

MENDEL, Miloš: *Dějiny Saúdské Arábie* [History of Saudi Arabia]. Prague: Lidové noviny Publishing House, 2016, 400 p. ISBN: 978-80-7422-499-7

The average Westerner often romantically views the whole Middle East in the light of his impression of Arabia before its oil reserves were developed – as a region peopled by nomadic Bedouin tribes roaming the vast desert expanses. Even in the Arabian heartland that image is much less true today than it was before World War II. In recent years, the inhabitants have begun to settle in permanent habitations and sedentary occupation. Modern communications in Arabia have ended the isolation that made the region a romantic land of fantasy peopled by noble horsemen and camel caravans. The great oil companies and their ancillary industries have set in motion a trend toward Westernisation that can no longer be reversed.

In the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the effect of great and sudden wealth has produced one of the most extraordinary phenomena of the twentieth century. It is not only that a state which was one of the poorest on the globe when it was created nearly a century ago is well on its way to becoming one of the richest by any standards, with control over a major part of the world's financial reserves, but that it should have happened to a Bedouin tribal monarchy ruled on the most fundamentalist and puritanical principles of Islam. When the kingdom of Saudi Arabia was created by its great founder ʿAbdalʿazīz Ibn ʿAbdarrahmān Āl Saʿūd (shortened by Westerners to Ibn Saʿūd), it had a population which was roughly estimated at two million. Nearly a quarter of these were nomadic and the rest lived in small oases, market towns and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He first became the Sultan of Nejd and in 1926 after a short victorious military campaign also became King of al-Ḥijāz (p. 192).

The author correctly claims that Ibn Saʿūd helped to maintain the unity of his kingdom through a series of brief marriages to the daughters of leading tribal chiefs (p. 219). The tiny revenues of the state were derived from services to Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and a small subsidy from the British government. This situation had only begun to change by the time of Ibn Saʿūd's death in 1953. Oil was discovered by the Arabian American Oil Company /Aramco/ before World War II, but exports and revenues only began to increase significantly after 1947 (p. 226). Even so the impact of the new wealth had already begun to cause a severe strain for the monarchy and its puritanical Wahhābī traditions before the death of Ibn Saʿūd. Extravagance and corruption were both possible and humanly inevitable. The old king's authority and prestige were enough to prevent internal tensions from becoming too great during his lifetime.

Saudi Arabia, one of the richest oil-producing countries in the world, represents one of the last patriarchal states in the world. As in old patriarchal societies, all power in the kingdom is concentrated on the person of the king, who is subject only to the law of God. Every act of government, whether legislative, administrative, or executive, must have the king's sanction, and whatever authority the officials of government – from prime minister to lowest functionary – possess, it is by virtue of the king's delegation, which he may restrict or withdraw at will. Local government is practically unknown, except for the "municipal councils" of Mecca, Medina, and Jidda, which are composed of religious figures and notables appointed by the king. The official constitution of the state is the Koran, and the entire judicial system is based on *shariʿa*.

There is a wealth of information contained in the book, the result of careful research. The overall scope of the book and the author's keen insights help dispel much of the misinformation and misperception that seems to cloud an outsiders' view of the essentially closed Saudi society. Professor Mendel conveys to the reader a real flesh and blood portrait of Saudi Arabia's still highly traditional, conservative society with its deeply seated Islamic values, as the country wrestles with the secularising effects of Western modernisation and its ubiquitous pop culture that the author so insightfully identifies. For example, the author rightly states that the *ʿasabīya* (the tribal solidarity) prevents Saudi society from exercising Muḥammad's legacy – equality and unity of the believers before God and to observe the divine law, *sharīʿa* (p. 205).

The paradox in Saudi Arabia is that the extended family, not the regime, is the greatest source of both political and economic stability, and at the same time, traditional extended family customs and practices are a growing source of frustration among younger generations who are being marginalised by family elders, who command and still receive respect and allegiance of their children and grandchildren.

The book under review presents an objective and well-documented synthetic work. Its author, notable Czech Arabist and specialist in Islam, long standing research fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences and university teacher at Masaryk University in Brno, associate professor Dr. Miloš Mendel, has, according to his scientific results and pedagogical practice, every qualification to express the given complex of problems objective standpoints. His book is divided into several well chosen parts: 1. The History and Culture of Islam; 2. Arabia in the Formative Period of Islamic History; 3. Emergency and Development of the Wahnābī Reformation; 4. The First Emirate in Riyāḍ (1843 – 1887); 5. The Second Emirate in Riyāḍ (1902 – 1932); 6. ʿAbdalʿazīz Ibn Saʿūd and Building of the State; 7. The Reign of King Saʿūd (1953 – 1964); 8. The Reign of King Fayṣal (1964 – 1975); 9. The Reign of King Khālīd (1975 – 1982); 10. The Reign of King Fahd (1982 – 2005); 11. The Reign of King ʿAbdallāh (2005 – 2015); 12. Czech-Saudi Relations; Appendices.

The book is furnished with useful appendices and a reliable register. Keeping in mind that a synthetic work of this type cannot answer every question it suggests, it gives a sound basis for further reading. Although the bibliography is limited to a list of selected works, it shows a creative and wide-ranging use of primary and secondary sources and can serve both historians and those interested in history as a sufficient guide. The reader finishes this substantial book with a firm grasp of the main tendencies of the socio-political development. The author has put together a fascinating account of continuity and change and his book is a significant contribution to the contemporary history of the Middle East. It is likewise an excellent stimulus for Czech and Slovak students of Arab and Islamic history as well as for interested readers.

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