



INSIDE THE KINGDOM: PART II

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In the second of three reports, Elizabeth Farnsworth explores the debate over Islam, education and culture in Saudi Arabia.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: The Hajj, the yearly pilgrimage of Muslims to the holy sites of Mecca is under way. More than a million and a half people have poured into Saudi Arabia for the observance of prayer and rituals that reaches its height next week.

They go to the great mosque in Mecca. Many encircle the Kaaba, a shrine believed to have been built by Abraham. One billion Muslims worldwide face in the direction of the Kaaba when they pray. Saudi Arabia is the center of the Muslim world, and Islam is at the heart of Saudi life.

It's also at the heart of a global controversy because Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers of September 11th were Saudis who cited their religion as justification for what they did.

We begin our look at this controversy at a folk festival in Riyadh, whose two themes were Islam and Palestine. A poet famous in the kingdom read a new work for an audience that included Crown Prince Abdullah, who has been the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia since his half brother the king became ill.

The poet spoke of Islam as the dawn waiting to light the "zionist night." He condemned the West for blaming Muslims for acts he said they haven't done.

"They clad us with a strange cloth of terrorism and blame us for every despicable deed," he said. "Our religion is our soul. We will not compromise. The West has given civilization a bloody and distorted face. They filled the earth with science, but weakened it with inequity and shame."

Most every Saudi we spoke to over a period of nearly two weeks agreed with the poet that Islam and the kingdom are being blamed unfairly for al-Qaida's murderous attacks, but Prince Turki al Faisal, who retired last fall after 25 years as head of Saudi intelligence, and who is [the king's nephew], said Saudis are in a state of deep introspection about their countrymen who hijacked the planes.

A time of Saudi introspection

PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL: Where does he come from? He is a Saudi, and yet he's willing to go and kill himself in the name of something that is totally alien to what a Saudi is or what a Muslim is.

So let us look back and see, who are these people, and where do they come from? If they are Saudis, then let us see what made them go that way, what made them go astray.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What do you think? How do you answer that?

PRINCE TURKI AL-FAISAL: I don't know. I don't know, and this is why this process of introspection and retrospection is very important for us here in the kingdom.

Look, the whole society here is based on religion. I am a product of that society. My children are products of that society. We have been taught our religion since the country was established more than 70 years ago, and it's a pretty good record for any society that over these 70 years that you could count a handful of individuals who have been led astray.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: We heard a similar view from the deputy minister of Islamic affairs. I wore a scarf and robe with religious authorities. He told us what his ministry was doing differently as a result of September 11.

TAWFAIQ AL-SUDAIRY (speaking through an interpreter): We are addressing this on two fronts. First, we are trying to clarify the portrait of Islam, that it has nothing to do with terrorism. That message is addressed directly to non-Muslims, especially in the United States.

Secondly, we have a duty to educate Muslims in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere that anyone committing terrorist acts in the name of Islam is not representing the religion, because it's a tolerant faith.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: It was almost impossible in Saudi Arabia to hear a contrary view, though some people criticized religious leaders off camera and not for attribution. There is little religious freedom in the kingdom, no Christian churches, no Jewish temples, few Shiite, as opposed to the majority Sunni, Imams.

Sociologist Fatina Shaker is a devout Muslim who did speak openly about her concerns. She was a Fulbright scholar in the United States, then taught in Jeddah. She worries that in Saudi Arabia moderate Islam has lost its voice.

FATINA SHAKER: So many Saudis, good Saudis, good minds, have been excluded from the real process of development because of the extremist religion, the extremist voice of religion.

Now the government has realized that it has done wrong by really giving credit to these people, and now, as probably you have heard, that the Crown Prince Abdullah really came out on the TV and said, "No extremism anymore. No extremism anymore."

A question of schools

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: All children in Saudi Arabia, in private or public schools, spend part of each day studying religion. This teacher taught a lesson about modesty and respecting others' rights the day we visited.

Only one sort of Islam is taught in Saudi schools. It's often referred to as "Wahhabism" or "Wahhabi Islam," though we were told "Salafi" is the proper term. The students learn that Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wahhab was an 18th- century preacher who advocated a very basic Islam, as he believed it was taught by Mohammed.

The preacher's descendants and the al Saud family united Saudi Arabia, marrying religion and politics. That marriage has been good for this part of the world, according to Prince Faisal bin Salman, a member of the ruling family who teaches political science at a university in Riyadh.

PRINCE FAISAL BIN SALMAN: It has been very good for Saudi Arabia. The Islamic message is very much trans-regional and super-tribal. It unified this part of the world. It has achieved security. It has achieved stability. It has achieved central governance.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: But whatever its successes, the Salafi Islam taught under the guidance of Sheikh Wahhab's heirs is not universally popular here, and many people find it excessively restrictive.

