

هللا لوسر دمحم هللا ال هللا ال

*La Ilaha Illa Allah, Muhammad Rasulu Allah*

*“There is no god but God: Muhammad is the Messenger of God.”*

—the Muslim creed as inscribed on the flag of Saudi Arabia

## *About the Saudi Speakers Bureau...*

The Saudi Speakers Bureau takes as its credo this basic formulation: That knowledge begets understanding, that understanding begets respect, and that greater knowledge, better understanding and deeper respect together beget the possibility that the nations and peoples of the world can find ways to live together in peace, develop a true appreciation for one another’s values and beliefs without prejudice and sustain a lasting mutual tolerance for each other’s aspirations and ways of life.

Viewed from this perspective, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a special story to tell—many stories to tell, in fact, vitally important stories. The world at large—and the Kingdom itself—will together benefit from a greater awareness of the unique character of the Saudi people, of the richness of the Saudi heritage, of the diversity of Saudi culture, of the contours of Saudi history, of the beauty of the Saudi land and of the strength of Saudi industry. The goal, then, of the Saudi Speakers Bureau is two-fold:

- 1) To create a range of effective means to collect and share those stories; and
- 2) To lead and support a broad-based, multi-media effort to tell those stories to groups and schools and organizations everywhere.

We pursue these goals believing that knowledge and understanding bring light to the world, drive away the shadow of ignorance and lead us out of the dark land of misunderstanding. Embracing this position, we begin with a look at the long and varied history of Saudi Arabia, a rich, vibrant tale unique among the nations of the world.

# *An Overview of the History of Saudi Arabia*

## *What's In a Name?*

When people the world over speak of Arabs, Arabia, and Saudi Arabia, few non-Arabs realize the significant history underlying these words. Likewise, geographically, as a rule most people place Saudi Arabia squarely within a region referred to by common acclaim by English speakers as “the Middle East,” by French speakers as “la Moyen-Orient,” and by German speakers as “der Mittlerer Osten”—three terms in three languages sharing the exact same meaning. Again, few who use any of these variations give thought as to why we call this part of the world just this. A curious person might rightfully ask two questions: the first, “The middle of what?” the second, “East of where?”

The earliest known use of the word Arab dates from ancient Assyria in the ninth century BCE. Variations punctuate classical literature thereafter. The term is thought by some to be derived from a Semitic root associated with nomadism. Signs of the use of the closely-related word *Arabia* followed soon thereafter. While describing ancient Egypt in the times of the pharaohs, the fifth century BCE Greek historian Herodotus—often referred to as the “father of history”—wrote of the geography of the neighboring land of Arabia:

From Heliopolis however, as you go up, Egypt is narrow; for on the one side a mountain-range belonging to Arabia stretches along by the side of it, going in a direction from the North towards the midday and the South Wind, tending upwards without a break to that which is called the Erythraian Sea...and where it is widest, as I was informed, it is a journey of two months across from East to West; and the borders of it which turn towards the East are said to produce frankincense. Such then is the nature of this mountain-range.

The term *Arabia* historically has referred not only to the Arabian Peninsula proper, but also variously to adjacent lands and waters, sometimes extending to the west as far as the Nile River, to the north as far as the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and to the east beyond the Tigris–Euphrates Rivers, covering the entirety of the area known to history as the “Fertile Crescent.”

In modern times, the term Arabia has been attached more narrowly to the world’s largest peninsula, a boot-shaped land mass bordered on three sides by water—by the Red Sea to the west, by the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to the east, and by the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the south. This vast expanse, almost 1.3 million square miles (over 2 million square kilometers) in size, is the twenty-first century home to nine Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. At 830,000 square miles (over 1.3 million square kilometers), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is by far the largest of the nine, roughly one-third the size of the continental United States, making it the fourteenth largest country in the world in terms of area.

Turning to another point of geography, we pose the question, How is it that we bundle together in our minds the countries of the Arabian Peninsula with a cluster of others to the north as far as Syria, to the east as far as Iran, and to the west as far as Egypt and refer to them collectively as the “Middle East?” This expression reflects a European perspective, owing its ubiquitous usage to the predominance in modern times of the western political powers with their western-leaning cultural viewpoints. Turning in the direction of the rising sun, Europeans considered the distant lands of China and Japan and Korea as being in the “Far East.” As a derivative of that mentality, by the nineteenth century they came to view Arabia as part of the “Near East” or, using this century’s current moniker of choice, the “Middle East.”

In 2004, the Group of 8 (“G8”) expanded the concept of the Middle East still further, declaring that there is a “Greater Middle East” extending to the west all the way to Morocco, Western Sahara, and Mauritania on the northwest Atlantic coast of Africa. To the east, it reaches Pakistan and Afghanistan at the western borders of India and China in Asia. To the south, their vision now includes Sudan and Somalia. Later, the G8 expanded its definition still further, incorporating Turkey and the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus region and middle Asia into the mix. One dominant common element shared by all of the countries now included by the G8’s definition of the Middle East is their Islamic heritage. Another, with varied tones, is language.

