

<CN>Chapter 15

<CT>Saudi Arabia's media mask

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<A>Introduction

Saudi Arabia's government has long been characterised by an ambivalent, if not schizophrenic, relationship with the media. However, it is a relationship marked not merely by oscillation, but also by evolution, as the Saudi regime overcame its initial attitude of deep suspicion, and even antipathy, towards broadcast media, newspapers and publishers.

The Saudi rulers' current attitude is comparable to that of a person who, terrified of lions, becomes a lion tamer: the Al Saud have not learned to love the lion, but to recognise its power and danger. So their political – one might say existential – imperative has been to embrace the potentially deadly beast, which, having raised its head with a threatening roar, left them with no choice but to use all possible means to confront, tame and master it. The means – oil money – has been available in abundance, as has the motivation, to the point of obsession, to defend a carefully constructed international image at all costs.

In order for the Al Saud to maintain their historical narrative's dominant position, they must incorporate and accommodate rival narratives. This requires a certain degree of flexibility, a measure of give and take, and a willingness to engage in a dialogue with weaker and less powerful voices. However, the reigning narrative's dominance implies inflexibility and thus fragility, for it is both stuck in time and unable to modify and innovate in response to the ever-changing present. Thus, the relationship of the Al Saud with their subjects may not be as enduring as it appears,

and any sudden and sustained exposure of the gap between appearance and reality – increasingly likely, to the extent that global media culture undermines policies aimed at ensuring isolation – may cause the regime to fall apart.

As a result, the Al Saud are engaged in a continual struggle to ensure that the officially sanctioned narrative includes only what is permitted – Islam, prosperity, virtue and heroism. Excluded from this story is the kingdom’s strategic dependence on the United States, rifts in the ruling family, and the contradictions of the Al Saud’s effort to ensure their legitimacy through partnership with the Wahhabi sect, whose puritanical brand of Islam nurtures terrorism abroad and anti-regime radicalism at home.

Against this backdrop, the Al Saud narrative is increasingly fragmenting, as globalisation gives rise to an ever greater complexity. The Al Saud achieved leadership and prominence because of oil wealth and control of Islam’s holiest places, but the proliferation of new media alarms and irritates them because it exposes their narrative’s flaws. A loud and defiant voice from neighbouring Qatar, Al Jazeera, was the first to attack the Al Saud narrative directly. Indeed, the attack is implied by Al Jazeera’s very name, which means ‘the Peninsula’, suggesting that the Al Saud could no longer claim to speak for ‘*al-jazira*’. A subsequent wave of other satellite TV channels, from Hizbullah’s Al Manar to Iran’s Al Alam, has only intensified the erosion of the regime’s carefully crafted public façade.

This diversity of views poses a fundamental challenge to Al Saud power and control, because the regime has staked its legitimacy on strict adherence to a dogma that cannot withstand independent scrutiny. All the might and determination that the Al Saud apply to imposing limits on opposing voices, especially when these voices come from abroad, is devoted to the Sisyphean task of preserving this fixed image. To

be sure, the regime pursues foreign policy initiatives that are intended to promote an image of imaginative and responsible leadership, but this can do no more than provide brittle cover for domestic realities.

The dominant position of the Al Saud depends on maintaining a certain unity of purpose. But a distorted and aggressive mission to tame the media, no less than the behaviour of the media itself, threatens to expose the regime's hollowness. While the addiction of the media 'lion' to oil money has been appeased until now, a sharp drop in oil prices might prove fatal in the absence of any real bond of loyalty or affection between tamer and tamed. Oil money alone cannot buy long-term mastery.

<A>Three phases of media development

The emergence, expansion and current fate of the Saudi mass-media enterprise is best examined as a three-phase process of development that has unfolded over a remarkably short period of time, spanning four decades. The first phase was marked by the Saudi media's reluctant, belated and turbulent birth in response to Arab nationalism, whose most prominent voice was **Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser's** Sawt al Arab (Arab Voice) in the 1950s and 1960s. The young kingdom of Saudi Arabia was haunted by pan-Arab nationalism, and possessed no means of warding it off. A political battle was unfolding in the Arab world, but the kingdom was yet to be shocked out of its Wahhabi reactionism into a realisation of the potential of broadcast media.

