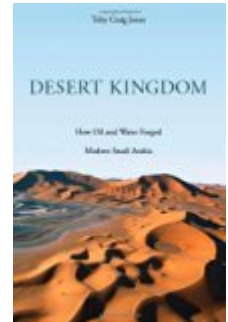




Toby Craig Jones. *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 312 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04985-7.



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Toby Craig Jones opens his book, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia*, with a description of a scheme to transport Arctic icebergs to Saudi Arabia in order to alleviate the water shortage in the kingdom. The scheme was rejected as too extravagant, but with this anecdote, Jones illuminates the relationship between oil, water, and the Saudi government: oil wealth enabled the Saudi government to overcome the problem of aridity and water scarcity. Instead of focusing on the late twentieth century, Jones looks to the period between 1930 and 1980 which led to the hubris symbolized in the above example.

Jones's book deals with issues of progress, development, the role of science in the creation of a state, and also how the environment contributed to the articulation of Saudi identity. Though oil and water are in the title, it is not a book about oil or water. This book explores the role of natural resources in the articulation of the relationship between a central government and a resource-rich peripheral area—in this case, al-Hasa, the

Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and a historical center of oil wealth and agriculture. This perspective enables Jones to describe how access to oil, water, and land was a primary source of tension in and prosperity for the Saudi government. This novel take on Saudi history makes this book useful to scholars of Middle East history, Arabian history, environmental history, and the history of commodities.

Jones organized his book chronologically. In the first two chapters, he explores the creation and execution of environmental knowledge in and for the Saudi government. He notes how two expatriates in particular, Federico Vidal, an anthropologist with the Arab American Oil Company (ARAMCO) and Karl Twitchell, an American geologist and mining engineer, contributed to cementing the connection between political power and environmental knowledge. Jones explains, “the bottom line was that American scientists served Saudi political power in the building of an authoritarian political system, one that used science and knowledge and technology and the environment

as a means to shore up centralized Saudi dominance” (p. 35). The result was an “environmental technostate” whose goal was to create productive, but dependent subjects (p. 54).

The third chapter is an exploration of a specific project: the al-Hasa Irrigation and Drainage Project (IDP), which was completed in 1971 and, though never a technological success, a success in binding the subjects to the government. It also formed the basis for discontent among farmers, because, as with all of the environmental development schemes, the engineers failed to take local land tenure and social patterns into account. Thus, the IDP increased religious and social tensions because it privileged certain villages over others and large landlords over independent farmers.

The discontent that was brewed by the insinuation of government into agriculture was not just a result of a single development project. In chapter 5, Jones highlights the history of discontent and political activism that characterized al-Hasa’s Shi’a population. From the 1930s, Shi’a writers were articulating their discontent regarding the uneven distribution of government resources and rising political discrimination in newspapers in an attempt to gain recognition from the national government. These policies and the “deplorable social and economic” condition led to violence in November of 1979 in the form of a week of violence and bloodshed (p. 181).

In the final chapter, Jones demonstrates how, following the Shi’a uprising, Saudi government officials modified their allegiance to science, technology, and development. They diversified their programs away from al-Hasa and toward issues of crop diversification, wheat production, food security, and the outsourcing of agriculture. They also replaced the role of science and development with an emphasis on Islam as a way to temper the government’s reputation for materialism and excess.

Jones’s contributions to the literature are many. For those who know little about Saudi politics, he explains the issues at hand coherently and succinctly. For those who know more about Saudi politics, his work provides a new way of conceptualizing these politics from the peripheries, rather than from the center of Riyadh. He sets up Shi’a discontent as emanating from discriminatory environmental practices rather than simply from religious biases and in doing so, demonstrates the complexity of issues related to the 1979 uprising. For all of the social and political change Jones highlights, oil wealth and water access are the central motivators for action, even for the 1979 Shi’a uprising, and he rarely loses sight of this connection. Jones manages to convey the importance of oil wealth for the kingdom without resorting to a teleological march-to-progress narrative or one that is a reiteration of the story of oil. He successfully critiques the positivism of technological development and questions the role of science in the expansion of governmental power, taking a cue from James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State* (1998) and Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (2002).

This is not to say his work does not have drawbacks. Like many works of Gulf history, this one reads as though Jones is flinging the reader between pockets of sources. To compensate for this distribution of sources, Jones at times becomes lost in the details. A second problem with this work is that it is primarily a discussion of al-Hasa history and though Jones tries to connect the region with the rest of Saudi Arabia, the connections are often weak, tenuous, and fail to support his primary argument. The third and perhaps most important drawback of this book is that Jones fails to fully appreciate the role of desalination plants in the water politics of the kingdom. He alludes to them provocatively, saying that they provided a way to turn oil wealth into water/agricultural wealth (p. 3), but water is often an afterthought in Jones’s argument, which focuses on

agriculture and land rather than specifically on water itself.

In spite of these drawbacks, Jones's work is an excellent examination of how a resource-rich province became integrated into the state through environmental development. It is an attempt to empower the local authorities and though Jones periodically includes ARAMCO and other foreign scientists and engineers as actors, the story he tells is largely a Saudi one. This book is a refreshing take on how environmental resources and politics work together to reinforce and check power.

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