



INSIDE THE KINGDOM – PART I

February 14, 2002

In this first of three reports from Saudi Arabia, Elizabeth Farnsworth explores a country and culture that has remained inaccessible to most foreign journalists until just recently.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: A visitor to Saudi Arabia is struck by images that often seem discordant. There's downtown Riyadh with its modern architecture, traffic jams, and trendy shopping malls. And then there are the women who still cover themselves head to toe with veil and Abaya, the robe all females, including foreigners, must wear in public.

There's the black gold that powers our modern life. Saudi Arabia sits on about 25 percent of the world's known oil reserves.

And then there are camel races, like this one at a folk festival in Riyadh that was the big social event last month. Little boys age seven or eight served as jockeys, and a Toyota SUV went to the winner.

We came to Saudi Arabia to see as much of its culture and people as we could, and to learn about the place that produced Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers. We started at the folk festival, which Crown Prince Abdullah attended. He's the de facto ruler of the kingdom, as it's called.

His half-brother the king has long been ill, and Prince Abdullah governs in his stead in what some people have called the most absolute monarchy in the world. This is the spectacle he saw on stage that night. It was broadcast live on Saudi television.

It tied the ruling family directly to the glories of the Islamic past, and specifically to the great Muslim warrior Salahadin, who retook Jerusalem from Christian crusaders nine centuries ago. A film about Salahadin was inter-cut with news footage of Israeli soldiers shooting Palestinians. "Jerusalem will be ours once more," the Arabic says. "This is the sword of Salahadin, and it must be unsheathed again."

This is just the kind of rhetoric American newspaper columnists and analysts have jumped on since September 11 as they lambasted the kingdom for extremist views. In Time Magazine's words, for example, Saudi Arabia "fanned al-Qaida's hateful cause, and still harbors a populace that fervently supports it." Saudis have been blindsided by the criticisms, said Hussein Shobokshi, a business leader in Jeddha.

Saudis' impressions of Osama bin Laden

HUSSEIN SHOBOKSHI: It's no longer bin Laden at issue here. It's the country of Saudi Arabia at issue; it is the religion of Islam at issue. This is where we have to differentiate. This is where we have to really tread lightly, because bin Laden is going to be history in a couple of months, but Saudi Arabia is here to stay, and so is Islam.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The hijackers of September 11 came from all parts of Saudi Arabia, and especially from the Southwest, from the province of Aseer. Five were from the area around Abha, capital of Aseer. Two attended this college of Islamic law. One was Imam at this mosque. We were among the first American TV crews to get access to this place.

Our experience as a news crew reflected what seems to be a very dynamic but confusing process under way here. At times, we were allowed much freedom to shoot and do what we wanted to do.

At other times, people were warned away from talking to us, and it was often hard to determine why or by whom. Some people spoke openly with us about their criticisms, for example, of the extremism of some religious leaders here. Others feared speaking on camera about those matters, saying they could lose jobs, or worse.

We came to believe there were deep differences in Saudi Arabia about September 11 and the kingdom's role in the attacks, and we found a strong reluctance to air dirty laundry publicly. Many of the people we spoke to refused to believe the hijackers were Saudi at all.

MAN ON THE STREET: This is the version the Americans have adopted. It hasn't been proven yet. We and the rest of the world are waiting for evidence.

MAN ON THE STREET: I think they... Most of them are not from Saudi Arabia, and we are surprised if there is... Any of them is from Saudi Arabia, because as you know, we are... The people in Saudi Arabia are peaceful.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Most people we talked to did condemn bin Laden and the attacks of September 11.

MAN ON THE STREET: Islam is against killing innocent people, even if they are not Muslims.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: But a survey carried out by Saudi intelligence reported in the New York Times last month revealed that 95 percent of educated people age 25 to 41 very much supported bin Laden. Sami Angawi, an architect in Jeddha, said he was surprised to find that his teenage son's friends considered bin Laden a hero.

SAMI ANGAWI: My son and his friends, they were in the house three days after the incident. I kind of asked them, "what do you think of bin Laden?" They shrugged their shoulders. They didn't know. A week later, they were also here, and one of them said, "Do you know... You asked

us about bin Laden, and we didn't tell you what. You know what? We think he's a hero." That disturbed me.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Really? Your son and his friends?

SAMI ANGAWI: My son was quiet. But his friends... And that really disturbed me.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: We asked a group of journalists and business leaders, some of them friends of Angawi, to gather at the home of a newspaper editor in Jeddha one night to help us understand more about the Saudi reaction to September 11 and bin Laden.

KHALED AL-MAEENA: The support that came for bin Laden came because they considered bin Laden as a folk hero, and he twisted the nose of the giant.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And this group insisted the support was directly related to people's anger at American politicians' support for Israel.

YUSUF AGEEL: They are more pro-Israel than the Israelis, and we consider them, you know... Your politicians, we consider them fanatics. They're fanatically pro-Israel, so it really antagonizes the whole thing.