In his memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T. E. Lawrence, widely known to history as Lawrence of Arabia, described the common heritage of the Arabs in this way:

A first difficulty...was to say who the Arabs were. ...Once it meant an Arabian. There was a country called Arabia...There was a language called Arabic, and in it lay the test. It was the current tongue [in 1916] of Syria and Palestine, of Mesopotamia, and of the great peninsula called Arabia on the map. Before the Moslem conquest, these areas were inhabited by diverse peoples, speaking languages of the Arabic family. We called them Semitic. ...Arabic, Assyrian, Babylonian, Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac were related tongues; and indications of common influences in the past, or even of a common origin, were strengthened by our knowledge that the appearances and customs of the present Arabic-speaking peoples of Asia, while as varied as a field full of poppies, had an equal and essential likeness. We might with perfect propriety call them cousins....”

A Saudi living in one of the four great cities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia today—Jeddah, Makkah, Riyadh, and Madinah—could reasonably argue that his country, based on religion and history, deserves consideration as the center or middle of the world. Italy, France, America, and their brethren are from a Saudi’s standpoint the West, while India, China, Japan and their kindred nations to him are the East, leaving his own Arabian Peninsula as the central fulcrum upon which the world balances. Given the vital importance to the world economy of the vast oil and gas reserves located there, the Arabian Peninsula arguably *is* the pivot point of modern history. Today the Arabic equivalent of “Middle East” in common usage is “ash-sharq-l-awsat” (Arabic: *طسوأل اقرشلا*). Regardless of our location or choice of direction and perspective, we all live in the same world and,

in the eyes of the three great monotheistic religions that originated in Arabia—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—we are all children of one God.

Labels like the “Middle East” are just that, labels. Look beyond labels if you truly want to understand another country or culture or people. Realize that labels are flat, two-dimensional objects, measured quantitatively by length and width. Life, in contrast, is multi-dimensional, adding the third quantitative element of height to the calculation as well as a host of qualitative factors as diverse as the earth around us. The richness of Saudi Arabia begins to come alive when we set aside simplistic labels and explore up close its many facets.

### *Pre-Islamic Arabia*

Legends, mysteries, and traditions abound surrounding the history of Arabia, where the oldest confirmed signs of human settlement date back over 15,000 years to prehistoric times at the end of the last Ice Age. The earliest historical records date back 5,000 years to the epoch when the Egyptians were first establishing their civilization along the banks of the Nile. In comparison with life in the land of the pharaohs, lacking a mighty river like the Nile to water and enrich their soil, limited by scant resources, confronted by a climate of great extremes, and visited upon all too often by a succession of foreign armies, the native peoples of the Arabian Peninsula have forever faced myriad challenges in their everyday lives. And yet, for five millennia and more, they have survived and thrived and contributed mightily to the history of the world. This is the land that gave us in historical order Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Set at the crossroads of three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—Arabia was known to writers of antiquity as the conduit through which flowed the bulk of spice and incense and luxury trade from Asia to the lands of the Mediterranean Basin and Europe. For untold centuries, strings of camels and donkeys burdened with pepper and ginger, cardamom and cinnamon, cassia and turmeric and more from India’s Malabar Coast trekked Arabia’s caravan routes, bringing in their train wealth and splendor to settlements along the way that owed their existence to passing traders and wayfarers. Three such places were the “Rose Red” city of Petra in present-day Jordan, the port of Shabwah on the Gulf of Aden, and the port of Gerrha on the western shore of the Arabian Gulf. Almonds and dates from the peninsula were also traded in abundance. With Petra as its capital, the Nabatean Kingdom established a unique civilization at the time of Jesus based on trade with the Roman world.

Other valuable goods making their way across Arabia in ages past included silks and precious stones, silver and gold, and aromatics like balsam, terebinth, frankincense, and myrrh. Celebrated traditions and enduring images emerged from this fabled land, often appearing as themes in fine art and popular culture. The great painters of the Renaissance frequently portrayed the Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon’s court and the three wise men bearing gifts to honor the birth of

a child in Bethlehem. Children of all ages, meanwhile, have long thrilled to the tales of mythical Sinbad the Sailor battling monsters and visiting magical places, of Aladdin and his golden lamp, and of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.

