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The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why

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[Intruders in the House of Saud]

Part I

Shortly before midnight on May 12, 2003, Riyadh, the Saudi capital, was jolted awake by a series of synchronized car bombs that ripped through three residential compounds across the city. Twenty-five people from several nations, including Saudis, were killed. The jolt was psychological as well as physical. Al Qaeda, it seemed, had come home to roost, and not long after the terror attack, Saudis began referring to May 12 as "our Sept. 11."

Until the bombing, denial was officially sanctioned as a collective response to accusations that Saudi Arabia had a bit of a terrorism problem. Fifteen Saudis were among the hijackers who turned American passenger planes into missiles? Impossible, insisted Prince Nayef, the septuagenarian interior minister and younger brother of King Fahd, who has been ruler of Saudi Arabia since 1982 and is one of the dozens of sons of King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, who founded the modern-day kingdom in 1932. Only the Zionists benefited from 9/11, the prince told a Kuwaiti reporter in an interview that was later published in the Saudi press in December 2002. Therefore Israeli intelligence must have masterminded the plot.

When Saudi intellectuals began worrying aloud that Saudi mosques and schools were fostering hatred of non-Wahhabists among young men, the religious establishment -- which ensures that the kingdom follows a strictly puritanical interpretation of Islamic law -- reacted with righteous anger, as if its social authority were under threat. Prince Nayef defended the religious establishment and blamed instead a foreign import -- the Muslim Brotherhood, the radical Islamic political organization founded in Egypt in the 1920's -- for the kingdom's problems. For years, Saudi Arabia sheltered and embraced the Brotherhood activists, and now, Prince Nayef told the press, the Brotherhood had turned against the Saudis and were destroying the Arab world.

As many Saudis themselves will tell you, theirs is not a society accustomed to self-reflection. Critical thinking is discouraged. Obedience to the king is the unwritten constitution of the land; as the clerics say, it's God's law. The Saud dynasty and the Wahhabi clerics mutually reinforce each other's authority. It's been that way since the 18th century, when Muhammad Ibn Saud, a tribal ruler in the untamed deserts of central Arabia, struck a bargain with Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a puritanical religious reformer. They would purge Islam of the idol worshiping that had slipped into Bedouin religious practices, unify the competing tribes and conquer the Arabian peninsula. The Saudis lost and regained power over the centuries, but that religious-political covenant has endured and is the source of today's Saudi system. The royal family rules over politics,

security and the economy. The clerics hold sway over things social and cultural while preaching loyalty to the ruler as one of the highest duties of the good Muslim.

Under the strains of modernization, unemployment and terrorism, that covenant is beginning to fray. On a recent three-week journey through the kingdom, I heard the word "reform" everywhere I went, though no one seemed to agree on exactly what it meant. Much of Saudi society still clings to its conservative ways, fearfully glancing at change as a euphemism for an American cultural invasion. Many of the elderly princes -- the oldest brothers of King Fahd who for more than a quarter century have controlled the Ministries of the Interior and Defense, the National Guard and the Governorships -- are divided about how to change their kingdom to rid it of the extremism that leads to terrorism, without upsetting the powerful Wahhabi clerics who regard reform as apostasy and who legitimize the royal family's power as divine will.

An unlikely group of onetime religious jihadists have recently stepped into the midst of this debate. They belong to a larger circle of liberals, intellectuals, professors, former Wahhabi scholars, judges and even women who are discussing subjects in the media that were taboo before 9/11 -- questions about terrorism, about Wahhabi discrimination toward Muslims of the Shiite and Sufi sects (whom they consider apostates), about alcohol, about AIDS, about the rights of women to drive and work.

The ex-jihadists are fluent in Islam and, more important, in the lingo of the underground terrorists, and they've surfaced from the extremist subculture with a message for the Wahhabi official clerics, the royal family and even their complicit American allies: Wake up. It's you who created us. We are not an aberration.

Mansour Al-Nogaidan is the most daring and idiosyncratic of these reformists. He is a 33-year-old former radical imam and a columnist for Al Riyadh, one of the largest daily newspapers, controlled by the government, but his writing is often banned. The main target of Mansour's vitriolic critiques for the past three years has been Wahhabism, which he argues is the source of the political and cultural problems in the kingdom. Since Wahhabism is the ideology upon which the royal family has erected its legitimacy, Mansour is indirectly denouncing them. That's the way political dissent operates in the kingdom. If you aim directly at the royal family in public, you are likely to lose your freedoms. But in interviews with the foreign media, Mansour has been far more bold. He has said that if the royal family does not put aside the ideology of Wahhabism and rule more democratically, it will ultimately bring about its own downfall.

