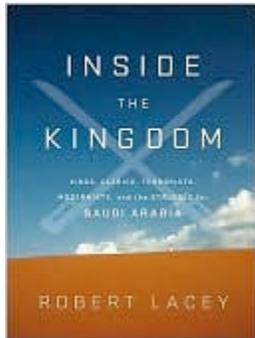




Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us.

This morning we are delighted to welcome Robert Lacey to our breakfast program. He will be discussing his latest book, [Inside the Kingdom: Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia](#). Once you hear him talk about this complicated society, you will realize just how thoroughly researched and insightful his analysis is.

When most of you think of Saudi Arabia, I would imagine your thoughts might include the most notorious Saudi of all time, [Osama bin Laden](#), maybe visions of the 15 [9/11](#) hijackers, or women who are veiled from head to toe. In stark contrast, others may be thinking about its enormous oil wells and how this valuable resource has impacted on the [House of Saud](#). But whatever pictures you may conjure up, there is consensus that what has happened in the past and takes place in the present has had and will continue to have a tremendous impact on the lives of so many Americans.

Just how significant this country is to our own and to others is the subject of Robert Lacey's fascinating new book, *Inside the Kingdom*. Almost 30 years after his first stay, our speaker returned to Saudi Arabia to write a sequel to his earlier work, the widely acclaimed [The Kingdom](#), which was published in 1981. In it he wrote about the rise to modernity of a society that insisted on tradition, but that also was a place where there was the need for a delicate balancing act by the ruling family to manage these two conflicting views. This book was later banned in Saudi Arabia.

This time around, our speaker stayed for almost three years, talking to princes and commoners, businessmen and bloggers alike, to learn even more and examine the issues on which the Saudi future turns. He writes about how an ancient religion came to define a modern state and, in turn, fueled violence that has spiraled far beyond the boundaries of this desert kingdom. Although one could argue that some progress has been made since his last time there, this is still a society where cultural stultification, political stagnation, and pervasive corruption abound and internal frustration festers.

As Mr. Lacey so insightfully and clearly points out, Saudi Arabia is a country with two competing narratives. On the one hand, there are those who declare that Islam has gone wrong precisely because the Saudi Arabian leadership has been prepared to work with the West. On the other hand, there are those who want to use the oil wells to support a government and a culture in tune with the 21st century.

As long as events in the Middle East continue to have geopolitical consequences far beyond the region's boundaries, these divisions and views continue to be a concern, especially to the West. It should be apparent, therefore, that an understanding of this complex nation is essential.

Accordingly, we are grateful to Robert Lacey for his adventurous nature and acumen, which has provided us once again with a superb look inside the Saudi state.

Please join me in giving a warm welcome to our speaker this morning, Robert Lacey.

Remarks

ROBERT LACEY: Thank you, Joanne, very much indeed. It's a great pleasure and honor to be here this morning, talking at breakfast time. I hope you've all had your coffee. I'll try and keep you awake.

I'd like to get straight in by reading you something from the *Arab News*, which is one of the English-language newspapers in Saudi Arabia, although, as you may see, its command of English is not totally perfect.

My interest in Saudi Arabia was stimulated by my previous interest in the British monarchy, about which I've written and I remain a commentator. I have an interest in your own monarchy, the presidency, with all your political dynasties competing. But that's another issue. Perhaps we can talk about it another time.

So I was delighted in 1982, when I was just finishing my first book on Saudi Arabia, *The Kingdom*, to find there were royal events happening in England. This is how the *Arab News* reported those royal events to its readers. It said, "The marriage of [Prince Charles](#) to the [Lady Diana Spencer](#) is due to be consummated next month in St. Paul's Cathedral by the [Archbishop of Canterbury](#) and a team of other top clergymen."

You can see that just getting one word wrong can land you in a lot of trouble. I'll try not to do that today.

Why does Saudi Arabia matter? Let's get that sorted out to start with.

I wrote a whole book about this, as Joanne has said. It's called *The Kingdom*. It was published in 1981. It was banned by the Saudi government at the time. I'll talk about that a little later. It's a very big book, as those of you who have it will know, about 450 pages. I'm now going to sum it all up in a paragraph by looking at this map.

This is the importance of Saudi Arabia and the House of Saud. If you look at this map, you will see—and it's actually highlighted in a separate area—the main centers of oil and gas production in Saudi Arabia. To be honest, that's why we're really interested in Saudi Arabia. That's why Saudi Arabia matters in the world. That's why Saudi Arabia is currently a member of the G-20, the 20 most powerful nations. Some say it's not quite in the top 20; it should be 21 or 22. But anyway, it should certainly be in that forum—the one monarchy, the one absolute monarchy, the one Arab country.

That's all because of the largest reserves of oil and gas in the world, which are under the sands of Saudi Arabia. As you probably know, it's not at the moment the world's number-one oil exporter, because it is exercising restraint in order to maintain the price of oil, from its own point of view, and the Russians have jumped in and gone in the lead. But that's a temporary thing.