Until the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when the voyages of explorers like Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan from Portugal and Christopher Columbus from Genoa by way of Spain led to the opening of direct, all-sea trade routes to India, China, and the mysterious “Spice Islands,” a significant portion of the luxury goods from Asia craved by the European world traveled through the land and waters of Arabia. From the dawn of the Age of Exploration forward, nearly five hundred years passed before a singularly-powerful leader—King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud)—united the kingdoms of Najd and Hejaz to form the country we know today as Saudi Arabia. The fortuitous discovery in his reign of an astonishing source of wealth buried deep beneath its sands brought his new creation, lying in the very heart of the Arabian Peninsula, wealth and influence on a scale comparable to that enjoyed by its forbearers of yore.

For vast stretches, the land traversed by those long-ago caravans was arid, challenging terrain, mostly desert, with a seemingly endless ocean of sand dunes lying far to the south in a region known as “Rub’ al Khali” (Arabic: رُبِّالْخَالِي) —in English, “The Empty Quarter.” A crazy quilt agglomeration of local tribes populated the peninsula—in past ages more than now, but still now—each with its own distinctive traditions. The rigors of adapting to life in such a land led to a system of communal life where deep-rooted tribal, clan, and family loyalties cemented together by staunch blood relationships helped make survival possible.

Over the centuries, those tribes struggled often amongst themselves for preeminence, their endemic conflicts portrayed by some scholars as a direct reflection of the severe realities of a land that demanded strength, endurance, self-reliance, adaptability, independence, and courage of all who wished to abide there. Through countless generations, hardy nomads found ways to survive in the harshest of the peninsula’s tracts, steeling themselves to the desert’s heat and cold and conditioning themselves to endure for days at a time without liquid replenishment or solid sustenance. Using such trials to measure their mettle, one may justifiably look upon the Saudi people as heroic survivors of climate and geography and history. Indeed, endurance, determination, and perseverance are hallmarks of the Saudi character, key elements in understanding who and what these people are and how they view and live life.

From the dawn of recorded history into the seventh century CE, waves of foreign conquerors occupied peripheral areas of Arabia for varying periods of time, lasting in some cases for centuries. Among those conquerors were the Phoenicians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Byzantines. Over the centuries, however, the vast distances and daunting landscapes of the peninsula’s interior, coupled with the hardiness of its peoples, protected large areas of Arabia from foreign control, in particular the upland regions of the Najd.



On occasion, facing demographic pressures, Semitic invaders rose out of Arabia to subjugate foreign lands, most notably the “mysterious Hyksos,” described by one historian as “shepherd kings” from the land of Canaan, who conquered Egypt in the eighteenth century BCE. In subduing the Nile Valley, the Hyksos employed two powerful new weapons whose adoption by the defeated Egyptians transformed the pharaoh’s armies: the composite bow and the chariot.

Within Arabia itself, concurrent to the travails brought by sundry invaders from afar, internecine struggles between an inchoate mass of indigenous tribes shaped life on the local level. On a larger scale, a succession of Arab kingdoms struggled for hegemony in the peninsula, the trajectories of their histories traceable today by the magnificent ruins of the palaces and fortresses and places of worship they left behind as their testaments. The intricate pattern of human enterprise woven by these many events is too complex to portray in its fullness here. Their most significant legacy arguably is, they served as an extended prelude to the rise of Islam.

### *The Origins of Islam*

Three great monotheistic religions originated in Arabia: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Islam was founded in the seventh century CE by the prophet Muhammad. Arab Muslims consider themselves lineal descendants of Abraham (18th century BCE?) through Abraham’s first-born son, Ishmael, by his wife Sarah’s handmaiden, Hagar. Judaism, like Islam, also recognizes Abraham as a patriarch. Following a different course than Islam, it charts its lineage after Abraham through his second-born son, Isaac, by his wife Ruth, rather than through Ishmael. Christianity, in contrast, originated following the death of Jesus. Together with Islam and Judaism, Christianity also traces its origins back to Abraham. Like Judaism (of which it is a direct offshoot), it also delineates its subsequent ancestral trail beginning with Isaac. All three of these religions recognize Abraham as a forefather. For this reason, they are often referred to as the “Abrahamic religions.”

Judaism recognizes neither the divinity of Christ nor his messianic mission, while Christianity declares him to be the Son of God. Muslims, in contrast, revere Jesus as a messenger of God, calling him Isa, but, like the Jews, view him as a human, not as a deity. Muslims further believe that Muhammad was a direct descendant of Abraham, without ascribing to him divinity.

Over the centuries, countless writers have dealt with the complex relationship, diverse similarities, and profound differences between these three faiths. We shall focus on one aspect of that story: the history of the faith whose impact on Saudi Arabia and Arabs has been paramount—Islam. Whether a person is a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, or the holder of another belief, without understanding the rise of Islam, one cannot understand the history of Saudi Arabia nor, as well, the history of the modern world.

