

The Rise and Fall of Muslim Dynasties

By Geoffrey Clarfield

Although I wrote this in 2011, when it was first published in the National Post, It is still a warning to Israel and the West. Non democratic Islamic states always collapse suddenly, it is just hard to know when.

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The Arab world is in turmoil. The presidents of Egypt and Tunisia have been driven out of office by people power. This week in Yemen, anti-government tribesmen killed four people, despite their president's pledge to step down. In Libya, a brief civil war is reaching its bloody conclusion. Even the youth of fundamentalist Gaza have taken to the streets with clubs. Clearly, the Arab masses are un happy with their rulers.

This unrest now threatens to destabilize the formerly sleepy monarchies of the Persian Gulf, oil terminal to the world. Last week, during one disturbance, Saudi security forces shot three protesters from Islam's Shiite branch – who are a minority within the Sunni nation, but the dominant group in the region of the country's eastern oil fields. In neighbouring (Shiite-majority) Bahrain, the Sunni-led government has declared a state of emergency and called in Saudi troops to protect them from Shia protesters and possible Iranian intervention (as the Iranians have claimed that Bahrain is a historical part of Iran). The West has done little so far, except stand by and watch. But the stakes are huge: an upheaval in the Gulf could radically change the balance of world power.



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A Saudi man inspects a 1934 Rolls Royce in Riyadh.

Despite the wealth and apparent stability of the Saudi Kingdom, it is actually quite a fragile state, with a decadent ruling class that has become estranged from its austere religious ideology. As we shall see, its rise and (possibly imminent) fall epitomize the waxing and waning of Muslim states since Mohammed's time.

Saudi Arabia is a one-commodity country: a command economy where 90% of export earnings, and three-quarters of government revenues, come from oil. Within its borders lie one-fifth of the world's petroleum reserves. When oil began to pump in the late 1930s and '40s, there were no more than two or three million people living in the Kingdom – many of them nomadic. Today, the population is over 25 million, with a sky-high birthrate. The state generally has found the money to satisfy their expanding economic expectations. When the money has run dry, there have been protests and riots. Saudi Arabia has a medieval social structure, comprising four classes of people. The royal family is on top: it includes all the descendants of the original Saudi rulers and their tribal allies. The family includes an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 princes. Their yearly allowance generally is over a million dollars each. Many get

much more.

Second comes a smaller group of businessmen dependant on the patronage of the royal Family, followed by government employees. At the bottom are the majority of commoners who are supported through the welfare state. Oil revenues are treated as the personal property of the Saudi royal family and distributed downward, as in any medieval society.

How did Saudi Arabia become such an anachronism? The country is home to Mecca and Medina, the bases from which the prophet Muhammad preached the new religion of Islam to the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula 14 centuries ago. When his descendants left Arabia to conquer neighbouring lands, Arabia lapsed into a tribal backwater. The centre of Islamic life moved to other cities, in modern-day Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Iran, Turkey and central Asia.

In the 13th century, when the eastern Arab empire was conquered by Turks and Mongols, there arose an Islamic theologian named Ibn Taymiyya who preached a fundamentalist version of Islam that marked a radical departure from the previous six centuries of Islamic jurisprudence. He argued that anyone deviating from the original practices of the prophet and his companions were not really Muslims but heretics, even infidels, and they could become the targets of holy war.

In the early 1700s, when a theology student named Mohammad Abdel Wahab returned to central Arabia after studying the works of Taymiyya, he married into the family of a tribal leader named Muhammad ibn Saud. Their allied lineages of priests and warriors started a holy war in Arabia based on the radical theology of Ibn Taymiyya. This centuries-old strategic alliance remains the backbone of Saudi power – and gives the state its modern name and its distinctively austere and backward-looking school of Sunni Islam (“Wahabism”).

In the 1800s, the Saudi-Wahabi alliance conquered Mecca and Medina, but were eventually defeated by the Ottomans and the Egyptians. However, in the early 20th century, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the alliance regrouped. Within a few years of the end of the First World War, they had reconquered the peninsula. Then they struck oil, and their erstwhile backwater became a powerful Petro-state.

It is a nation with split personality: on one hand, it makes billions selling oil to the West. On the other, its princes have done more than anyone else to export jihadist ideology and finance terrorists – including Osama bin Laden, himself the son of a Saudi construction magnate.

Massive oil wealth earned by the Saudi royal family led its members to adopt lavish Western lifestyles in the privacy of their homes and European properties – double lives, in other words. (a former Swedish soldier once told me that while visiting a Saudi ambassador's residence on business, he was ushered in to his office. The ambassador changed out of his Saudi costume, and then gladly shared a double whiskey while wearing jeans and a t-shirt.) It is this hypocrisy and moral rot that eventually can be expected to help bring down the regime.

In fact, the corruption and downfall of Muslim leaders is an established subject within Islamic literature – including that of Ibn Khaldun, a 14th-century Arab social theorist who believed that Islamic states rise and fall according to a predetermined cycle.

Scholar Caroline Stone has summarized his theory succinctly "Ibn Khaldun perceives history as a cycle in which rough nomadic peoples with high degrees of internal bonding and little material culture to lose, invade and take resources from sedentary and essentially urban-based civilizations. These urban civilizations have high levels of wealth and culture but are self-indulgent and lack both 'martial spirit'

and the concomitant social solidarity. This is because those qualities have become unnecessary for survival in an urban environment and also because it is also almost impossible for the large number of different groups that compose a multicultural city to attain the same level of solidarity as a tribe linked by blood, shared custom and survival experiences. Thus, the nomads conquer the cities and go on to be seduced by the pleasures of civilization and in turn lose their solidarity and come under attack by the next group of rough and vigorous outsiders and the cycle begins again.”

This description of “rough nomadic peoples with high degrees of internal bonding and little material culture to lose” arguably describes not only the original Saudi-Wahabi dynasty, but also other more modern ascensions to power in the Arab and Muslim worlds – including that of Saddam Hussein, the PLO and even Muammar Gaddafi.

But the Saudis are the ultimate case study in the dissolution caused by wealth, which is why I am dwelling on them in this article. Decades of British scandal sheets have highlighted the behaviour of Saudi princes in Europe drinking alcohol, cheating on their polygamous wives and gambling away their billions. This explains the repulsion of self-styled ascetics such as Bin Laden, who has assumed the spiritual mantle of Abd al Wahab and declared war on the Saudi royal family.

In another, more positive, variant, the same spirit of reform can be found in the democratic-minded protestors who brought down Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, in large part motivated by revulsion at the manner by which he used power to enrich himself, his family and his cronies.

But the Saudi top dogs won't go down without a fight. The country's military contains a special, private “praetorian Guard” called the Sang – a sort of army within an army that answers directly to the royals. If push ever comes to shove, it might well square off against the rest of the military.

Amidst the resulting may hem, tribal, regional and religious militias may fight it out as they did in Iraq after the fall of Saddam.

There is no evidence that the Saudi royal family will democratize to avoid this likely meltdown. As the late King Fahd once said, "a system based on elections is not within our Islamic creed." Ibn Khaldun could have predicted this more than six centuries ago. Corrupt Islamic regimes, he saw, did not bend. They broke.

The pampered and softened Saudi elites will be overwhelmed by new puritans who come from within or outside of their own borders. That day may be closer than we imagine. Perhaps Barack Obama should buy his own copy of Ibn Khaldun's works to understand what will come next.

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