Then, on the other side of the map, you will see Hejaz, which is the name of the nation that used to exist on the Red Sea coast, and particularly, of course, just inland of Jeddah you see Mecca and, to the north of that, Medina. Those are, of course, the holy places of Islam. That part of what we now call Saudi Arabia is why Arabia has mattered, certainly, to Muslims in the world for 1,430 years now, since the days of the Prophet [Muhammad](#). As I'm sure you know, it is the duty of every Muslim in the world—and the latest estimate shows 1.8 billion Muslims in the world—to travel at least once in their life, if they can, to the Holy City, Mecca, and they would often go to Medina as well.

So there on this peninsula, the 17th-largest nation, I think, in terms of space in the world—it's sort of like America as far as the Mississippi—you have these two sources of significance—the oil, the energy, and on

the other side, the holy places.

The importance of the House of Saud is that if it weren't for this family, who conquered, unified, pulled together—whatever word you want to use—the peninsula, these two centers of very different influence and significance would be separate. They were separate for centuries, after the decline of the early Islamic Empire. They were separate at the beginning of the 20th century. It was the House of Saud, and particularly—on the back [of the map] you can see [Ibn Saud](#), as we call him in the West, Abdul Aziz, "servant of the mighty," father of the present king—in fact, father of all the modern kings of Saudi Arabia.

It was he who, in a series of dazzling and very politically skillful campaigns, partly conquest, partly consensus—the House of Saud are great consensus builders. People talk about Saudi Arabia not being a proper political entity. They haven't met the House of Saud and seen how they operate. It's not Western democracy, but they are wheelers and dealers, let me tell you. It's all in the book.

This family pulled it all together at the beginning of the 20th century. The Hejaz was ruled by [Omar Sharif](#)'s father. I'm thinking of [Lawrence of Arabia](#), Hejaz. The [Hashemites](#) ruled the Hejaz, the Red Sea coast. Ibn Saud finished his conquests by kicking them out. We, the British, gave them Jordan and Iraq as consolation prizes. We, the British, who at that time considered ourselves the United States of the area, as you now are, felt that we would leave Ibn Saud in place. In fact, we couldn't do anything about it. The power structure that this man created less than 100 years ago is quite extraordinary. He built this nation.

There's just one third thing. So these two incredibly significant areas were brought together under the control of the House of Saud and the particularly austere strand of Islam, the puritanical strand of Islam, which had enabled the House of Saud to conquer Arabia in a religious mission.

Excuse me, sir—we have here the Saudi ambassador to the United Nations— I'm going to use a word now that you may not like. Many Saudis object to this. We call Saudi Muslims, or the dominant strand of Saudi Muslims, [Wahhabi](#). Saudis often take me to task for this, because they do not believe that they are a separate sect of Islam. They believe that they understand the fullness of Islam and they are simply Muslims.

But you'll excuse me, sir, if for the rest of today, we use this word, because it helps us to understand it.

The Saudis are called Wahhabis because the preacher, the teacher who propagated this particular, as I say, austere and puritanical view of Islam, I'm sure you know, was someone called [Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab](#). "Abdul Wahhab" means "slave of" or "servant of the giver."

I'm sure there are many Arabists here. Whenever you see "Abdul" in an Arabic word, it means "servant of" or "slave of," depending on how you interpret it. So the present king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah, is the servant of God. His father, Abdul Aziz, was the servant of the mighty, Aziz being one of the 99 names of God. Another of them is Wahhab, God the giver.

In the middle of the 18th century—and I just go back into this little bit of history briefly. This is before the creation, I like to remind my American friends, of the United States. In the 1740s, the first alliance was formed between Muhammad ibn Saud, as he was called, the Saudi leader of the day, then the ruler of a little oasis called Dariyah. That's now a beautiful suburb of Riyadh, which later became their proper capital. He formed this deal with the two of them, the preacher and the emir, that the emir, the sheikh, would go out and spread the word—by force, if necessary—of Abdul Wahhab.

At that time, in Christian terms—again, forgive me, sir, for making these sort of comparisons—you might say Abdul Wahhab was like a [Calvin](#), the character who came over here and helped create the United States of America—a puritanical, simple believer. When, eventually, the Saudi troops conquered Mecca, it was as if the Calvinists had taken over Rome, smashing the equivalent of stained-glass windows, pulling down the idols which were diverting people from their true religious purpose, and so on.

Finally, to conclude this little piece of history, that is the significance of the House of Saud. They unified

this religious and economic power and harnessed it to this particular version of Islam, espoused, of course, most violently, by Osama bin Laden. Most studies would say—and I would have to agree with them—that the violent interpretation that Osama bin Laden and [al-Qaeda](#) put on Islam, or Wahhabism or whatever you want to call it, was not true to the writings or teachings of the teacher nor to what most Saudis believe.

I have been living now in Saudi Arabia for the last three years. I've never found a Saudi who approved of what Osama bin Laden did on 9/11—what he did before was another matter, and I'll be talking about that—and who does not feel very ashamed and embarrassed about what has happened.

Saudis are no better at apologizing than the rest of us. But as you will see from my book, and as I try and talk about what King [Abdullah](#) is doing, you will see that the modern policies of Saudi Arabia, the reforms of Saudi Arabia, the new direction that this rather extraordinary man is taking the country could add up, if we wanted it to, to an apology.

It's certainly a new direction.

