

Was 9/11 a Wake-Up Call for Saudi Arabia Like It Was for America?

“Where were you on Sept. 11?” has become one of the defining questions for today’s generations, much like older Americans were audited on how they heard about Pearl Harbor, the John F. Kennedy assassination or the Challenger disaster. On that fateful day in 2001, I was traveling in the Middle East with my then-13-year-old son, leading a group of journalists and pastors on a tour of biblical sites in Jordan.

While standing in the ancient ruins of the biblical city today known as Jerash, we received the news that the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were reduced to rubble. How surreal, from a region of the world identified with tension and violence, to watch the horror unfolding on our own shores.

Fast forward nearly two decades to September 2019, and my experience on the eve of the 18th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy was especially significant and even more surreal. I was back in the Middle East to meet with Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, as part of a delegation of American evangelical Christian leaders led by author Joel C. Rosenberg, serving as ambassadors of reconciliation and friendship in the name of Jesus.

We returned for our second meeting in less than a year to deepen a growing friendship and continue candid, substantive dialogue, including hard, direct questions about countering radical extremism, the Middle East peace process, religious freedom and human rights. We inquired about imprisoned activists, for whom we asked mercy be shown or a pardon given, and about Khashoggi investigation trials and updates on ongoing reforms related to Vision 2030.

While some questioned the timing of our visit concurrent with somber "Never Forget" anniversary observances back home, it was appropriately symbolic, sending a message in defiance toward individuals who aim to derail reform in Saudi Arabia through an embrace of hate and fear rather than courage and moderation. We even asked Salman, commonly known as "MBS," about his personal experience on Sept. 11, 2001.

MBS was just 16 years old at the time of the attack. Though the two-hour meeting was off the record, like other leaders in the region, he was angry that in addition to commandeering planes, the jihadists hijacked his religion and the reputation of true Islam. Further, they brought misunderstanding and humiliation to him and his generation, who could no longer identify as Saudis with the international community, as that is not who they are.

It seemed the crown prince made a decision that day as a teenager that defines his current priorities of aggressively combating both radical Islamist terrorism and extremist ideology in an effort to make Saudi Arabia a model of moderate Islam. It also drives the dramatic and progressive economic and social reforms he is championing throughout his nation today, including empowering women and focusing on peace, religious freedom and human rights. In a way, MBS also seems to be driven by the #NeverForget mantra, and despite many challenges to be addressed and much more to be done, Saudi Arabia, the Middle East region and the world are better for it.

Saudi Arabia is far different than it was in 2001, which is most obvious with respect to matters of religion and faith. Back then, most Muslim leaders were silent about the evils of al-Qaeda and unwilling to wage war against it. As evidence of his bold leadership, MBS has since fired 3,500 extremist clerics and created the Etidal Center for Combating Extremist Ideology to provide global leadership in discrediting violent, vicious theology fueling the jihadists and proactively counter

digital radicalization on the internet in real time. As Joel Rosenberg observed, "He is fully in this fight and determined to win."

But Saudi leadership is also helping to codify and clarify the rights of individuals of minority faiths within majority Muslim nations. In March of this year, the crown prince's father, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, hosted a gathering of 1,200 top Muslim scholars in Mecca, who unanimously endorsed "The Charter of Makkah," a document significant in its inclusiveness and a development promising in its promotion of religious tolerance and moderation in the birthplace of Islam. We were especially encouraged by our conversation with the crown prince about religious freedom in that context, that Christian communities are free to practice their faith in their homes.

We also commended MBS for recent sweeping, historic economic and social reforms, including the empowerment of women, as part of Vision 2030 to create a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. These developmental changes are on track as the government is fully committed to strengthening and diversifying the economy and improving the quality of life for their citizens and residents.

The crown prince and his father have taken their economy from mud houses to one of the G-20 nations on the world stage in a very short time, which did not happen by accident and has never before happened in the history of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As part of their ongoing reforms, the new Saudi Arabia is placing an emphasis on tourism to welcome international visitors from all faith backgrounds to experience the rich heritage and natural beauty of the Arabian Peninsula.

That includes Al-Ula, the ancient southern capital of the Nabataean Kingdom complementing Petra in Jordan to the north, which we visited during our stay. We also went to NEOM, an unprecedented master-planned city of the future, near the

traditional site of where Moses led the children of Israel across the Red Sea in their flight from Egypt and began their 40-year wilderness wander.

As a result of 9/11, metaphorically, Saudi Arabia was in its own wilderness of isolation after 2001, and we acknowledged with the crown prince these rocky periods in the long history of the relationship. But leaders have since been making significant changes to bridge to the global culture while maintaining their values as Muslims. They are focusing on the next generation, as 70% of the population is under 30 years of age. Remarkable transformational change is happening throughout the Kingdom, with global consequences.

The Bible teaches us to pray “for kings and for all who are in authority” (1 Tim. 2:2a). As a result of what we heard and observed, our delegation came away with a better understanding of how to pray for the crown prince and the king. That includes wisdom and courage in tough decisions that need to be made to protect the safety and security of the Saudi people and residents of the kingdom, especially in the wake of horrific drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities two days after our delegation departed Jeddah for home.

Arguably, the national crisis of 9/11 was integral to the remaking of the American soul—individually and collectively. It was an occasion for citizens to take personal inventory of our lives and our priorities, uniting in gratitude to God for what we still have and what we can do, and back to His purpose and will for our lives. Michael Hyatt observed that we can manage how we respond to negative situations by asking ourselves the right question, “What does this experience make possible?”

Now, Crown Prince MBS is similarly finding his personal destiny and the kingdom’s national identity seeking tolerance, moderation and innovation, which may become the epicenter of revitalization of the region and a cultural and religious

renewal that will shake the world. {eoa}

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