

**Society Outreach - House of Lords - 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2009**  
**"Is the kingdom of Saudi Arabia prepared to defend Human Rights, Civil Liberties and Fight Terrorism"**  
**Review and reflections by Roya Arab**

We gathered at the House of Lords on 7 December in room 4a, seats filled full with people standing on the sides of the room, as Lord Ahmed began proceeding on an hour's presentation by a mixed panel of political, social, commercial and educational representatives commenting on whether the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is prepared to defend Human Rights, Civil Liberties and Fight Terrorism, followed by half an hour of discussion. What follows is a brief report of what I heard sitting in the back of this room. I have tried to capture the essence of what the speakers said, and have included a section on the ensuing Q&A, followed by a cursory moment of personal reflection.

**Robert Lacey** (Journalist and Historian) who now lives in the Saudi Arabian Kingdom, started by asking why we were not debating other topics, 'what has it to do with us? What of USA?' And, suggested when discussing Saudi Arabia we should look at subjects such as Saudi involvement in the Middle East Peace process, or how 'it does the best it can for Palestinians and its Arab bothers.' Mr. Lacey took umbrage to the term 'prepared' contending that using this word made Saudi Arabia sound juvenile. He referred to the Law of the Government of Saudi Arabia, and the constitution that the Saudis declared in 1992 after the first Gulf war, which outlines the fact that the country is an autocracy, with a system of government of monarchy, with no talk of democracy, and as a sovereign Arab Islamic state, the Saudi constitution is believed to be the Qoran from which the basic law is derived. Mr. Lacey further stated that the 'state protects with Islamic *Sharia*, thus the idea of the Saudis not defending human rights is a non-starter'. They may not do it well, but he found the basic premise of our round table here today condescending. Mr. Lacey further noted that 26 human rights watch groups had been invited into the kingdom, and how the Saudis do listen to human rights watch. He recounted how upon receiving a report of the mistreatment of the Shia minority in Najra, the King had a committee look into it and replaced the governor of the region with his own son. He acceded that there is a great deal of intolerance in Saudi textbooks, but said that they are trying to change it. Mr. Lacey found it extraordinary that terrorism was up for discussion in view of the Saudi government's engagement in fighting Al-Qaeda directly since 2003, and the resources devoted to defeating Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, 'thanks to the Saudis we know the Al-Qaeda leaders in Yemen.' Though, the Saudis had not apologized directly after 9/11, he felt that their actions spoke loudly, including the 'famous rehabilitation programme for extremists, which is a model for other nations.' Mr. Lacey finished by saying that Saudi Arabia is a 'major independent world power', and although it has aspects of the third world, it was moving in the right direction, and how the Saudi papers are able to discuss and debate all subjects other than the royal family.

**Mr. Michael Thoma** (Director General at The Middle East Association) our second speaker opened his talk saying that he felt we lacked understanding of this kingdom. His first visit had been in 1973 when the country had been far less well developed, at a time when it was a self contained nation with the 'UK and USA doing nicely out of energy deals' and how 'the first oil boom had a big affect in propelling their country, which is a pillar of Islam and custodian of Mecca and Medina.' Mr. Thoma said that

the question being asked at this conference ‘showed ignorance, who are we to impose our western ideas and ideals on a country that’s eastern’, arguing that a system can not be imposed but must be chosen by the government, and how we need to look at the culture and history of any given nation. He mentioned that Islamic migrants are using the human rights laws in the UK, ‘we’ve gone too far, and I am not happy with EU legislation on human rights’, which means that we end up harboring terrorists, for EU laws will not allow us to send them back to their country of origin. He then defended Saudi restrictions, for after living there he thought ‘women are safer there.’ He asked ‘Is Saudi Arabia moving towards western ideas? Yes, now women are reaching higher positions, and we must see all this in the context of Saudi Arabia being the custodians of Islamic sites.’ With terrorism he noted that whilst there had been terrorist attacks, British citizens have also been involved in terrorism, saying that ‘many of those in Saudi Arabia have been brought to justice, and Saudi Arabia must be allowed to move forward at its own rate’. He finished with ‘my own mother used to not leave the house without a headscarf. It is a major mistake to impose western culture on the east, we tried with the Shah and look where that’s gone.’

**Rt Hon Daniel Kawczynski** (MP for the Conservative Party) then proceeded to passionately defend the rights of Saudi Arabia, expressing his frustration after four and half years in government at people’s ignorance of the kingdom. He admitted that Saudi Arabia has bad human rights records, but mentioned Sudan, Burma and China as other places to be weary of. ‘Let us think of the human rights abuses in the UK or study the Suisse who have voted to ban minarets. What sort of abuse of human rights is that? We are by no means perfect, before criticizing other countries we should get our own act together.’ Mr. Kawczynski argued that the liberal media wanted to show Saudi Arabia as hard line, and how in the communist era whilst there had been hardliners there were also many reformers. He recounted how Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. Reagan had realized the only way to go forth was through engagement with the reformers in the communist regime. He described how much he enjoyed his visits to Saudi Arabia, and how he is ‘warmed by people’s freedom and the openness in the society’ and how amazed his fellow MPs had been when Mr. Kawczynski had taken them on visits to Saudi Arabia. He then informed us that he had met King Abdulla who ‘has a unique responsibility’ as custodian of the two holiest shrines in Islam, and ‘though he wants reform, he has to be cautious.’ As a Catholic Mr. Kawczynski, expressed his own personal frustration with the Vatican and the extraordinary statements coming out of there. Finishing with the fact that he had met many ministers in Saudi Arabia and the UK who spoke of the extraordinary cooperation between the two nations on counter terrorism, surmising that ‘no doubt Saudi Arabia is doing all it can to end global terror and will continue as an ally.’

**Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed** (Department of Theology and Religious Studies in King's College) the first Saudi Arabian or indeed Middle Eastern speaker on the panel expressed her astonishment at the hostility the debate on Saudi Arabia engendered in her fellow speakers. She noted that since the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia had relied on western commentators who have acted as brokers, however, ‘Saudi Arabia has an archaic political system which hides behind Islam.’ She further mentioned the rosy picture that is painted of a conservative backward people with enlightened leadership, to be nourished and conserved, all lead to a form of schizophrenia – ‘an avant garde leadership, with a backward religious population - we in the west need the former to tighten the reigns on the unruly savage population -

this is a myth' Professor Al Rasheed contends, 'Saudi Arabia as an Islamic state is a phallacy, that it is run by *Sharia* law is the flag raised for those asking about human rights.' And, Islam in Saudi Arabia has been subservient to the leaders, and not 'an independent variable shaping Saudi Arabia, it is used and abused.' She further stressed that the idea that 'what is good here for us in Europe, is not and cannot be good for Saudi Arabia is another myth', seeing this as a mask behind which apologists hide and not workable any longer. Professor Al-Rasheed, mentioned human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia ranging from torture in prisons, passports being confiscated and petitions being banned. Whilst giving the image of a tribal desert democracy with princes holding consultations with the people, when in fact 'princes don't agree together nor do they consult the population.' The Saudi state 'privileged radical elements thought out its history' and though at present it tries to shed the past and appear as a champion of moderation, there are still reports by international and Arab local human rights groups exposing human rights abuses. The other argument in favour of Saudi Arabia which Professor Al-Rasheed discounted was the notion that 'yes, but they are not as bad as the others, if this regimes tortures 100 its ok, because next door tortures 1000', mentioning that of the thirty thousand British ex-pats living in Saudi Arabia, we knew that some had been tortured, and yet 'we try to deal with it.' In terms of terrorism, she mentioned the two human rights groups set up in Saudi Arabia after 9/11, and how whilst supposedly being 'non governmental, it had been set up by the government, and its members appointed by the government, therefore not so independent from the government - they will take on the case of a woman slapped by her husband, but not academics who are imprisoned!' and with terrorism they 'have double standards. Jihad is forbidden at home but its *halal* abroad.' Further explaining that Islam and culture are used to mask abuses, whilst weapons and commerce (here, I would like to add political strategic ties) blind us from the reality of the regime. Professor Al-Rasheed ended with 'Accountability and transparency is what the Saudis want, the problem they have is all our problem. People have resorted to violence because they have not been given the opportunity to have human rights.'

**Dr. Mai Yamani** (Academic and Author) also female and the only other Saudi person on the panel, opened with 'my life and experiences give me a unique perspective, I am an academic, I am from Mecca, my grandfather was a religious man who worked towards opening up the religion, and my father, a lawyer, was involved in Saudi oil policy for years.' She told us when word had got round about this forthcoming talk, she had been inundated with emails from former students and interested youth asking that she be their voice in their absence. After her publication, 'Cradle of Islam: The Quest for an Identity in Saudi Arabia', which she thought the authorities would appreciate, she was told that she 'would need to go through re-education' and a book was published listing all her errors. Dr. Yamani, further pointed out that academics received sixty lashes for stepping out of line and 'broadcasters and authors receiving up to a thousand lashes is not rare.' She produced a list for all participants naming people who have been abused, further noting the bad treatment of the *Shia* minority who are considered as apostates. She mentioned a young woman Zeinab from Medina who had passed on the following message, 'no matter how many skyscrapers we have, we cannot practice law. A female has been appointed as education minister, but I cannot drive my kids to school.' Dr. Yamani, stated that according to Amnesty international 'Saudi Arabia has six thousand prisoners of conscience', these people are tortured, besides which there is secrecy and restriction. She felt that Saudi Arabia could no longer hold the world at bay, for the Saudi people were calling out for

‘human rights, equality and dignity. One day when emails and passionate websites fall silent I will feel hopeful.’

The session was brought to a close by **Elaine Hargrove** (Researcher at Women Without Borders) who shared with us the findings of a survey of over 4500 youth. The results showed that the youth want and expected change, they are ambitious and want smaller families, and 70% don’t want power to be gender based. ‘The youth perceive themselves as well educated and techno savvy’ and most see gender role change as a good opportunity, and whilst two thirds of the women questioned felt that men should provide for women, only a third believed that women should care for men.

