

**Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement:
Social, Political and Religious Conditions during the Three
Centuries Preceding the Rise of the Saudi State**

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As the Muslim world searches for the right formula for reform, scholars and intellectuals are invited to study Islamic reform movements and the conditions that made their successes possible. In this context, *Najd before the Salafi Reform Movement* is a timely contribution to the literature on social conditions of reform in Muslim societies. The author correctly notes that pre-Salafi Najd (central Arabia) was neither a center of religious learning nor the site of large urban communities, which might be expected to produce a reform movement of a size and significance of the Salafi movement. Nevertheless, the Salafi movement managed to establish a strong state that unified Arabia and imposed peace and order on its people for the first time since the period of the early caliphs (pp. 1-2).

This book, originally a Ph.D. dissertation, seeks to solve this puzzle. A six-page bibliography and a thirteen-page index are suffixed, along with several maps and tables, and both the Hijri and the Gregorian calendars are used to mark the general time periods. This book is particularly useful for students of history, sociology, anthropology, or genealogy in an early-modern context, such as that of Najd between the mid-ninth/fifteenth and mid-twelfth/eighteenth centuries. The author argues that nomadic migration and settlement; the growth of a sedentary population, as well as migration and resettlement; and the growth of religious learning combined to create a new Najdi society that produced the Salafi reform movement (p. 2). Each of these factors is addressed in one chapter.

The first chapter, "The Geographical and Ecological Background," demonstrates how Najd's geographical setting and climatic conditions (viz., a desert region with an unpredictable climate) dictated its people's hard lifestyle and activities. For example, a persistent drought could turn a settlement, a region, or even the entire emirate into a wasteland (pp. 36-37). The second chapter, "An Historical Background," surveys Najd's inhabitants at the rise of Islam and follows its demographic and political developments throughout the first 9 centuries of the Islamic era. On the eve of Islam, Najd was populous and prosperous; however, by the third/ninth cen-

tury, its sedentary-nomadic equilibrium had become disturbed, mainly to the advantage of the nomads. This was a result of fresh nomadic migrations and the `Abbasid government's waning authority. As the local emirate only had limited power, it could not protect the settled population. The nomads' reign, however, was interrupted in the mid-ninth/fifteenth century by the short-lived rule of the Jabrids (pp. 54-55).

The third chapter, "The Nomads of Najd," details how Najd received waves of nomads from regions to the west and southwest during the 3 centuries that preceded the Salafis. New tribal groups and confederations dominated the emirate and forced out the old groups. When the nomadic population grew so large that Najd's natural resources could no longer sustain the people, fierce competition among the nomadic groups intensified. However, this problem was moderated as some nomadic groups elected to migrate to the Syrian desert or southern Iraq, while others settled the land (p. 89).

The fourth chapter, "The Sedentary Population of Najd," proves a clear, but gradual, movement of resettlement and repopulation from the mid-ninth/fifteenth century, especially during the 150 years that preceded the rise of the Salafi movement. A majority of the settlements were either newly established or old settlements revived by groups other than their original inhabitants. This population growth resulted in a considerable number of Najdis migrating to the eastern coast of Arabia and southern Iraq (pp. 126-27). The fifth chapter, "The Growth of Religious Learning in Najd," shows a substantial increase of Najdi ulama between the tenth/sixteenth and the twelfth/eighteenth centuries, due mainly to two factors. First, many Najdi ulama traveled to Syria and Egypt to study with the leading Hanbali scholars and, upon their return, were initiated and began to contribute to an enthusiastic movement of learning. Second, the growing sedentary population not only needed, but could also support a large number of ulama, who served as imams, teachers, preachers, judges, and muftis (p. 139).

The final chapter, "Political, Social, and Religious Conditions in Najd," focuses on the sociopolitical unrest in Najd evident in the conflict among the inhabitants of each individual settlement, particularly within the town's ruling families, and the continuous fighting among the various towns and settlements. The *sharifs* of Makkah and the chiefs of al-Ahsa' (eastern Arabia) did not use their authority to impose peace or protect the settled population from the nomads' raids and extortions. The sedentary population appears to have grown frustrated by this endless strife and wanted peace and order to protect their lives and economic activities (pp.

155-56). The rise of the Salafi reform movement provided answers to these new problems.

A major strength of this study is its excellent use of local sources, both oral and written. Given that Najd was historically isolated and remote from the centers of culture and political life, the author had to gather pieces of information from mostly unpublished pre-Salafi sources as well as chronologies, biographies, popular poetry, genealogical and legal sources, and geographical dictionaries written during different periods. Unfortunately, the study did not shed much light on non-materialistic factors that contributed to the Salafi reform movement's rise, leaving the readers with an impression that only geography and economics matter in the making of history.

If Najd succeeded in producing such a great Islamic reform movement despite its extremely hard conditions, then no Muslim country can be excused from developing and nurturing Islamic reform movements on the same scale.

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