Chacour surely expresses this inner conviction of love for all God’s children, lived out in the political reality of everyday life.

Because Chacour is surrounded by the misery caused by institutionalized evil, he understands that Christian response requires specific and concerted activity in community on behalf of its victims. His own life has become the paradigm for Christian discipleship in Palestine through his exercise of free choice and responsibility in action and prayer. For Chacour, the kingdom of God begins here on earth in humanity’s cooperation with grace in the creation of a just and free society. Thus, holiness is found in a dynamic spirituality expressed in community with the living God as its focus. His own words express this best:

_We Palestinians and Jews live in what the world calls the Holy Land, but what makes the land holy? Is it the stones or trees? Is it the churches? The shrines? The paths on which the patriarchs and our Lord Jesus Christ walked? Or is the land sanctified by what we do to make God present? (p. 196)._  

_We Belong to the Land_ awakens the reader to a new sensitivity for the Palestinian people, and gently, yet persuasively, makes the case for a re-thinking of Western support for Zionist militarism. While not overtly political, this book presents a diary of oppression that calls out for justice, a justice that can only be politically mandated. Thus, it belongs to the genre of Liberation Theology in which authentic spirituality is linked with political and social action on behalf of the poor. Elias Chacour has told a story that captures the very best of Christian evangelization, and, in the process, has exposed his own huge heart that embraces all, mourns for all, and loves all. _We Belong to the Land_ should be required reading in every secondary school, from the West to the Middle East, so that the cycle of racism and violence finally can end.

Jamie Dance


By a combination of several accidents of history and geography, Saudi Arabia has come to occupy a pivotal position in the politics of the Muslim world.
Like most of the nation states that emerged in the twentieth century, Saudi Arabian frontiers do not represent any ethnic or political rationale. The dominant narrative in the Kingdom’s history is that of the state formation of a people without memory of unity or national heritage which would justify their inclusion into a single entity. The process started with the adventur of a Najdi emir [Amir], Ibn Saud ['Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud] (d. 1953) and culminated when the boundaries reached the limits acceptable to the British.

The book under review is a refreshing new addition in the Cambridge University Press series on Middle Eastern studies. The book betrays a thorough grasp on the subject by its author, Madawi al-Rasheed, who is a Senior Lecturer at the King’s College, London. Her subject is Social Anthropology and her narrative is anything but a chronological description of events and battles. She has done justice to the processes that led to the emergence and then the consolidation of the Saudi state. Has the Saudi state completed its natural life and is up for disintegration is a mute question and I shall come to it later. First we may look into the rise of the Kingdom from the debris of many collapsed emirates and principalities.

Save for a handful of cities that were important from religious and/or commercial point of view, like Makkah, Madinah, Jeddah and Tabuk where token Turkish troops were stationed, the Ottoman rule in most of Arabia was only nominal. Hence, the discourse on the Turkish rulers being arrogant and insensitive, was irrelevant for most of the people of the areas that now form the Kingdom. One may safely exclude the factor, actual or presumed, of the Arabs’ dislike for the Turks as a contributing one to the emergence of Saudi Arabia. The internal dynamics notwithstanding, the paramount British interest and influence, at least in the first three decades of state formation, can hardly be discounted.

The idea of a Saudi state was a late development, certainly not associated with Ibn Saud’s early conquests which were a function of inter-Emirate rivalries, jealousies and insecurities. Personalities and events are certainly important in history. Nevertheless, the former operate and the latter have meaning only within a certain historical context. When Ibn Saud embarked on his campaign of conquest, the Ottoman empire was already on its last legs, whereas the Anglo-German rivalry was shaping the British policies in the region, much to Ibn Saud’s advantage. While known as the mother of democracies, Britain did not, as the author aptly points out, “distinguish herself by great efforts to generate discourses on independence and autonomy” (p. 4).

The state emerged by an interplay of religion and money. Conquests were made drawing legitimacy from Islam, but to retain the conquests money was
used. Ibn Saud consolidated his authority by turning the royal court into a
centre for reallocation and redistribution of resources. He appropriated
surplus produce from certain sections of the society and redistributed it in
search of allegiance and loyalty. The author rightly says that the consolidation
of the Saudi state was not dependent on institutions, bureaucracies and
administrations (as there were none), but was a function of informal social and
cultural mechanisms, specific to the Arabian peninsula (p. 9). One may add
that the Kingdom is still being ruled according to much the same socio-cultural
arrangements without any significant or meaningful institutionalization.