The Chairperson **Lord Ahmed**, who did an admirable job keeping a sharp eye on the clock and passions in check, defended his right to hold this discussion (in reference to the early speakers questioning the use and validity of discussing Saudi Arabia in reference to human rights and terrorism) noting the wide range of topics and nations that have been studied in this manner.

### **Q&A and further comments**

What follows are some of the questions and points raised by the participants after the speakers had finished. The first question was a thanks to Lord Ahmed for chairing this important talk, and mention of the Saudi business interests of the male European speakers here today. Another person mentioned that when we speak of human rights there should be no borders and concepts of east and west, human rights is and should be promoted as universal and for all. I mentioned in the Q&A that when it comes to human rights, the west with its dirty back door had lost the moral high ground. Mr. Thoma whilst right to suggest that the west should not be ‘imposing western ways on the East’, should remember that for almost as long as the walls of parliament have stood in London, the honorable members have been passing motions about lands containing gold, diamonds and later oil. One cannot deny or hide western meddling in resource rich regions of the world. Thus, it is a sad reality that the west does interfere and intrude on the east, and so if in modernity it is good enough for Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran, it is surely good enough for Saudi Arabia. ‘The words goose and gander come to mind, and it seems clear to most of us spectators sitting in this room that the gander that is Saudi Arabia is worth too much money and business interests.’ A western gentleman asked when we would be discussing Islamophobia, and to what extent are we able to deal with Islam in a way that is fair? He also noted the absence of other religions being practiced in Saudi Arabia. Another person asked if the male members of the panel, who had mentioned *Sharia* law and its uses, had any idea what *Sharia* law is and stands for. One young Saudi lady, who writes for a Saudi paper agreed that change was needed, however, felt strongly that change should come from within, after which another young Saudi lady noted that whilst defending her love of her country, she could not overlook the treatment of Asian workers in Saudi Arabia, which broke many a human right law. The speakers tried, as best they might, to address the questions and points raised by the audience, meanwhile passions were roused, leading to, at one point the Rt Hon Daniel Kawczynski to suggest to the female Saudi Academic speakers that they return to Saudi Arabia, to which one replied ‘would you come with me and take the lashes for me?’

The subject being discussed in a two and a half hour period could easily fill up a week long conference, for it is indeed an important and multi faceted issue: 'Is the kingdom of Saudi Arabia prepared to defend Human Rights, Civil Liberties and Fight Terrorism?' It became very clear over the short time here that feelings are divided, but what especially struck me from where I was sitting was the source of the opinions being expressed. Three men all supporting Saudi Arabia, one a writer who now lives in Saudi Arabia, one an MP who takes other MPs out to visit the kingdom to see its 'openness and freedom of the society', and the third a man who has done business in the region for decades. They sang Saudi Arabia's praises and glossed over its shortcomings by highlighting other nation's failings including that of western nations. They are quite right, there is a great deal of corruption, deceit and law breaking being carried out by governments around the world, but it does not make it right, and if we are to get involved in one man's land than surely the gates are open to all lands. Interestingly the only two people, who spoke up against Saudi Arabia, were Saudi female academics who do not return - largely due to the content of their publications.

Saudi Arabia, everyone knows breaks human rights laws, in its treatment of women, foreign workers, religious minorities and academics, and commentators who speak up against the regime. Saudi Arabia, is where Wahhabi Islam was born, the very Islam that is printed in Qorans rewritten in the extremist vein, as read in Madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, expressed in the ideals of the Taliban and seen worn as neghabs (face coverings) for women, who's rights are sorely and dangerously eroded. And lest we forget when it comes to terrorism, Osama Bin Laden is a child of Saudi Arabia, trained and funded by their allies, the Americans, to head the Taliban to fight the Mujahedin in Afghanistan. This well trained child of Wahhabi Islam and American war tactics, first became a wanted terrorist when he questioned the 'army of the infidel in the holy land' (US army bases remaining in Saudi Arabia after the first Gulf war) Bin Laden further questioned the treatment of Palestinians in their occupied lands. He founded (along with others no doubt) Al-Qaeda who also question and criticize the Saudi monarchy, which we found to be forbidden by admission of even Saudi supporters on the panel today. Clearly, the Saudi royal family is going to want to find this man and to root out this group from the Saudi kingdom. But, this does not stop Saudi Arabia supporting fundamentalist Islamic thinkers and funding extremist books and groups.

In answer to the question being discussed, as a spectator at this event, one could surmise that for as long as Saudi Arabia remains a western ally economically and strategically, and hides behind its unique situation as the cradle of Islam's holiest sites, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is only prepared to defend Human Rights and Civil Liberties within the remit of a constitution that ties itself to its own interpretation of the Sharia law. And, whilst being fully cooperative in fighting terrorism, it does so against enemies that may endanger its own kingdom, yet conversely through spreading fundamentalist ideals Saudi Arabia underscores much of the terrorism taking place elsewhere. The ray of hope seemed to be the youth and female Saudis, as seen on the panel and at question time, who mobilised through education and access to the world via the web, are sewing the seeds of change. But, I fear for as long as the West keeps collecting its pieces of silver, it will be some time before we see flowers of positive change in Saudi Arabia.

