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What to Read on Saudi Politics

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Saudi Arabia's political system is opaque, and its government, while more open now than in past decades, is generally hostile to independent outside inquiry. Much of what has been written about Saudi politics, therefore, has been based on anecdotes or limited information. Ideology has also skewed research: those who favor strong American relations with Saudi Arabia have portrayed it in the most favorable light, while others with differing views have demonized it. Since 9/11, there has been more criticism than praise, but too often both miss the most interesting and important dynamics in Saudi politics -- the development of the Saudi state; the changing relationship between the religious and political establishments and the accompanying changes in Wahhabism; the social revolution brought on by oil wealth that has transformed Saudi Arabia from a rural to an urban society; the emergence of domestic political groups and the regime's efforts to deal with them; and the twists and turns of Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States.

***A History of Saudi Arabia.* By Madawi al-Rasheed. Cambridge University Press, 2002.**

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This book is a smart, revisionist take on modern Saudi history. A principled reform advocate whose family was displaced from rule in Najd, Madawi al-Rasheed is no friend of the Al Saud. But she is a very good social anthropologist and historian. She turns some of the conventional tropes about Saudi history on their head and deconstructs the regime's efforts to enshrine its official version of Saudi history. Al-Rasheed's deconstruction, however, is no hatchet job. She acknowledges the success that the Saudi regime has had in building a strong centralized state and in bringing order and some amount of prosperity to the country; she simply does not buy the official line on how all this happened.

***The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Saud.* By Robert Lacey. Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1982.**

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Robert Lacey is a chronicler of royalty, mostly British. He is probably best known for his biography of Queen Elizabeth, so when the Saudi government invited him to the country in the late 1970s and gave him unparalleled access to its elite, they probably expected him to produce a fluffy bit of monarchist propaganda. They were wrong. *The Kingdom* is a very readable account of the modern

history of the country through the 1970s. With impressive detail and balance, he depicts the struggle for power within the Saudi family in the 1950s and 1960s between the half brothers Saud and Faysal as well as the heady politics of the oil-boom years of the early 1970s. His take stands up even after almost 30 years of subsequent scholarship.

"The 'Imama vs. the 'Iqal: Hadari-Bedouin Conflict and the Formation of the Saudi State." By Abdulaziz H. al-Fahad. In *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*. Edited by Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

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"From Exclusivism to Accommodation: Doctrinal and Legal Evolution of Wahhabism." By Abdulaziz H. al-Fahad. *New York University Law Review* 79 (2004): pp. 485-519.

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Abdulaziz al-Fahad is a Saudi lawyer and intellectual. These essays provide excellent accounts of the relationship between the Al Saud rulers and two extremely important social groups -- the religious establishment and the tribes. Al-Fahad explodes two popular myths about Saudi politics. In "The 'Imama vs. the 'Iqal," he deconstructs the idea that Saudi Arabia is a tribal state, showing that the core of support for the expansion of Saudi rule in Arabia came from town dwellers, not tribes, and that breaking tribal autonomy has been the consistent project of the Saudi rulers. In "From Exclusivism to Accommodation," he shows that the Saudi religious establishment, rather than being the driving force in Saudi politics, has crafted its ideological interpretation of Wahhabism to fit the requirements of the rulers. The use of Wahhabi ideas by Osama bin Laden departs substantially from the tradition of interpretation developed by the official men of religion in Saudi Arabia.

***Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*. By Mamoun Fandy. Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.**

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Published before the 9/11 attacks, Mamoun Fandy's book is an excellent source on the ideological development of Wahhabi opposition to the regime and places Osama bin Laden in his Saudi context. Fandy also deals with other currents of opposition in the kingdom, including Shia opposition groups. He concentrates on the ideas driving the various strands of Saudi opposition but also discusses how the Saudi regime has successfully dealt with domestic opposition forces through a combination of co-optation and repression.

***The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al Qaeda*. By Yaroslav Trofimov. Doubleday, 2007.**

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Yaroslav Trofimov, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, pieces together the most complete account of the 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of Wahhabi zealots opposed to the Saudi regime and how the Saudis recaptured the holy site. It reads like a detective story. I would quibble with the effort he makes at the end of the book to connect the event directly to the rise of al Qaeda, but that does not detract from the value of his careful reporting on this central event in modern Saudi history.

"Islamist Violence and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia." By Thomas Hegghammer.

***International Affairs* 84, No. 4 (2008): pp. 701-715.**[Read](#) [12]

In the aftermath of 9/11, the Saudis were rocked by al Qaeda's campaign to destabilize the country. From May 2003, when housing compounds in Riyadh were attacked, through strikes on government buildings and oil facilities into 2006, al Qaeda's local sympathizers waged an internal war against the Saudi state. After an uncertain beginning, the Saudis were eventually able to put down this domestic challenge. Thomas Hegghammer, one of the best of the new generation of scholars focusing on Saudi Arabia, provides a convincing treatment of how they did it -- by isolating the al Qaeda sympathizers from the rest of Saudi society and developing a more effective security strategy to defeat them.

***America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier.* By Robert Vitalis. Stanford University Press, 2006.**[Purchase at B&N.com](#) [13] | [Purchase at Amazon.com](#) [14]

There are a number of more conventional recent accounts of the history of the Saudi-American relationship, but Robert Vitalis's work is the must-read of the group. Using American archives and private papers from officials at ARAMCO (the Arabian-American Oil Company, formed by Chevron, Texaco, Mobil, and Exxon to develop the Saudi oil patch), among other sources, Vitalis tells a unique yet convincing story about the development of Saudi-American relations. He shows that ARAMCO was hardly the good corporate citizen, working with Saudis to develop the kingdom, that it has been portrayed as elsewhere. He also provides new details on the sometimes difficult relationship between Washington and Riyadh in the 1950s and early 1960s and on the struggle between Saud and Faysal for power in the country. Vitalis ends his narrative in the early 1960s and would be the first to admit that things in the Saudi oil patch are very different now, with the Saudi government firmly in control of both the oil company (now Saudi ARAMCO) and oil policy. But his book is nevertheless a fascinating read.

***Cities of Salt.* By Abdelrahman Munif. Vintage International, 1989.**[Purchase at B&N.com](#) [15] | [Purchase at Amazon.com](#) [16]

Written by Abdelrahman Munif, a Baathist opponent of the regime who spent most of his adult life in exile, *Cities of Salt* is the best-known novel to come out of Saudi Arabia. Brilliantly translated into English by Peter Theroux, the book deals in a magical-realist way with the enormous social upheavals brought about in eastern Saudi Arabia by the beginnings of the oil industry. There is something vaguely hypocritical about a Baathist pining away for an imagined pre-oil Arabian utopia, but the prose is marvelous, and the story it tells -- from the point of view of the denizens of a village whose way of life is turned inside out by the newcomers -- is fascinating.

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