



Covering the birth of a nation: The rise of Saudi Arabia in *The London Times*, 1927–1937



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ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is considered as one of the most conservative countries in the world with regards to the role of religion in shaping national politics. We use a history of Saudi Arabia and British imperialist policy to contextualize the framing of religion in news coverage of Saudi Arabia in *The London Times* between 1927 and 1937 to uncover themes that were available to British readers before and after recognizing Saudi Arabia as a nation on September 23, 1932. We found that religious fundamentalism was part of this coverage, providing one potential media framework for understanding Saudi Arabia that is consistent with current coverage and discussions. We also found instances of favorable framing of events and individuals, which seemed to intensify after Saudi Arabia's recognition as a nation.

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1. Introduction

The Oil Embargo of 1973, the terrorist attacks against the US of September 11, 2001, and the Arab Spring of 2011 are just a few events that highlight the importance of the Middle East as both a political and economic player in the global village. Media coverage of these events often portrays the region as one replete with militant religious fundamentalists, political tyrants, and huge disparities of wealth based on oil. This paper uncovers the ways in which religion was framed by the media for British readers from the beginning of the birth of one Middle Eastern country – Saudi Arabia, which was recognized globally as a nation in 1932.

Our conceptual framework is grounded in the idea that reporters comprise an interpretative community (Zelizer, 1993). We assume that reporters covering the region in the

late 1920s and early 1930s understood the importance of Islam – or their informants understood this – to those who were living through the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the redrawing of national boundaries. As interpretative communities, other reporters will follow the lead of those who first cover the area, maintaining a consistent storyline.¹ If this is true, early reports will shape subsequent news. If early reports point to religious concerns, we assume that this framing will be used in subsequent reporting. This in turn could have developed an agenda for Saudi Arabian politics in the minds of British readers (Morey & Yaqin, 2011), supporting the idea that the media provide readers a sense of reality for issues with which they have little or no experiential knowledge (Gamson, 1992). We begin with a brief history of Saudi Arabia and British imperialist

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¹ It should be noted that we are aware that not all newspapers follow *The London Times*, as reporters for other western newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, provide alternative framings for Saudi Arabia. Our interest with a major British newspaper is predicated on the fact that Britain has a stronger presence and more at stake with Saudi Arabia at this time.

policy to provide a larger context for our study before turning to an analysis of British press coverage of Saudi Arabia between 1927 and 1937.

2. A brief history of Saudi Arabia

Given western media coverage of Saudi Arabia, one may be led to believe that those citizens share similar characteristics, such as religious faith and practices (Islam), concerns over oil, and fears of cultural encroachment from the West (Page, Challita, & Harris, 2011). Saud is also a tribal name that may lead one to believe that Saudi Arabia is one large tribe. The country, however, is heterogeneous in both geography and its population. Hejaz is located on the west coast and home to Islam's holiest cities of Mecca and Al-Madina. The majority of the population are Sunni Sufi. Al-Hasa and Al-Qatif are located on the east coast and home to large oil reserves. This area has one of the largest Shia communities in the Arab world, second only to Iraq (Fuller & Francke, 1999). The Northern Region is the least populated area of the country, sharing borders with Iraq and Jordan. Most of the population are Sunni. The Southern Region borders Yemen with strong ancestral relations to that country, and some researchers (Salameh, 1980) maintain those who live in the area are more like Yemenis than other Saudis. This region is populated by followers of diverse Islam sects ranging from Sunni (both Sufis and Wahhabis), to Ismaili, and Zaidi. Finally, Najd (the Central Region) is home to the House of Saud, and may be considered the Wahhabism motherland. The city of Riyadh represents the base upon which the country was founded. It is in this region that religion and political power were successfully melded to form a nation-state.