## *Muhammad, Makkah & the Birth of Islam*

Located inland from the coast of the Red Sea halfway down the western length of the Arabian Peninsula, the holy city of Makkah sits in the Plain of Abraham, surrounded to the east, west, and south by a rugged, mountainous landscape made up mostly of granite. In the center of Makkah stands the Kaaba, the holiest place of worship in Islam. Set within the cube-shaped Sacred Mosque, the Kaaba is a similarly cube-shaped stone built by the prophet Abraham. Nearby, at one of the mosque's outside corners, rests the Black Stone, believed to be of meteoric origin. Both the Kaaba and the Black Stone were venerated by Arabs many centuries before the birth of Islam. At the dawn of the seventh century, Makkah was the most important political, commercial, and religious center of Arabia.

Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah was born in Makkah in 570 CE, a member of the powerful Quraysh tribe, the leading tribe in the city at the time. Orphaned by age 6, he was raised by an uncle. After working variously as a shepherd and a merchant, at age twenty-five he married a rich widow, Khadeejam, fifteen years his senior. Together they had six children, of whom only his daughter Fatima survived. Growing discontented with the degenerate, heathen character of life in Makkah, Muhammad retired into the nearby mountains. In those mountains, at age 40, in the month of Ramadan, he received the first in a series of revelations ("hadiths" [Arabic: *ثي دح ل*]) from God, delivered by the angel Gabriel, revelations that continued until his death in 632.

Surrounded at first by a group of forty or so dedicated companions ("Sahabahs" [Arabic: *ةباح صل*]), three years later Muhammad began preaching publicly that there was but one true god to whom all men must submit, launching a direct attack on the polytheism being practiced in Makkah. In 622, the threat of persecution by local authorities forced him to flee Makkah for Madinah, an event known as the Hejira, or Flight. That year marks the beginning of what is called the Muhammadan Era and serves as the first year of the Muslim calendar. Resettled in Madinah, Muhammad was recognized by believers as the prophet of God. Drawing to himself many followers, he led them on a series of conquests, culminating in the taking of Makkah in 630. Triumphant, he demolished the many pagan idols set up in the Kaaba to worship false gods and instituted the monotheistic religion we know today as Islam.

At age sixty-three, in the eleventh year of the Hejira, Muhammad died from a violent fever and was succeeded by his father-in-law, Abu Bakr, one of the original forty companions. Abu Bakr was named the first Caliph, or leader. Previously, Abu Bakr's daughter Aisha had become Muhammad's second wife following the death of his first wife, Khadeejam.

Based on surviving historical evidence, the details of Muhammad's life are well-documented. Yet, one of the best-known stories to non-Muslims concerning the prophet has no verifiable evidence to support it. It first appeared in the writings of the English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon. In 1625, Bacon wrote in his *Essays*:

Mahomet made the people believe that he would call an hill to him, and from the top of it offer up his prayers, for the observers of his law. The people assembled; Mahomet called the hill to come to him, again and again; and when the hill stood still, he was never a whit abashed, but said, “If the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the hill.”

According to this legend, Muhammad was trying to prove a point to his followers by praying for the mountain to come to him. When it did not, he instead walked to the mountain himself, thanking God for His mercy—for, had Muhammad’s prayer been answered, he and everyone with him would have been crushed beneath the mountain’s mass. The lesson to be learned was, Deal with the world as it is; do not expect it to conform to you.

In modern times, Bacon’s words have been updated to say, “If the mountain won’t come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain.” People commonly reverse the order and say instead, “If Muhammad won’t go to the mountain, the mountain must come to Muhammad.” Remember the next time you hear someone use this expression in either form that this tale is anecdotal, apocryphal, with no historical evidence to support it and no mention in the holy book of Islam, the Qur’an.

Over the twenty-seven months following Muhammad’s death in 632, under Abu Bakr’s leadership, Muslim forces continued the geographical expansion begun by Muhammad, invading territories held by the Persian Sassanid Empire and the Byzantine East Roman Empire. These two empires had been intermittently locked for centuries in a seemingly endless, mutually-debilitating war which left them vulnerable to the armies of Islam. Immediately preceding their latest war, a pandemic outbreak known as the Justinian Plague devastated both their populations, wreaking havoc on their economies and severely weakening them on the eve of the moment when they needed to be at their greatest strength.

Abu Bakr was the first of four Caliphs (Arabic: *أخوة يلى*) known as the “Rightly-Guided Caliphs.” He was followed in that position after his assassination in August 634 first by Umar, then by Uthman ibn al-Affan, and then by Ali ibn Abi Talib. His three successors continued the wars of expansion into Persian and Byzantine territory first launched by Abu Bakr.