Mansour is a small, roundish man, with intense, protruding eyes and a gentle voice. He pouts and broods and smiles like a child. He's the vexing kid who never stops asking why. That constant questioning is what got him into Islamic radicalism and got him out if it -- and landed him in prison six times during the last 15 years.

He now lives alone in a studio in a small peach-colored building with a marble facade in a suburb of Riyadh. It's sparsely furnished with a bed, desk and a computer. Books that just four years ago he would have considered heretical are now piled up along the wall --

the banned novels of Turki al-Hamad, a liberal reformist from Mansour's hometown, Buraida; "Religions of the World"; texts by Nietzsche and Habermas; and a book of Michelangelo's art. He also keeps a CD-ROM, "Fatwas of Ibn Tamaya," the 14th-century scholar and éminence grise of Wahhabism, upon whom much of Saudi law is based. Mansour is locked in an intellectual battle with Ibn Taimaya, finding in his fatwas justification for terrorism. Most dear to him these days, however, is a biography of Martin Luther, which surprised and inspired him. For Martin Luther was not what Mansour had expected -- a soft messenger of God. Instead, Mansour discovered that Luther was tough and cruel with his enemies.

Mansour himself is attacked on all sides for his raw, brazen writing. I met him in December, when the capital was on high alert for terrorist attacks. Police checkpoints were sprouting up randomly in the middle of traffic. Hotels and government ministries were ringed with concrete barricades. A few weeks earlier, during the fasting month of Ramadan, militants sped through the gates of a residential compound just beneath one of the hilltop royal palaces in an S.U.V. packed with explosives. It detonated and killed 17 mostly foreign Arab workers and their families.

Mansour had just spent five days in prison for his recent anti-Wahhabist writing, and he told me that he often turns for strength to a story about Luther and Erasmus during the Protestant Reformation. "When Erasmus told Luther to calm down and be polite," Mansour said, "Luther told Erasmus: this is war."

Mansour is in a virtual war. Jihadi sympathizers routinely flood his e-mail and cellphone text messages with death threats and insults. Earlier last year, Mansour replied in kind -- calling one jihadi the Arabic word for "bitch." Insults are punishable by lashings under Islamic law, and the recipient of Mansour's retort filed a complaint with the judicial authorities, who are all Wahhabi scholars in law. In fact Mansour's curse was a pretext for the plaintiff and judge to threaten him for his recent heretical writings. When the confrontation came to a head, Mansour was sentenced to 75 lashes. Feeling desperate, alone and defenseless -- Saudis in such cases have no right to an attorney -- Mansour published an Op-Ed essay in the *The New York Times*. It appeared the day after Thanksgiving, during the festival *Id al-fatr*, the feast that ends Ramadan fasting. In it he told the world that though the Saudi government was cracking down on terrorists, they were missing the real culprit.

"Saudi Arabia is bogged down by deep-rooted Islamic extremism in most schools and mosques," he wrote. How can officials claim Saudi society "loves other nations," he asked, when state-sponsored preachers "continue to curse and call for the destruction of all non-Muslims?" He appealed to the world "to help us stand up against our extremist religious culture." He dared his fellow Saudis to "see ourselves the way the rest of the world sees us -- a nation that spawns terrorists -- and think about why that is and what it means." Only then "will we be able to take the first step toward correcting that image and eradicating its roots."

A few days later, the police showed up at the newsroom of Al Riyadh and ushered Mansour to jail. Mansour had made such criticisms before in various autobiographical essays published in the Saudi press and on popular Saudi Internet sites. But this was different. As Mansour recalled, the judge shouted, "How did you dare to write in the enemy's newspaper?"

Not everyone in the Saudi establishment wanted Mansour silenced. As Khalil al-Khalil, a prominent expert on Islamic law, told me, "Mansour has the guts to criticize some of the unquestioned ideas here because he cares about the future of the country." Jamal Khashoggi, a former editor of Al Watan, the most progressive newspaper in the country, and now a media consultant to the Saudi ambassador in London, explained: "Mansour comes from the hard-core camps. He knows their narrow minds. That's what makes the clerics so angry. Every ideological movement hates the breakaway, the traitor."

