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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Politics and Society in Saudi Arabia: The Crucial Years of Development, 1960-1982

Sarah Yizraeli

London, C. Hurst & Co., 2012, xxi + 276 pp., £55, Hardback

ISBN: 9781849041706

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The inside flap of Sarah Yizraeli's most recent book promises to provide the reader with the "essential context and background for a real understanding of modern Saudi Arabia" by tracking how the royal family's development policies before and during the oil-boom years "placed limitations on potential social change and thwarted any reform of the political system that might have been expected, had such development been carried out by more western-oriented countries." As a matter of fact, the factors that forestall political reforms in developing countries are very complex and cannot simply be measured with a political regime's openness towards "Western" norms and values. Yizraeli emphasizes the dominance of conservative political and religious beliefs in Saudi development politics, but not without illustrating the complex and complicated power relations on which Saudi political conservatism is based. On the whole, Yizraeli's book lives up to the expectations raised by the publisher, though with some minor flaws.

Yizraeli touches on a period in Saudi Arabian history which, due to the difficulties of getting access to Saudi Arabian archives, remains understudied and therefore often misunderstood by foreign observers. Yizraeli's strongest point is her use of the Arabic-language historiography of the period and autobiographies of a number of key Saudi actors and thus her ability to refer to alternative interpretations and insights in the "key years of economic development" which are often missed by foreign researchers. She further builds her analyses on the wide range of reports issued by the US administration and the private papers of former oil company employees which are accessible in US archives. The fact that she cannot pursue field research inside the country lies probably at the core of her decision to focus on the perspectives of the decision-makers and to omit the presumably illuminating insights of the "subjects" of development, the wider populace of the country. Unfortunately, Yizraeli's singular focus on elites also distracts her from the evidence of grass-roots development activities in her primary sources.

Yizraeli's text is clearly structured, allowing the reader to follow her argument easily throughout the book or to read the chapters separately without missing the main points. On the other hand, this structure means that the reader who follows the chapters in sequence has to put up with quite a few repetitions. Nevertheless, the consistent manner in which the arguments are presented is appealing and Yizraeli finds the appropriate approach to her elite perspective by introducing her study with a discussion of prevailing Western development theory during the roughly two decades under consideration. In doing so, she balances "attempts to explain socioeconomic developments in Saudi Arabia on the basis of Western theories of political science" with Saudi Arabian views and thus defines the area of conflicting theoretical and practical approaches in which Saudi development policies were molded.

Her empirical study is divided into two main parts which contain a total of ten chapters. Chapters one to five introduce the main actors and elements in the development process, namely the royal family, the religious leaders (*'ulamā*), the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and the US administration. She carefully carves out the multiple interdependencies that connected or antagonized these groups and their factions and provides conclusive evidence on the compromises which determined the boundaries of Saudi development policy. Chapters six to nine retrace the changes which resulted from the development process and which shaped the country's sociopolitical foundations until today. In lieu of a conclusion, the tenth and last chapter attempts to generate a more appropriate understanding of the early Saudi development process, thus feeding back into the theoretical discussion at the beginning. Yizraeli proposes the concept of "defensive change" for describing how the royal family's decision to build a modern state stemmed from their concerns about the undermining consequences which economic growth would cause for the traditional structures of Saudi society and their own authority. She argues that this strategy of defensive change and self-preservation was based on the traditional family, clan and tribal system and the religious establishment and further ingrained them in Saudi society.

In defining the royal family as the main actor for development and change in Saudi Arabia, Yizraeli disagrees with the long-lived image of Aramco's predominant modernizing impact on Saudi Arabia. This image, she argues, was self-produced in the course of corporate expansion, whereas the company's genuine modernizing interest was restricted to its "strategy to create a receptive and efficient business environment." In Yizraeli's eyes, the will to modernize the country existed a priori within the royal family and enabled the company to increase oil production in the late 1940s which in turn caused the company's interest in a stable political regime. Modernization introduced by Aramco thus was nothing more than a by-product of its commercial activities and Yizraeli rightly states that the company had no interest in using its significant economic leverage on the Āl Sa'ūd for pursuing political reform. Yet, she misses the active role Aramco played in forestalling a participatory political culture in the country when, at a later point, she exclusively blames the *'ulamā* for the failure of the 1963 draft of a union-friendly labor law which the religious leaders regarded as a contradiction to the principles of the *sharī'a*.