In 636, Muslims forces under Umar conquered Syria. The next year, they took Persia and Jerusalem and, five years later, Alexandria in Egypt, all under Umar’s leadership. Until then, the political and religious center of Islam had remained in Madinah and Makkah. By 661, however, the political center of Islam was transferred under the Umayyad caliphs to Damascus. From there, the caliphs directed their armies on continued conquests westward along the coast of North Africa and finally across the Straits of Gibraltar to Spain. In time, most of the Byzantine Empire and the entirety of the Sassanid Empire came under Muslim rule.

The Muslim advance into Western Europe was finally stopped in October 732 when Frankish forces led by Charles (“The Hammer”) Martel defeated them at the Battle of Tours (also known on



the French side as the Battle of Poitiers and on the Muslim side as “ma'arakat Balâṭ ash-Shuhadâ” [Arabic: *ءادهشلا طالاب* ; English, the “Battle of Court of the Martyrs ”]) in north-central France—arguably one of the great turning points in world history. Supporters of that view like Edward Gibbon, author of the influential *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, have long speculated that, had the forces of Islam continued their advance into the European heartland, the subsequent history of Europe and the world would have been vastly different from that which ensued. The defeat at Tours came 100 years after the death of Muhammad. For fully a century, the forces of Islam had been nearly invincible.

## *The Golden Age of Islam*

In comparison with the religious practices often seen in the Christian lands of Europe through the Middle Ages, Islamic caliphs showed notable tolerance toward the religious beliefs of the peoples they conquered, at the same time welcoming conversions to the Islamic faith. Christians and Jews living under Islamic rule were allowed to practice their faith with few restrictions. Adherents to those faiths held many important public posts. All Muslims were expected to learn Arabic so they could read the Qur'an. This sharing of a common language helped unite the diverse ethnic groups encompassed by the sprawling Islamic empire. It also made possible the easy exchange of knowledge and ideas, with profound and lasting and widespread results.

Through a long series of conquests over a host of cultures, the caliphs created a vast empire lacking internal political boundaries that was largely free from external attack. Within the Islamic world, life was peaceful and secure compared with prevailing conditions in much of the rest of the world. One fortuitous result was, trade and intellectual and cultural exchanges flowed freely across the Islamic world, bringing together the knowledge and wisdom of India and China, ancient Greece and Rome, Persia and Egypt. Muslim rulers in the main left their new conquests administratively and intellectually intact, preserving, not destroying, the best of those civilizations. The Roman Empire at its height at the time of Christ enjoyed what historians call “Pax Romana”—Roman Peace; similarly, the Muslim Empire at its height in the centuries following the conquests initiated by Muhammad enjoyed what some historians call “Pax Islamica”—Islamic Peace.

With the ascendancy of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 and the founding of Bagdad twelve years later, the political center of the Muslim world shifted from Damascus to this new city on the west bank of the Tigris River. The spiritual capital of Islam, however, has always remained Makkah, today as much as ever. For over 1,000 years, until the rise of the House of Saud and the forming of modern day Saudi Arabia, the holy cities of Madinah and Makkah were under control of the Sharif of Makkah, who himself owed political allegiance at various times to major Islamic empires based elsewhere in places like Bagdad and Istanbul.

Following the fall of Rome in the fifth century CE to barbarian invaders from the north, Western Europe entered a period popularly referred to as the “Dark Ages.” Once-prosperous cities began

a slow, steady decline economically and socially. Intellectual life stagnated and, in some places, disappeared all but completely. The truncated, localized system of governing known as feudalism replaced the universal rule of the Roman Empire. Peasants struggled in their daily lives, with many becoming serfs. Visions of death and the devil and the Apocalypse haunted art and literature.

Islamic civilization at its height during the European Middle Ages embodied Muhammad's belief in the paramount importance of knowledge. In contrast to the situation in Christian and barbarian Europe, the Muslim world, stretching from east of Arabia across the southern shore of the Mediterranean into Spain, in the mid-ninth century CE entered a period of astonishing economic, cultural, and scientific achievement that lasted some 400 years until invading Mongols sacked Bagdad in 1256, toppling the Abbasid caliphate. Muhammad had mandated public education for Muslims, giving a tremendous boost to the pursuit of knowledge. This era is known as the Golden Age of Islam, a time filled with light and splendor.

About the time the Abbasids came to power, paper making technology was introduced into the Muslim world from China, leading directly to the replacement of expensive parchment and papyrus with inexpensive paper in the making of books and documents. There soon followed an explosion of printed works, accompanied by the rapid expansion of knowledge of all sorts as extensive libraries, both public and private, sprang up throughout the Muslim world.

Under Abbasid rule, the Muslims built the world's first astronomical observatory and scientists speculated on the rotations of the planets around the sun, this at a time when many in Europe believed that the world was flat. In Christian Europe in the year 1000, to argue the earth was not the center of the universe, of God's creation, could easily earn you martyrdom. Arab scientists were able to use their mathematical prowess to calculate the circumference of the earth to within a few thousand feet. Arab cartographers in turn used their extensive knowledge of the lands and waters beyond their immediate borders to produce the finest maps the world would know for many centuries.