Mansour's views seem to be known throughout Saudi Arabia to anyone who reads. You can hear everything about him these days: that he's a bright young hope, a loser, an apostate. He's hated, adored, written off as an extremist who is now simply embracing the opposite extreme. A Saudi mother with a teenage son told me Mansour's Op-Ed had given her so much hope that she printed it out from the Internet and carries it in her purse to ensure all her friends read it. A year ago, three of the most radically extremist sheiks -- who are independent from the state clergy -- put out the word on the Internet and in mosques that Mansour al-Nogaidan rejected fate (up there with rejecting God) and believed in a new "humanist" Islam, and they asked God to destroy him. "If there is Islam in this country, he must be put to the sword," they decreed. Neither the Ministry of the Interior nor the official Wahhabi clerics denounced the death threat. Instead, they banned Mansour from writing.

Mansour is still on salary at Al Riyadh, though since his Times Op-Ed he cannot publish there, or anywhere else in the kingdom. If he does, the authorities have threatened to imprison him and take away his passport. So in the tradition of dissidents from repressive countries throughout the world, Mansour has chosen to keep his voice alive through the Western media -- both as a matter of liberal principle and as a safeguard against being forgotten and left to languish in prison.

In addition to Mansour, there are several writers who have left the Islamic extremist subculture and who are criticizing Wahhabi ideology. They live all over -- in the liberal port city Jidda, the conservative capital Riyadh and the southern mountains of Asir province, where four of the 9/11 hijackers came from. Among them are Khalid al-Ghannami, a cleric for 10 years who now advocates an individual interpretation of religion. There's Abdullah Bejad al-Oteibi and Mashari al-Thaydi, friends of Mansour's from their extremist days, who have rejected their pasts and the terrorist subculture, but who are more loyal than Mansour to the royal family. There's Abdullah Thabit, a poet and dreamer who writes about the beauty of music and poetry and the idiocy of religious restrictions against them.

But Mansour is in a category of his own. As Adel al-Toraifi, a political-science student and friend of Mansour's, told me, "Mansour has personally experienced almost every role in modern Saudi society" -- from his painful childhood, to his long history with Islamic scholarship, to his experience as an extremist and his political reformation. "So if you want to understand this period of transition in Saudi Arabia, and the debates about reform, you must study Mansour."

Mansour was born in 1970 in the Wahhabi heartland town Buraida, a centuries-old prosperous trading post on the caravan route between Kuwait and Mecca, 200 miles north of Riyadh. Today it could almost pass for an American town, with its tall houses, leafy trees and highway strips of gas stations, furniture shops and convenience stores -- except for the salmon-colored sand rustling through the streets and rising into dunes that cushion one side of town. Past the dunes, it's all shrub-dusted desert plains. As the principal town of Al-Qassim province and an oasis rich in agriculture, Buraida has spawned some of the wealthiest, most educated and influential people in the kingdom. Yet it's a conservative city, and one of extremes, the hometown of both the banned liberal novelist Turki al-Hamad and the unrepentant radical sheiks who inspired bin Laden.

Mansour grew up during the oil boom years in a typical central Arabian family -- his father, a livestock merchant, had two wives and 11 children; Mansour was a child of the second wife. It was a time of hurtling modernization and decadent prosperity, and Bedouin families were catapulted out of the desert age as new multilane highways and spic-and-span metropolises sprang up, often built by American workers.

The government promoted education to develop the mostly Bedouin nation.

The conservative Saudi society, however, was suspicious of this whirlwind of change, and murmurings of cultural resistance were finally given extreme voice in 1979 with the Mecca uprising, a seminal event in modern Saudi history. One November morning, Juhayman al-Oteibi, a fundamentalist preacher helped by a band of wild-bearded, gun-toting tribesmen, seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca and vowed to sweep the kingdom of corruption. Juhayman's complaints had been circulating in his Islamic manifestoes for years. The Saudi dynasty, he declared, was desecrating Islam, making alliances with Christian infidels who were importing their Western values, secular education and women on TV; the royal family was squandering billions on private jets, gambling, drinking and cavorting in loose European resorts. Even the royal governor of Mecca, cried Juhayman, was an alcoholic and a womanizer.

