
My Saudi Sojourn

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THE APPLICATION for a visa to Saudi Arabia asked for my religion. In inviting me to give some lectures and interviews, the American embassy in Riyadh had already suggested I answer “non-Muslim”—its standard advice to American visitors, I was told. But I did not feel comfortable with this evasion, so I put “Jewish.” My visa came through nonetheless.

I was under the impression that Jews were or had been barred from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and once there I asked several Saudis if this was true. Some agreed that the ban had once applied to all Jews, but most denied it, saying that only Israelis were excluded. Among the deniers was Prince Turki al-Faisal, an important figure in the ruling family and a former ambassador to the United States. He cited two examples that he could recall personally: the visits of Rabbi Elmer Berger in the 1950’s and Henry Kissinger in the 1970’s. Respectful of royalty, I did not reply that, given Kissinger’s lofty position in the U.S. government, and Berger’s notoriety as the then leading Jewish opponent of the state of Israel, his examples were of mixed import.

I had asked my embassy hosts whether I could bring a prayer book with me; they advised against it, warning that non-Muslim religious articles might be confiscated on arrival. But since I was in

mourning for my father and unlikely to find a minyan in Saudi Arabia, my only recourse was to bring prayers and psalms to recite on my own. In the event, my luggage was not searched. Once inside the country, several people suggested that I not leave the book in sight in my hotel room, lest cleaning personnel or covert visitors from the security services report it. I did as advised, and nothing came of the matter.

Just before I departed Washington, a Lebanese friend who manages one of the Arabic satellite television stations had called me with the news that four Frenchmen had been gunned down in the kingdom in an apparently random terrorist attack. “Please be very careful,” he admonished. It turned out that the four were not tourists but expatriates who resided in Saudi Arabia, and at least two were converts to Islam. Their stalkers were not interested in discovering any of this. That the men were Westerners had sufficed to seal their doom.

Prior to this warning, I had not thought there would be anything dangerous about my visit, but my concerns were heightened on my first morning in Saudi Arabia when I was taken to the U.S. consulate in Jeddah. The consulate, its grounds taking up a city block, is a fortress surrounded by concertina wire, concrete barricades, and other protective structures. There are reasons for such precautions. In addition to the 1996 attack on the U.S. army barracks in Khobar Towers near the eastern city of Dhahran, other, less well remembered at-

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tacks have been mounted against Americans or American facilities. In one, the Jeddah consulate was stormed and four foreign nationals who worked there were slaughtered. Only a well-placed shot by a Marine guard that felled the leader of the terror band prevented the death of many more.

Thus, the first briefing I received was about security. The five days that I was to spend under the direct auspices of the embassy were not at issue; diplomats familiar with security routines would accompany me, and we would always travel in armored U.S. diplomatic vehicles. But I planned to stay on for another week to meet more Saudis and do my own research. For that period, my briefer offered a series of rules designed to make me careful “but not paranoid.” Some were easy to follow; others were not. “Try to avoid taxis,” he said. “We’d prefer you not travel in thin-skinned vehicles.” I imagined asking the hotel concierge to call me an armored car.

AFTER A FEW days, and despite the warnings, I came to feel at ease. I had had the experience on other trips of arriving in Egypt, Israel, or the Palestinian territories right on the heels of terrorist events. To a visitor such acts are not only appalling but also always frightening, even if there is a greater likelihood that one will become a random victim of reckless drivers than of terrorists. Saudi Arabia has more than its share of the latter, but it has even more of the former—the result, I conjectured, of too many young men with too much access to money and too little access to other worldly thrills. The newspapers during my stay carried stories of suicidal motorcycle daredevils and homicidal drag races and other automotive antics; on a couple of occasions I caught glimpses of such near-mayhem on the road. A Saudi woman who advocates women’s rights quipped to me: “I would like to be able to drive here once Saudi men learn how to drive better.”

If I did not find the country exceptionally scary, I did find it rather bleak. To begin with, alcohol was entirely absent. I had read that Christopher Hitchens secreted a bottle of booze into the kingdom in his luggage. I might have tried the same, but having put a higher priority on my prayer book, I figured that two items of contraband would have pressed my luck.