The characteristics of each region developed over long periods of time and led to processes that evolved into the founding of modern day Saudi Arabia. We can begin to see the linkages between Wahhabism – the official religious and political doctrines of contemporary Saudi Arabia – and the Saud family nearly 175 years prior to Ibn Saud's becoming the Saudi King. The founding of the first Saudi state under Mohamed Bin Saud, the fourth-great grandfather of Ibn Saud, took place in 1744. Mohamed Bin Saud was the ruler of Dariya, a small town in Najd, who made a pact with Shikh Mohamed Bin Abdul-Wahhab (Steinberg, 2005) to spread the Whabbi doctrine throughout the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula (Benoist-Mechin, 1957; Lacey, 1981). Under the pact, political power went to the House of Saud while religious power was given to Abdul-Wahhab and his disciples, with the latter group becoming the religious scholars [*Ulama*] of the state (Al-Rasheed, 2010).

These allies were able to combine the existing cultural codes of the tribes, emphasizing notions such as “war's glory,” the tribal chief's status affecting the “honor of all tribe members,” the “shame of being behind,” and so on, with the influence of military power and specific interpretations of Islam to offer incentives for other tribal leaders. This move was not without opposition, though the consolidated power on the Arabian Peninsula forced people to follow a leader who did not belong to their tribe. These Bedouin tribes, through the codes offered by Islam, became

subject to leadership through an outside political (*wali al-amr*) Muslim community leader or religious person (*Imam*), rather than their traditional tribal leaders (Bowen, 2008; Glosemeyer, 2005; Mackey, 2002). The tribal leaders, in turn, gained material and status-raising benefits by bringing their tribes into the fold of Mohamed Bin Saud.

Mohamed Bin Saud extended his power through expansionist wars using the Najdi tribes under the religious legitimacy provided by Abdul-Wahhab. Abdul-Wahhab's previously issued *fatwas* forbidding practices which had been considered acceptable by other Muslim sects (such as admiring saints' graves, wearing talismans, and smoking) were to be followed, and these edicts became the basis of Wahhabi jurisprudence for the new state (Bowen, 2008). As the new state grew and stabilized, the spoils of wars were replaced by taxes (Menoret, 2005).

These events took place under Ottoman rule, so all doctrines and edicts had additional layers of politics and bureaucracy. The push toward modern and independent statehood did, however, begin prior to the conclusion of World War I which brought an end to the Ottoman Empire, as alliances were launched that sought independence from the Empire. Such efforts included alliances between Ibn Saud and his Wahhabi adherents in Najd, as well as efforts at independence from Sharif Hussein bin Ali in Hejaz, his son Ali in Transjordan, and other tribes living on the edges of the Arabian Peninsula.² These leaders sought to legitimate their political titles by linking themselves to such concepts as Arabism and Islamism. In addition, these individuals were often tied to the British Empire that helped keep Western influences at arm's length. This was especially true during unsettled times in Najd, as the British were not interested in sending an army to control a desert that was thought to have had few economic resources (Al-Rasheed, 2010). This is not to say that the British Empire was ignoring the region between the wars, as it was in Britain's best interest to maintain close ties in and around the Persian Gulf. Various historical accounts, however, show that the British government decided that a strong ally in the area was better than complete military intervention. In short, Saudi Arabia was to be a client and not a country to be controlled as had been the case in India.

This relative independence from Britain gave Ibn Saud an opportunity to consolidate his tribe and rise to power.³ The strategy was to continue to incorporate religion into political agendas, evidenced by the change in Ibn Saud's title from Bedouin tribal group to the leader of a religious

² In 1926, Hejaz becomes the western part of Saudi state after Ibn Saud usurps the authority from Sharif Hussein ibn Ali the King of Hejaz.

³ There are various accounts concerning the role of Britain in the founding of modern Saudi Arabia. The sources we use gave this topic little mention, while others are more likely to discuss direct support (e.g., Al-Hassan, 2006; Al-Rasheed, 2010; Bowen, 2008). These latter sources describe Saudi Arabia as a client of the British Empire which is facing the Rasheedi state, a client of the Ottoman Empire. It is also interesting to note that our articles from *The London Times* rarely mention direct British support to Ibn Saud, while other newspapers do. For example the *Washington Post* runs a front page story on March 11, 1928 with the headline, “New Arabian Empire Called British Plan: Ibn Saud Would Have Nominal Lordship and Subsidy of \$500,000 Yearly,” a clear indication of direct support.

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