

SAUDI ARABIA TODAY
An Introduction to the Richest Oil Power

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*An Introduction to the Richest
Oil Power*

Peter Hobday

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Preface

This book is not intended for that small army of Arabists whose knowledge of the Middle East I could never hope to match. I have drawn unashamedly on their researches, and wherever possible make due acknowledgement of their scholarship. But their attention to detail and encyclopaedic knowledge of events goes far beyond the scope of this rather modest work. My aim is rather the general reader who has heard of Saudi Arabia—indeed who hasn't—and wants a readable introduction of the country: its past, its present and its future. The fact that a wealthy Saudi can offer £3 million to Ravi Tikkoo, the tanker owner, for his house in Hampstead, as a present for his nephew, gives some indication to the ordinary mortal of what it means to be rich. But Saudi Arabia is *very* rich—so rich, as someone once worked out, that it could buy all the shares quoted on the London Stock Exchange in 18 months, or all the gold in Central Banks in five years. It is so rich that businessmen everywhere are beating a path to its door in the hope of just some small share in the most ambitious development plan known to history. Increasingly, the power that money brings is being used to turn Saudi Arabia into one of the most important nations in the world.

Yet this million square miles of the Arabian Peninsula gets so hot that most of its people who can afford to leave and spend their summer in Europe. Half of its country is empty—the Rub' Al Khali, one of the largest deserts in the world. Apart from the flowing robes of its leaders, the flames at Dahran where the gas is burnt off, and the weight of its money, little is known about Saudi Arabia. Newspaper articles tend to dwell only on the superficialities of Saudi life—the seemingly losing struggle against the effects

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of too much money too soon. Newspapers chronicle in their diaries the doings of princelings—of their women, their fast cars and their spendthrift ways. A recent book tried to highlight some of the problems of women behind the veil—but its European standpoint distorted the report in that, seen through Saudi eyes, the progress has been remarkable.

Can I, as another European, do any better? Possibly not, but at least I will try to understand the stresses and the strains of rapid change—and allow that in the compressed time-scale that has been forced on Saudi Arabia they are handling the changes as well as could be expected. After all, the changes in the British position in the world during the past few years have been as dramatic, and the feeling in Britain is sometimes that changes are going too fast for comfort. Imagine how you would feel if you had won the football pools. Imagine the pressures to give some away to friends and neighbours. Imagine how many friends and neighbours you would suddenly discover. What sort of life would you want? Could you face up to a life of luxury for the rest of your days without feeling that you might give up the very things you enjoy? If you had a deep religious belief, how far would your convictions fall victim to the demands of pleasure?

Well, that's a little like Saudi Arabia—except that it is not a family but a nation, and a relatively new one, going through the process. And it's doing it in a goldfish bowl. Understanding, rather than envy, is what is needed. I hope that this book will start that process.

Acknowledgements

My name may appear on the cover as the author of this book, but there are many people who have helped in producing it. Sheikh Fahd al Sudairy, the then deputy Minister of Information, who made my first trip so memorable; Peter Hopkirk of *The Times*, who gave me so much space in his special reports on Saudi Arabia; Tim Farmiloe of Macmillan, who asked me to do it and put up with my bad time-keeping with such good humour; Allan Aslett, who edited a very untidy manuscript; Patrick Seale and Jane Blackstock, who kept me going; Abbas Kelidar of SOAS, who bravely took it to read on holiday to keep me from making too many mistakes; the late David Holden, who was typically generous with his expert knowledge while we worked together on 'World in Focus' on BBC Radio Four; Victoria Fenwick, who introduced me to so many of her family's friends in the Middle East; Harry Hubbard, who gave me a memorable evening in Riyadh and taught me so much about the desert; and Salem Azzam, Secretary General of the Islamic Council of Europe, whose beliefs were such an example to me. All of them helped—needless to say what merit there is really belongs to them, everything else is my responsibility.

Finally to my wife Tamara and my children, a special thank you for putting up with the pains of authorship so patiently.

