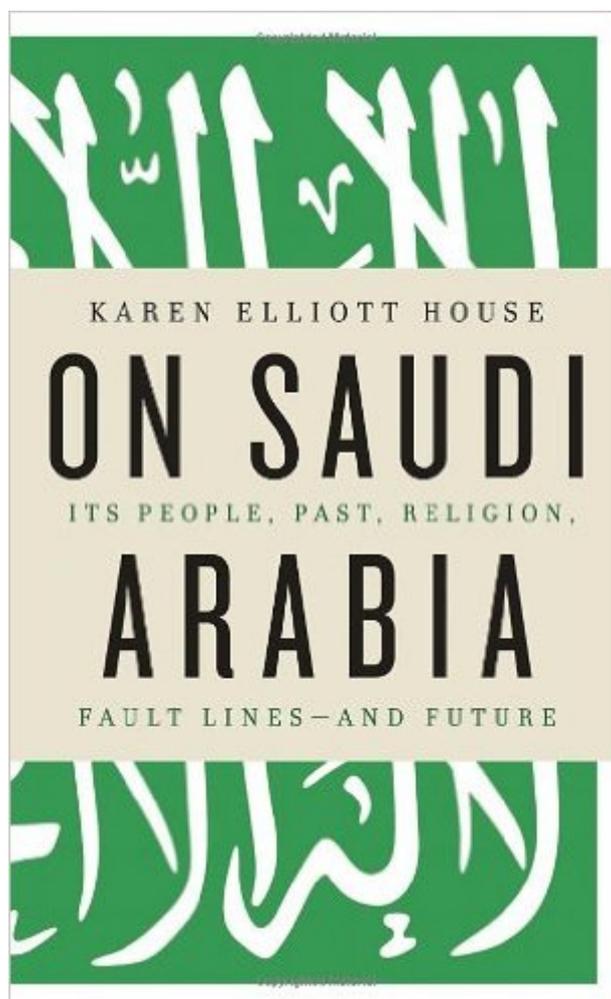


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# On Saudi Arabia: Its People, Past, Religion, Fault Lines - And Future



## Synopsis

From the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who has spent the last thirty years writing about Saudi Arabia—as diplomatic correspondent, foreign editor, and then publisher of *The Wall Street Journal*—an important and timely book that explores all facets of life in this shrouded Kingdom: its tribal past, its complicated present, its precarious future. Through observation, anecdote, extensive interviews, and analysis Karen Elliot House navigates the maze in which Saudi citizens find themselves trapped and reveals the mysterious nation that is the world's largest exporter of oil, critical to global stability, and a source of Islamic terrorists. In her probing and sharp-eyed portrait, we see Saudi Arabia, one of the last absolute monarchies in the world, considered to be the final bulwark against revolution in the region, as threatened by multiple fissures and forces, its levers of power controlled by a handful of elderly Al Saud princes with an average age of 77 years and an extended family of some 7,000 princes. Yet at least 60 percent of the increasingly restive population they rule is under the age of 20. The author writes that oil-rich Saudi Arabia has become a rundown welfare state. The public pays no taxes; gets free education and health care; and receives subsidized water, electricity, and energy (a gallon of gasoline is cheaper in the Kingdom than a bottle of water), with its petrodollars buying less and less loyalty. House makes clear that the royal family also uses Islam's requirement of obedience to Allah—and by extension to earthly rulers—to perpetuate Al Saud rule. Behind the Saudi facade of order and obedience, today's Saudi youth, frustrated by social conformity, are reaching out to one another and to a wider world beyond their cloistered country. Some 50 percent of Saudi youth is on the Internet; 5.1 million Saudis are on Facebook. To write this book, the author interviewed most of the key members of the very private royal family. She writes about King Abdullah's modest efforts to relax some of the kingdom's most oppressive social restrictions; women are now allowed to acquire photo ID cards, finally giving them an identity independent from their male guardians, and are newly able to register their own businesses but are still forbidden to drive and are barred from most jobs. With extraordinary access to Saudis—from key religious leaders and dissident imams to women at university and impoverished widows, from government officials and political dissidents to young successful Saudis and those who chose the path of terrorism—House argues that most Saudis do not want democracy but seek change nevertheless; they want a government that provides basic services without subjecting citizens to the indignity of begging princes for handouts; a government less corrupt and more transparent in how it spends hundreds of billions of annual oil revenue; a kingdom ruled by law, not royal whim. In House's assessment of Saudi Arabia's future, she compares the country today to the Soviet Union before Mikhail Gorbachev arrived with reform