The second phase began in the 1970s as an ambitious project to own or otherwise silence and control Arab-language media. This was an obvious effort to maintain the Al Saud's dominant narrative. The strongholds of Arab-language media, Cairo and Beirut, were commandeered. However, regional supremacy was not

sufficient, and by the 1990s the struggle of the Saudi media empire had developed into a global mission.

The third phase, from the 1990s onwards, has been marked by mounting challenges and contradictions facing the Al Saud media empire. The Saudi monopoly is threatened by the proliferation of new media, which have forced the realities on the ground into public view, overrunning a choice of programmes of control and containment that do not meet the public's needs. Alternative media such as digital video cameras bear witness not only in Abu Ghraib prison or at Saddam Hussein's hanging, but also when the Saudi *mutawwa'a* (religious police) brutalise Iraqi Shi'ite pilgrims in the Great Mosque of Mecca. Indeed, videos of Saudi prison guards beating juvenile detainees have become easily accessible on YouTube. The sermons of **Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser** that lasted for hours are now replaced by instantaneous images of bleeding Iraqis and reports of insurgent activity by Saudi jihadis.

The electronic news media pose a serious challenge to the reputation of the Saudi rulers, not only by virtue of their fast-moving images, but also because the internet, in particular, has ushered a new political culture into being. The internet creates a space for convergence, bursting open national jurisdictions of content regulation.¹ Hundreds of Saudi websites defiantly expose the secrets that protect the illusion of stability and harmony within the kingdom. The Al Saud cannot hope to bar, ban and block all these avenues of publicity. The nature of the new media and the vulnerability of the official narrative underlying the regime make such an attempt impossible.

As this third phase unfolds, two types of contradictions within the official Saudi media have come to the fore, both of which have served to increase the impact

¹ Ian Hargreaves, *Journalism: Truth or Dare*, London: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 19.

of the new, unofficial media. The first concerns the incongruous messages of approved programming, which include channels presenting Wahhabi religious sermons intended to 'educate' the masses, alongside channels that are aimed at entertaining them, often showing dancing-girls. Second, and more importantly, the official media's programming choices constitute an abject failure to represent the aspirations, experiences and problems of Saudi citizens.

Phase one: the birth of a national media

The birth of the mass media in Saudi Arabia came relatively late compared to other countries in the region. Within Saudi Arabia's current borders, newspapers were published in the Hashemite-ruled Hijaz from 1907.² These included the official gazette *al-Qibla* (the direction in which Muslims pray) and *Sawt al-Hijaz* (Voice of the Hijaz). By contrast, the Al Saud, the rulers in Najd, were cocooned in their central region of the peninsula, largely isolated from outside influences, including that of other Arabs.

The first Saudi–Najdi newspaper *al-Yamama* (Dove of good omen) was founded in the 1950s. Increasing consciousness of the importance of printed material marked the rule of 'Abd al-'Aziz Al Saud, the founder of the kingdom. 'Abd al-'Aziz commissioned books about Saudi Arabia from Arab foreign advisers, Egyptians, Syrians and others from the Levant, and also established the Salafi Printing House to nurture nationalism. However, while these books were considered by 'Abd al-'Aziz as central to creating a sense of popular identification with Saudi Arabia, literacy was very low in the central parts of the peninsula, where, in contrast to coastal urban centres, the population was mainly tribal and nomadic.

² Mai Yamani, *Cradle of Islam: The Hijaz and the Quest for an Arabian Identity*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2004, p. 2.

As a result, radio soon emerged as an important means of providing information. Domestic radio broadcasting began during the 1950s and was supported by the state during the following decade in an effort to reduce the size of the audience of foreign broadcasts, especially Egyptian propaganda from sources such as Sawt al-Arab. However, all the way through the Six Day War in 1967, the Saudi government had still almost no effective radio defence.³ Saudis still recall how the streets of Riyadh and other Saudi cities were empty during broadcasts of **Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser’s** speeches.