SAMAR FATANY: The news every day-- watching innocent children and innocent Palestinians dying or being killed or abused or tortured or whatever... You can't help but feel the rage, feel the anger. So of course we'll be sympathetic towards anyone who stands up and says, "Stop it; enough is enough." So this is what is happening. This is how the Arab world feels.

Conflicts with Israel

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: And the Palestinian suicide bombings of Israelis, she said, should be understood as self-defense. The group was also very concerned about the criticisms of Saudi Arabia in the American media.

ALI ALIREZA: We are surprised. We are shocked. Our government, our people, have never said anything bad about America except, of course, you know, "look, you've got to rethink your support towards Israel." But we... You know, we didn't start this campaign. We are fighting it. We are hoping it subsides.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Meanwhile, our host, Khalid al Maeena, and his wife, Samar, and others have brought children back from schools or jobs in the United States, and are enrolling them at home or in Europe instead. Most had stories about family and friends in the United States. Hussein Shobokshi's sister was in Boston in September.

HUSSEIN SHOBOKSHI: She was with my father in Mass. General. Basically he was having some medical checkups and an operation. And on the 12th of September-- she's a veiled girl-- they came into her hotel room-- I think members of the FBI and the local police-- and interrogated her and aggressively beat her up.

She had a 20-centimeter slash on her face. There was a mistaken identity. That's putting it mildly, I guess, because her fiancé's name is Mohammed Ataj, and they mistake him for Mohamed Atta, and it was six hours later till things cleared up.

Foreign relations

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mohamed Atta was the name of the Egyptian who is believed to have led the hijackers of September 11. And there are people like Yasin Qadi who may lose their fortunes because of the attacks.

He studied and worked in the United States, and then built a business empire in Jeddha including diamonds, real estate, and high-tech interests. He's one of the Saudis whose assets have been frozen by the U.S. Treasury, which charged they were used to support international terrorism.

YASIN QADI: As far as I know, we were never engaged in helping any terrorist group whatsoever. If we discover that an employee did something wrong, we're ready to hear it; we're ready to take all legal actions against him, if that happened. But according to my knowledge, I never had something like that. I never heard something like that.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: How badly are you hurt economically right now? Very bad?

YASIN QADI: You can say bad-- very bad.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Qadi met Osama bin Laden in Jeddha in the 1980s, and then again in Afghanistan.

YASIN QADI: My uncle took me, at that time, for so-called... To help the warlords to get together. So I was young; he took me with me... with him, and I think I saw Osama at one meeting in that. But that's... You know, how many American officials saw Osama? How many people from Europe saw Osama? How many politicians saw Osama?

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Saudi officials have also frozen Yasin Qadi's local bank accounts, and are monitoring more than 100 accounts of other prominent people at the request of U.S. law enforcement agencies, according to press reports.

Security forces have also arrested al-Qaida suspects, and Adel al Jubeir, foreign affairs advisor to Crown Prince Abdullah, said the kingdom is cooperating in other ways too.

ADEL AL-JUBEIR: The cooperation between the two countries is excellent. Everything that Saudi Arabia could do, Saudi Arabia has provided. There are a number of things that we were able to establish that we shared with the U.S., and visa versa.

At the end of the day, we are both victims of this terrorism, and we both have an interest in rooting it out.

Perceptions of Saudis

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: On the public relations front, Crown Prince Abdullah gave a rare on-the-record interview to the New York Times and Washington Post affirming the kingdom's close ties with the United States. He recognized that most of the 19 hijackers were Saudi-- "deviants," he called them.

He also said it's hard to defend America now because of what he implied was a bias toward Israel in the conflict with the Palestinians. The crown prince also urged religious leaders to avoid extremist language and actions. Nevertheless, most Saudis we talked to refused to concede that problems in Saudi society could have contributed to September 11.

AHMAD AL-KHERIJI: Nothing went wrong here. As was said, we had 10, 11, 12, or 20 bad guys, okay, if I can call them that, out of 20 million people. That doesn't mean that something went wrong in Saudi Arabia.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Sociologist Fatina Shaker said many Saudis may sound defensive now because they're sensitive to the criticisms from abroad, but she thinks there is a problem. The voice of moderate or middle Islam isn't heard.

FATINA SHAKER: Yes, we have a problem, and we don't realize that we have a problem only now because 9/11 happened and now, because you are here and you are trying to find out.

We've been saying this over the years. "Look, guys-- responsible people, decision makers-- we have problems in the education system; we have problems in the family system; we have problems in terms of religion, that the middle Islam, the voice of the middle Islam, has been silenced."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Even at the top, there is a new awareness that perhaps all is not well in the kingdom. Prince Turki al-Faisal is [the king's nephew], and was for 25 years director of Saudi intelligence. He retired shortly before September 11.

PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL: A society that... Whose makeup is based on religion-- a religion of tolerance and a religion of understanding and the religions of extending the hand of friendship-- and yet someone can come and hijack some of these ideals and put them to the service of murder and the killing of innocent people, which is 100 percent contrary to all the teachings that we have been taught in our lives. It gives one pause.

Copyright © 2003 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. All Rights Reserved.