

# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

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## The Saudi Arabia I Remember

By John R. Bradley

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

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The Saudi Arabia that I remember

By John R. Bradley

If it bleeds, it leads. So the infamous journalism cliché has it. And since there has been a lot of blood spilled in recent weeks in Saudi Arabia, that inevitably is what has been screaming from the headlines.

However, we should pause briefly to put things into perspective, especially to counter the entirely negative image of the kingdom that now seems to have been adopted by those who have no direct experience of it.

The kingdom is, we are told, a hotbed of religious fanaticism. Many of its people, we hear, hate foreigners and unconditionally support Osama bin Laden. There is some truth to that. But there is another side to the life and people there, which represents the best Islamic traditions of generosity, kindness and hospitality. And during the nearly three years I spent living and traveling throughout Saudi Arabia, from its remotest cities to its most inaccessible mountainous areas, it was that other side that was overwhelmingly in evidence.

Recent particulars come to mind. In Sakaka, a small city in the north near the Iraqi border, I arrived early for an appointment. The secretary at the office, after finding out that I did not have a car to get back to my hotel, handed over the keys to his own. Minutes later, I was driving through the city's streets, overwhelmed by an act of instinctive kindness that would perhaps now be unimaginable in any other part of the world.

In Riyadh, I could not find the offices of Al-Watan newspaper, nor could the taxi driver, so we stopped to ask the way from a Saudi in his 30s who had parked by the side of the road. He called a friend, who gave him the number of someone else, who was able to give directions to where the office was. The Saudi then told me to get in beside him, and we drove in silence for 15 minutes before he dropped me off. Then he was on his way again, almost before

I had a chance to say thank you.

In the mountains of Asir in the southwest of Saudi Arabia , when I took a wrong turn in my four-wheel drive and ended up on the edge of a cliff, I was concerned to discover that I had ended up in the yard of a small brick house, literally in the middle of nowhere. This also happened to be the region the majority of the Saudi hijackers involved in the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks had come from. Stephen Schwartz, an American writer, has never visited the kingdom, but in his book "Two Faces of Islam," he endorsed a historical description of its people as "barbarians."

Well, it may interest Schwartz to know that the "barbarians" who emerged from the brick hut were two little boys who had flowers and herbs woven intricately into their hair - part of the region's tribes known as "flower men" as a result of that charming habit. It quickly became evident that they had never seen a Westerner before; but they were all smiles and hellos, until their father arrived. He, too, emanated perfume made from local flowers, and was also sporting a splendid floral display in his hair. He pointed the way out of the mountain, which entailed driving for 20 minutes through a stream. But when a Saudi in such circumstances tells you something, you implicitly have trust that you are being helped.

And so, a short while later, I was back on the goat track, contemplating how you go into the heart of alleged "bandit country" and encounter the unconditional assistance of boys and men heavily into flower power. With the beheading of American Paul Johnson last week and the violent acts against foreigners that preceded it, things have changed, perhaps forever. The bonds of trust that existed between guests who made the effort to get to know Saudi culture and those local Saudis who had the time and inclination to welcome the foreigners into their midst have been undermined, perhaps irreparably.

I admit it: If a Saudi offered me a ride in his car today in Riyadh , I would probably decline. But I would still much prefer to spend an evening sitting with my Saudi friends on Jeddah's corniche, smoking a hubbly-bubbly and feeling the gentle wind on our faces, to sitting in a New York cafe with people who spend their days posting messages of hate about Saudi Arabia and Arabs on anti-Muslim websites.

One ray of hope was given by Johnson's courageous family, which released a statement after news of his death was confirmed, recalling: "He considered Saudi Arabia his home," and "loved the people and the country." They also knew, a family spokesman added, that "this act of terrorism was committed by extremists, and does not represent the Saudi Arabia that Paul often spoke and wrote about to his family."

Many of those of us who have lived in Saudi Arabia , and feel lucky to have Saudi friends, feel the same way.

*John R. Bradley ([www.johnrbradley.com](http://www.johnrbradley.com)), formerly managing editor of Arab News, Jeddah, is author of a forthcoming book, " Saudi Arabia Exposed: Princes, Paupers & Politics in the Wahhabi Kingdom ." He wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR*

More About the Author:

John R. Bradley was the only permanent, accredited Western journalist in Saudi Arabia from before the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington until after Al-Qaeda's two Riyadh bombings in May and November last year. He traveled extensively in Saudi Arabia: from the mountains of Asir in the southwest to the remote northern city of Sakaka; from the oil-rich Eastern Province to Najran on the Yemeni border.

He is a former managing editor of the Jeddah-based Arab News, which The New York Times has called "the pre-eminent English-language daily in the Middle East;" and a former senior editor at Al-Ahram Weekly in Cairo.

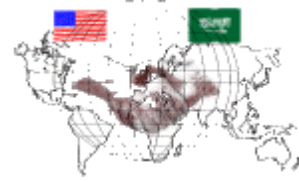
He was educated at University College London, Dartmouth College in the United States and Exeter College, Oxford; and he has studied Arabic intensively at language schools in Morocco, Egypt and Yemen. His travel/cultural guides to Iraq and Saudi Arabia appear in The Lonely Planet Guide to the Middle East.

More..

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