Jeddah architect Sami Angawi and his artist wife, Amira, review their sons' religious homework after school. On this day, one son's class had been studying innovation in religion, and the textbook said much innovation is "haram," forbidden. Sami Angawi, who considers himself deeply religious, told his son there were other ways of seeing things, too.

SAMI ANGAWI: Well, they told him in the school this, and I have to adjust it and say, "well, they tell you that, but there is a different view. Our view is this and this, and other people may have a different view, and it's okay, but respect their view, and they should respect yours."

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Some books used in schools have specific passages that have been criticized in newspaper articles in the United States. One passage from a high-school book reads, "Muslims will fight the Jews just before the day of judgment and will destroy them until the Jew will hide behind a tree or stone, and the tree and stone will say, 'Muslim, servant of god, here's a Jew behind me-- come, kill him.'"

University professor Faisal bin Salman reviewed the textbooks. He found this passage, but said it's one of few which would be considered objectionable.

PRINCE FAISAL BIN SALMAN: About ten to twelve pages are taught in Saudi schools where people might interpret as containing text which is anti-non-Muslim, but if you compare that to over 20,000 pages that students read from day one at school until they graduate-- I mean, how

does that measure up statistically? I think to pinpoint the curriculum as a cause for extremism is very much an oversimplification of what's going on.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: What do you think the key causes are?

PRINCE FAISAL BIN SALMAN: If you look at the whole question of the political system... I mean, some say, "Well, you have terrorism because there is a lack of democracy." Well, how do you explain terrorism in Spain or Northern Ireland, for example?

So let's not try and find a cause that would explain everything. I think the answer will have to be much more complex and much more limited to certain instances and certain individuals at that time.

Other possible causes of terrorism

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: So what are some of the other causes of terrorism, we wanted to know. Dr. Maneh al-Johani, secretary-general of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, which runs camps and other programs all over the world, pointed, as most people here do, to U.S. support for Israel.

He also said many Saudis bitterly resent the presence of American troops in the land that is home to Mecca and Medina.

MANEH AL-JOHANI: This kind of feeling, it is definitely not only bin Laden's feeling. It is shared by many youth, by many religious leaders, and they have voiced this through various means.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: I asked him if he agreed with that view.

MANEH AL-JOHANI: Not necessarily. No, I don't agree with that. I know there are... Their existence has certain negative aspects as well as positive aspects, but I don't look at it in that, I mean, complete negative way.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: He insisted al-Qaida's terrorists learned their murderous ways not in Saudi Arabia, but in Afghanistan.

MANEH AL-JOHANI: It became a meeting place of various people from various countries with different ideologies, and many of the Saudis in Afghanistan were indoctrinated with certain ideologies and ideas that are not actually approved of in this country, and to tell you the truth, this is probably... maybe the crux of the problem.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Al-Johani's organization has been accused by exiled Saudi dissidents of helping fund camps and schools in Pakistan and elsewhere that produced recruits for al-Qaida, but he insisted these charges were untrue.

MANEH AL-JOHANI: By and large our camps and what's taught in those camps and the ideology we try to actually inculcate in the youth does not in any way encourage extremism or terrorism or what have you. So definitely-- Of course there are individuals here and there who might go off the track.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Fatina Shaker said she is convinced that important changes are under way in her country's practice and teaching of Islam. As a response to the crown prince's denunciation of extremism, she said, more moderate voices are making themselves heard.

FATINA SHAKER: Okay, this is good. This is good, if we are going to talk about positive coming out of the negative, light coming out of the dark. Of course, the price has been very high -- very, very high-- it should not have happened that way.

But now the middle voice of Islam is really coming out, and I hope real Islam, and out of that I hope real understanding between West and East, between Christians and Muslims, between Jews and Muslims, the three religions, and other people as well, would happen.

Saudis after Sept. 11

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: While we were in Saudi Arabia, many people pointed to planned curriculum reforms as a sign that leaders were willing to change, but earlier this month a leading Saudi cleric denounced such attempts at reform as "conspiracies by unbelievers aiming to hurt Islam."

It was one more example of a struggle that seems to be under way here over how best to respond to September 11. Much of that struggle is occurring places few foreigners can penetrate, but as we traveled in the kingdom, and in the countryside of Aseer Province in particular, we were struck by a deep sadness among many Saudis that they are being tarred with the terrorists' brush.

Ali Moghawi is a teacher and museum director in Aseer, the province that was home to five of the 15 Saudi hijackers. Before September 11, tourism was providing a good source of income to many people here. Now the flow of people from outside the country has almost stopped.

ALI MOGHAWI: We are very sad because there are-- when I for example go to any place, like USA, Germany, Europe, Australia, they say, "He is from Aseer, he is a terrorist."

So I am not that. I am a religious man. And I have a culture, I have a heritage. I have a history. I am a teacher. I like all the world. So why do they say I am a terrorist? It's really, really the wrong idea.

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Ali Moghawi says he's hoping for the healing effects of time so once again he can feel welcome abroad and American tourists will return.

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