

## HIGHWAY 15:

### KINGDOM AT THE CROSSROADS



**Oliver Steeds**

*'Saudi Arabia, look there for some answers'. It was October 2001, and 9-11 was lunch-time conversation with an old friend just returned from years living in Central Asia. From my vantage point of an American news studio, it was difficult to know what he meant. In the immediate aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, I'd finally found an excuse to travel through Saudi Arabia and Yemen guided by an old friend - artist Stephen Stapleton: our mission - to meet Saudi and Yemeni artists and document their work and their changing perceptions of themselves and the world around them – Stephen looking through the prism of art, and I as a journalist.*

Saudi broke into the international spotlight over oil and terrorism. It houses the spiritual home of Islam, a quarter of the world's oil and the birthplace and leading recruiting grounds of al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden views Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of a new Islamic Kingdom that will spread out across the world. It is becoming ever clearer that this is an ideological conflict. Young men are the weapons and yet few ask them what they think. In the Greater Middle East, 70% are under 30, in Saudi 50% are under 15. The demographic time-bomb is ticking where young people rarely have a voice. They face an inheritance of internal political, religious and cultural change, the fallout from 9-11, the politics of Palestine and Iraq, a love-hate relationship with America, and what many believe is the West's war on Islam.

From nomad to settler, from Bedu to businessman, the last 50 years have seen seismic cultural change in the Kingdom. Glass towns have risen from Saudi's sands, financed by billions of petro-dollars. Urban population has increased from 1 million in 1973 to 22 million today. But despite these changes the tribal culture is still alive, seen in the streets of the capital Riyadh where men still choose to wear the full-length desert thawb. Politically as well as culturally, Bedouin traditions and alliances remain strong across Saudi Arabia. The political legitimacy and position of power of the Al Saud family would crumble without the historic pledge of allegiance from the other tribal leaders.



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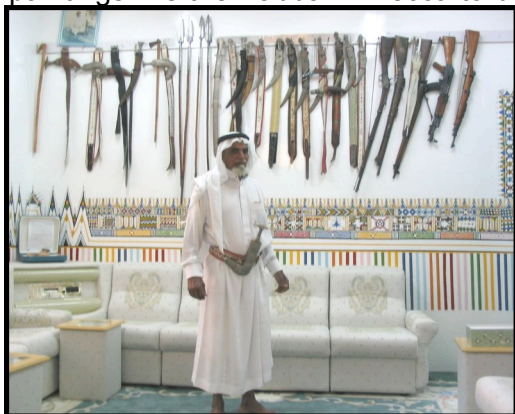
Highway 15 was the vision of Mohammed Awad bin Laden, Osama's father, to link his ancestral Yemen with Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed. The road starts in the tribal heartlands of Aseer, historically a place known throughout the Kingdom for the Flowermen, a tribe of fearsome warriors that took their name because of the flowers worn in their hair. But today, Asser is one of the most religiously conservative regions of Saudi, the home of many of the radical jihad-preaching clerics. In the heart of this mountainous province is the village of Jal Alma, now infamous as the birthplace of a number of the September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers. Few there can forget that 15 of the 19 involved were Saudi, 12 of whom originating from the tribes that straddle Highway 15. The local Sheik, like many, believes they were not true to their faith: 'Every blood is sacred and as Muslims we respect the sanctity of life even the lives of animals and the trees. Causing harm is a sin. My advice is to fear Allah and obey the leaders as it says in the Qu'ran'.



Is this just an unhappy coincidence or is there a link between Aseer and terrorism? As one articulate young poet in the regional capital Abha said: "I am astonished that we tend to see the empty half of the glass. We tend to focus on the few who committed the atrocity and ignore the tens of thousands of peaceful people". The poet is part of an emerging group of young contemporary artists, who are probably more important than the terrorists in understanding what people really think. They are

intelligent, articulate and the unofficial historians of their time and place. They express the feelings of this new generation, a generation that will decide the Kingdom's future, echoes of which will resound around the world.

