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[Introduction to] Arabia Incognita

Sheila Carapico

University of Richmond, scarapic@richmond.edu

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ARABIA INCOGNITA

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Introduction

This book is titled *Arabia Incognita* because I believe that the large, strategically crucial landmass known as the Arabian Peninsula is far too little known and even less understood: This book attempts to remedy that situation.

This landmass has long been central to US and North Atlantic security interests and energy policies. However, even for many generally well-informed citizens elsewhere, the realities and dynamics of this crucial part of the Middle East still remain largely a *terra incognita*. This book presents a treasure trove of materials that were originally published between 1980 and 2015 in the resolutely independent periodical *Middle East Report (MER)*, through the editorial collective, the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), of which I am honored to have served for more than 20 years, and its online versions *Middle East Report Online (MERO)* and the MERIP Blog. As someone who has studied the politics of Yemen and the Gulf since the 1970s, I have pulled these articles together into this anthology in an attempt to help readers around the world understand the societies, politics and geopolitics of the countries of the Arabian Peninsula more richly than they have before.

The Arabian Peninsula is a distinct landmass, surrounded on three of its four sides by strategically significant bodies of water: the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf. It is home to, broadly speaking, three very different kinds of natural and human environments: the arid, sparsely populated but oil-rich expanses of deserts of the interior, most of which are in present-day Saudi Arabia; the string of former trading posts

along the Persian Gulf coast, many of which, also being hydrocarbon-rich, have been transformed into extremely wealthy city-states in the past forty years; and Yemen, a mountainous and heavily populated country that sprawls north and east from the southwest corner of the peninsula and has been plagued by civil conflict and instability since 2012 (and subjected to harsh military assaults from a Saudi-led coalition since March 2015).

The co-location of very different kinds of society on the Arabian Peninsula has tied their destinies together for eons. Of the three kinds of societies found in the Arabian Peninsula, the one with which most outsiders may have the most familiarity is the string of super-rich city-states along the sinuous coast of the Persian Gulf. First-class globe-trotters may have passed through the upscale airport in Dubai (which is one of seven tiny princedoms that make up the United Arab Emirates, UAE), or may have flown on Emirates Airlines. American or European students and tourists may have spent time in the state-of-the-art branch campuses of western universities established in Qatar or the UAE, or in the museums and shopping malls that now dot much of the UAE. Over the past fifty years millions of contract workers—pursuing a range of occupations, from hotel managers, to construction workers, to teachers—have flocked to the Gulf city-states from Asia, the Arab world, and Eastern Africa. Some have remained there for decades (generally, under tight surveillance); others, once their contracts have finished or if they have raised their voices seeking better working conditions or greater freedoms, have been summarily returned to their original homes. Al-Jazeera, the global news network based in the Qatari capital Doha, is now a familiar brand-name worldwide. Doha and several other twenty-first-century Persian Gulf cities glimmer with high-modernist architecture financed from petrochemicals, built by South Asian migrant laborers, and made livable only by relentless air-conditioning.

Since 1981, Saudi Arabia and the five other Arab states along the Gulf have worked together in a joint defense organization called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which has been strongly supported by the United States and its NATO allies and provides a massive market for Western arms manufacturers. Tens of thousands of American armed service personnel have spent time in the Gulf protecting the oil-rich monarchies against threats from the Soviet Union, Iraq and Iran.

The second broad environment in the Peninsula is the vast desert interior, most of which lies within Saudi Arabia. While millions of Muslims journey to Mecca for the annual *hajj* pilgrimage, relatively few Christians

or Jews—apart from oil executives and military contractors—have been permitted to visit the ultra-secretive Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (Only in Saudi Arabia and Oman are citizen-subjects the majority of residents.) Saudi Arabia is the only state in the world to be named for its founding family, the descendants of whom still hold tightly to the reins of government there today. From its very beginning, in the eighteenth century of the common era, the “Saudi” political system was based on the maintenance of tight alliance between the “al-Saud” (the Saud family) and the descendants and followers of a puritanical and highly intolerant religious leader called Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. The Wahhabis, as these religio-sectarian activists are known, continue to play an important role in the kingdom’s internal governance—and in many aspects of its foreign policy—to this day.

Yemen’s mountainous, relatively fertile and heavily populated environment provides a strong contrast to the natural and human geography of most of Saudi Arabia. In the days of the British Empire, the Yemeni city of Aden, perched at the corner where the Red Sea joins the Indian Ocean, was a vital coaling station for British ships traveling to India or points further east. The present-day Republic of Yemen stretches up along the Red Sea a little, and out along the Indian Ocean coast to join with Oman. Its many mountain fastnesses contain a diverse array of micro-cultures, many of them with long and distinguished urban traditions—and a correspondingly great array of political movements, some regional, some religious, some ideological, and some more interest-based.

