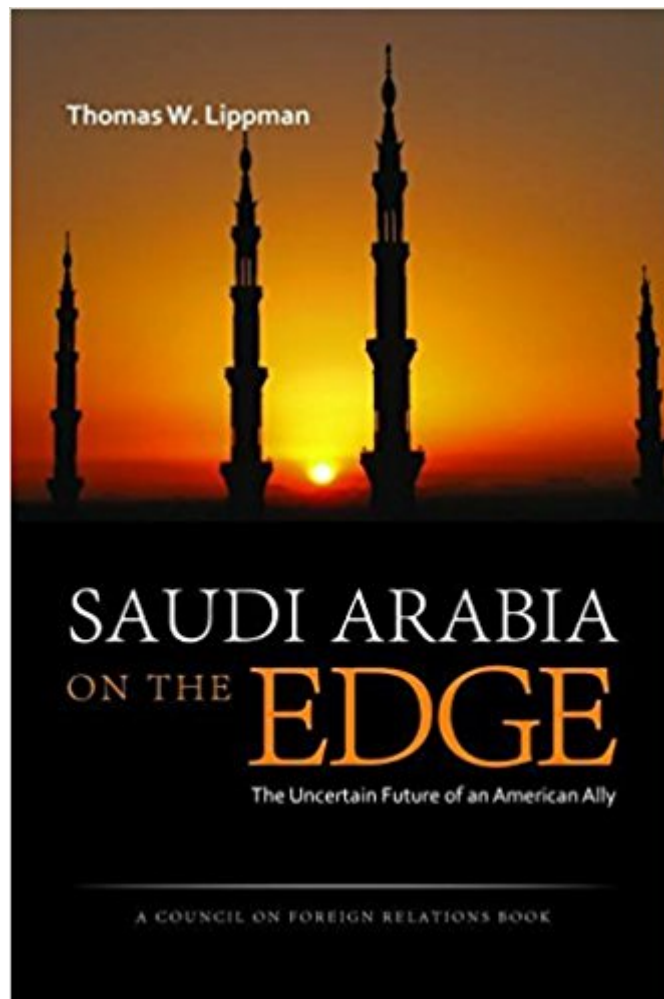


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Saudi Arabia On The Edge: The Uncertain Future Of An American Ally (Council On Foreign Relations Books (Potomac Books))



Synopsis

Of all the countries in the world that are vital to the strategic and economic interests of the United States, Saudi Arabia is the least understood by the American people. Saudi Arabia's unique place in Islam makes it indispensable to a constructive relationship between the non-Muslim West and the Muslim world. For all its wealth, the country faces daunting challenges that it lacks the tools to meet: a restless and young population, a new generation of educated women demanding opportunities in a closed society, political stagnation under an octogenarian leadership, religious extremism and intellectual backwardness, social division, chronic unemployment, shortages of food and water, and troublesome neighbors. Today's Saudi people, far better informed than all previous generations, are looking for new political institutions that will enable them to be heard, but these aspirations conflict with the kingdom's strict traditions and with the House of Saud's determination to retain all true power. Meanwhile, the country wishes to remain under the protection of American security but still clings to a system that is antithetical to American values. Basing his work on extensive interviews and field research conducted in the kingdom from 2008 through 2011 under the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations, Thomas W. Lippman dissects this central Saudi paradox for American readers, including diplomats, policymakers, scholars, and students of foreign policy.

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On Washington D.C. license plates it says "no taxation without representation". So what is one to say about a place like Saudi Arabia, a rentier state, where there is no representation but also no taxation? Thomas Lippman does a great job of explaining the difficult religious, political and social dynamics of Saudi Arabia along with their contradictions. It is evident that Lippman tries to provide a positive trend in Saudi Arabia's social and even economic development. While the opening introduction and the start of most chapters begins with an optimistic outlook the author ends each section with tentative hope; a hesitant desire to support the positive trend. In the end, the face of Saudi Arabia is a reflection of the ruler's desires. What King Abdullah has done in the last few years could easily be reversed upon his death and succession. What is the positive? King Abdullah has pushed for many social reforms. And in a country where society is tied to religion they are bold but limited maneuvers. In Lippman's view, the monarchy must battle to maintain political legitimacy and does so through the Wahhabi religious support, thus religious legitimacy. The monarchy has the power to dismiss, remove, replace Wahhabi clerics that disrupt certain economic or social reforms but too much meddling in the religious establishment could push the fine power balance over the edge. Lippman looks at a few of King Abdullah's reforms describing the very interesting relationship between the King's 'pet projects' and their impact and reception by society as a whole.

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