“There is no link between the city and the terrorists or a group of people, or outcasts who do not represent Islam. By doing so they harm Islam”, said Abdu Arishi, one of the group's leading artists. In the last two years he has shifted from traditional paintings like the Kabba in Mecca to building a life-size sculpture of a man made out



of television, video and computer components, the organs and vessels of an encroaching technology. They all share one thing in common – they feel the tiny minority of terrorists do not represent them. Beyond the hype that mainstream Western media gives to the terrorists, these are the voices that are not being heard, voices that are asking the same

questions that are being asked in the West: why is this happening?

A young journalist working for a progressive newspaper in Abha pointed to too much religious education in society to explain how his contemporaries, a number of whom he knew, had become the hijackers of 9-11: “it can be easily influenced by people in mosques or even in the street. Their education must have been superficial”.

Young people are being schooled in conservative religious teachings rather than vocational training. They lack many of the key skills needed to drive the economy. With more than 40% of men working in government jobs, the economic structure seems increasingly unsustainable. More worryingly, the economy is weakening. In real terms, despite the recent high oil prices, Saudis are now earning less than a third of what they were earning in 1980 and unemployment among young men is now as high as 30%. It's the economy of their inheritance, and within all failing economies political and social discontent increases.



In a large under-used car-park in Abha, next to the artists' commune, a group of Pakistanis had rigged up some stumps and were enjoying a game of concrete cricket on their day off. They are some of the six million 'guest workers' in the Kingdom, allowed in to take the jobs that Saudis refuse. In a quiet moment down at fine leg,



Imran, a manager at the local bottling plant, explained that their days may be numbered if the government has its way: 'they've launched Saudisation, a process of economic and educational reforms to decrease reliance on us foreign workers and bring the under-employed middle class back into the picture'. If these plans fail,

and if economic and demographic trends continue, Saudi will be a poor country and perhaps even a failing state in less than 25 years.

But change is slowly underway and currently the vast majority of young Saudis are not so deeply alienated economically or socially that they see violence as offering political solutions. But many do see the events of 9-11 in New York, 7-7 in London and the spread of Islamist violence as a long-overdue wake-up call, the increased politicisation of young Muslims in general and young Arabs in particular.

Achmed Matre is one of the most talented young painters in the Kingdom, his work exhibited worldwide including the centrepiece at the British Museum's recent contemporary Middle Eastern art exhibition. His painting reflects his life - an early



painting shows a black bird standing on a sign reading UN1441. Achmed, like many of his peers around the world, feels angry and powerless regarding the situation in Iraq. "What concern us all is similar and it's global", he said whilst working in his studio, surrounded by the x-rays he incorporates into his artwork, which he has taken from the hospital where he's studying to become a doctor. "We all have the same vision. We are all linked so whatever happens in the world affects us all. In my work I try to reflect my feeling and concerns and sometimes I don't

understand how I can say a particular thing. My work is a witness to my situation and the frame of mind I am in at the time."

Achmed's recent paintings explore the common suffering of all humanity; the results are powerful, emotive, and honest reflecting a cultural development and creative expression that wouldn't look out of place in galleries in the West. His art is full of empathy for people's struggles throughout the Arab and Muslim world and no more so than with the people of Iraq. While he's against his peers taking up arms, he realises that a growing number are becoming increasingly radicalised. It's a fomenting discontent that the government is trying to keep a lid on and prevent from spilling into domestic issues.



“The cause of Palestine is the main cause for all Muslims and Arabs”, said an impassioned member of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth. Young Saudis, like their contemporaries all over the Islamic World, talk of the injustice in Palestine as central to their political awakening. “Al Aqsa mosque”, he continued, “the third holiest mosque in Islam, is there. What is happening in Palestine is terrorism by the Israelis. The Palestinians are defending their homeland using stones while the Jews who occupy the land have weapons of mass destruction and tanks and they call the Palestinians terrorists”. In another art studio, exiled Palestinian Mazin Okal works on a painting of a boy with a slingshot, one of a series of posters he makes for the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. The political art of Mazin and others is a reaction to what they see as the never-ending cycle of violence. Many of these images decorate teenagers' rooms and public spaces alike, but to an outsider they seem more part of the problem than the solution.

