

The Kingdom Is All Right

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Over the past year, and particularly since January, commentators and critics have spilled a lot of ink on Saudi Arabia. The stories have focused on both long-time favorites, such as the Kingdom's prohibition against female drivers and the supposed link between Saudi Islam and Daesh, to more recent developments, like the governments' new leadership team and its bold response to the protracted collapse in oil prices and the. The general tone of most of these pieces can best be characterized as foreboding and anxious, with the general consensus holding that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is at a crossroads, both domestically and with respect to its relations with the United States, and that an uncertain future lies ahead. Karen Elliot House's recently published report on the state of affairs in Saudi Arabia, provocatively titled *Uneasy Lies the Head that Wears a Crown*, provides an informative and well-thought contribution to this ever growing body of writing on the Kingdom and its present day challenges. Without a doubt, Ms. House presents both a comprehensive and knowledgeable account of the Kingdom in 2016, and her insights reflect an understanding of both the country and its people. For this alone, Ms. House's report is a welcome and refreshing addition to contemporary scholarship on Saudi Arabia, and its points are very well taken. And yet (there is always an "and yet"), Ms. House's report still falls victim to the general – very recent – tendency to project a sense of urgency and near imminent upheaval in the government and in Saudi society as a whole that, in reality, is exaggerated. Indeed, despite her conclusion that the crown is uneasy, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is, and will continue to be, on the right path.

My experience as a student in the United States made me realize many people do not really know what to make of Saudi Arabia. Although the country is familiar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has managed to remain somewhat of mystery and is typically thought of in terms of easy stereotypes, imagined threats, and generic images that either distort or ignore the place and its people. “Gas must be cheap there; do you guys even drive?” some classmates would ask, while others were curious what it was like to live in a city full of terrorists. “Is it safe to go outside?” they would ask me earnestly, all the while, I think, wondering whether I and fellow members of the Saudi Student Association were truly peaceful, or just pretending. The myths and misconceptions abounded, but I truly appreciated their curiosity; indeed, this is one of the things that makes school in America so unique: education is a great leveler, and being in school gives everyone a voice to be heard if spoken. Some questions I answered, but I have to admit that I left some others just rest, knowing that my efforts to set the record straight would likely be falling on deaf ears. For its part, Saudi Arabia has done a fairly poor job working to dispel these notions – self-promotion simply does not come easy or naturally to most Saudis – and this reticence to speak on our own behalf has allowed others to control the narrative, largely to the detriment of the truth.

Fortunately, Ms. House’s report avoids pigeonholing the Kingdom and instead seeks to present the challenges facing Saudi Arabia, as well as the mood of the country, based largely upon her impressions and ideas gained from a recent visit to the country. This fact in itself – that she actually has first hand knowledge of and personal experience in the Kingdom – makes her report noteworthy; her familiarity with Saudi government and culture, as well as the connections she has made with Saudi citizens from all walks of life, undoubtedly bolster the strength of her analysis. In short, Ms. House gets quite a bit correct, and it was refreshing to read a depiction of

the Kingdom that did not dwell exclusively on all that makes it “backward” or “oppressive” in the eyes of the West. Though quick to point out what she sees as troubling in Saudi Arabia, Ms. House also acknowledges that life in the Kingdom is not all gloom and doom, and that now more than ever the future is ours for the making.

In this respect, however, Ms. House’s report does not go far enough. Specifically, in reading her report I cannot but help to feel that she fails to appreciate the mood of anticipation and excitement that exists in the Kingdom, and instead focuses on what she perceives as an overriding sense of anxiety and fear. Indeed, the report’s title alone suggests that the challenges and uncertainty facing Saudi Arabia today are what defines the country, and that the Kingdom has far more to worry about than even its leaders perceive. Already framed as country where *uneasiness* rules, how can we ever recover? And yet, throughout the report, Ms. House repeatedly references the fact that most Saudis sense that change is in the air, and that they are experiencing this with feelings of both trepidation *and* hope. Why is the focus so heavy on the potential pitfalls, instead of the prospect for a country that is increasingly aware of and response to the voices of its young population? After all, if Saudi Arabia is uneasy, where lies the state of America, with the prospect of a Trump presidency and all that it entails? Surely, we Saudis have a right to feel uncertain, but our uneasiness pales in comparison to the anxieties surrounding this year’s presidential election. Why then, is Saudi Arabia the target for such concern?

Admittedly, for years, the Kingdom has been able to coast along, buoyed by high oil prices and relative regional stability, and most Saudis have become accustomed to the status quo. Recent events have challenged this complacency, however, and have brought a host of changes and new challenges to the Kingdom, which Ms. House acutely identifies but immediately casts as problems and threats to stability, rather than forces that must, and will, be addressed by a

competent leadership team. American style democracy does not have a monopoly on effective intervention in times of social and economic need, and the Saudi government is fully capable of responding to the exigencies of the day, with or without a deadlocked Congress.

Further, in her coverage of the generational transition within the monarchy, which she properly identifies as a significant turning point in the young country's history, Ms. House falls victim to the temptation to find palace intrigue and friction when, in reality, the demands of everyday governance preoccupy most members of the royal family far more than questions of succession. Indeed, just as most Americans do not preoccupy themselves with worry over who might be the next president only one year into the term of the current commander-in-chief, few Saudis are consumed with worry over who will be the next ruler following King Salman. Moreover, the fact that the Allegiance Council, which certifies decisions regarding the transition of power within the Kingdom, decisively voted in favor of the current structure of government shows that the government does, in fact, have the support of the required number of interested parties.

Here then, Ms. House overstates the case. The royal family is not in turmoil over "who will be next;" rather, most of the Al Sauds are far more interested in the bold new moves and policies of King Salman and his leadership teams, whose recent launch of Vision 2030 has set the Kingdom on an entirely new path. Certainly, not everyone is satisfied with this turn of events, but the Saudi government is not a monolith, and its more vocal critiques need to be understood as much for what they hope to gain from criticizing the current state of affairs as for what they have to say about its presumed rashness or failings. In this respect, Ms. House's report is a bit too deferential to those looking to find *A Game of Thrones* in Saudi Arabia, and fails to recognize that King Salman and those surrounding him enjoy the full support of most Saudis.

While some might disagree with King Salman's decisions, we are all virtually unanimous in our support for the stability of the Kingdom and its government; we want to succeed where others have failed.

Few would deny that change leads to uneasiness, uncertainty, and doubt, and Ms. House's report is commendable for its thorough examination of how current challenges have led to a transformative change in Saudi Arabia that has left many feeling uneasy about the Kingdom's future. Change also leads to excitement and aspiration, however, and commentators on Saudi Arabia – as well as those within the Kingdom itself – need to stoke this fire of transformation and to support the country as it creates an independent future for itself that is beholden neither to Western power or to petro dollars. As Ms. House so articulately explains, Saudi Arabia is at a crossroads, and for the first time in our history we are taking the reins of our own destiny. This is a journey is not without its own obstacles and perils, but Saudi's resolve is strong, and through it all, both Kingdom and Crown are, and will continue to be, all right.

Note: This paper reflects the personal views of the author and not the official views of the Saudi government.