudi Arabia since the 1970s and 1980s, the country now boasts the largest anime fanbase in the Middle East and a growing industry to cater to them. This includes streaming platforms like Anime-Key and MBC's Shahid, and events like the Saudi Anime Expo.

Zanib, an employee at Boulevard World's "Anime Town," an anime-themed pavilion at an amusement park styled after Epcot, echoed this sentiment. Saudis love anime, she told me—they're the biggest weaboos around. Even government officials promote it. "Ditto for K-pop," she added, which tends to be a sister interest to anime.

In Riyadh, there's an anime-themed café called Konime, and about half a dozen dedicated stores, like Animation

Theory and Geek Dimension. According to Zanib, though, the *real* otaku community is in Jeddah. Not only are there more stores, events, and conventions, but "that's where people are meeting up and discussing anime."

The Saudi love of anime extends beyond just consumption. Manga Productions—a company owned by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's MiSK Foundation—collaborated with Japan's Toei Animation to produce *The Journey*, an award-winning anime that tells the story of a pre-Islamic battle over Mecca from a Saudi perspective. (I can't help but wonder if KSA has the same purposeful, propagandistic perspective on "kawaii" anime mascots as Japan—call it "cute-washing.")

None of this means that Saudi Arabia is uniformly "more liberal" than its reputation, at least in the way a Westerner might think. I suspect many of the more liberal attitudes—the slightly more provocative clothing, the attention to social media, the openness to a

more Western style of courtship—are concentrated among the upper classes, or at least the metropolitan centers. Formula One, for example, isn't exactly accessible to everyone; nor are the upscale malls of Riyadh and Jeddah.

Whenever I visited a tourist hotspot, like Boulevard World, famous souks, or the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Diriyah, I saw plenty of niqabs. I saw more prayer and more visible sex segregation. At least in public, these Saudis were more reserved than the cosmopolitan youth vanguard I'd met elsewhere, though in no way hostile. Which was the real Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

It was hard to tell, and perhaps there's no correct answer to that question. No matter where I was, though, and no matter who I was surrounded by, I felt welcome. *Safe + Saudi Arabia + Jewish woman?* As the Redditors proclaimed: absolutely. ■

This article was originally published on May 23, 2023.

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

A Man With No Name Revisits the Kingdom

A portrait of life in the heart of America's military empire, where the work of perpetuating the 'liberal world order' can be seen up close

BY JEREMY STERN

After another evening of sweeping rooms at the Ritz-Carlton for bombs, I was driving back through the busy Malaz district of Riyadh when I saw a small girl, no more than 4 or 5, maimed in a traffic accident. I'd noticed her a few moments before it happened in the backseat of a white sedan. She'd been climbing over

a woman's shoulders toward the rear windshield of the car, giggling and unfastened, rocking back and forth.

The sedan had cut us off before swerving into the adjacent lane of oncoming traffic. To avoid an approaching vehicle, it swerved back into our lane but started drifting, first ahead of us and then toward a concrete barrier. The driver spun the car the other way around to avoid it, but the barrier caught the rear of his car.

The girl, I believe, was thrown from an open window. From a car stopped several feet ahead of the crash, peering out the window to look behind, I could see her tangled and motionless body on the pavement. Judging by the nature of the driver's reaction, he was her father.

The woman in the backseat of the sedan, I assume the mother, got out. She wore a black niqab and black gloves, and as she stumbled out of the car and got down close to the girl's body she gave a long, breathless shriek, like a train rounding a sharp corner. The father started yelling and waving his arms at a group of men standing outside a pharmacy just beyond the concrete barrier. I don't speak Arabic, but I gathered from the fact that these men didn't run to help but instead yelled back at him angrily that the father was blaming them, in his madness, for the location of the barrier. At once, dozens of backed-up drivers too far away from the accident to see what happened started honking.

I was in the car with a Navy dog handler and his bomb-sniffing German

shepherd. I was a bomb technician at the time and the leader of our little team, which was on its way back to base after having cleared a series of rooms at the Ritz of explosive threats—work that consisted mainly of turning on light switches and faucets and jumping on beds, so that any booby traps would kill us and the dog, rather than the important officials who would use the rooms afterward.

After a frenetic exchange, the sailor and I both guessed, by the indecisive and panicked mannerisms of the gathering bystanders—one man kept wiping the length of his face, as if washing off a cold shower of disbelief—that the girl was unconscious or dead. There wasn't even a distant siren of the Saudi police, and the scene of the accident—the unmoving girl, the raving father, the screaming mother, the rattled on-lookers, the drone of horns—was assuming an air of chaos.

It was a long time before I understood that I wanted to get out of the car and help the girl as badly as I did because by then I'd reached an inhuman degree of apathy during my time in Saudi Arabia, and this whole thing, by contrast, was invested with nerve and spectacle. Here was a badly hurt child, and we had to be the only people around with a first-aid kit in the trunk and a basic competency in emergency medicine. From where we stood we could see no blood, but maybe she did need some kind of trauma dressing or help breathing, or perhaps people would try to move her in such a way that would threaten her life and we could stop them.

And yet there we were, in our jeans and baseball caps and preposterous haircuts, in a Chevy Tahoe with a German shepherd in a cage, a bag of tools and U.S. tourist passports, at the scene of a private tragedy—strangers in someone else's desert, and no longer out of sight, which is where we were meant to be. The girl's father was clearly not in his right mind and looking for someone to blame. The police would eventually come.

"Are they actually going to care, if we're just helping?" the sailor next to me asked. What he meant was: "If something goes wrong, and we get

"Starting in the 1950s and continuing through the Gulf and Iraq wars, the House of Saud forged a compromise between the defenders of its security and the guardians of its domestic power."

blamed, will anyone be able to bail us out?"

