

Islam under strain in Saudi Arabia

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The desert kingdom of Saudi Arabia presents many cultural contrasts. It is the birthplace of Islam and home to Islam's two most sacred cities, Mecca and Medina. Under its rulers, the royal House of Saud, the state is run according to the strict Wahhabi form of Sunni Islam. As the world's largest oil-exporting country, it has accumulated vast wealth from oil revenues, beginning at the time of the oil crises in the 1970s which saw soaring oil prices. Global and, in particular, American demand for oil has focused world attention on Saudi Arabia, its way of life and the prospects for its long-term stability. However, Saudi rulers face pressure from a number of sources. The Americans accuse Saudi Arabia of doing too little to combat terrorism, pointing to the fact that religious terrorist groups, particularly al-Qaeda, originated in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government also faces pressure from the conservative religious establishment on which its legitimacy rests and, finally, from the growing voices for reform within the kingdom.

Oil wealth held much promise for the kingdom, funding education, health and other social welfare programmes for the country's rapidly growing population. At the same time, the wealth accumulated by the oil-rich elite funded a luxury lifestyle far removed from ordinary people. In recent years, state finances have become strained as they struggle to maintain welfare programmes. The ruling dynasty has been reluctant to introduce market reforms in the economy, which remains state-dominated, and economic growth faltered as oil revenues fell back. Unemployment, estimated at 15 per cent, has become a growing problem, particularly among the young, and 62 per cent of the population are under 25. GDP per head peaked at \$23,980 in 1977, and since then has fallen to just over half that figure, standing at \$12,650 in 2002. There are concerns that social unrest and instability may flourish in this environment, finding an outlet in religious radicalism. However, suggestions for reforms from well-meaning outsiders, urging the adoption of more modern, liberal values, have been resisted by the establishment.

Nevertheless, there are voices within Saudi Arabia urging reforms of the education system in particular and the role of women in society. Women are now better educated than previous generations and are less willing to accept their very limited rights in Saudi society. While literacy has reached high levels, the education system has aimed above all to imbue strict Islamic culture, with an emphasis on memorizing texts, leaving students poorly prepared for challenging employment. One Saudi executive has said: 'It's a one-way education, teachers lecture and students listen. They don't develop an inquisitive mind. They are not creative when put in the job market' (Khalaf, 20 November 2002). There is little scope for other subjects, such as foreign languages, which are seen as posing a threat to their own culture. One girl student who was disappointed at not being able to learn English has said: 'By learning English we open the door to different ideas, different ways of thinking and different ways of living. That, after all, is what education is about – or should be about' (Khalaf, 30 October 2002). It has been suggested by the United Nations Development Programme (2002) that a 'knowledge deficit' is holding back economic development in Arab countries generally, noting that highly qualified citizens often want to emigrate to the industrialized world.

Liberal intellectuals in Saudi Arabia, many of whom were educated abroad, advocate social reforms, democracy and a constitution, while Islamic reformists urge more limited reforms such as some power sharing. An additional consideration is that the kingdom has attracted many foreign workers and their families, now accounting for over a quarter of the population. The society has become more culturally diverse, and the economy now depends on their skills. King Abdullah has initiated a forum for discussion between Wahhabi clerics and both Sunni and Shia representatives, to bring about greater dialogue and perhaps signalling a moderation in the power of the Wahhabi clerics. Cultural changes seem inevitable. Reformists stress that the gradual change is the better pathway to preserving essential values and social stability, warning that inflexible resistance to the calls for change may lead to social upheaval.

Sources: Khalaf, R. 'Saudis start to question society that leaves women marginalized', Financial Times, 30 October 2002; Khalaf, R., 'Plenty of debate but little action', Financial Times, 20 November 2002; Khalaf, R. 'Inside the desert kingdom', Financial Times, 18 and 19 November, 2003; Righter, R. 'Poverty of knowledge amid the oil riches', The Times, 30 July 2002; Gardner, D. 'Chaos theory', Financial Times, 30 July 2004; United Nations Development Programme (2002) Arab Human Development Report (New York: UNDP); United Nations Development Programme (2004) Human Development Report 2004 (New York: UNDP).

Case questions

What are the cultural challenges emerging in Saudi Arabia, and how do they impact beyond the country's borders?



The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has a section on Arab states at <http://arabstates.undp.org>