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Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads

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interaction has happened for centuries, and understanding that history will offer today's strategists, officers, and decision makers the background they need to think deeply about the great-power interactions of the twenty-first century.

BENJAMIN ARMSTRONG



Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads, by David Rundell. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. 336 pages. \$27.

The active pursuit of knowledge through experience, academic study, and deep critical thought may define a lifelong learner; however, the ability to convey that same information to readers effectively is no less than a gift. In David Rundell's *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads*, we find its result: a treasure that is no less than a sentinel-level work on the historic evolution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

It is easy, even natural, for this reviewer and other readers to be critical even to the point of cynicism when it comes to books on geopolitics and history. Before reading this work, a colleague (who is also a war college graduate) and I listened to a virtual presentation by an opening commentator and then one by the author himself. Both of us exclaimed, "This guy is an apologist of the current leadership, without question!" Had the book not been ordered already, I fear I may have skipped it, given the opinion I developed that afternoon. What a mistake that would have been, and how terribly wrong I was in my assessment! Rundell is no practitioner of apologetics; he is a gifted storyteller and writer, and his insights into the dynamics of the Middle East and Saudi

Arabia's role in it are comprehensive. He misses none of the subtle nuances that elude some of the best writers. For any real student of the subject, this book is a treasure to be returned to again and again. If one ever has observed a master of any craft or profession—surgery, for instance—one understands and knows the joy of learning from someone who is comfortable in his element and has progressed through practice, experience, failure, and reattempts in the pursuit of excellence. This certainly is the case with Rundell's lucid explanation of Saudi Arabia's journey.

Rundell has spent his life preparing for or serving within the diplomatic sphere, beginning with his education in economics at Colgate University and MPhil from Oxford in Middle Eastern studies. Of his more than thirty years of diplomatic experience, half was spent in Saudi Arabia itself and the remainder in countries in the region or having influence in the same. If academic preparation and experience are not enough to convince, consider critical thinking as the third leg in certifying Rundell as a subject-matter expert on the kingdom. Finally, he is a gifted writer, interweaving facts, opinion, and external influences into a thesis that sticks. His ability to convey the complex in a near-layman's approach helps the reader form enlightened conclusions rather than being merely informed through expert opinion.

Readers will enjoy the format by which the writer progresses. The book is divided into five near-equal parts, each with three to five chapters that are easily digestible and leave the consumer hungry and expectant. The parts give general views on subjects such as nation creation, succession management,

stakeholder consideration, delivery of competent government, and meeting of the challenges of the future. There is scant evidence of salaciousness or vivid tale-telling of critical events merely to invoke readers' interest—for instance, there is little coverage of subjects such as Jamal Khashoggi and the Ritz-Carlton affair. Instead, Rundell's effort goes toward providing considerable insight and explanation to help readers understand the “why,” leaving them to draw their own conclusions. In contrast, many of the available books out now use such particular events to draw in readers and keep them interested. Rundell uses history to analyze the decision-making and actions of Saudi rulers, and applies them to current events and personalities as a predictor of what the future may hold.

Like many readers, the reviewer picks up a new book and ruminates on what can be drawn from an initial review of the title, cover, and introduction; I myself do not even begin to read the content until I have considered these for a couple of days. Rundell gives the initial impression that he is looking at Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), his “Vision 2030,” and whether it can bring the kingdom through its current crossroads into the future. What Rundell delivers is an analysis of how the Al Sauds have approached many crossroads in the past, to provide a prediction of how its current leadership will proceed in the future. Readers who study this work and the history of Saudi Arabia will gain insight on what is to come. Regardless of what you think or have heard, MBS is right on track with the history of his predecessors.

JOHN W. STRAIN



Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East, ed. Paul Salem and Ross Harrison. Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, 2019. 213 pages. \$14.95.

Civil war has been a defining reality of the Middle East for decades. The conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are just the latest examples of countries squandering their blood and treasure while achieving inconclusive political ends. Even more troubling, civil wars in these countries often lead to a “conflict trap”; war devastates the economic, political, and social fabric of the nation, trapping it in a vicious cycle of unending violence.

In *Escaping the Conflict Trap*, editors Paul Salem and Ross Harrison have brought together academics and practitioners to help shed light on the causes of and challenges posed by civil wars in the Middle East. The volume is written to appeal to a broad audience, including academics, practitioners, and “interested citizens.” The readings offer valuable academic and policy insights on specific civil wars while remaining accessible to the general reader. However, what makes this book truly unusual is that it also includes potential courses of action that might help end a few of the region's civil wars.

Escaping the Conflict Trap is structured to address what the editors assert are three “gaps in the existing discourse of civil wars in the Middle East” (p. ix). Salem in chapter 1 and Harrison in chapter 3 assess the historical and geopolitical dynamics, respectively, of civil war in the region. Salem sets the context for the volume by providing a useful synopsis of the “patterns, definitions, and dynamics of civil wars” in