While the literacy rate in Western Europe outside the confines of the Catholic church and the courts of princes fell to near zero, Arab scholars translated classical Greek works into Arabic, including the writings of Aristotle and Plato, helping to preserve vital texts fundamental to the development of modern civilization that otherwise might well have been totally lost.

Arab mathematicians developed and refined algebra and geometry and spread the use of Arabic numerals—originally brought in from India—in place of cumbersome, severely-limiting Roman numerals. As well, they introduced the concept of zero. Innovations such as these opened up an entirely new world of scientific exploration that would have been impossible to enter otherwise. Other innovations and breakthroughs introduced by Arab scientists, scholars, and doctors with no counterparts in Europe at the time included the astrolabe for navigation, advances in health care and medicine, new methods in agriculture, livestock breeding, and water distribution, and fresh approaches to understanding history and philosophy.

Over a period lasting nearly a millennium, by a host of important measures, the culture and civilization of Arab lands arguably surpassed those of Western Europe. When Europe entered the era known as the Renaissance (French for “rebirth”), and moved on from there into the Reformation and forward toward the birth of modernity, Arab contributions to that reawakening were prodigious. In this same era, imagery taken from Arabia appeared frequently in the great works of art of the age, ranging from paintings to sculptures to the works of Shakespeare.

In 1453, invading forces of Ottoman Turks led by Mehmed II captured Constantinople, bringing an end to the thousand-year reign of the Byzantine Empire. Under a succession of conquering sultans, the Ottomans extended their empire northeastward into the Balkans and central Europe, northward into the Ukraine and Russian territories, eastward into the Caucasus and present-day Iraq and Iran, and westward along the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt all the way to Algiers. While the Ottoman Empire ruled the eastern and western coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula, including Makkah and Madinah, the interior territory and southern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula were never conquered by their armies, strengthening the spirit of defiant independence in the native tribes living there.

A unified Muslim Ottoman Empire continued to thrive through the Renaissance and Reformation periods in Western European history into the seventeenth century and the emergence of Early Modern Europe. Just when powerful monarchies in France, England, and Spain were consolidating their control over the territories that comprise the modern nations we know today, a series of military defeats brought a final end to Ottoman expansion and led to the rise of smaller Muslim kingdoms.

While science, industry, and commerce progressed in Europe, they began to lag in Arab lands. During this time, the peninsula entered into a period of relative isolation. Nonetheless, throughout the centuries, all the way up to today, Makkah and Madinah remained the spiritual heart of the Islamic world and continued to attract pilgrims from around the world.

### *The House of Saud and the Rise of the Saudi State*

A large part of the unique character of the Saudi people derives from their Bedouin heritage. Nowhere else in the Islamic world have the values and ways of life of this nomadic culture had a greater influence. The first modern attempt to unify the diverse tribes of the Arabian Peninsula dates from 1744 and was led by Prince Muhammad bin Saud. His revolt resulted in the formation of the First Saudi State. Once in control, ibn Saud sought to restore a distinctively Bedouin vision of orthodox Islam in the peninsula. Much as the prophet Muhammad had done many centuries before, he wished to cleanse the land of perceived heretical practices and lead its people back to the rightful worship of the One God.

Bin Saud looked for guidance to the teachings of a Muslim scholar and reformer named Shaikh Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahhab. Early in the eighteenth century, Abdul-Wahhab began advocating

a return to the original form of Islam, founding the Wahhabist strain of Islam. Persecuted by established Islamic scholars and religious leaders, who perceived him as a threat, he sought protection in the town of Diriyah, ruled then by Muhammad bin Saud. In time, bin Saud married Abdul-Wahhab's daughter, thereby establishing the same royal line that rules the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia today. The alliance of bin Saud and Abdul-Wahhab made the First Saudi State possible.

Over the next sixty-plus years, under the leadership of the House of Saud (Arabic: *دو ع س ل آ*), the Kingdom continued to expand. In 1765, Bin Saud was succeeded by his son, Abdul-Aziz. By 1814, at the height of its glory under Abdul-Aziz's son Saud, the House of Saud ruled most of the central plateau territory of the peninsula—a region known collectively as the Najd—and Red Sea coastal areas including the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah.

The Ottoman Empire was the preeminent political power in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa at this time. Fearing a challenge to their rule, and upset when the Saudis won control of Makkah and Madinah, the Turks decided to put an end to the upstart state. In 1811, the Ottomans began what turned into a seven year war with the Kingdom. Following Saud's death in 1814, the Turks continued their assault, challenging the rule of Saud's son, Abdullah.

