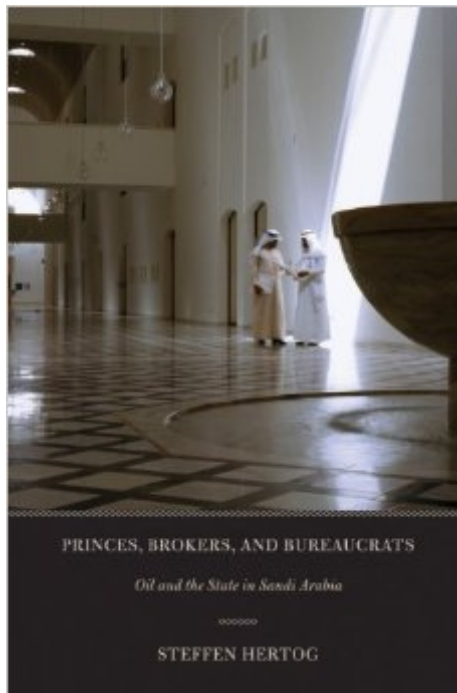


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Princes, Brokers, And Bureaucrats: Oil And The State In Saudi Arabia



Synopsis

In *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats*, the most thorough treatment of the political economy of Saudi Arabia to date, Steffen Hertog uncovers an untold history of how the elite rivalries and whims of half a century ago have shaped today's Saudi state and are reflected in its policies. Starting in the late 1990s, Saudi Arabia embarked on an ambitious reform campaign to remedy its long-term economic stagnation. The results have been puzzling for both area specialists and political economists: Saudi institutions have not failed across the board, as theorists of the "rentier state" would predict, nor have they achieved the all-encompassing modernization the regime has touted. Instead, the kingdom has witnessed a bewildering mélange of thorough failures and surprising successes. Hertog argues that it is traits peculiar to the Saudi state that make sense of its uneven capacities. Oil rents since World War II have shaped Saudi state institutions in ways that are far from uniform. Oil money has given regime elites unusual leeway for various institutional experiments in different parts of the state: in some cases creating massive rent-seeking networks deeply interwoven with local society; in others large but passive bureaucracies; in yet others insulated islands of remarkable efficiency. This process has fragmented the Saudi state into an uncoordinated set of vertically divided fiefdoms. Case studies of foreign investment reform, labor market nationalization and WTO accession reveal how this oil-funded apparatus enables swift and successful policy-making in some policy areas, but produces coordination and regulation failures in others.

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Customer Reviews

Book Review by M.R. Raghu, CFA, Head of Research, Markaz, Kuwait

The book is a great bird's eye view of Saudi bureaucracy. Saudi Arabia is a state that cannot be easily understood by a layman. In some cases, actions can be very swift and decisive and in some other cases very long procrastination is usually the norm. The book serves a great deal to understand the background of the Kingdom from a political science point of view especially when the author notes that Saudi Arabia is probably one of the most poorly documented state in the world relative to its size. The book classically describes the growth of the Kingdom through the creation of new institutions, the parallel existence of radically different bureaucratic fiefdoms, strict centralization, clientelism, and diluted implementation of broader-based policies.

Background

Whenever the Kingdom encountered a problem it created a new institutional island to subvert the process. These Institutional islands have been largely separated from games of brokerage according to the author. SAMA, SABIC, Saudi Aramco, Saudi Ports Authority, etc are great examples. Aramco is probably one of the worlds' best NOC's and one can clearly see the factors at play here.

Parallel to the creation of these islands, fiefdoms with more historical depth, such as Interior, Defense, or the religiously controlled judiciary, enjoyed deep roots and were difficult to coerce into submission.

Another interesting background is the growth of religious ulama with extensive administrative powers more as a quid pro quo for modernization and development. However, this has imposed a huge cost on Saudi development. According to the author, such a cost can only be borne thanks to the rentier state structure of Saudi Arabia.

Steffen Hertog does a wonderful job in this book on the political economy of Saudi Arabia. He opens by asking a few questions, such as: "Why did infrastructure projects of the 70s and 80s succeed, but regulations of the 90s fail? Why did some policies get implemented while others foundered?" As he unpacks the institutions that form the Saudi state and narrates the history of their formation, Hertog strives to examine the successes and failures of the state at large. He argues that the kingdom has "islands of efficiency with explicit mandates to bypass state bureaucracy," on the one hand, while the government failed in three policy areas since the year 2000, on the other. The

failures include the kingdom's inability to successfully implement the laws for the Saudization of Labor, laws for foreign investments, and policies for accession into the WTO. Among Hertog's "very efficient and capable parts of the Saudi State" are the Central Bank SAMA, the national oil company ARAMCO and the state-owned petrochemical group SABEC. Unfortunately, not all Saudi state institutions turned out to be as efficient as some ministries that became fiefdoms under the exclusive control of their respective ministers, princes and commoners. "Ministries of Defense and Interior, the National Guard and the Religious Bureaucracy have reached a level of internal autonomy that is almost unrivaled among modern states," according to Hertog, who writes that some Saudi institutions have become states within the state. To make things worse, relations between the Saudi ministries have always been "vertical" rather than "horizontal."

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