Then there were the women, all of whom were draped in black *abayas* from neck to toe. Above the neck, here and there, a bold individual exposed her face beneath the *hijab* hiding her hair, but most had their faces covered. Of these, the more liberal had a

slit through which one might see their eyes or from which their glasses protruded, while the more conservative peered out at the world through the black material that shrouded them totally. For me, beer or wine with dinner and the chance to admire the beauty of women are among life’s quotidian joys; I missed them.

In addition, the land is flat and dry, the architecture functional (apart from the occasional gilded palace), the arts undeveloped, music minimal. The religious authorities frown upon most forms of joy outside the joys of faith itself, and this dourness suffuses things. The most visible form of self-indulgence is sweets. That is common enough in the Arab world, but whereas elsewhere in the region I have seen plentiful baklava, in Saudi Arabia, with its odd mixture of traditional ways and American influence, every city block seems to boast a Dunkin’ Donuts or some rival outlet.

Not all Saudis are *salafis*, as Muslim puritans are known. (We often call them Wahhabis.) But the country is bathed in ascetic religiosity, of which the shrouding of women and prohibition of alcohol are only small parts. Saudi schoolchildren spend one-third of their classroom time on religious studies. The business sections of newspapers tout “*shari*’a-friendly” investments. Each day’s papers also prominently list the times for the five obligatory daily prayers. A sixth, at night, will earn the believer extra credit in the beyond. Although not everyone worships so dutifully, shops close at prayer time and people cease working. During one such appointed hour in Jeddah, I was in a restaurant that promptly closed its doors to new customers while the whole staff (and some diners) gathered in an unobstructed area to perform their devotions.

Saudis stay up extremely late. I speculated that this might have to do with the constant consumption of coffee at times of the evening when a Westerner might be imbibing a beverage with sedative properties. But an American who lived there offered a different explanation: daytimes were so broken up by prayer that only after nightfall could Saudis easily accomplish anything that required several uninterrupted hours of attention.

THE SIX specified daily times are not the only occasions for praying. On Saudi Airlines, on which I hop-scotched around, each takeoff was preceded by a male voice on the sound system intoning a passage that commenced with the customary “Allahu akhbar, Allahu akhbar, Allahu akhbar.” The flight from Riyadh to Jeddah featured yet another prayer. As the metropolis nearest

Mecca and Medina, Jeddah is the jumping-off point for pilgrimage to the holy cities. The flights I took en route to that city were partially filled with men and boys dressed only in two white cloths, most often bath towels, one covering the lower and one the upper portion of their bodies—symbols of their immersion in the unworldly spirituality of the *hajj*. A chorus of prayer erupted when the pilot announced that we had crossed the irregular, imaginary perimeter (ranging from 14 to 300 kilometers) surrounding the *kaaba*, the holy structure at the center of Mecca. “Mecca and Medina are so beautiful,” said the handsome young crewman who explained all this to me. “You must see them.” “But I am not a Muslim,” I replied, alluding to the fact that non-believers are barred from these cities. He gave me a look of earnest kindness and said: “Then I will pray that you will be a Muslim.”

It was in Mecca that the prophet Muhammad was born and in Medina that he established his capital. They are the twin birthplaces of Islam, which itself lies at the center of Saudi identity. At the National Museum in Riyadh, one wends through dimly lit rooms that display the early history of the land until, ascending an escalator, one is greeted by light that grows progressively and dramatically brighter as the narrative reaches the birth of the prophet. But if the coming of Islam remains the defining historical event for Saudis, a second historical episode is reshaping their country’s identity. This is the confrontation with modernity, a collision, powered by oil wealth, that has occurred at a greater speed than anywhere else that I have ever visited.

The National Museum shows photos and video footage of Abdel Aziz al-Saud uniting the peninsula under his rule by conquest in the 1920’s and 30’s, forging the state we know today. From the pictures of nomads and tents and camels, one cannot but be struck by how little, apart from the advent of fire arms, appears to have changed from the time of the prophet until that moment.