Many feel that Arab leaders continue to wave the emotive flag of Palestine without doing much to actually support its people. Israel provides the perfect external focus to channel people, especially young people, away from their dissatisfaction of domestic corruption and political failures. It is dangerous to say so openly, but many young people realise that the Al Sauds have been lining their pockets with petrodollars at the expense of the people for years, helped by a mutually beneficial relationship with the US. The US economy is like a patient on dialysis, dependent on imported oil, and more than 20% of that oil



comes from Saudi. In turn the US has served both as the Al Sauds' off-shore investment centre, with 860 billion Saudi dollars flowing into the US economy over the last 25 years, as well as filling the role of the Kingdom's chief supplier of weapons. Instead of focussing their anger on the Al Sauds' personal profiting, many view the US as being at fault, and coupled with American soldiers still stationed on sacred Saudi Arabian soil, provides the major focus of anti-US sentiment, a situation easily exploited by bin Laden as his messages often declare: "There is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the holy land [of Arabia]"



Continue along Highway 15, and you reach Mecca - the spiritual home of Islam, the birthplace of Mohammed, the final destination of the pilgrimage or Hajj, and closed to non-Muslims. On the outskirts of town stands a sign: Muslims may enter Mecca, non-Muslims must take a ring-road. It's a sign of the present conflict - Al Qaeda and fundamentalists call for a removal of non-Muslims from the holy land, whilst reformers are trying to open the doors of Islam and engage the world in an open discourse.

"Islam in Saudi is unique thanks to the presence of the two sacred mosques in Saudi Arabia at Mecca and Medina", Mohammed said gently. "They give security to the people who live in Saudi Arabia who live in the vicinity of the two mosques".

Mohammed is a devout Wahhabi Muslim and lives his life according to the strict interpretation of the Koran laid out in this back-to-basics branch of Sunni Islam.



Wahhabism is the state religion, the crossed swords on Saudi insignia reflecting the 18<sup>th</sup> Century power sharing deal struck between al-Wahhab, the founder of modern Wahabbism and the Al Saud tribe. This alliance lies at the foundation of modern Saudi Arabia but cracks are now starting to form. In openly challenging domestic and

foreign policy, the Wahhabis are starting to present an Islamist opposition to the Saud State, something that the new King must tackle.

Despite the authoritarian control and the dangers inherent with expressing overtly challenging political views, it remains up to the Saudi people to define the debate about their modern Islamic identity and how Wahhabism should influence their social, cultural and political character.

“I painted portraits but I also tried different styles but there are people who prohibit painting portraits claiming it’s un- Islamic”, said Abdu Arishi, whilst drilling computer parts to his latest conceptual art piece, the Twin



Towers. “But that’s their opinion but to me it’s just a form of expression”. These artists express their changing identity through their art, engaging in the debate about what modernity and progress mean within the Kingdom. The Wahhabis view progress in terms of developing an Islamic identity through religious and cultural education while the modernisers are calling for more rapid social and political change, increasing the availability of vocational education, expanding the role of women, improving human rights and modernising the legal system.

Whether you sit with the Wahhabis or the Modernizers, Saudi’s future will be



dependent upon adapting the institutionalised Wahhabi faith to economic and social change. Reforms have begun but the pace and acceptance of these changes will decide the Kingdom’s future. But to many non-Muslims in West, Islam currently seems more black and white, stimulating the

dangerous radicalisation of young Arabs.

Just across the southern border lies Saudi’s poor cousin, Yemen. The two countries were once very similar, but have been pulled apart and rebuilt in very different ways. Yemenis seem less averse to talking about their past, and in the old city of Sanaa,

Yemen's capital, a young man called Kais spoke openly about how he'd been studying at his local mosque when he was recruited into a Jihadi training camp.