Why do I know what I know, for what it's worth, about Saudi Arabia? As Joanne said, I first went there in 1979. My own reasons were that I had just written this very successful book called [Majesty](#) about the British monarchy. I got intrigued by the way in which in Britain the monarchy thrived. Today it's thriving even more—a strange, irrational institution, but, I felt, connecting with people's psychologies, with people's hearts in a way that just defied ordinary political analysis.

I was looking for more than this. And, of course, where would you find more monarchy than in Saudi Arabia, with a royal family of 4,000, 5,000, 6,000, 7,000 people? Nobody knows. Well, the man who pays them every month knows, but that's a secret. It's certainly a secret I haven't cracked.

Here was an absolute monarchy, with absolute power. The basic law of Saudi Arabia, which is their constitution—we would call it their constitution—the official constitution of Saudi Arabia is the [Qur'an](#). I don't know how many other countries in the world have a holy book for their constitution. But the constitution of Saudi Arabia is the Qur'an. All law is derived from that, and its political system, which is called the basic law, is derived from that. Item 1 says Saudi Arabia is a monarchy. Nothing about democracy now or in the future. It is a monarchy.

1979, of course, was the end of the first great oil boom. Oil had gone from about \$2 a barrel in the early 1970s to, by the end of the decade, up around \$34, \$35.

There were all these scare stories in the British papers: "It will only take Saudi Arabia six hours of pumping to get enough money to buy Buckingham Palace." "It will only take ten hours to buy the city of London," and this type of scaremongering, as people love to do.

But I wanted to go there and see what it was like. So I started traveling, as journalists did and do, on a month's visa to visit the kingdom.

In those days, as everywhere in the world, it was a much easier, freer place. There was this road in Riyadh, which is like Ministry Row. I could just go down there—no guards on the gates that worried about me. I could just walk in and ask where the minister's office was, go upstairs. I wouldn't get into the minister's office, but I would get into an outer office, present my card, the explanation of why I wanted to be there, and the office manager would say, "Fine. Come back next week. I'll see what the minister says."

I'd get back the next week. "The minister has read your paper and would very much like to talk to you. But, of course, there's important business at the moment. Come back next week."

Then, when I came back the next week, there was, not a death in the family—because Saudis don't lie—but an illness or something. There was one more week, and there was another reason why he couldn't see me. Then it was time for me to go. That was how the system worked. People knew that if these nosy Westerners, journalists managed to get in, you only had to keep them buzzing around the bottle for 28 days and then they were out.

It so happened that soon after that I met a young Saudi businessman just getting started in London. The ambassador will know him, Khalil Ali-Razur [phonetic] of one of the old merchant families of Jeddah. He said, "I think you should tell the world more about Saudi Arabia. Can I help you? What can I do to help you?"

I said, "Well, I'd like one of these things called an *iqama*. An *iqama* is a Saudi residence visa. If you are a serious businessman or working there under contract, you get a two-year *iqama*. You are effectively a resident for those two years.

He said, "Sure, sure. I've got a few of those. I just had some issued. Would you like to be an electrician or a plumber or a carpenter?"

I said, "No, I don't think that's going to work, because it can become pretty obvious what I'm really doing. And that will be bad for me because I'll be out, but also it will be bad for you."

He swallowed and realized he'd gotten himself into more than he had bargained for. But he was as good as his word, as Saudis were. He said, "Next time you're here, I'll take you to meet somebody."

It was the summer, I remember, of 1978. It was Ramadan that particular summer. Everything was happening at night, as those of you who know the Middle East will recognize—wonderful nighttime life. He took me to Taif, which is a wonderful hill town, not overlooking Mecca, but it's in the hills above Mecca. We drove down the road from Jeddah to Mecca. It would have been quicker for him to go through Mecca to get to Taif, but he couldn't do that because he had me with him. When you get to the edge of Mecca, you get to a checkpoint, and if you're not a Muslim, you have to go around something called the "Christian bypass." That's what we, the Westerners, called it.

So up to Taif. There he introduced me to an old college friend of his, a member of the royal family, Prince [Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz](#), who was then, and is to this day, the deputy minister of the interior. You will see him on this chart at the bottom of the princes under King [Fahd](#).

I told him my story, and he smiled on me. We had a very good conversation. He was one of the first of the senior Saudi princes to be educated in the United States, at Redlands College, I believe, in California. As a result, he didn't hand over the *iqama*, but the *iqama* was issued to me. I was actually described as a *mu'alif*, which I understand to mean "writer," "author."

A high old time I had whenever I came or went through the Saudi immigration gates, because they had never seen a visa issued to a *muwaliff* before.

I then brought my family, my long-suffering wife and my daughter. Through the generosity of another Saudi friend, we were able to live in a villa in downtown Jeddah, not far from the lagoon. We were there for two years, and I wrote my first book, *The Kingdom*.

When that was completed, it was published to good reviews here in the West. I took it back to Saudi Arabia, to the Ministry of Information, for permission for the book to be published there.

This book, the book I have written now, has already been banned, I'm happy to say, in Bahrain, the island off the coast of Saudi Arabia. I say "happy to say." It certainly doesn't do any harm to the sales to have a book banned, I can tell you.