Even today, Saudi traditions remain extremely insular. The exclusion of Israelis (and once, apparently, Jews) was just part of a bigger picture. Until a year ago, Saudi Arabia did not issue standard tourist visas. Historically, the only foreign visitors to reach the kingdom in large numbers were pilgrims. Much insularity remains within as well. The Shiites who constitute an estimated 10 percent of the Saudi population are largely segregated geographically (in the eastern regions) and to some extent socially and professionally. A leading liberal declared to me un-self-consciously that he believed

in the equal dignity of all: “Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Shiites.”

THESE ARE the veils of isolation that were pierced by the discovery of oil in 1938 and that in the last four decades have been shredded by the avalanche of wealth that has generated an intense demand for foreign labor. A Saudi economist who briefed me estimated the country’s population at 17 million Saudis and 6 million foreign workers. The foreigners include Westerners who fill skilled positions in management and technology and Asians or other third-world immigrants, sometimes illegal, who perform less skilled jobs. As a result, English is the lingua franca, spoken widely in the cities, and the country boasts two good English newspapers, the *Arab News* and the *Saudi Gazette*, each replete with help-wanted notices.

Despite the mixed work force, the country is no melting pot. Foreign workers generally cannot bring their families with them. Ihsan, a Pakistani cab driver sporting a white robe, skull cap, and long beard told me that he worked in Riyadh eight months a year and then returned for the balance to his home in Peshawar—“where lots of Taliban are,” he added with a laugh. He has no education, but, he said proudly, a son of his was in medical school in Karachi. A few other cab drivers told me they did not like the way Saudis treated them, and there were stories in the papers about the mistreatment of foreign household help.

The flood of foreign workers is matched by the influx of foreign cultural artifacts. The cities are sprawling, their centers made up of modern buildings bristling with satellite dishes. The wide roadways throb with the engines of BMW’s, Mercedeses, Lexuses, and Harleys. In a newspaper that lengthily parsed Qur’anic teachings on the role of women, and where one could read advertisements by parents seeking husbands for their daughters, I opened to a center spread of gossip about Paris Hilton’s legal problems, Angelina Jolie’s travels, Christie Brinkley’s surgery, and Beyoncé’s appearance in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. At a shopping mall in Riyadh, women could buy Gucci and Ferragamo fashions to wear beneath their *abayas*—at least, when the stores were not closed for prayer. The food court sported Cinnabon, McDonalds, Baskin-Robbins, Cheesecake Factory, Annie’s Pretzels, Little Caesar’s, Subway, London Fish & Chips, Hotdog Express, something Tex-Mex, and of course Dunkin’ Donuts. Outside there was a huge bowling alley.

“American culture,” I joked self-deprecatingly to

Ihsan, my cabbie from Peshawar, as we stopped for a light next to an enormous set of McDonald's golden arches. "I do not like McDonald's," he said solemnly. "Nor do I," said I. "I like KFC," he explained.

FOREIGN IMPORTS include not only cars, fast food, and Hollywood gossip, but also scientific knowledge. While I was there, the King Faisal Hospital in Riyadh boasted of a record five organ transplants in a single day, and the King Abdel Aziz University Hospital in Jeddah hosted a conference on "sex-correction" surgery (for inherited abnormalities only, as news accounts were at pains to point out). Regarding education, it was reported that "academic leaders from ten of the world's top science and research universities" had been retained to help design a new King Abdullah University of Science and Technology now under construction. Also during my stay, the creation of the King Abdullah Prize in translation was announced, to be awarded separately in the sciences and the humanities.

The pace of Westernization is of course uneven. Once, when I asked for directions, I was told that my destination was on a certain street near another street: "We haven't yet gotten to putting numbers on our buildings." Still more uneven is the pace of cultural change. Corporal punishment is still practiced in the kingdom in the name of Islamic law. Although I did not choose to visit "chop-chop square" in Riyadh, where public hangings and mutilations take place, the papers reported enough floggings to satiate the Marquis de Sade. For the most part, I learned from a local journalist, Saudi criminal law specifies no punishments, leaving the matter entirely to the wisdom of judges. Some are draconian, while others are experimenting with the idea of community service for minor crimes. (Since almost no private voluntary organizations are allowed in Saudi Arabia, this takes the form of mosque-cleaning.) A highly publicized charity run by a member of the royal family works to free murderers on death row by securing forgiveness from the families of the victims, often in exchange for the traditional monetary restitution.