"We had one strange teacher who taught us lessons about jihad. Once he told us to come to his house to watch some videotapes about people who had been to Afghanistan. Then he moved from the subject of Koran to jihad. Jihad is holy word. Every night for about one week, he showed us movies including stories of a man who threw a stone at a tank and the tank exploded because he said 'Allah Akbar'. Later we went on a picnic and they showed us how to use the gun. We believed all this but I was a child."



Jihad, the struggle, the act of defending the faith, is the unofficial 'sixth pillar of Islam'. When one hears stories like Kais's, it's easy for us in the West to link Islam with terrorism. That is what Osama bin Laden's aim. He hopes that the West's view of the Middle East is polarised around Islam and the youth of the region, especially those in Saudi Arabia, see America's 'war on terror', and ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as a war on Islam.

Increasingly many young Muslims in Saudi and the UK believe their faith is the target. But extremism and terrorism are not inextricably linked to Islam; they are a global and historic scourge. The 'war on terror' did not begin on 9-11. Over the centuries, Islam has been no more violent than Christianity. Open the bible to Ezekiel 9 and read: "Kill and destroy them all, old men and young girls, little children and women... defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain". Open the Qu'ran to Sura 8: "I shall cast terror in the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, strike off the very tips of their fingers". Both talk of war, martyrdom and religious violence. Different interpretations exist and without a single, unified voice within Islam it's easier for individual preachers, politicians or terrorists to manipulate the scriptures for their own purpose, leading to deep misunderstandings.





Many young Saudis, and increasingly British Muslims, feel they are being linked to terrorism simply because they are Muslims, by the indiscriminate linking of Islam or Muslims with broad terms such as fanaticism, terrorism or fundamentalism. At best this leads to confusion and at worst it aggravates anti-Muslim racism and indirectly legitimises the use of Islam as an excuse for terrorism. It polarises the conflict around Islam and takes the world a step closer to Huntingdon's fabled and tabled 'clash of civilisations'.



One medical student put it succinctly: "When they [the West] start judging us like criminal people because we are Muslims, things become more difficult for us. I want to tell you something - whatever they do, we will not change our way of living. It will become harder for us but we will not leave our religion whatever will happen."

Very few of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims actively support terrorism, but an increasing number are vocally supporting Osama bin Laden and see him as a romantic revolutionary hero, a modern-day Robin Hood, Saladin or even a Che Guevara, a pious, brave man who gave up the luxuries of immense personal and family wealth to go and fight in the trenches to defend Islam and protect Muslims. He is clear in his message to the young: "Defensive jihad is obligatory for all Muslims: it is even more obligatory upon the youths in the prime of their lives than upon the old". The more that young Muslims feel that their religion is becoming the target, the more they will see the solution lies in war, or in Islamic terms, as inspired by bin Laden and instructed by Allah, a defensive jihad to protect Islam.



A stone's throw from Mecca is Jeddah, a modern melting pot of cultures, the port of pilgrims on their Hajj, the corporate head quarters of the bin Laden family, and the end of Highway 15. With a high number of fatal road accidents, Highway 15 is known locally as 'The Road of Death'. It's a sign of the times; young people always want kicks and here, racing their cars is one of the few ways they can get them.

In Jeddah, young people embrace American culture. They watch pirated DVDs like 'The Fast & The Furious' and take to the streets. Identity is worn on the sleeve - wear this - be that. As their clothing and graffiti about Eminem and 2-PAC testify, it's the US gangsta look they aspire to. Rodeo Drive, the main strip, lined with Western brand icons from Ferrari to Starbucks, from Nike to Porsche, hustles and bustles at



night. Apart from the stark absence of women, it could easily be a street-scene in any major Western, or most strikingly American, city. A young photographer highlights a glaring contradiction: "They say they hate America but they are using the American lifestyle".

Many young Muslims hate America, not for what America is, nor for their affluence, culture or way of life - because many love that - but for what America does - its economic, military and political policies towards the Arab and Islamic World. It's a crack that Osama bin Laden and others are opening up. This is the frontline of a clash of cultures - where McDonaldisation and Coca-colonisation clash with fundamentalist views of Arab and Islamic tradition and where culture becomes subliminally political.