In this book, you will find more writings about Yemen than about any of the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The reason for this is simple. Contributors to *Middle East Report* are overwhelmingly social scientists, along with a smattering of journalists. And the kind of field research that social scientists do, or the kind of free-ranging, on-the-ground reporting that good journalists seek to do, is extremely hard to do in Saudi Arabia or any of the other monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula. Nearly all those monarchies have truly terrible human rights records and afford no protection whatever for the freedom of most forms of information-gathering, association or expression. Saudi Arabia, where in May 2014 blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 public lashings with a whip, purely for what he had published on his blog, may have the very worst record in this regard. But the other GCC members are not far behind when it comes to stifling free inquiry and free expression. Until the exigencies of war overtook it in early 2015,

Yemen provided a much more fertile and welcoming environment for the kinds of inquiry that MER contributors like to pursue. Nonetheless, both in MER in general and in the compilation of this anthology, we have worked hard to include well-informed dispatches from other countries in the Peninsula.

In 2011, news consumers worldwide became somewhat familiar with the exciting news coming out of Yemen, which was the only place in the Peninsula apart from the city-state of Bahrain where the kinds of popular mobilization typical of the “Arab Spring” gained any real foothold. Yemeni pro-democracy organizer Tawakkul Karman was even awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her role in helping lead the Yemeni movement. But in Bahrain, the king, with considerable military help from Saudi Arabia, was able to beat back the democracy movement. And in Yemen, in March 2015, amid the deep political turmoil into which the country had fallen, Saudi Arabia’s newly installed King Salman and his defense minister (and son), Mohammed bin Salman, ordered air strikes to try to reverse military gains by a Yemeni militia known as the Houthi movement

King Salman’s colossal military operation in Yemen was joined by the UAE and some other regional coalition partners, deploying advanced weapons and surveillance technology sold by the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Canada. As Yemen’s ports, utilities and other infrastructure were pounded by many long months of aerial bombardment and a naval blockade, humanitarian catastrophe ensued for an already impoverished population of nearly 27 million Yemenis. United Nations relief agencies, human rights observers and historic conservationists drew some attention to this crisis, though de-escalation and ceasefire still seemed far away.

King Salman may have hoped for a speedy victory; but such was not to be. Though the Saudi-led coalition succeeded in pushing back the Houthis from Aden and some other areas of south Yemen, they made little headway in restoring any legitimate, functioning government anywhere in the country. And while the battles between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis continued in many of the western and central parts of the country and broad swathes of the east, al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP, long a target of American drone strikes) and even the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, newly arrived in Yemen) were often gaining ground.

The nine chapters in *Arabia Incognita* are arranged in a broadly chronological way, and allow the reader a number of different entry points into the “story” of the Arabian Peninsula in modern times. Chapter One starts with an excerpt from a magisterial 1980 survey by the (now sadly deceased) London-based writer Fred Halliday of the history of the Persian/Arabian Gulf region between 1958—which saw anti-monarchist revolutions in two major Arab countries, Iraq and Egypt—and 1979, which saw one in neighboring Iran. Needless to say, all those developments had a strong impact on the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Chapter One also includes a good account of a little-remembered but crucial event that occurred in Saudi Arabia in November 1979, and a survey of Gulf affairs that Joe Stork wrote in 1985, updating Halliday’s earlier record.

In Chapter Two, “Cold War and Unification in Two Yemens,” we take a first dive into the complex history and politics of Yemen. Until May 1990, the country now known as Yemen was two countries. The Yemen Arab Republic, also known as North Yemen, had been independent from the Ottoman empire since 1918, while the southern areas of the country continued to be ruled by Britain until 1967, when London ceded power to national liberation fighters who soon consolidated their rule under a socialist leadership as the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. When the two states united, they chose the former capital of North Yemen, Sana’a, to continue as the capital of the united state. In Chapter Two, Fred Halliday sets the scene by recounting the main points in the history of the two Yemens. The chapter then moves to social science, with an ethnographic study of two families’ lives in North Yemen that I wrote with Cynthia Myntti in 1991 and a study of the economic dimension of Yemeni unity that I wrote in 1993.

Chapter Three takes us through some of the tumultuous developments Yemen witnessed soon after unification. Just three months after that historic milestone, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein sent the entire Middle East into turmoil when he invaded Kuwait. Yemen had for many decades been a large-scale exporter of migrant labor to the rich Gulf countries; when the rulers of Kuwait and their allies in Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries judged that Yemen’s newly united government was insufficiently supportive of their stand against Saddam, they summarily expelled more than a million Yemeni workers back to their homes. The first two pieces in Chapter Three cover some of those developments. The next two pieces cover the notable, well-organized set of parliamentary elections held throughout the country in April 1993. Sadly, the promising prospect

raised by those elections did not last long. The final piece in the chapter is an essay I wrote in 1994 titled “From Ballot Box to Battlefield.”

Most of the “story” as told to this point has been one of secular politics and social science. In Chapter Four we (re-)encounter another strong strand in the history of the Arabian Peninsula by presenting seven pieces that explore different parts of the story of (often competing) political Islams in the region, written between 1997 and 2009. This chapter starts with an excerpt from a powerful, late-2001 description by Khaled Abou El Fadl of the Wahhabi doctrine that has semi-official status in Saudi Arabia. It also includes a first (fall 2004) introduction for readers to the ideology and thinking of the Houthis, who would later emerge as such powerful actors in Yemen.