In 1818, entering the seventh year of fighting, a large and well-armed expeditionary force made up mostly of Egyptians launched a final, determined drive. At the end of a long siege, Abdullah's forces suffered a crushing defeat late that year, and the Ottomans took control of the Saudi capital of Diriyah. Captured and sent to Istanbul, Abdullah was tried and beheaded by the Ottomans, putting an end to the First Saudi State. Many members of the local nobility, including those of the Al Saud clan, were sent by their conquerors as prisoners to Egypt and Turkey.

As a final punishment and lesson to be learned, the leader of the Turkish forces, Ibrahim Pasha, ordered his troops to raze the mud-brick Saudi capital of Diriyah to the ground with their artillery. He further had them ruin the wells and uproot the date palms, rendering the area nearly uninhabitable. In the brief aftermath to the Ottoman–Saudi War of 1811–18, a 350-year-old, once-flourishing city—one of the largest on the peninsula—became little more than a ghost town. When Saudi rule returned to life in its subsequent iteration as the Second Saudi State, it established its new capital some twenty miles to the south in Riyadh, where it remains to this day. What remains of Diriyah are largely ruins.

### *The Road to Modernization*

Resilient and determined, the House of Saud responded to their defeat by Ibrahim Pasha in short time by launching a rebuilding program that resulted in their retaking power in the central Arabian Peninsula in 1824, thus creating the Second Saudi State. Ultimately, the intimidating tactics of the Turks failed. Whatever short-term misery they produced, in the long term they did more to spark a forceful Saudi response than to quell it. The new Saudi ruler, Turki bin Abdullah Al-Saud, located his capital to Riyadh. Over an eleven year period, Turki managed to steadily



recapture most of the lands recently lost to the Ottomans. For the next thirty years, ruled first by Turki and then by his son and successor, Faisal, the people of the peninsula enjoyed a prolonged period of peace and prosperity, as trade and agriculture flourished.

The nations of Western Europe by this time had entered into the age of radical economic, social, demographic, and political change known as the Industrial Revolution, which saw one nation after another transform itself over the span of a few decades from agrarian into industrial societies. In countries like Britain, France, and Germany, throughout the nineteenth century factories arose, productivity grew, populations ballooned, and cities burgeoned, forcing governments to expand and adapt to manage the new dynamic. On the Arabian Peninsula, economic, social, and demographic change on a comparable scale would only come more than a century later. For Saudi Arabia, political unification came first.

### *The Unification of Saudi Arabia*

Owing to diverse factors, the First Industrial Revolution largely by-passed the nascent Saudi state. The peninsula had to await the discovery of oil before it could undergo a Second Industrial Revolution, one that has belatedly and dramatically transformed the nation, its infrastructure, and the quality of life of its people. The recent history of Saudi Arabia is dominated by three closely-interwoven developments:

1. The formation of a strong, centralized political state;
2. The development of a vibrant industrial economy; and
3. The transformation of Arabian society as it adapted to new and unforeseen realities.

Each of these developments posed its own set of challenges, and none of them came easily or without a cost. Major powers as nearby as Turkey and Egypt and as far away as Great Britain and France had their own political ambitions that often conflicted, sometimes violently so, with Saudi dreams. While fending off the aggressive moves of outside parties bent on colonizing the Middle East to their own advantage, Saudi leaders had their own internal difficulties to deal with. Reaching their goals meant finding a way to meld the peninsula's 5,000-year-old nomadic heritage in all of its aspects together with the confounding realities of the modern world. Accomplishing all of this within the life spans of a handful of generations is one of the great achievements by any nation in recent history.

For nearly a century after the Turks destroyed Diriyah, they continued to wage war against the House of Saud's dream of creating an enduring, unified Arab state. In 1865, the Ottomans renewed their campaign to extend their empire into the interior of the Arabian Peninsula. Supported by the Ottomans, the rival (and, from the Turkish perspective, accommodating) Al-Rashid family



of Hail rose up in an attempt to overthrow the Second Saudi State. After a long struggle, in 1891 the head of the House of Saud, Abdulrahman bin Faisal Al-Saud, was forced to give up his throne and seek refuge with the Bedouin tribes in the Rub' Al-Khali—the Empty Quarter. In time, Abdulrahman and his family relocated to Kuwait. It was there, as a new century dawned, that his young son Abdul Aziz took his first steps toward finally securing the independence of modern-day Saudi Arabia.