I was rather disappointed, though, about this banning in Bahrain, which has already happened. At the moment it's being considered by the Saudi Ministry of Information.

I said to my publisher, "Oh, great. What didn't they like about the book?"

He said, "They didn't open the book."

They just said, "It's about Saudi Arabia. It's about modern politics and modern religion. We ban all books on such subjects."

So it just went on a pyre with lots of others. Bahrain, this small offshore island, is very dependent on Saudi Arabia. It has no natural oil. I think it gets about a quarter of a million barrels a day from Saudi Arabia. I'm not even sure if it pays for it. So they wouldn't want to upset the Saudis. They play safe.

A reading committee in the Ministry of Information looked at my first book, *The Kingdom*. This was 1982 by now. Again, it was the same mechanism. There was not a single Saudi on the reading committee. They were all Sudanese and very conscious that their *iqamas* wouldn't last too long if they let the wrong sort of book in.

So playing safe, they made 97 objections to my book. About a third of them were about Islam. I said, "You're the Muslims. I'm a Christian. Whatever you say I'll change."

About a third were cultural. I would quote people saying, "You can never trust a [Bedouin](#)." They would say, "Oh, that's very insulting to our cultural roots."

I would say, "Yes, but those are not your only cultural roots." Yes, Arabian society can be traced back to the Bedouins or nomads. They were probably the first people who came. But it grew up through the oasis dwellers. The word for them is *hadur* [phonetic], town dwellers. The House of Saud may have been Bedouin once, but they were town dwellers, oasis dwellers, when they started pulling the place together. There is a great conflict between the town dwellers, who want to trade between the different oases, and the Bedouin, who want to raid them. This is the what I want to bring out in the book. This was totally lost on them.

The final third was straightforward political problems. It was a rather recent and raw memory. There had been trouble in the House of Saud. The first king here, King [Saud bin Abdul Aziz](#), the eldest son of the old king, had been deposed after a succession of problems by the family, who installed his brother [Faisal](#) beside him. There was lots of interesting but rather gory material about that, which I put into the book and which, for obvious reasons at that time, the Ministry of Information didn't want published.

I said I couldn't change any of that, and so the book was banned.

I remember going straight afterwards—I had an appointment with the deputy governor of Riyadh, Prince [Sattam bin Abdulaziz](#), who is running Riyadh at the moment, while his elder brother is with the crown prince, Sultan, in North Africa for most of the time.

I was rather despondent. He said, "Cheer up, old man. If it weren't banned, none of us would take it seriously. None of us would read it."

That has proved to be the case.

I was able to come back, having written a banned book. One of the most banned authors in Saudi Arabia is a man called Dr. [Ghazi Alqosaibi](#), who is not just the minister of labor, but one of the very principal advisers to King Abdullah, one of the minds behind this reform program. Some call him the unofficial prime minister of Saudi Arabia. He regularly writes books that get banned. He's a poet, secular, outspoken. It would take a whole lecture to explain how this works.

Anyway, I thought I would have no more to do with Saudi Arabia after that. I kept my Saudi friends. I went off. I wrote other books. I came to live here, in Detroit and wrote a book about the [Ford](#) family and the motor business and other things.

Then 9/11 happened. Of course, 9/11 suddenly threw Saudi Arabia, never unimportant, right into the center of what the 21st century is all about. Think of these words we now use or are familiar with, like [jihadi](#) or [fatwa](#) or al-Qaeda or [Salafi](#) or Arab-Afghan or Osama bin Laden, for that matter. What do they all have in common?

They all relate to and, in some cases, stem from this country of Saudi Arabia.

So that became the subject of my new book, which has just come out, *Inside the Kingdom*, the story of how the poisonous intolerance and hatred that al-Qaeda represents came to wreak such havoc that autumn day eight years ago.

The book tells the story. I'll just run through the main points. My book is a completely new book. *The Kingdom* was finished in 1979, and by happy chance—I suppose happy chance—that's when I was living in Saudi Arabia. So the new book starts in 1979. I'm sure many of you know that 1979 was an incredible turning point in the history of the Middle East. If you have to know what Saudi Arabia means, the other thing you have to know is why 1979 matters so much.

It is, first of all, the year of the [Iranian Revolution](#), when a Westernizing, albeit autocratic, modernizing ruler was brought down. It's a revolution unlike any other revolution in history. Revolutions tend to modernize a country, not always in a peaceful way. They tend to make a country more secular. They tend to diminish the power of the religious establishment. Your own revolution moved this country forward. The French Revolution did the same, the Russian Revolution also.

In our Western terms, the Iranian Revolution was the first revolution where people went backwards, where people went back to religion. It's one of the themes of my book, the way in which the 1970s—the wealth, the oil boom of the 1970s, the money boom—produced a little modernization, but what it really produced was a religion boom. The money boom changed societies in a way that made people fearful. They wanted to go back.

It's not so different from your own country. Who would have thought in the 1960s that at the beginning of the next century, you would have powerful right-wing religious political figures that really mattered in your political system? [Rush Limbaugh](#) is your Wahhabi. Fundamentalism is one of the unexpected—it proves that historians are no good at predicting the future. Who would have predicted that as the world got wealthier and more sophisticated, it would also become much more religious and fundamental? My book examines that particular theme.

