

## PROFILE OF SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia is the creation of its first king, Abdul Aziz of the Al Saud family. From the turn of the century, he led his bands of desert warriors on a series of conquests, subjugating neighbouring tribes, capturing Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, from his Hashemite opponents and proclaiming in 1932, under his family name, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. His warriors fought their battles in the name of the austere Wahhabi Islamic movement which had arisen in the barren centre of the Arabian Peninsula. These factors have had an important place in the Kingdom's development.

Saudi Arabia has been a very stable and adaptable country over the past four decades. Also it has been able:

- to use its oil wealth to modernize its economy while maintaining internal stability;
- to play a significant role on the world economic scene through OPEC and the key position it holds in that Organization.

In foreign policy, Saudi Arabia has attempted to remain part of a broad Arab consensus. Within Arab counsels Riyadh plays a vital role. Its moderate, pro-Western influence has been used effectively to promote regional stability.

The Kingdom has played a prominent role in welding the oil producing states of the Gulf into a military/economic alliance, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), to protect their mutual interests in the region.

Oil wealth, especially since the boom of the 1970s, has led to increased domestic prosperity and rapid economic development. All members of society have enjoyed substantially greater economic well-being. For example:

- the average Saudi enjoys access to a wide range of social benefits ranging from free health care and education (including at foreign universities) to subsidized housing and interest free loans;
- the creation of a vast new infrastructure including roads, airports, water desalination plants, factories and whole new cities has given the populace an enhanced quality of life;
- industrialization and efforts to diversify the economy have also helped create opportunities for young Saudis.