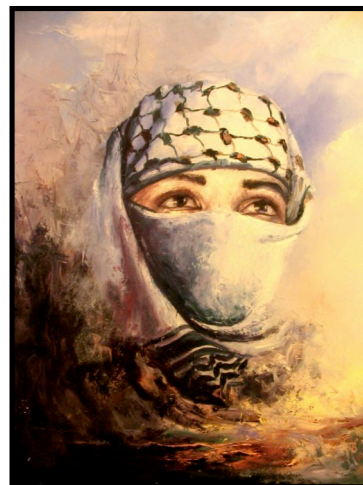
This is an ideological conflict. War is as much to do with thoughts and words as anything else and in today's world, media plays a vital role. As a Sheik in bin Laden's ancestral home said: 'If this mind is built by the media it will also be destroyed by the media. But history should still teach us more than the media'. History tells us that we should not be surprised that the majority of suicide bombers in Iraq are Saudis. After all, it's been government policy to export trouble-makers since the 1980s where certain young people (including Osama bin Laden) were encouraged to go a kind of gap year to fight in Afghanistan.



Internet use in Saudi is on the increase: 31% of the population has online access through 42 service providers. Much like those in the developed world, Saudi youth are a generation 'growing up digital'. Since 9-11 Al Qaeda's greatest expansion has been through the Internet using affiliated sites like Al-Ansar, Al-Neda, and Al-Islah for propaganda, education and communications. Websites, bulletin-boards and chat rooms are the domain of this

new 'cyber-caliphate', where the political messages of global jihad are being spread.

There are now around 2000 newspapers and 95 satellite channels available in the Arab world. Young Saudis are now able to tune into the global airwaves, piping in a heady mixture of influence from international news channels to American soaps and Hollywood movies. Al Jazeera, Al Arabiyah, Al Ekhbaria, and Abu Dhabi TV among others are for the first time starting to show the world from an Arab perspective - polarising and politicising young people. Turn on the TV anywhere in the world and you see carnage in Iraq. In the UK we get the perspective of the BBC looking in over the shoulder of American soldiers. In Saudi they see Al Jazeera, looking out from the streets flowing in the blood of fellow Arabs.



The Arab world watched the events unfold in Iraq and saw the US-led coalition occupy a Muslim country, in the name of the 'war on terror'. The war has validated bin Laden's case for a defensive jihad against the United States. It has increased hatred for American foreign policy, increased political, economic and social instability within the region, provided a new breeding ground where terrorists can operate and develop, and has presented a focus for a fresh recruiting drive among existing and newly-formed jihadi groups.

A nation's response to its history can suggest its future. Young Saudis have two very different perspectives of their past - one looks in and another looks out. Look in



through their eyes, and you see domestic problems of corruption, deprived political empowerment, weakening economies, poor education and deplorable human rights. Look out and you see the West's role in their history - the post-

colonial arbitrary carve-up of the Middle East after the Second World War and the West's subsequent support of corrupt totalitarian regimes in a divide-and-rule foreign policy in the region. Look in from the West and you see the need for reform, look out from the Arab World, and you can see why America is increasingly hated and why bin Laden is winning more support.

This is not a war on terror, this is a war of ideologies. History has a strange way of repeating itself. Once again two sides are seemingly acting out agendas that are mutually served by reducing the complexities of the real world to a simple black and white morality of 'good versus evil'. Political rhetoric on both sides is reminiscent of the Cold War, leaders in the Arab and Western worlds talk of 'us against them'.



We have not yet reached the terrifying prospect of another 'clash of civilisations' but if the world carries on down this path, we probably will. As the young man who went through jihadi training said: "I'm sure all the hate against the US is because they're beside Israel. They should be beside fair. Because there is no justice there will be other worse attacks in America or maybe in England". His warning has sadly come too late for many, but examining the causes of this violence must be done, not to legitimise but to understand. In the middle of it all, a Kingdom stands at a crossroads. Ultimately, Saudi's youth will decide its fate.

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THE AUTHOR FILMING IN YEMEN