Three other things happened in 1979.

Mirroring, in a way, the religious revolution in Iran, a group of extremist Muslims [seized](#) the Grand Mosque in Mecca and held it for two weeks. It was something that didn't make much of a blip on the radar screens of the West. It was incredibly significant in the Muslim world. It called into question the whole nature of Saudi power and whether the Saudis were proper people to control the holy places if they were allowing these men to seize it.

The problem about these men—and I write about them in this book and reveal this for the first time—these men were actually protégés of the Saudi religious establishment. They didn't just come out of nowhere. They were young religious students of the sort we would recognize today, Salafis with their long beards, looking back into the Qur'an to see whether it was right to eat chicken or not, regulating every single detail of their lives by looking backwards.

The leaders of them were protégés of the [ulema](#), of the [sheikhs](#), particularly one very significant figure called [Abdul Aziz bin Baz](#), who features in the book—to such a degree that the House of Saud had arrested them before the Grand Mosque was seized. It was Sheikh bin Baz and other sheikhs who persuaded the ruling family to let them out. They got let out and then they seized the Grand Mosque, with all the shame that that involved for Saudi Arabia.

Of course, everybody said these were not typical Saudis, which is, of course, what people say about bin Laden. I would agree. They are not typical Saudis, but they are typical of a strand in Saudi life and culture which went wrong in these years and which, as I say, the present government and king are trying to correct.

Just the other two things that happened in 1979, and then I'll stop and take your questions.

A revolt, at the same time as the seizing of the Grand Mosque, in the East of Saudi Arabia, the oilfields by the [Shia](#) Muslims. Those of you who know the difference between Shia and [Sunni](#) will not need me to explain it, and those of you who don't can read it in the book. It's a very significant difference. It's right at the heart of the conflict, which is deeper than people realize, between Iran and the Arab countries. It affects Israel in all sorts of interesting ways. There is very deep mistrust between Sunni and Shia.

Certainly in those days, the Shia of the East were oppressed. Any crew manning an oilrig would have a dozen Shia with one Sunni foreman. To this day, there is not a Shia pilot in Saudi, certainly not a Shia pilot in a Saudi fighter plane in the air force, no Shia in the officer class in the army in Saudi Arabia.

You will see again in the book the very interesting ways in which the House of Saud addressed this problem, and I think has addressed it rather well.

Anyway, there was this revolt, which was a foretaste of what was to come.

Then the fourth thing, which involves you, was the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan, the proclamation of the [Carter Doctrine](#), by which, effectively, historically America finally took over the all-British role of being the arbiter of the Middle East, from the Western point of view, and said that any incursion into this territory—of course, it was your national security adviser, [Brzezinski](#), who actually wrote the Carter Doctrine. I was interviewed by his daughter the other day on this subject. Very interesting. But that's another story.

This led to the Americans and Saudis getting together, not for the first time. Again, something else I write about in the book is something called the Safari Club, whereby all through the 1970s, Saudi Arabia, working with France and Egypt and troops from North Africa, intervened undercover in Africa, in Angola, and various places like this, in anticommunist and pro-American interests.

You know what happened in Afghanistan. It was a tremendous victory for the West. It brought down the "evil empire." It was a major factor, let's say that, in ending the Cold War. Of course, in Saudi terms, all the credit went not to the Afghans and not to the Americans, who paid as much as the Saudis, but to this relatively small group of Arab-Afghans led by Osama bin Laden. They had much less to do with that military victory than they like to claim. But they came back the conquering heroes.

They established this new role model for young Muslim youths, unemployed, frustrated by the problems of single-source economy, like oil, in generating real work. So, again, bizarrely, at the end of the 20th century, the idea of becoming a holy warrior starts to appeal to a whole generation of not just Saudis, because it spread around the world. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Thank you very much. I'll be happy to take your questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: You left us with a cliffhanger—many—which is so clever of you. With the royal family so entrenched and being paid from the oil revenues without having to work, there is a lot of resentment, in Saudi Arabia and outside, and one might expect a revolution, except that the powers-that-be seem to have control. So there are reforms, about which you have only hinted.

Could you please tell us more about how the Saudi government is dealing with all these resentments and keeping themselves in power?

ROBERT LACEY: Thank you very much. Several questions there.

The first one about the control of the Saudi government: Again, forgive me for saying so, but in a way, you'll have to read my book, because my book is the story of how a succession of threats have in the last 30 years thrown themselves against the House of Saud and how they have more than survived.

The question I always get asked—forgive me for saying it—is, how long will the House of Saud last? When

I was writing about it 1979 and 1980, every journalist had to end his article by saying, "I give them eight years," "I give them nine years." There's actually a whole book called *The House of Saud*, a very good book by a couple of distinguished experts. But even they in their final chapter had to address the question, how long is it going to last?

I say it's going to last a very long time. It's just a reality. The House of Saud is a reality. As I tried to explain at the beginning, they are the creators of this thing.

Everybody who feels a partner in that country feels a partner with them. They have their criticisms, obviously.

As I say, my book is the story of how in the last 30 years Sunni religious extremists, Shia religious extremists, clever Western intellectuals who want constitutional reform, human-rights campaigners have all, in their different ways, thrown themselves against the power of the House of Saud and have all been, not rejected, but incorporated into the system. That is their cleverness.