With the discovery of oil, and especially since hike in its price especially
from the mid-1970s onwards, the size of the cake grew considerably. For
around two decades, the redistribution left each segment content with the
piece it got. But that is no longer the case now. A burgeoning population and
shrinking resources have put the arrangements under enormous strains. With
soaring unemployment and the economic trickle down considerably reduced,
few would be willing to sacrifice their interests to serve those of the Kingdom.

The present Saudi Kingdom is the third Saudi-ruled polity. The first
chapter describes the first two Saudi emirates (1744–1818 and 1824–1891). The
Saudi emirate was the sequel of a union between the adventurism of the Saudi
leaders and the puritanical zeal of the Wahhābī ‘ulamā’. In the mid-eighteenth
century, the oasis of Diriyyah in central Najd was a small settlement of a total
of around seventy households. A tribal chief, Muḥammad ibn Sa‘ād (d. 1765)
became a broker, financing journeys of local merchants. Meanwhile, in the
neighbouring settlement of ‘Uyaynah, a religious scholar named Muḥammad
ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), belonged to a family distinguished for its
lineage of ‘ulamā’. His strict views about what pure Islam meant led him to be
expelled by the ruler of ‘Uyaynah. Ibn Saud gave him shelter with open arms.

As time passed, the position of Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb became very
important in the town. Many people converted to his ideas while presumably
some did so out of fear. Eventually, this nexus exhibited expansionist
tendencies when many converted Bedouins started raids on neighboring tribes
forcing them to adhere to the strict interpretation of Islam. The subdued tribes
were also forced to pay Zakāh. This, being primarily a religious obligation,
became a source of income for the Saudis on the one hand, and a token of
submission by the tribes on the other. The concept of jihād was
institutionalized which imbued the Saudis with a religious zeal. The Wahhābī
fuqahā’ (religious doctors) concerned themselves with the solutions to
everyday problems such as marriage, divorce and usury, etc. which became an
attraction for the sedentary population consisting of merchants, brokers and
artisans who were little concerned with purely theological matters. Although
The first emirate was destroyed by the Turkish General İbrahim Paşa (d. 1848) in 1818, and Diriyah was sacked, but the Saudi polity was based on solid foundations of ideology and interests, and it re-emerged in 1824 and lasted till 1891.

The largest emirate in Najd was the Rashidi emirate, and not the Saudi one. It stretched from Ḩā’il in the North to Riyadh in the South. It was based on a uniform tribal identity. The Rashidis were responsible for pillaging and ransacking the second Saudi state in 1891 when the Saudi ruler ʻAbd al-Raḥmān (r. 1889–91) was deposed. At that time, almost all the coastal emirates on the Gulf, from Kuwait to Muscat-Oman had entered into some sort of treaty arrangements with the British. Till the end of the World War I, the British had never felt the need to negotiate with the powers of Central Arabia, the Sharifs, the Rashids and the Saudis. It was with the Emir ʻAbd al-Raḥmān (r. 1896–1915) of Kuwait that the Saudis took refuge. And it was from there that the son of ʻAbd al-Raḥmān, the legendary Abdul Aziz ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz led his daring foray, recapturing Riyadh in 1902. Thence, fortunes changed hands and by 1921, Ḩā’il was captured and Ḥijāz fell to his lot four years later. It was then that Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman al-Saud assumed the title of King. It may be added that given the socio-political context, such a title was perhaps irrelevant for his own subjects but was needed for external consumption.

It has been mentioned above that while the Sharifs derived legitimacy from the “holy lineage” and the Rashidis from tribal identity, the Saudis drew strength from the ideology of Wahhabism. They purportedly were making conquests in the name of spreading puritanical Islam. Given the fact, the ‘ulamā’ were undoubtedly very powerful in the Saudi polity. Ibn Saud himself was not spared public punishment. Once found wearing a long shirt, scissors were brought and his shirt was cut short in public (p. 53). Ibn Saud is reported to have said that when he came across Shaykh Abdul Latif ʻAbd al-Laṭīf in the narrow streets of Riyadh, he trembled with fear (p. 62).

The third chapter deals with the rule of King Ibn Saud from 1932 when Saudi Arabia was declared a Kingdom to 1953 when he died. The consolidation of the state was through sheer display of power, especially since “the state could not impress with public works, administration or bureaucracy” (p. 81). The royal court was impressive enough to instil awe and admiration for anyone who visited it. The King’s employees did not receive regular salaries but were bestowed with annual gifts, making them perpetually dependent upon the King’s grace.