Yizraeli's reconstruction of the struggle over the scale and pace of development between the Āl Sa'ūd and the religious leaders is the strongest part of her book. She rightly points out that, like the Āl Sa'ūd, the religious leaders benefitted from the institutional centralization trend of the 1950s which allowed them to extend bureaucratic and doctrinal control over the population. Her argument that the *'ulamā*'s support for Faysal's political take-over in 1964 gave them influence over his development strategy is plausible and explains how the religious elite was able to resume its crucial function of safeguarding the traditional structure and cultural character of Saudi society, a principle which was explicitly reinforced by Faysal and the majority of the royal family. Yizraeli convincingly shows that Faysal's "Ten-Point-Program," issued in 1962, which she describes as a defining document for the royal family's development policy, was first and foremost intended to secure the royal family's monopoly over rule through channelling the oil revenue for the welfare of the wider populace while leaving the Islamic constitution of the country intact.

The reasons for leading *'ulamā*'s willingness to compromise in regards to the modernization of the country becomes clearer when Yizraeli retraces the power struggle between Faysal and the Shaykh family who dominated the religious establishment: the latter received a big share of the annual budget, largely devoted to the implementation of the five-year-plans for development, for their religious activities. Moreover, after a decade of vehement struggle over transferring control over the judicial system from the religious establishment to the state, the *'ulamā* were able to secure unrestrained influence over the

country's education system and thus over the norms and beliefs that shape Saudi society. This and the fact that, as partakers in the compromise over development, the religious leaders alienated themselves from the ultra-conservative religious currents that opposed any form of Western influence, prompt Yizraeli to stress the catastrophic role played by the marginalized and extremist religious opposition in later re-adjustments of Saudi development strategy. Violent resistance against the Āl Sa'ūd and their modernization policies by religious extremists, such as the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, was answered by a reinforcement of the legitimizing coalition between the Āl Sa'ūd and the wider religious establishment and a consequent expansion of the religious sector in the socio-political life of the country. Yet, the increased influence of Wahhābī doctrine over society and the continuous identification of a considerable number of '*ulamā*' with more extremist religious streams still accelerated the formation of an Islamic opposition. This observation is not entirely new but is legitimately made as it feeds into Yizraeli's argument that the defensive matrix created by the Saudi regime failed in legitimizing modernization in the eyes of Wahhābī opponents and further perpetuated the emergence of religious extremism. However, the way Yizraeli contextualizes her work in the book's preface by referring to the events of 9/11 – an introductory premise that seems to have become an indispensable feature of books about Saudi Arabia – unnecessarily narrows the outlook of the book. A different approach towards Saudi development, such as the noticeable pauperization of parts of the Saudi population or the prevalence of conservative political beliefs in today's society, may have allowed for conclusions that do not center around religious extremism and would thus have made a more remarkable difference to our understanding of Saudi Arabian society and politics. Although Yizraeli raises other important aspects of Saudi development strategy, such as the 'demographic revolution' and social stratification – very promising lines of inquiry – the respective chapters remain largely descriptive and appear strangely disconnected from the analytical argument.

Despite the somewhat hapless contextualization of her book, Yizraeli's writing does not aim at a sensational revelation of what is – supposedly – hidden behind the Saudi veil. The value of her good book lies in her captivating contextualization and re-interpretation of the way in which the struggle over development in the crucial years of state consolidation laid the foundations for socio-political trends in later years. Thus, Yizraeli contributes to the necessary elimination of some long-lived myths about the coming of modernity to Saudi Arabia and further grasps the roots of some of the problems faced by the Āl Sa'ūd in their contemporary struggle to stabilize the country (and their rule) in the face of new internal challenges.