I'm sure you have read—I made a film about it for PBS—about the "[Betty Ford](#)" clinics that the House of Saud is running for terrorists, the way in which they are embraced into the society—not the very hardcore terrorists. They don't want this, and they remain locked up in the Saudi equivalent of [Guantanamo](#) that is not much talked about. Ten percent just remain locked away.

But the vast majority of young men who have strayed take part in these rehabilitation courses. They are given a car when they graduate. They are given a job. Most important of all, they are given a wife. It costs about \$18,000 or \$19,000 these days in Saudi Arabia to arrange a marriage and get a wife.

One of the problems with these young men is that they have no roots in the society. I'm not going to get into the role of sexual frustration in extremism, but if you just think about it, if you have a religion which believes that any sex outside marriage destines you for hell, which is the strict Islamic belief—not just extramarital sex, but premarital sex—and you are a religious fundamentalist, then there is a certain amount of sexual energy in a young man building up. That is one easy explanation of an element in Islamic fundamentalism.

Much more seriously, the House of Saud has worked out how to give them a stake. I have a friend. Those of you who saw my film for PBS would have seen him, a young man who did his five or six years in Guantanamo, came out, went through the process, got himself a wife, and, after a year or so, no children. So the government is paying for her fertility treatment, so that they can produce children, which is what a marriage should do, and he should have a stake in society.

That's my answer about threats to the House of Saud. To be cynical about it, the different constituencies would all far rather have the House of Saud running the country than anyone else. The Shia don't want the bearded sheikhs running the country. The merchants in Jeddah don't want the bearded sheikhs either. But nobody wants the clever Western constitutionalists either.

Interestingly, one of the reforms as a result of 9/11 was municipal elections that were held, the first real exercise in democracy. It was announced that these municipal councils would be set up. Half the places would be nominated and half the places would be elected. Everybody said, "There's the House of Saud cheating again. They don't want full democracy. They're going to keep their control of it."

What happened when the elections came? All the religious fundamentalists got to work—again, it's the Rush Limbaugh syndrome—and they found out every single candidate who had been educated in the West, who got an American Ph.D. They spread the word: "Don't vote for him," as a result of which the Taliban was effectively elected.

One of the good things was that in the East, where the Shia dominate, they themselves got power. That, we would say, is a good thing.

But my point is that suddenly we all realized, "Oh, my God, half these seats are nominated, so we can

have the people who speak English, the people who have been educated, to balance." This is one of the challenges of Saudi Arabia.

Just one last point on this. In so many ways, it defies the stereotypes. Yes, it's an elderly establishment of old powerful men, dominating a very youthful country. But it's the old men who are the Westernizers, the old men who are the progressives. One of the problems is, it's the young men and the young generations who are bitterly anti-American because of what they see, the two wars being fought against Muslims by American troops. Islamic fundamentalism, whatever one means by that, is not going to go away with age, as the old folk die. It might almost be the reverse.

This 85-year-old man, Abdullah, is the Saudi equivalent of [Obama](#). This is the man who represents hope, change, reform.

Just to run through them quickly. A national dialogue he started—no democracy, but a national dialogue—in which for the first time Sunnis would meet with Shias. Women came and took part. People from different parts of the country got together and talked.

Then he founded an international religious dialogue, in which Sunnis and Shias would talk. I went to, not the very first meeting of it, but the first meeting held abroad, in Madrid. To see these rabbis queuing up to shake the hands of the king of Saudi Arabia was a wonderful sight, particularly orthodox rabbis, and bishops and Buddhist monks.

But, of course, this is not something that King Abdullah could do in Saudi Arabia. He could never invite rabbis and bishops and Buddhist monks, these religious figures, to come to the Holy Land of Islam. That would just be unacceptable to the vast majority of still very conservative folk.

This particular year, the king has appointed the first woman of ministerial rank—very interesting—[Noor Al-Fayez](#), distinguished expert on women's education. The next day, of course, the papers were full of it. There was a little photograph of her, a very small passport photograph, with her head covered by the headscarf and everything. All the papers got phoned by her office that day, saying, "Never run any more photographs of me in the newspapers." It's not that she would really mind herself, but because photographs of women in the newspapers are deeply offensive to religious conservatives, and not just religious conservatives.

Let me just finish with one little story. It just happened a month or so ago. A radio show talk host on one of the Arabic stations—it's actually called Red Lines, which is all to do with exploring the red lines of Saudi convention and society—starting boasting and talking, as these radio presenters do, about his love conquests and sexual conquests when he was a young man, before he got married. "I remember doing this," and "I remember doing that. This is how I'd pick up the girls," and so on.

The government didn't do anything to him, but the listeners did. The station was flooded with protests by listeners. A local prosecutor took it upon himself to prosecute the young man. What this man was saying—by admitting that he had had sex before marriage, out of marriage, he was saying, "I'm not a good Muslim. I don't mind going to hell." And that was deeply offensive to people.

He got sentenced to five years in jail—perhaps that's the way to deal with Rush Limbaugh—five years in jail and 500 lashes. There aren't many Saudis who are saying this infringed his freedom of speech. In Saudi Arabia you are not free to say that sort of thing, and that's how most people would like it.