policies that proved too little too late after decades of stagnation under one aged and infirm Soviet leader after another. She discusses what the next generation of royal princes might bring and the choices the kingdom faces: continued economic and social stultification with growing risk of instability, or an opening of society to individual initiative and enterprise with the risk that this, too, undermines the Al Saud hold on power. A riveting bookâ€”informed, authoritative, illuminatingâ€”about a country that could well be on the brink, and an in-depth examination of what all this portends for Saudi Arabiaâ€™s future, and for our own.

## **Book Information**

Hardcover: 320 pages

Publisher: Knopf; First Edition edition (September 18, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307272168

ISBN-13: 978-0307272164

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.3 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 starsÂ Â  See all reviewsÂ  (160 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #137,553 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #14 inÂ  Books > History > Middle East > Saudi Arabia #266 inÂ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern #702 inÂ  Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > Cultural

## **Customer Reviews**

This wasn't what I was hoping for at all. Striving to be objective, I will say that the book could serve as a good primer for those who have never been to Saudi but are seeking to understand some of the basic issues facing the House of Saud and its subjects in 2012. With chapters devoted to the roles of religion, women, royalty, education, jihadis, and poverty (among other issues) it succeeds in providing a broad and mostly accurate sketch of Saudi society and the challenges it faces. For people thinking of coming to KSA to work, or for foreign policy generalists not terribly familiar with Arabian peninsula, Ms. House's book provides a solid overview of the complexities of Saudi life, written in breezy style clearly aimed at the general reader. On the other hand, those seeking a deeper level of analysis of the situation in the Kingdom are likely to come away disappointed, as I did. Having spent several years living and working in Saudi Arabia, it didn't take me long before I realized that this book wasn't written for anyone intimately acquainted with the Kingdom or,

generally, with Middle Eastern history or politics. Anyone who's spent even a few weeks in Saudi Arabia will have made many of the same observations Ms. House makes, and the level analysis never goes much deeper than the informed generalizations of a long lead article in the Economist or Foreign Affairs. For a book that purports to have been based upon "hundreds" of interviews, this is pretty light-weight stuff. Worse, some of it is plain silly. When Ms. House latches onto a metaphor, such as Saudi Arabia as an inescapable "labyrinth," you can be sure she'll lash you with it until you want to scream "block that metaphor!!"

I am so grateful to Karen House for writing this book. It is a marvelous book to help Americans understand a country most of us can never visit, let alone explore in the depth House has done. Traveling to Saudi Arabia as a foreign correspondent since the 1970s, she spent four years recently interviewing hundreds of people and researching for this book. She points out her advantage as a foreign woman who could be treated as sexless and interview numerous Al Saud princes, Muslim imams, and even rehabilitated terrorists. As a woman she was also able to talk with widows in poverty on the extreme edges of Saudi society and some of the very few women who enjoy a professional role such as employment by ARAMCO -- the only progressive employer in the country. Her analysis reveals a depressing picture of an autocratic monarchy governed by successive aged half brothers who actively support the conservative religious education that created not just Osama bin Laden but dozens of terrorists against the west. It is a regime with neither the strength nor will to confront its deep unemployment problems, its economic reliance on its diminishing oil resources, an uneducated and passive population that imports its manual labor, a repressive religion that oppresses women, and its vast gulf between lavish royal lifestyles and extreme poverty for many. House paints a scenario that cannot survive, but she professes no optimism that the ultimate collapse will be accomplished peacefully. She compares the Al Saud regime to the Soviet Union where the ruler who finally attempted to encourage change unleashed uncontrollable results. When it happens the world will experience shocks to its oil supply and the Middle East will experience incalculable strife between Muslim factions.

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