Things changed when Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with an American company SOCAL (the precursor of ARAMCO that was established
in 1944) for oil exploration in 1933. The oil extraction started with 0.5 million barrels a day in 1938 but steadily rose to 21.3 million barrels daily by 1945, with the consequent rise in revenues as well (p. 93). ARAMCO influenced the Saudi state and society in more than one way. In addition to being the largest employer for the Saudis (larger than the State itself), it also brought thousands of foreign workers including 4,000 Americans. The interaction led to exposure to new ideas. In the absence of an effective State infrastructure, many essential civic services like water and health were initially introduced and run by ARAMCO (p. 96). ARAMCO not only produced the first wave of indigenous engineers, civil servants and millionaires in Saudi Arabia but incidentally also the “first political prisoners, dissidents and opposition literary figures” (p. 100). In fact all organized forms of political dissent in KSA initially owed origin to the influx of foreigners and thus foreign ideas brought by the ARAMCO, The first general strike took place in 1955 and the first abortive coup in 1956.

The next chapter deals with the period 1953–73, when the large number of princes got divided into three groups. There was a time when King Saud [Sa‘ūd bin ‘Abd al-‘Azīz] (r. 1953–64) mobilized the Royal Guards against his brother Crown Prince Fayṣal [Faysal] (d. 1975) and the latter called in the National Guards (the successor force of the erstwhile Ikhwān), and there was a danger of the Kingdom plunging into a civil war. Then, there was a third group of ‘liberal princes’ which was in favour of civil liberties and constitutional monarchy. During his struggle with his elder brother, Fayṣal also promised many progressive actions including introduction of a basic law and the constitution of a consultative council, the promises he conveniently forgot after consolidating his grip on power (p. 134). This should not detract from the various reforms that he did introduce like television, establishment of universities, encouragement of female education, as well as the institution of foreign scholarships.

The fifth chapter tells us how the sudden oil boom increased the vulnerability of the Saudi state. Between 1970 and 1980 Saudi Arabia spent an average of $14 to 24 billion per annum on defence purchases. The sixth chapter tells us that the 1990 Gulf war was a watershed. With 1,500 foreign press and mediamen, the civil society felt that the time was ripe for demanding reform. The first show of public defiance was by educated women, 45 of whom defied ban on female driving by bringing cars into the centre of the capital Riyadh.

The book ends with a reference to the question of succession to the Saudi throne. Any outcome may have profound ramifications for the regional political landscape as a whole. In absence of clear cut rules for transfer of
power, as the episode of the two elder brothers Saud and Faysal amply shows, the Crown Prince Abdullah’s succession is by no means certain. He and his half brothers princes Sultan (1924– ), Na’if (1934– ) and Turki (1935– ) have informal mechanisms of securing their positions (p. 186). There is no formal legal document, nor an independent superior judiciary and not even any formal method of ascertaining the will of the people, to determine who should be the next ruler. Since 1998, when King Fahd (r. 1982– ) became almost incapacitated to rule, Prince Abdullah (1923– ) has been denied the assumption of full powers. However, he could not be sidelined because just like his elder brother Crown Prince (and later King) Faysal (r. 1964–75), he commands the formidable tribal force, the National Guards.

The book also discusses the artificial identities that the State is trying to superimpose on the subjects. The textbooks ignore the cultural and local traditions of the Kingdom, criticize the concept of Arab Nationalism as being alien to Islam and explain every event in history with reference to the success of Islam and the Muslims. But they also glorify King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, i.e., try to develop the personality cult around a ruler. The author tells us that state control over public imagination cannot be successful in the present age of information revolution (p. 189).

As an endnote to this review, it may be added that recent analyses of Saudi polity point out the stark contradictions rooted in the present system. The biggest casualty of the arbitrary arrangements for allocation of resources has been the middle class, which is a factor of stability in most modern nation states. The population of the Kingdom has risen since 1973 to 23 million (a rise of 300%). After a period of affluence, poverty has risen to alarming levels, slums have emerged around Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam, the three largest cities, which now comprise 80% of the Kingdom’s population.¹ This urbanization was the result of soaring unemployment and people had come in search of jobs. The construction boom had resulted in too many buildings being built with no one to afford to occupy them. Thousands of families in Riyadh cannot afford electricity, let alone, flats. The recent visit of Crown Prince Abdullah in November 2002 to the slum areas and the announcement of a national strategy to combat poverty are indicators that the government has acknowledged the existence of the problem.

Saad S. Khan

¹ “What Ails Saudi Arabia? ” (Staff Story), Daily The Nation, Lahore, 21 May 2003.