Without exchanging any other words, we motioned our heads in agreement, rolled up the window, and drove away.

It was around the time Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef was deposed, and Mohammed bin Salman was made heir presumptive to the throne, that I was living in secret in Saudi Arabia. I was stationed on a small military base we called the Hamlet, which was overseen by the Saudi Ministry of Interior. We were there under the auspices of the government, in other words, as Americans have been for 70 years. But unlike Germany, Japan, Djibouti, and a hundred other countries, Saudi Arabia has never signed a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States—which is how it became the only place I'd ever been expected to conceal not just my identity or location but the fact of my existence.

Starting in the 1950s and continuing through the Gulf and Iraq wars, the House of Saud forged a compromise between the defenders of its security and the guardians of its domestic power: It would authorize American military deployments of varying sizes and

evolving mission sets, but would never formally waive legal jurisdiction over U.S. troops by signing an agreement that might imply their permanence. Instead, the Americans would be kept "over the horizon" (i.e., out of sight), where we would have no contact with the people we were meant to be defending, and wouldn't contaminate the country with our *haram* habits and behavior. The power of the Wahhabi clergy, and its political alliance with the Saudi royal family, had not yet been broken, and the royal court was likewise eager to obscure any vivid reminders of its existential dependence on "Anglo-Saxons"—another reason to keep the Americans deep in the shadows.

All this was rather frustrating for an American lieutenant nursing fantasies of swashbuckling foreign adventure. If I didn't quite expect to set off into the desert to win the heart of a tribal leader and back him in a historic revolt before being anointed with some especially fragrant type of incense, I was not yet worldly enough to think I'd be in chinos, T-shirt, and a ball cap, carrying a tourist passport and driving a Chevy Tahoe on my way to disarm minor explosive threats in the ad-Dahna Desert, or hunt for booby traps at the Ritz-Carlton, when I was doing anything at all.

The Hamlet and its high walls were tucked away between a migrant slum and a sewage dump. A nearby foundry, power plant, and plastics factory combined with these attractions to give

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the little compound an unforgettable stink, and to ward off any outside interest. On the Hamlet's outer perimeter, which was visible from a nearby civilian road, a uniformed Saudi could usually be seen sitting in a Potemkin guard shack; the call to prayer bellowed into the Hamlet from an adjoining mosque, adding to the illusion that it was just another Saudi garrison. A few meters beyond the southern gate, from the top floor of a tall and otherwise empty office building, Saudi military police kept watch. For Americans in the habit of command—we'd seen and carried ourselves as figures of power and authority to whom deference is owed—it was a stinging indignity to be watched from above like that, less like prisoners than children.

During the many scorching days, when the air was thick with moving dust and made a nasty rasping sound, and an orange fog settled over the Hamlet, we would wait out the sandstorms in hours of petty conversation, feeding each other's mounting bitterness toward the army, the desert, the miasma of burning sewage and trash. As for the Saudis themselves, we grew to resent them with the kind of intensity that can only come from a total absence of human contact, save for periodic meetings with the military police looking down on us.

During one such meeting in their top-floor office, where we were received with dates, burning agarwood, and every other demonstration of hospitality, I saw an American staff sergeant erupt violently at a Saudi who was with us in the room, speaking on his phone but not participating in the meeting. The man wore a white robe

“As for the Saudis themselves, we grew to resent them with the kind of intensity that can only come from a total absence of human contact.”

and a sleek earpiece, and from where we sat, we could see him rubbing his bare, calloused feet together, sprinkling little bits of skin on the floor. The staff sergeant told us afterward that he lost his composure when he noticed the man, who was talking on his phone so loudly that it interfered with the meeting, spreading the skin around by making circles on the ground with his toes. The American began yelling hideous racial insults at the barefooted man and had to be restrained. He was quickly disappeared from Saudi Arabia, likely via a cargo night flight to Kuwait. I wish I could say that none of the rest of us shared in his insanity. We all did.

It had been a while since I'd thought of all this, and only a bit more lately since I'd last thought of the little girl, who for all I'll ever know may have died immediately, or maybe survived her injuries. The memory only reappeared in garish and, no doubt, at least partially unreliable detail a few weeks ago, when I was back in Riyadh for the first time in five years, this time as a civilian—a journalist from a Jewish, pro-Zionist magazine, no less. In an oblique sort of way, it gave me a better glimpse than I would have had otherwise of the changes the kingdom is undergoing now.

I was having dinner at a Café Bateel

in the posh Oud Square in Al Safarat, the diplomatic quarter. On the patio of the café there were the usual tables of men and mothers with young kids in full niqabs. There were also groups of young, unaccompanied women, some of them smoking shisha, their hair and many earrings and frighteningly beautiful faces uncovered. Several of the waiters, too, were young women, as were the Uber and Bolt drivers waiting at the entrance to the square. I smoked a cigarette and ordered lox on rye bread.

A few tables away, there was a group of three teenage girls; two were giggling at the other, who was struggling to stifle a big smile. A handsome boy at a different table was smiling too and pretending not to look at her every few seconds. Some kind of atmospheric Arabic folk music alternated with throbbing house music pregnant with the possibility of relief. Lovely children ran around screaming.

Maybe what I'd been expected to do and did, and what I didn't do, equally didn't matter. Saudi Arabia had always been moving forward without me, which in truth was all most Saudis ever wanted—and all we wanted, too. ■

This article was originally published on May 22, 2023.



UPCOMING HOLIDAY

Shavuot

The day the Israelites got the Torah



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Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, among the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world.