It was during the 1960s, under King Faysal, that Saudi Arabia realised that it could no longer ignore the need to create a viable media programme. The first Saudi **radio station called *Nida’ al-Islam*** (The call of Islam), debuted in 1961,⁴ in opposition to Nasser’s ‘Arab Voice’. It was broadcast from Mecca daily for ninety minutes (‘Mecca Calling’), using religious catchphrases to ensure its legitimacy. By 1962, *Nida’ al-Islam*[[*]] was on air for four-and-a-half hours daily, 95 per cent of which was Qur’an recital and 5 per cent solo lute playing.⁵

Saudi radio also began during the 1960s to broadcast to the Muslim world beyond the Arab countries. Specified hours broadcast in Urdu, Indonesian, Turkish, Bengali, Swahili, Somali and Farsi. These broadcasts were made in order to counteract “destructive” or negative perceptions of the Saudi state. The aim was to broadcast Wahhabi teachings of the ‘true Islam’. But the real agenda was to emphasise Saudi Arabia’s voice of leadership in the Muslim world, as opposed to the voice of Arab nationalism, particularly Nasser’s programme *Saihat al-Nadir* (The

³ Douglas Boyd, ‘Saudi Arabia’s International Media Strategy: Influence through Multinational Ownership’ in Kai Hafez (ed.), *Mass Media, Politics and Society in the Middle East*, New Jersey Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2001, p. 45.

⁴ Badr’ Krayyim, *Nashat wa tatawwur al-itha’a fi-’l-mujtama’ al-Saudi*, Jiddah: Dar-Tihama, 1982, pp. 85–90.

⁵ Mohammed-Ali al-Uwaini, *al-I’lam al-Khaliji*, Cairo: Anglo-Egyptian Library, 1984, p. 112.

warning shout) and al-Saed (God's enemies). The station also sought to strengthen the sense of national unity with programmes such as *haqiq wa arqam* (Truths and Numbers) that dwelt upon the achievements of King 'Abd al-'Aziz and Saudi rule, in addition to showing 'our truth and their lies'.⁶ The aim was thus to define the region in terms of Islam and Saudi leadership in the Muslim world.

The Wahhabi religious establishment, however, had long regarded the advent of modern mass media as a dangerous innovation. Official clerics, including the late Ibn Baz, denounced radio broadcasting as *kufir* (heretical) and leading to corruption. They objected to the broadcasting of music – regarded as *mulhi* (sinful distraction) – especially after announcing 'Mecca calling', while the use of women's voices was considered *awra* (faulty).

Nevertheless, the *al bait al sa'id* (happy home) programme broadcast during the 1960s featured a woman's voice, as the Al Saud considered it important to propagate national identity through the family, where women were confined to the role of raising children. With tensions in this new public sphere growing as men talked about religion and women discussed cooking and children, an agreement was reached with the Wahhabi establishment that set out the boundaries of the permissible, which came to include secular propaganda in support of the state, such as 'happy home'[[*]]. Moreover, in the course of bargaining with the Wahhabi establishment, the Al Saud gave the clerics their own space in the media – totalling roughly 20 per cent of broadcast time – with programmes such as *al-Da'wa* (The call) and later *al-Majd* (The glory). This pattern was repeated with the launch of Saudi Arabian television broadcasting in 1965, which represented a further huge step towards co-opting the Wahhabi clerics.

⁶ Krayyim, *Nashat wa tatawwur*, p. 74.

Phase two: consolidating media control

Between 1967 and 1974, the Al Saud succeeded in creating one of the best-financed and most powerful electronic media systems in the Middle East. It was Prince Fahd who oversaw this development, and who, together with his Sudayri brothers – the children of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz’s most favoured wife – reaped its political benefits from the 1970s onwards. The sixth in the Sudayri line, Prince Salman, is today recognised as the media ‘king’.

Two developments in the Arab world were instrumental to the expansion of Saudi media in the 1967–74 period and beyond. First, Israel’s defeat of Egypt in the Six Day War exhausted Nasser’s power. Nasser’s secular nationalist mantle passed to Iraq, with Radio Baghdad replacing Sawt al-Arab until the Baath regime lost popular credibility in the aftermath of its own defeat in the first Gulf war in 1991. Second, successive oil booms established Saudi Arabia’s economic hegemony. The Saudis thus became stronger financially while benefiting from a significant change in the regional balance of power as their Arab rivals became weaker.

However, the Saudi media remained tightly controlled and zealously managed, which became glaringly obvious precisely in August 1990, during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Most Saudis learned about the invasion three days after it occurred, while those who had access to Radio Monte Carlo (Middle East), the Voice of America or CNN discovered the extremes of the Saudi state’s censorship. During the same year, when 1,400 pilgrims died in a tunnel during the annual Hajj in Mecca, information about the tragedy was withheld by the Ministry of the Interior, which limited international journalists’ access.