Even more profound than the import of foreign technologies is likely to be the effect of study abroad by Saudi nationals. Despite the tightening of U.S. visa procedures after 9/11, 15,000 Saudi students are currently enrolled in U.S. universities (according to our embassy). Many others are in Europe. A young man named Khaled told me that he had studied at a small school in St. Louis, where

after an initial bout of homesickness he gradually fell in love with the American way of life. After his studies were finished and his student visa had expired, he stayed on, having decided to become an American by hook or by crook. Then came 9/11, and he was picked up in a sweep. A neighbor whom he had befriended, an elderly secular Jew, knocked on official doors on his behalf, and after three weeks, satisfied that Khaled constituted no threat, the authorities released him, giving him time to put his affairs in order and buy himself a ticket home. "My greatest fear," he told me, "was that I would not readjust to Saudi life."

After our interview, Khaled invited me to visit his home. "My father would love to meet you. He is a neocon," he said. I asked what it meant to be a Saudi neocon, and Khaled replied: "He supports you guys." A few days later, taking him up on the invitation, I headed off to an older, poorer section of Riyadh for the Saudi equivalent of cocktail hour. My cab driver was guided via cell phone to a landmark, where Khaled met us in his pick-up and led us the rest of the way. Once there, he took me into the *majlis*, a square room in the outdoor courtyard, lacking furniture except cushions along the walls to make sitting on the floor comfortable.

The standard fare at these pre-dinner sittings is dates, tea, and Saudi coffee—tannish green and heavily laced with cardamom; but Khaled had graciously thought to stop for doughnuts and American-style coffee as well. His father, a retired customs clerk who spoke no English, presented me with a gift of a string of white prayer beads. Other male relatives arrived, one of whom regaled me with memories of "the happiest three-and-a-half years of my life" when he studied engineering at a New England college. In deference to his elders, Khaled shrank into a corner and kept mostly silent. Not once did I spot a female family member. As I left, Khaled translated his father's farewell wish that I learn Arabic so that next time we could talk with each other.

Such meetings brought home the way in which Saudi Arabia is like a vast battleground between antiquity and modernity—a battle conducted more on the personal than on the political level. The enforcers of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, called the *mutawa* or *mutawa'een*, roam the streets and the malls, spying out derogations from the country's strict code of morals and decorum. Young people, and others, push against the restraints. A woman journalist told me she was working on a story about fashions in *abayas*, which were starting to appear with embroi-

dery and shapes suggestive of the female figure. Diplomats told me that if invited to a Saudi home for dinner, they felt obliged to bring wine, available in the diplomatic quarter and much appreciated outside it. Although many families still select spouses for their children, young Saudis maneuver to meet members of the opposite sex. Every restaurant and café has separate seating areas for men and women, but youngsters get around this through text-messaging. Boasting of his adeptness at recognizing various makes and models of cell phones, a young man explained to me how, after launching a conversation by text-message, he would scan the women's section and quickly figure out which girl he was flirting with by identifying her phone.

CELL PHONES are not the end of it. In the *Arab News* I read an exposé of the “widespread problem” of “schoolgirls and female university and college students playing truant and hanging out at coffee shops, shopping malls, restaurants, and hotel foyers to meet boyfriends and flirt with men.” Newsstands carry the slick English-language magazine *Arabian Woman*, modeled after American glamor magazines. (There is also *Arabian Man*.) Much less flesh is displayed, and the whole is far less steamy than its American equivalents, but the subject matter is the same. Although published in Dubai, a more liberal place, the magazine is sold and advertised freely in Saudi Arabia. One issue, featuring a “regional report” on the decline of premarital virginity, contained this passage:

As teenagers enter into high school, many of them find it difficult to preserve their chastity. Remaining a virgin until marriage is neither an easy nor common choice in schools or colleges in this region. Deena, a 16-year-old Yemeni student in Sharjah, UAE (United Arab Emirates), shared her first sexual experience. . . . “One night, when I met Ali at our regular building terrace, he began joking about taking our physical relationship to the next level. At first I was nervous and embarrassed. I mean, although I had discussed oral sex with my friends before, I didn't really know that much about it. But almost everyone in school was having a physical relationship with their partners. So it didn't seem wrong. . . . Immediately I regretted doing it, but when I got to school most kids were pretty supportive and said that everyone did it. At least I hadn't lost my virginity.”

No doubt this portrait, assuming it is accurate or representative, depicts life in one or more of Saudi

Arabia's more permissive neighboring countries. Still, Saudis who read it were not learning about the infidel West but about their Muslim Arab cousins. The impact is not difficult to imagine.

As for homosexuality, although same-sex acts can be punished by death, a recent article in the *Atlantic* claims that homosexual behavior is in fact widespread in Saudi Arabia, but that it does not necessarily signify gay identity. Because contact with the opposite sex—especially in private—is so difficult, people are more likely to have same-sex experiences. One young man is quoted as saying: “It's a lot easier to be gay than straight here. If you go out with a girl, people will start to ask her questions. But if I have a date [with another male] upstairs, and my family is downstairs, they won't even come up.” Arab friends from other countries have told me that, at least according to legend within the Arab world, homosexual experiences are common among Saudis of both sexes. To my surprise, one blogger whom I arranged to meet displayed the familiar mannerisms suggesting both that he was gay and that he wanted others to know it.

Although the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice remains a potent force, it also seems on the defensive, perhaps the blowback from a notorious episode in 2002 when a fire broke out at a girls' school in Mecca. Because the girls were not properly scarved, they were blocked by some *mutawa'een* from exiting the building, and fifteen perished. During my visit, the *Arab News* carried a long interview with one of the heads of the commission in which he stressed the humanitarian nature of his organization and endeavored to dismiss what he said were false beliefs about its abuse of citizens. At the Riyadh International Book Fair, which happened to coincide with my visit, the exhibits had to be approved by a government ministry, but not, as was the case last year, by the *mutawa'een*. Interestingly, one die-hard fundamentalist was arrested at the fair for impersonating a *mutawa* and trying to censor “un-Islamic” items.

ON THE POLITICAL level, Saudi Arabia remains one of the least free countries in the world. But here too the situation is not static. In annual Freedom House surveys, Saudi Arabia has always ranked among the ten or so countries scoring a rock-bottom 7.0. In last year's report, for the first time, Saudi Arabia climbed out of this “worst of the worst” category to score a 6.5. According to Freedom House, the change was based on an improving atmosphere of academic freedom.

Reforms in governance are modest in the extreme. A new rule has been promulgated specifying the procedure for selecting the crown prince. Succession has always entailed internecine politics within the sprawling royal family, but now the process will be formalized. The *Shura* council, entirely appointed by the king and not empowered to make law, has begun to conduct hearings at which government ministers are subjected to questioning. Municipal elections were held in 2005, albeit for only a restricted share of seats in bodies with limited authority.

Yet the progress in freedom of expression was greater than I expected. True enough, I read no criticism whatsoever of the royal family or the basic system of government. And the English papers I read were probably freer than the Arabic press. But they did keep up a drumbeat of criticism on the subject of women's rights. They also carried investigative reports and stories of societal self-criticism. Their opinion pages offered a range of views, mostly from American and British sources. And even their news coverage of Israel, to my surprise, could be reasonably fair. (For reasons one can guess, the *Arab News* often ran headlines biased against Israel atop stories that were objective and balanced.)

Then there is the Internet. Websites can be censored. (A spokesman for the commission insisted that 95 percent of the blocked sites are pornographic and only 5 percent are political.) I made my way to one censored site and found a one-line message announcing the blockage and also two links. You could click one link to send a message arguing that the site should not be blocked, and you could click the other to volunteer the URL's of additional sites that you felt needed to be blocked. Of course, by clicking either one you would be informing the *mutawa'een* that you had attempted to visit a forbidden site.