Proponents of Thomas Carlyle's Great Man Theory of history need look for modern-day proof of their argument no further than the person of Abdul Aziz ibn Abdur Rahman ibn Faisal al Saud, better known to history as ibn Saud. Few individuals ever have had the impact on their nation that ibn Saud had on his. Conqueror, warrior, leader, visionary, commanding in presence, fearless in battle, cunning in negotiations, by force of will he created the modern nation of Saudi Arabia. What George Washington is to Americans, what Ghandi is to Indians, what Simon Bolivar is to Latinos, ibn Saud is all of that and more to the people of Saudi Arabia.

Starting young, in 1902, at the age of twenty-three, he took his first not-so-tentative step toward greatness. In January of that year, though badly outnumbered, he led a band of nine armed men in a daring early-morning raid on Riyadh, then under the control of the rival Al-Rashid family. Having just overthrown the Al-Rashid ruler there, he reportedly called out to an assembled crowd, "Who is on my side...Who? Your own amir is with you again."

For the next thirty years, ibn Saud continued his campaign of territorial conquest and administrative consolidation, piece by piece bringing more and more of the peninsula under his control. Carefully navigating through the treacherous waters of the First World War, he deftly balanced his kingdom's interests against those of the Ottoman Turks and their Austrian and German allies on the one side and those of the Allied forces, including especially Great Britain and France, on the other.

The campaign against the Ottomans made famous by T. E. Lawrence's autobiographical literary epic, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and by David Lean's historically inventive cinematic epic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, was waged largely on the western and northern fringes of the peninsula, on the outskirts of the Saudi realm. While the House of Saud aided the Allied march against the Ottoman Turks to a degree, it remained largely an observant bystander to the events depicted in that film. However much you may enjoy the sight of Peter O'Toole parading about in his resplendent white Arab robes atop a camel, remember that much of what you see in that movie is an exercise in creative license by its director, not an accurate portrayal of the history of Saudi Arabia. The true history of the Kingdom is arguably more colorful, but still awaits its David Lean.

Following the end of World War I, throughout the 1920s and on into the 1930s, overcoming formidable odds at every turn, ibn Saud finally achieved his goal of political unification of the majority of the peninsula. Operating from his inland base in the high plateau of Najd, by 1926 he had conquered the western slice of Arabia bordering the Red Sea known as the Hejaz, where the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah lay. For the next six years, he ruled what became known as

the Kingdom of Najd and Hejaz (Arabic: زاجحلال او دجن ةكلامم) On 23 September 1932, by royal decree, ibn Saud formally established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Ibn Saud was a great leader, but even great leaders need financial resources to accomplish their dreams. The discovery of oil on 3 March 1938 soon magnified his effective power several fold, enabling the total recasting of the Saudi economy with all of the attendant benefits for the Saudi people. By the time of his death in 1953, his country was deep into a wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, oil-fueled makeover.

### *Discovery & Transformation*

**T**he discovery of commercial quantities of oil at Damman Dome on 4 March 1938 forever changed the course of Saudi history, and that of the world. Global geopolitics would never be the same again once the Arabian Peninsula became the epicenter for oil and gas production. By 1940, annual Saudi output surpassed the 5 million barrel mark. When World War II ended, production rose dramatically, reaching 60 million barrels per annum by the end of 1946. By the time King Saud died in 1953, the annual number exceeded 300 million barrels. In recent years, *the daily* production of crude oil in Saudi has exceeded 8,000,000 barrels.

The changes engendered by the nation's oil wealth are multitudinous. Prior to the 1960s, most Saudis lived a nomadic or semi-nomadic existence. Today, over 95 percent of the population is settled. With a birth rate that well exceeds the death rate, the country has seen the median age of its people dip below 25 years. In comparison, the median age in the United States today is 35.6 years, that in Great Britain, virtually the same as in the U.S., that in China, 35.5 years. Similarly dramatic changes are evident in all aspects of Saudi life, from education through quality of life, through health care, through basic infrastructure, through industry. Fundamental changes industrialized nations like the United States, Germany and Great Britain underwent over a period of two centuries Saudi Arabia has undergone in just over half a century. The two critical forces that gave impetus to these changes were ibn Saud and oil.

The story of modern day Saudi Arabia starts with them. The history of the Arabian Peninsula and the rise of Saudi Arabia we have just told. In other learning modules, we shall explore the Saudi Arabia of today. Among the topics we shall study are: 1) The geography of Saudi Arabia; 2) The role of women in Saudi Arabia today; 3) Saudi industry; 4) the Arabian-American Oil Company (today's Saudi Aramco); and 5) King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST).

You have just taken a journey down a 5,000-year-long road leading to where Saudi Arabia stands today. The Saudi story does not end here. It has just begun. This introduction to the history of Saudi Arabia is meant to whet the casual reader's appetite to learn and see more. To fully appreciate the complex contours of Saudi life, a fuller meal must be served. Look for announcements of additional courses from the Speaker's Bureau. We shall be adding to the menu on a regular basis in the months and years ahead.