

Saudi Arabia: a generation beyond the Dark Ages

by Gail G. Kay

“Saudi Arabia in the Year 2023” is the title Lyndon LaRouche has given to his proposal to invest Saudi Arabia’s oil wealth in projects that would turn the Arabian peninsula and areas in Egypt and the Sudan into centerpieces of global development. LaRouche’s proposal is the subject of an *EIR* Special Report released in June 1983.

In his report, LaRouche calls on the Saudis to look beyond their dependence on oil, to develop those resources the country lacks most. The task for the entire Arab world over the next four decades will be the greening of the desert; the second is the creation of a scientific elite, so that Saudi Arabia and neighboring nations become exporters of some of the most advanced science and technology in the world.

To accomplish the latter task, LaRouche proposes the creation of a “science-city” modeled on the Ecole Polytechnique of Lazare Carnot, which will be the center of an agro-industrial complex comprising both producing industries and experimental facilities.

The first week of September 1983, I visited Saudi Arabia and saw first-hand what the prospects for LaRouche’s proposal might be. What I saw can only be described as one of the most astounding and contradictory stories of the 20th century.

First and lasting impressions

My introduction to Saudi Arabia was a flight down the Arabian Gulf coast from Jubail to Dhahran. The Gulf coast is the heart of the Saudi oil industry; it is a spectacular testament to a process that in one generation has brought Saudi Arabia out of the 18th century—in economic terms. Culturally, little has changed.

Jubail is one of two city-building projects at the center of the third Saudi five-year plan. By the end of the 1980s, \$50 billion will have been invested to make Jubail “the industrial capital of the Middle East.” From the air, it looks like an artist’s schematic diagram, with its harbor built 7 kilometers into the green waters of the Gulf.

Down the coast is a major electric-generating complex, each of whose two plants produces enough electricity for the city of Kansas City. Next is the computerized container port

of Dammam, and then Ras Tanura, home of the largest oil refinery in the world.

Then I stepped into the airport at Dhahran. I was immediately reminded that this industrializing nation is simultaneously a conservative Muslim religious state.

The annual *Hajj* to Mecca was just beginning, and early pilgrims from Bahrain, an island 25 miles offshore, were trickling through the airport. The women were covered from head to foot, and veiled. Among the men, the *ghutra* and *iqal*, the familiar headcloth with double-coiled rope, and the *thawb*, a loose-fitting, ankle-length shirt, though by no means universal, are very common. A corner of the airport is set aside with prayer rugs for the faithful to make their five-times-daily devotions.

Just outside the airport, you are confronted by a six-lane superhighway very much like the New Jersey Turnpike and with about the same volume of industrial traffic, which runs the length of the Arabian Gulf, from Kuwait to Qatar and beyond.

My first impression was confirmed as I began to look into the recent history of the country. The rate of change that has taken place in Saudi Arabia in 35 years, little more than my own lifetime, was almost beyond belief.

At the turn of the century, Saudi Arabia did not exist as a nation. Rather there were desert tribes scattered throughout the peninsula, and a trade-based oligarchy along the Red Sea coast largely living off taxes on pilgrims to the Muslim holy sites in Mecca and Medina. Nominally the peninsula was part of the Ottoman Empire, but with the possible exception of the Red Sea trading areas, it had little if any exposure to European civilization.

In the fall of 1901, Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdul-Rhman al Faisal al Saud, later King Ibn Saud, heir to a royal house in exile, rode out of the desert with 40 men mounted on camels and proceeded to wage Bedouin tribal warfare to regain his hereditary title. Approximately 30 years later, in 1932, he had unified the tribes of the peninsula under his leadership by means of war and marriage, renaming the country the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Since the mid-18th century, the House of Saud has been

the politico-military arm of the Muslim fundamentalist Wahhabi sect. Heads of the family were Imams, or religious leaders, of a sect that believed that all objects of worship other than God himself are false, and that those who so worship are deserving of death, be they infidel or muslim. Furthermore, the sect held that true knowledge was based solely on the Koran, and the Sunna—the sayings and manner of life of the Prophet.

This last dictum led in Ibn Saud's early days to repeated fights with religious leaders over the introduction of such infidel inventions as cars, telephones, radio, and aircraft. It provided the religious justification for banning science, music, and the arts from court life.

In line with the puritanical bent of Wahhabism, the House of Saud prohibited smoking, drinking, and personal finery—Saudi Arabia is still a dry country. It did allow its followers to take four wives at any one time, provided each is treated equally, and divorce was instantaneous—an option of which Ibn Saud availed himself such that by his death in 1953 he had had 300 wives!

