

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

'Death of a princess'

The provocative film was shown in America, too, but the Saudis didn't react like the film's British producers hoped they would.

The healthiest reaction so far to the showing of the Grade-B public television film "Death of a Princess" is the report that an Arab film consortium is considering the production of a movie about the gutter life and base immorality of Great Britain's Princess Margaret. In fact, the only point in the "Princess" film that showed even slight humor was the remark by an unnamed Saudi official, speaking to the nosy British journalist, that Saudi Arabia "does not turn aside from the excesses of our royal family."

Fortunately, reacting with some statesmanship to the showing of the insulting British-made film, the Saudi government has not reacted as the makers of the film had hoped that they would. What was intended—or at least desired—by the film's producers, representing a combine of the Anglo-American intelligence-controlled electronic communication media, was to provoke an outburst of Islamic anger and outrage that would, they hoped, be directed at the West as a whole.

They wanted the Saudis to declare an oil embargo against the United States.

Instead, quite selectively, Saudi Arabia has expelled the British ambassador from Riyadh and quietly severed all new trade and economic contracts with British firms.

But the battle is far from over.

"Death of a Princess" will echo and re-echo throughout the Arab world. As such, it represents a catalyst not for rebellion among the young and those disaffected with the Saudi regime; for, in Saudi Arabia, there are few real dissidents. Instead, the film—which has now gained notoriety and is thus certain to win attention as a curiosity—is calculated to provoke a backlash of Islamic fundamentalism à la Ayatollah Khomeini. Already, Saudi Prince Abdullah ibn Abdel Aziz, the Muslim Brotherhood supporter who is the commander of the British-trained Saudi National Guard bedouin elite force, has used the occasion of the film's showing to argue for the thousandth time that Saudi Arabia should avoid a modernization drive.

Suzanne Abou Taleb, the Egyptian actress who starred in the pornographic epic, has said prophetically that "there will be thousands of pirated tapes all over the Arab world." Many Saudis and other Arabs who view the film will identify with the theme of the two-hour propaganda exercise, namely, that the Saudi regime represents the "enemy of progress" and that what is necessary is a "return to the pure and democratic spirit of Islam." The struggle, says an actress in the film, "has already begun." And backward Prince Abdullah is ready to lead it.

Overall, the film carries the same message that the supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution did back in 1977. *First*, that Islam and modernization do not mix. By presenting the death of the princess as the inevitable result of an alleged clash in values between the Saudi tradition and the life of the twentieth century, the film endeavors to create the impression that industrial development in Saudi Arabia must necessarily corrupt the purity of Saudi life. We wonder, says one of the characters in the film, "how much of your present is worth imitating?"

Second, the film contrasts the alleged excesses and vices of the present Saudi regime with an idyllic vision of the primitive, tribal life under allegedly Islamic law. During one scene in the film, as an Arab actor plaintively suggests that the Arab world is searching for its roots and wants to go "back to the tribe," in the background is playing the Beatles' lyrics: "I believe in yesterday."

The "Death of a Princess" represents something that the Saudis are ill-equipped to combat: ideological and cultural warfare. For the last 15 years, Saudi students abroad have been put through a virtual brainwashing process by the university system in the West, especially in the U.S. and Great Britain. An entire generation of the Saudi elite has been trained in the neo-Malthusian outlook of Princeton University and Stanford, Oxford and Cambridge. Now, back in the bureaucracy and in the various government offices and ministries, they are susceptible to the lure of the fantasy-world presented in the film.