The Internet has also given rise to bloggers, perhaps a bit tamer than elsewhere but still with a great deal of independence. The one blogger who has most aroused the wrath of the authorities goes by the handle "Saudi Eve," and what has gotten her in trouble is frank discussion of her love life. Yet in contrast to Egypt, where several bloggers have been incarcerated and one has been sentenced to a four-year term, the Saudi government has struck at offenders only by temporarily blocking their sites. As Saudis are increasingly switching to satellite Internet providers, the government will find it technically difficult to exert this kind of censorship.

During my visit, the hottest controversy pitting modernizers against ultra-traditionalists concerned

a married couple whom a Saudi court had divorced in absentia and against their will. The wife's family had petitioned for the ruling on the grounds that, in asking for her hand, the groom had falsified his tribal identity in order to cover his lower social standing. Following the ruling, the wife refused to return to her parental home and was clapped in jail, where she languished along with one of the couple's two young children. The husband had gone into hiding with the other child. The case brought into bold relief the enduring grip of primitivism, but also undeniably evoked harsh and outspoken public criticism.

In another clash I observed, some modernizers lined up with primitivists against a world-famous architect named Sami Angawi. Educated in Texas, Angawi is a native of Mecca and a hereditary *mutawuf* (not to be confused with *mutawa*). *Mutawufs* serve as hosts and guides in Mecca and Medina for foreign Muslims making the *hajj*. Angawi is also a Hashemite, meaning a descendant of the prophet, and a devout Sufi Muslim. During the days I spent with him, he did not miss any of the obligatory prayers, although we were mostly in his home and not in view of anyone else. His speech is peppered with allusions to Allah and the prophet and the Qur'an, and during pauses between bits of conversation he often seemed to be reciting prayers under his breath.

Thanks to his background, plus his training in architecture, Angawi has devoted most of his professional life to the preservation of Mecca. The city is under severe strain from the increasing number of Muslims around the world who can afford to make the pilgrimage. Saudi businessmen and officials have collaborated to meet the rising demand for new infrastructure, which has sometimes been built at the cost of historically significant mosques, other buildings, and natural landmarks. The debate between developers and preservationists, familiar enough everywhere around the world, takes on a special twist in Saudi Arabia. The *salafis* are fanatic against (among other things) idolatry, which they see as lurking in human attachment to almost any physical thing, even in the veneration of an ancient mosque. So they throw their weight on the side of the developers. The very fact that Muslims wish to preserve something is, to them, a reason for its destruction.

I WAS WARMLY received everywhere in Saudi Arabia, though I always identified myself as a Jew and as a neoconservative. The latter term, much as at home, has become a buzzword through-

out the Arab world for everything disliked about U.S. policy. (An interviewer for an Islamist news organization in Egypt once put it to me: “‘neoconservative’ sounds to our ears like ‘terrorist’ sounds to yours.”) But Arabs value politeness, and to avoid confrontation they often say, “We like the American people, just not your government.” I always tried to block this retreat from controversy by asserting that I was one of those Americans who supported the very policies of my government that Arabs were angry about. Nonetheless, interviews with me in the Saudi media were respectful, fair, and accurately reported.

At my talks, people argued with me sharply, but invariably finished by saying that they were grateful to have gained a better understanding of American views. Since freedoms of speech and assembly are severely constrained, some of my talks took place in private homes. At one such salon, with a large and relatively heterogeneous group in attendance, I was pressed about why it was legitimate for Israel to have nuclear weapons but not Iran. One man, bedecked in white robes and brandishing a carved walking stick and a gold tooth, described Israel as a “cancer” made up of the “garbage of Europe.” I told the group that this man personified Israel’s reason for wanting nuclear weapons: it alone faced neighbors opposed to its existence. For the rest of the evening I pounded on the guy, and when it was over he smiled, laughed, apologized, and told me he had not really meant what he said.