Enter the 20th century

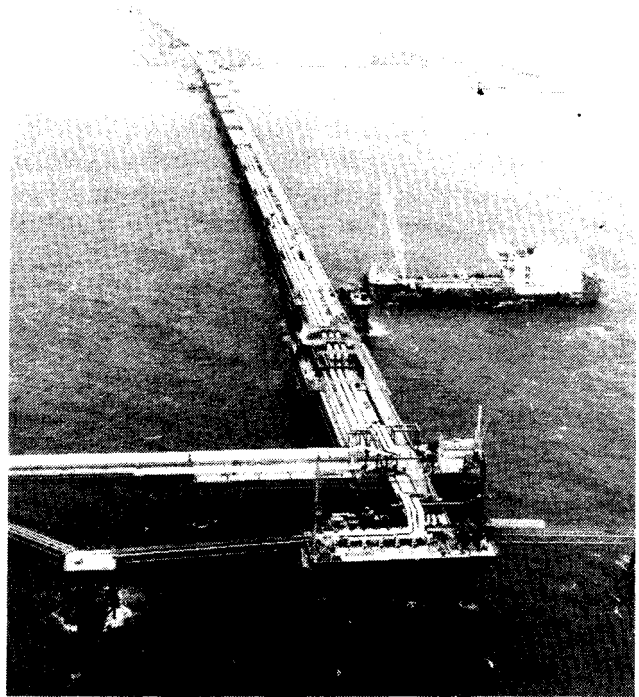
Oil was first struck in commercially significant quantities in the late 1930s, but World War II interrupted its development. Until the oil revenues began to flow in the late 1940s and early 1950s, national revenue in the kingdom depended upon proceeds from the dates of the oases, taxes on religious pilgrims, and whatever subsidies Ibn Saud could wrench from the British to pursue his tribal warfare against pro-Turkish tribes. As late as 1953, there was no government and no banking system. In that year, the last of his reign, King Ibn Saud called for the creation of a Council of Ministers. Slavery was not declared illegal in Saudi Arabia until 1962, well after his death.

In 1950, average daily crude oil production in Saudi Arabia was about half a million barrels per day. It doubled by 1958, again by 1965, again by 1970, and again by 1974. In 1980, its peak year, (due in part to Saudi efforts to compensate for the loss of Iranian oil thanks to Khomeini), production hit 10 million barrels per day.

The two most important problems to be solved in developing Saudi oil were building an industrial infrastructure and creating a skilled labor force. The first two five-year plans, largely under the direction of King Faisal, saw \$280 billion invested to that end.

City-builders in the second generation

The nation of Saudi Arabia is almost as large as the entire continent of Western Europe, or approximately one-fourth the size of the United States. Its population is only 6 million; labor has always been in short supply. A major part of the industrial workforce today is contract labor, hired in the tens of thousands for one-, two-, and three-year contracts from such nations as Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Korea.



Building the seawater pumphouse at the oil and gas refining center at Yanbu on the Red Sea.

Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu Annual Report 1980-81

In the 30 years since the death of Ibn Saud, an entire generation of Saudis, including women, have received training and advanced education such that in the next decade they will run the nation's largest industry. The rate of that process is astounding. From 1953 to 1963, skilled Saudi workers for Aramco, the American-led consortium of oil companies working in partnership with the Saudi government, rose from 9 percent to 57 percent; by 1980, over 45 percent of the management and supervisory positions of Aramco were held by Saudis, many of whom today hold multiple graduate degrees from the top universities in the United States and United Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia is now at the midpoint of its third Five-Year Development Plan, slated for completion in 1985. The centerpiece of the plan is a city-building project, focused on the ports of Jubail on the Arabian Gulf and Yanbu on the Red Sea. The Saudis intend to use these two polls of development to transform the peninsula and the Arab world. The overall aim is to make Saudi Arabia less dependent on oil by building primary industries.

In 1977, when the project started, Jubail was an 8,000-person fishing village on the Arabian coast; Yanbu was a decaying rest-stop for the camel caravans and religious pilgrims on the Red Sea. By the end of 1982, the population of

the two cities combined had passed 70,000.

Now, Yanbu will be home to six industrial projects: a crude oil export terminal, a natural gas liquid fractionation plant, three oil refineries, and a petrochemical complex.