Chapter Five takes the reader back into social science, presenting some very informative studies of the issues of water, oil, and migrant labor that have always played a strong role in the development and politics of the countries of the Arabian Peninsula—and certainly, in the relations among them.

With Chapter Six, “The Roots and Course of the 2011 Uprisings,” many readers will start to encounter more materials about events that they remember from recent news reports. The chapter starts with a prescient piece from 2006, “Foreboding about the Future in Yemen,” by Sarah Phillips. In the next piece, Susanne Dahlgren reminds us that the “Southern Cause” was still a live issue in Yemen in 2010. Then, as noted earlier, Yemen was one of the numerous Arab countries that saw an eruption of the “Arab Spring” in early 2011. Chapter Six contains three pieces about Yemen published on our blog between February and October of 2011. It then zigzags between Kuwait, Yemen and Qatar with updates on post-Arab Spring developments through the end of 2013. (The vignette from Kuwait was by the powerful, recently deceased analyst Mary Ann Tétreault.) Of the Arabian Peninsula countries, Bahrain was the other main one, in addition to Yemen, that saw notable popular mobilizations at the time of the Arab Spring. The dolorous developments in Bahrain are addressed in another article, Toby Jones’s “Embracing Crisis in the Gulf,” that is included in Chapter Seven.

The theme of Chapter Seven is the deep, continuing and mainly military engagement of the United States in the affairs of the Arabian Peninsula. The ten pieces here span the period from the FBI’s very controversial (in Yemen) investigation of the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*, in Aden’s harbor, through the growing disquiet in some circles in the

United States over the drone-bombing by both the CIA and the US military of numerous locations and targets in southern and eastern Yemen. Along the way, this chapter deals in some depth with aspects of the “arms for oil” deal that lies at the heart of the relationship that Washington (and to a lesser extent its Western allies) has with the despotic and retrograde kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In a March 2014 piece included here, Toby Jones presciently notes that the Saudi rulers harbored a particular fear that any easing of the United States’ longstanding conflict with Iran might cause Washington to reconfigure or downgrade its relationship with Riyadh.

Chapter Eight returns the book’s focus strongly to Yemen, where it picks up the story of the post–Arab Spring deterioration by charting the political “implosions” in the country in the course of 2014. Despite this generally pessimistic narrative, however, the chapter opens with a very lively description by Katherine Hennessey of a 13-play theater festival held in Sana’a, March through May 2014. Hennessey notes in her account that no fewer than four of the 13 plays presented featured suicide bombings as a subject. Her piece nevertheless reminds us that in Yemen as in other areas plagued by terrible civil conflict, many aspects of daily—even cultural—life continue, a powerful testimony to the strength of the human spirit. It is also worth noting that in no other country in the Arabian Peninsula can one find the kind of indigenous cultural resources that would allow nationals of the country to put on a theater festival on anything like this scale.

Chapter Eight ends with an article I wrote with Stacey Philbrick Yadav in late 2014, detailing the breakdown of a peace initiative that the GCC had formulated for Yemen. It thus provides an appropriate segue into Chapter Nine, which charts the first six months of the military attack that Saudi Arabia launched against the Yemeni Houthis in March 2015. In this chapter we see the strong interaction of the sometimes extremely “local” internal politics of Yemen with the “global” geopolitics of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States, in which the Saudi rulers’ wariness of Iran and Washington’s continued pursuit of its (often frighteningly ill-focused) “global war on terror” both remained strong factors.

Many Gulf royals and their friends have tried to portray recent developments in Yemen—as throughout the rest of the Middle East—as a winner-takes-all contest between unreconcilable Sunni Muslim and Shi’a Muslim forces, or as an attempt by the Saudis and their allies to halt and roll back an insidious expansion of (Shi’a) Iranian power and influence. Such depictions fail to provide much analytical purchase.

Eschewing such simple dichotomies, the selections in this anthology instead trace the roots of the complex conflict in Yemen back to the popular struggles of the 1960s, taking the story through the 2011 uprisings and beyond. Cumulatively they explain both how Yemen fell apart and the circumstances and background of the Gulf monarchies' intervention. Reporting at the time and mostly from on the spot, these dispatches feature local events in the former South and North Yemen, moments of "unity," parallel disharmonies in the seemingly placid Gulf petro-kingdoms, wider pan-Arab movements and active American security engagement. Although our main focus is on the Peninsula, rivalries between the Gulf kingdoms and the Islamic Republic of Iran during and since the Iran-Iraq war, the monarchies' panic after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and two American wars in Iraq form the essential backdrop to the drama in Yemen. The majority of texts presented here document Yemen's gritty, tumultuous and colorful instability; but stories from Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states illuminate socioeconomic connections, power configurations and ideological trends connecting the Peninsula as a whole. I hope that after reading this book, you will find this part of Arabia to be a lot less *Incognita*.

—Sheila Carapico
Richmond, Va.
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