The Saudi government's inability to control information from outside the country would become a constant source of worry. Indeed, the Saudi state, threatened in the 1960s by socialist Egypt, managed to turn the tables and exert authoritarian influence on other Arab media, stifling liberalisation and diversity. In 1981, the Higher Media Council was formed to address the country's information concerns. Tellingly, the council was headed by the minister of the interior rather than the minister of information, as the media were seen as a security issue first and foremost. During the 1980s, the minister of information was widely known as the 'minister of denial'. Meanwhile, 'white noise', produced by active jamming, helped defend against 'attacks' from Arab radio stations that could not be brought to heel by other means.

Such heavy-handed tactics have not always been necessary, however. The Al Saud (primarily the Sudayris, the real power in the Saudi state) own media in many Arab countries, as well as large shares in the Arab press published outside the Arab world. These include Al Mawarid, owned by the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) group, founded in 1991 and now based in Dubai, which has six entertainment television channels and two radio channels. In 2003, the Al Arabiya news channel was added to MBC's portfolio in an effort to counter the influence of Al Jazeera. Likewise, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the state news agency, owns major publishing companies such as Saudi Research and Marketing (SRM), which distributes private pan-Arab newspapers such as *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat* based in London. Saudi princes also own entertainment television channels, including IRT, Orbit (in partnership with LBC International in Lebanon), Al Mustaqbal (in joint

ownership with the late former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri) and the Rotana Group⁷.

Moreover, critics today have identified an intra-regional brain drain from traditional Arab media to outlets in rich Saudi Arabia. Arab media, especially in Cairo and Beirut, were relatively more diverse until the influx of Saudi money in the 1970s. The Egyptian television film industry is almost entirely dependent on the Saudi-dominated market, and is therefore obliged to turn a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's problems and failings. Nor is Egypt alone. Most Arab states are protective of any news that could humiliate the Saudi rulers' pride. Today, such channels are especially supportive of the Saudi news campaign against Iranian hegemonic ambitions, especially as this is the political line supported by the USA.

At home, Saudi Arabia continues to have the most controlled media in the region, supplementing direct and indirect ownership with strict administrative measures. A censorship committee with representatives from various government ministries monitors all local and foreign publications.⁸ Likewise, in 1994, the Saudi government issued Decree 128, banning private ownership of satellite dishes in order to keep out Western news and entertainment, 'un-Islamic' programming, and anything perceived as anti-Saudi.

However, Saudi Arabia's elaborate system of official control is hardly seamless, particularly in the case of non-terrestrial broadcast media. Aside from isolated instances of the religious police removing a few dishes, Decree 128 has not been enforced, and dishes as well as satellite reception equipment remain readily available in the kingdom. This indicates tensions and indecision within the Al Saud – a sprawling elite numbering 20,000 princes and princesses – and between the royal

⁷ **Champion, Daryl, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, London: Hurst, 2003, p.268-269**

⁸ Hussein Amin, 'Mass Media in Arab States between Diversification and Stagnation: An Overview' in Hafez (ed.), *Mass Media, Politics and Society*, p. 27.

family and their Wahhabi co-rulers. Increasingly, the media sense this indecision and timidity.

Phase three: challenges to closed media

Almost all the satellite television channels present a paradox. A viewer in London or even in Saudi Arabia can watch on Saudi satellite TV an old blind cleric in obvious pain holding forth about potential carnal sin or answering questions about menstruation and male versus female body hair. The viewer can then switch to another Saudi-owned channel and watch Lebanese and Egyptian girls dancing and enacting provocative scenes that surpass even the most risqué of Madonna's videos. This seemingly polarised concoction of dogmatic preaching and visual provocation uses the globalisation of communications to fuse religion and hyper-consumerism.

In fact, however, sermonising and tantalising go hand in hand to serve a clear purpose: distracting the public's attention from real debate and attention to socio-economic realities. Both modes of communication represent distorted pictures of reality, offering fantasies that each present a one-sided version of adulthood. Sermonising projects a strident sense of responsibility and an ascetic form of self-control, whereas tantalising presents a libertine form of irresponsibility and abandonment. The one relates to the individual's position vis-à-vis the state and its repressive apparatus, and the other to his status vis-à-vis the market. The space in the middle – that of maturity, judgement, solidarity and citizenship – is simply missing.