Jubail will have an 800,000-ton-a-year steel plant—which will reduce by 50 percent Saudi Arabia's imports of reinforcement bars and wire rod for building—and a plant to produce 500,000 tons a year of nitrogenous fertilizer, most of which will be available for export to the rest of the Middle East. Chemicals will play the biggest role in Jubail's exports: four petrochemical complexes will produce nearly 4.5 million tons of chemicals a year. In addition, there will be two refineries.

Connecting the twin cities is a 1.5 million barrel oil pipeline that gives Saudi Arabia a desperately needed back door to the Mediterranean and Western Europe.

In line with this city-building project, great emphasis is being placed on education. In the next generation, the Saudis want scientists where today they have oil technicians and managers. King Saud University in Riyadh is slated for \$1 billion in investment, much of it in the sciences, such as theoretical physics. The thinking behind both the Jubail-Yanbu city-building project and the expansion of King Saud University is motivated by a desire to build the "biggest and the best" of their kind in the Muslim world.

That type of thinking, an American brand of "great projects," has dominated Saudi development since the end of the Second World War, and is the essential ingredient that has built a national economy in one generation. It has not yet, however, transformed a culture that in many respects has not changed since the mid-18th century.

Fundamentalist pressures

As a woman, I was quickly made aware of the proper code of conduct. Inside the Aramco camps, dress is casual but discreet. (Even though the temperature stayed about 105°F, I do not recall seeing any women wearing shorts and sleeveless blouses in public.) Outside the camp, there is an unspoken rule that Western women respect the Muslim code; that is, while not adopting the veil, they are fully covered, wearing floor-length skirts and long-sleeved blouses. Among Western women who live outside the oil camps, it is not uncommon to wear the abayah, an all-concealing floor-length cloak which the Muslim women pull over their heads. In some public buses, women ride in a glass-enclosed section at the back of the bus.

Much of this is not new in Saudi Arabia, although I was led to believe that the last five to six years has seen a marked increase in the enforced restrictions. Two factors have contributed most to this: 1) the impact throughout the Middle East of the fundamentalist Khomeini revolution in Iran and 2) the seizure of the holy mosque in Mecca in November 1979 by religious fanatics. In a country where political power is still shaped by deals with the religious leadership, the

government has had to make concessions under the pressure of these events.

The week before I arrived in Saudi Arabia, it was announced that Saudi women would no longer be allowed to leave the country for higher education. When I returned to New York, I was told that the government had successfully resisted pressures from the religious leadership to enforce the wearing of veils inside the oil camps. I was also told that the religious police had on occasion punished women who were not properly covered by painting their legs green.

Also, the religious dictum that the faithful must pray five times a day is strictly enforced. Businesses literally shut down for one-half to three-quarters of an hour.

The effect of all this on the morale of the population, particularly the oil-boom generation, is reflected in the stories about students and business people returning to Saudi Arabia. As their plane approaches its Saudi destination, passengers retire to the restrooms to change from designer jeans to the *thawb* and *abayeh*. Many who have the money to do so, and there is a lot of money, spend a good deal of time out of the country. Stories of wild and opulent living in the West, especially by members of the royal family, are well known.

Finally, one is never very far away from the war zone anywhere in the Middle East.

A mere three hours outside of Dhahran, my plane crossed the Bekaa valley in northern Lebanon, and although a ceasefire was in effect, smoke could still be seen along the horizon line over Beirut. In the afternoons in Dhahran, Saudi F5s and F15s would take off almost daily for maneuvers somewhere in the region. The highway leading to and in the immediate vicinity of the Ras Tanura refinery is studded with anti-aircraft emplacements.

In recent months, sea mines have drifted into the Arabian coastal waters from the Iran-Iraq war zone. Mines have exploded on the beaches and offshore in areas of important Saudi offshore oil projects. As yet no damage has been reported; the damage will come when the Iranians shut down oil traffic in the Gulf, a situation which many analysts think is simply a question of time.

After the oil

When I left Saudi Arabia, I was filled with a tremendous sense of excitement at what has been accomplished; at the same time I had a sense of how fragile those accomplishments are.

Saudi Arabia is a religious fundamentalist monarchy sitting in the middle of a war zone—the shooting wars of Lebanon and just across the gulf between Iran and Iraq, and the cultural onslaught from Libya to Khomeini's Iran to turn the entire Middle East back to fundamentalism.

In a little over 30 years, Saudi Arabia has built a national economy. In the next 30 years it must draw on the skilled labor force of this oil-boom generation to create a citizenry that will defend those accomplishments.