This anecdote bears on the larger change taking place in the kingdom’s external role. Although the royal family has long used its great wealth and its religious prestige to influence international affairs, it has mostly preferred to play behind the scenes. Now it is asserting itself more publicly, mediating among Lebanese factions, brokering the deal that allowed Hamas to form a Palestinian coalition government without accepting Israel’s existence and without renouncing violence, and reviving the “Arab peace initiative” toward Israel. Influential Saudis pleaded with me to encourage U.S. support for this initiative in order to strengthen King Abdullah, who they insisted was a true reformer and peacemaker, and to seize an opportunity that might otherwise pass.

This is a long way from the former assertion of Saudis that theirs would be the last country to make peace with Israel. The reaffirmation of the proposed deal with Israel at the recent Riyadh summit is likewise a long way from the Arab League’s suspension of Egypt’s membership in

1978 as punishment for having signed a peace treaty with Israel, let alone from the famous “three no’s” proclaimed by the league in 1967: “no peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel.” The first and third “no’s” have been jettisoned. What remains murky is the status of the second, namely, whether the league is ready to negotiate with Israel about the terms of its proposal. If not, then the proposal remains little more than a posture. In this connection in particular, the argument that the opportunity may pass left me cold. If there is real readiness for peace, then the moment will not pass. A durable peace must rest on a durable willingness for peace.

Indeed, despite all the appeals I received for American support for Abdullah, the king went out of his way at the summit to rebuke the U.S. for its “illegitimate occupation” of Iraq. This, on the heels of his Palestinian mediation that stymied U.S. diplomacy by favoring Hamas, has led American officials to wonder what he is up to. I do not know the answer, but the contradictions of the king mirror the contradictions evident in his kingdom.

THUS, ALTHOUGH every one of my interlocutors responded in a friendly manner to my professions of Jewishness, I did have to secrete my prayer book, and demonization of Jews is still to be found in the Arabic news and entertainment media and in school curriculums. The editor-in-chief of the *Arab News*, the paper I so enjoyed reading, penned a magazine essay elsewhere parroting the childish semantic argument that “Arabs can’t be anti-Semites” because they are “themselves Semites.” Then he took it a step further, arguing that since Ashkenazi Jews are not really Semites but Europeans, and since they persecute Arab Palestinians, it is the Israelis themselves who are the true “anti-Semites.”

To cite another example, I was gratified to see the word “terrorist” used freely in the Saudi media and to see terrorists described harshly; but in each case the reference was to attacks perpetrated within Saudi Arabia itself. A U.S. diplomat told me that our government began to get much better anti-terror cooperation from Saudi officials after some al-Qaeda types tried to blow up the ministry of the interior. Nonetheless, I read several diatribes claiming that the U.S. uses “terrorism” as an excuse for its nefarious policies in the region and heard various expressions of support for “resistance” to occupation by Iraqis and Palestinians.

Finally, despite the flood of Saudi students to American campuses, their country—like the rest of the Arab world—remains awash in conspiracy the-

ories and wild rumors, and is sadly deficient in the skills of reality-testing. One educated Saudi bewailed America's alleged decision to double its aid to Israel; tracking the story, I found that Israel had begun negotiations with the State Department over its request for a 2-percent increase. Another Saudi told me of the Mossad's attempt to blow up the Mexican congress; when I replied that I did not believe such an event could have taken place without its having been reported in the American news media, he assured me that the story had been suppressed in America although widely known everywhere else. Invited to contribute to a prestigious journal published by a think tank in the foreign ministry, I was given a sample copy; the cover story

argued that "the West cannot live without an 'enemy,' whether real or made up" and that it was therefore "appropriate for the American administration, and also for the Zionist project, that it should exploit the September 11 events to the maximum extent possible, in order to give Islam and Muslims a bad name."

Once back home, I received an e-mail from Prince Turki bidding me to "come back again, with your family and friends." For my part, based on twelve days of observing this once-forbidden and still most distant of lands, I would be eager for another visit. My wife and daughters will not want to accompany me until they can go around without having to don *abayas*.