QUESTION: I wonder if you would address the withdrawal of the American military bases in Saudi Arabia, what the real story was there. It seems to me that when Osama bin Laden listed his demands, his number-one demand was the departure of American bases from his homeland. I think Israel was number four of his demands.

Very soon after 9/11, the American bases left.

ROBERT LACEY: Yes. Very good point. It goes back to the geography. All the Americans were up here in

the East. But because of the way Saudi Arabia was pulled together, it was possible for Osama bin Laden to say, "They are in the Holy Land"—obviously, troublemaking—as if they were in Mecca and Medina. The Americans and the Saudis are very careful to keep on that side.

But this, to continue the story briefly, is where—you exactly hit on the point—Osama bin Laden separated from the House of Saud. He came back in 1988, 1989, a conquering hero for the royal family and for everybody. Then [Saddam Hussein](#)—and this is another interesting story—having been supported to the tune of tens of billions of dollars in his fight with Iran, turns out Kuwait and, by implication, Saudi Arabia as well. What are the Saudis to do about it? The decision, as we know, was taken to invite American troops in.

Osama bin Laden had a better idea. He actually went and told it to my friend, Prince Ahmad bin Abdul Aziz and to other members of the House of Saud. He said, "Look, we are specialists in guerilla fighting. You don't need the Americans to get rid of Saddam Hussein. We've got to get them out of Kuwait. We can infiltrate Kuwait. We'll do it well"—and they probably would have done it quite well—"and we'll go in there and fight house to house, and we will drive the infidel Saddam Hussein"—the idea that 10 years later, Saddam Hussein and bin Laden were like that [i.e. close allies], your pretext for war in Iraq, is extraordinary. "We will fight them. We will push them out."

Prince Ahmad said, "I'll take this and talk to the family." And they said, "Thank you very much, but no thanks."

He was bitterly offended. He then said to [Prince Turki](#), the intelligence chief, "There's trouble down in Yemen. I'd like to go down there and deal with that."

Prince Turki said, "Your fighting days are over. This is it."

That is very interesting. I have a number of Saudi friends who fought in Afghanistan. And that was it. I have a friend who is a marriage guidance counselor now. He's actually the picture of the person I'm talking to on the flap of the book, Khalid Bahaziq. He went to Afghanistan in the 1980s no fewer than ten times. Most of them went for their holidays. They would buy a car or buy an AK-47, fight for a month or so and then, when they left, they would give the car and the guns to the guys who remained. Khalid went ten times. Then that was the end of it, but not for bin Laden.

To answer your question, the Americans stayed, again very carefully segregated over the eastern side of the country. It was sort of a matter of pride for the House of Saud. They weren't going to ask the Americans to leave just because bin Laden was asking them.

Then, of course, came 9/11, and it became more serious. It wasn't possible to do it straightaway, because, reluctantly, there were all sorts of command centers that had been created in Saudi Arabia, I'm not quite sure exactly where, which were crucial to the Iraq operation. The Americans asked if, as a favor, everybody could stay until Iraq was invaded. That's a whole other question.

The Saudis were not at all happy about the invasion of Iraq, but they regard America as their number-one ally in all sorts of ways, not just militarily, but economically.

All Saudi economic surpluses go straight into the dollar. I'm not an economic expert, but certainly the vast oil surpluses which the Saudis pour into the dollar every month that they have spare money are an enormous factor in the stability of the dollar. And never once do they play—journalists speculate about whether the Saudis are going to go for the euro. Iranians, of course, and other oil producers will talk about that. The Saudis would never dream of suggesting that they would wobble the dollar, because they have so many investments in it.

So straight after Iraq was invaded—it took about five or six months—the Americans all went down to Qatar. It was arranged. That's now the home of [Al Jazeera](#).

Qatar is where the American forces are based.

QUESTION: Would you tell us how the House of Saud is projecting itself outside Saudi Arabia, with the rise of threats from Iran, as well as the Iranian surrogate, Hezbollah, in Lebanon?

ROBERT LACEY: That's several questions. For a start, you talk about the House of Saud projecting itself. The House of Saud has a wonderful indifference to what the world thinks about it. They know they're right. They have bigger problems than what the West thinks about them. PR-wise, they don't employ PR companies and so on.

The present ambassador to America, [Adel Al-Jubeir](#), is a close adviser to the king. He translates for the king. That's his job. He relates to America in a very intimate and private capacity. But although he used to be a Saudi spokesman, he doesn't speak at all. The whole question of PR—perhaps they should pay more attention to it.

When it comes to Syria, you raised something very important. I don't really know enough about it. It's a very recent thing. I only know that a month ago I was at the opening of King Abdullah's wonderful new university on the Red Sea Coast, [KAUST](#) [King Abdullah University of Science and Technology].

This attempt to create an Arab MIT already has a \$20 billion endowment. It's a larger endowment than any other educational institution in the world except Harvard. It's a graduate university specializing in science and math. They brought academics from all over the world. Every single university president, dean, or vice chancellor you can imagine was there, in a succession of coaches and buses going up the coast, all hoping to get some sort of tie-up with KAUST.