An obedient, docile population, amenable to the orders of the state, is a contemporary incarnation of a master-slave relationship – a form of rule that is still familiar to the Al Saud, who abolished legal slavery in the kingdom only in 1965. Oil money and a monopoly on state power have resulted in a massive concentration of

political and economic power, which the Al Saud attempt to defend by repelling or crushing anything that constrains or limits their own freedom of action. What they have understood since the 1970s is that this requires bringing the media, no less than the state and the market, under their absolute control.

At the heart of the Saudi media empire is its aim to stabilise and reinforce the Saudi political system, both domestically and in terms of foreign policy, especially with respect to perceived threat to the regime posed by Syria, Hizbullah and Iran's hegemonic ambitions. Indeed, the Saudi battle for hearts and minds is as much concentrated on the outside world as it is on domestic affairs. The regime has spent billions of dollars on PR companies, donations to Western universities and the establishment of think tanks to promote the 'Saudi success story'.

By controlling the higher echelons of academia and sources of advice for Western policy makers – interestingly, the regime has focused only on the West, especially the USA, rather than on rising powers such as China, India or Russia – the Saudi government has bought itself effective armour against international criticism. This initiative has been ongoing, parallel to the expansion of the Saudi media enterprise, but it has gained further prominence in the aftermath of 9/11. Likewise, Western media have since been granted access to Saudi Arabia, albeit on a selective basis, with those who are chosen carefully screened to ensure that they conform to the official narrative.

Moreover, Saudi economic power, especially in buying high-tech weapons systems, has kept Western governments keen to maintain the 'special relationship' with the kingdom. However, instead of a real nation-building programme, the Al Saud appear to be successful only in selling their version of Saudi Arabia to Western powers.

Indeed, the regime's dream of absolute control has failed, as it must. The Al Saud have failed to homogenise a vast country replete with sectarian-tribal diversity and strong regional loyalties based in the 'Asir, the Hijaz and the Hasa. To be sure, the Al Saud have the economic clout to buy more newspapers and satellite television channels, and the political weight to exercise indirect influence both regionally and internationally. However, their narrow vision of the world is too divorced from realities at home to be truly effective.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia's sermonising and tantalising media are the face of a doomed totalitarian fantasy. Failures of representation, politics and economics, as well as the need for jobs and education for a youthful population, are real problems that cannot be solved by clerics threatening viewers with the fires of hell or by dancing women beckoning to them before the cameras. The Al Saud's monopoly of mass media ownership has effectively constrained new ideas and perspectives, but their investments in suppressing debate, criticism and diversity have merely bred myopia and a delusion of safety.

The limitations of the fantasy are exposed by external challengers such as Qatar's Al Jazeera, which was established on the principle of journalistic freedom, buttressed by the employment of ex-BBC and Western journalists. Yet, while Al Jazeera's attempts to push the boundaries of Arab journalism challenge the structures of power in the Middle East, old problems remain. The only way to erode authoritarian rule is to establish firm programmatic and institutional alternatives. This is far from having been achieved. On the contrary, while the Arab Journalism Federation protests regularly against repression by Arab governments, journalists collaborate with rulers by practising self-censorship.

Together, repression and collaboration block the emergence of real political alternatives. Western governments desperate for stability are forced to believe Saudi Arabia's 'success story' as propagated by official media, because there are no other viable options. The experience of regime change in Iraq shows how this can go horribly wrong. Nevertheless, as long as the Al Saud keep all their media channels in harmony with US interests in the region, the USA will maintain its faith in the official Al Saud narrative.

<A>Conclusion

The ultimate fate of our metaphorical media lion depends on its tamers, who face a dilemma. They can decide to let the lion out of the cage to roam free, trusting it not to destroy its own environment, let alone its tamer. However, the lion has been reared in a golden cage. If it gains freedom, it must feed itself and deal independently with other lions that it encounters in the wild.

Given these options, the tamer might decide to shoot the lion and hang its head on the wall. But the problem now is that the lion is so big that he cannot be killed by the tamer, only wounded, and a wounded beast is the most dangerous of all.

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