There were various heads of state. It was very interesting to see who is the flavor of the month. The biggest flavor of the month, to everybody's surprise, was the young president of Syria, who was the first to arrive, and embraced the king. Considering that King Abdullah believes that the Syrians were behind the murder of his friend and the Saudis' friend, [Hariri](#), and brought such disorder to Lebanon, everybody sort of opened their eyes. And since then, the king has been to Damascus.

People who know more about foreign relations in this area will know much more than I do, but I think this heralds a very significant shift in Saudi attempts to cut off the flow of Iranian money and influence through Syria, destabilizing Lebanon and also Palestine.

I'm just guessing this. I think it's all part of the Obama peace process. Obama came to Riyadh just before his great speech. He asked the king to do various things, like allow overflying rights and that sort of thing to Israel. The king said no. Abdullah feels that he has stretched his neck out already with his Arab peace proposal, which he pushed through the Arab countries in 2002, following the example of Egypt, and convened the Muslim world in 2005 and got the whole Muslim world to sign off on it, offering full recognition and everything else.

I know so many Saudi merchants who would just love to get everything back to normal, get pipelines going into Israel, get trade, create a civilized part of the world, with everybody working. But King Abdullah feels he has done as much as he can, and it would not be right for him now to send an envoy—he's certainly never going to go to Jerusalem until there's a proper deal—send an envoy to Tel Aviv or anything like that.

But you will see other things. You will see the client states, like Bahrain, Qatar to a certain extent, though they wouldn't like to be called that, Kuwait —maybe they will do some things like this.

As I understand it—although, as I say, it's just a guess—what the king is doing is trying to bring Syria back into the fold. The Saudis do not like —if you look at this map, if you look at the Gulf, what's right along the opposite side of the Gulf? It's all Iran. The Saudis are not any happier than anyone else about the idea that Iran might have its own nuclear bomb.

QUESTION: Two points that, in my reading, I think I have taken. One is that if you talk about the intellectual avant-garde of Islam or the place where Islamic issues are discussed at the highest

intellectual level, I'm supposed to think of Cairo, not Riyadh.

Secondly, the Taliban is a creature of the Saudis originally, or the Saudis and their allies, because of the Soviet influence and because of the Iranian influence.

Where does the deal come that we can get the Taliban to stop harboring al-Qaeda and then leave them to do what they want to do in Afghanistan?

ROBERT LACEY: I can't answer all those points, because I don't know. I'm not really an expert on that. Again, some of that is covered in this book.

It is not entirely true to say that the Saudis—the Saudis didn't make the Taliban. The Taliban emerged for its own reasons. Then, when these young fighters came to such prominence in the mid-1990s, it is true that the Saudis embraced them. The only people who tried to do anything about Afghanistan after the Soviets left were the Saudis. America went on its way and ignored Afghanistan entirely. So what you are dealing with now is a problem that—it's no good being wise after the event. I know you had other fish to fry. You had a whole new world order to deal with. So having kicked out the Russians from Afghanistan, why should you bother with it anymore?

The only people who tried to do something about it were the Saudis. They went in. I describe the episode in the book. They were getting desperate because these men were so corrupt and backbiting. The idea was a national coalition of some sort. They just couldn't do it.

Eventually, King Fahd invited them all to Mecca. He did this with the Palestinians, to try to get all the Palestinians together. As an enormous privilege, he opened up the [Kaaba](#), the inside of the Kaaba, the sacred cube in the middle of the mosque, so they could go inside. The idea was that they would all emerge brothers.

They all emerged pretending to be brothers. Then—and I got this from somebody who was actually escorting me to the airport—he got a call saying something had just been blown up in Kabul, obviously on the orders of one of these people who had just sworn brotherly love in the mosque.

Fahd didn't wash his hands of them. He allowed money to go in for charities in Afghanistan. But he said, "I'm not giving any money to any of the political factions until you actually come to a deal." They didn't. When the Taliban came, the Saudi government did not give any official money to the Taliban. They did give it recognition, and, of course, a lot of private Saudis gave money to the Taliban.

But then came the parting of the ways, before 9/11. In all sorts of ways that are too complicated to describe—they are in the book—the Taliban became the protectors—rather unwilling protectors to start with—of bin Laden. Bin Laden started his notorious blowing up of the American embassies. That was the turning point.

By then King Fahd was ill. The country was being largely run by Abdullah, who was then crown prince and remained crown prince for another ten years, until Fahd died. He sent Prince Turki al-Faisal, who was later the ambassador here, to Kabul to get bin Laden back. There were about four or five months of negotiations. The Taliban sent people to Jeddah. They thought they had done the deal. Money must have been involved in the deal. So Prince Turki went finally to collect bin Laden and was told it was off the table and that he couldn't have him.

The Saudis withdrew their recognition of the Taliban government, but the damage was done.

The only thing I would just add to that is that, as I understand it, most Saudi influence and involvement, certainly in the early days, in Afghanistan was all through Pakistan. All the Saudi money that they paid to get the Russians out was channeled through Pakistani intelligence. That was the case in the 1990s as well. I think it's the case today. But, as I say, I'm not an expert on that.

Thank you all very much for your attention.

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