The mosque siege pierced the royal family where it was most vulnerable. Juhayman's accusations were mostly true. And the royal family's Islamic credentials rested on its control of the holiest sites in the Islamic world. If it couldn't secure them, who needed the royal family? After Juhayman held the mosque for two weeks, the police raided the site, and some 200 Juhaymanis and policemen were killed in a shootout that ended the siege. Two months later, 63 captured rebels, including Juhayman, were publicly beheaded.

Though Saudis did not forgive Juhayman for vandalizing the Grand Mosque, many did sympathize with his preachings. And most Saudis today will tell you what I heard from Mohammed al-Odadi, a Georgetown graduate, who is the secretary general of the tourism board in Asir province, where many of the rebel tribesmen hailed from: "The royal family cut off Juhayman's head, but implemented his entire agenda. They said what the hell: it won't mess with our power. Let the society have what it wants." In effect, the royal family let the Wahhabi clerics take back the keys to the kingdom's mores and social development.

Mansour came into his teenage years just as an officially sponsored "Islamic Awakening" was flourishing. Girls and boys had always been segregated, but now they had even less access to one another. Women were to be de-Westernized: religious vigilantes began enforcing the black head-to-toe abaya and even the triple-layered black veil for the face. (Today educated Saudis jokingly refer to their female compatriots as B.M.O.'s, or black moving objects.) Up went thousands of Koranic schools, and after-school religious-awakening classes were organized -- in mosques, school libraries and desert camping grounds. Shops and libraries were stacked with cassettes of famous preachers narrating stories of the prophet Muhammad and early Islam. Boys collected the tapes by the hundreds, trading them like baseball cards or album covers. It was called the "culture of the cassette." Meanwhile the whole country was mobilized to support the jihad to drive the Soviets from Afghanistan. Recruiting offices offered cheap tickets for young Saudis willing to fight the Soviet infidels. The United States, too, encouraged the jihadis -- they knew that holy warriors were not afraid to die -- and they persuaded the royal family to match their financing of the Afghan and Arab mujahedeen at close to half a billion dollars a year until 1989, when the Soviets withdrew.

Mansour was a good student, but around the time he was 14, he fell into brooding spells as he wrestled with questions about the prophet, the universe and whether the Koran was really the word of God. He could bear no distractions as he struggled and began withdrawing from public school, attending more lectures at the mosque. His doubts caused him physical pain. "I was terrified I was going to die in doubt and go to hell," Mansour told me in December in the lobby cafe of the Inter/Continental Hotel -- one of the Riyadh spots where he feels safe. It was cold in the city, and he wore a gray wool thobe (the ankle-length shirt worn by Saudi men), and a red-and-white kaffiyeh that he fidgeted with as we spoke over tea and French fries.

He's soft-spoken but passionate and often ends his answers with a question. He told me he was so disturbed in his teens by theological questions that he plunged into books on Islam and Wahhabism. He stopped speaking to people. His school grades dropped. He didn't care. If he could just calm his mind and reach a state of certain faith, he'd be saved. A neighbor told him about a sheik who gave good lectures after evening prayer. He started going twice a day.

One day in the mosque, another sheik, a well-known holy man named Abdul Karim Ibn Saleh al-Hamid, grabbed Mansour by the arm and fixed him with his eyes. He had been a translator at Saudi Aramco, the oil company, but had left the business and more or less

turned his back on civilization. He rode a horse and buggy and lived in a mud house. He'd forsworn music and television and man-made laws, international conventions and traffic rules. He had joined the Salafiyya, a radical Islamic movement that models itself on the original followers of Muhammad. The Salafi aspired to return to a mythical time of purity associated with the prophet before, as they believe, Muslims deviated from God's plan. As Muhammad promises the followers of Islam: "I am leaving two things with you that as long as you hold fast to them, you will never go astray: the Koran and the Sunna of His Messenger" -- the Sunna are the sayings attributed to Muhammad. The Salafi, literalists and fundamentalists, find in the Koran and the prophet's sayings a road map for life and death, and in some cases jihad.

Al-Hamid told Mansour that he had a future as a sheik. He talked to him about God's love and told him that to enter paradise, he should abandon the public schools, which are forbidden by God and had filled his head with heathen values. "I was already so close to their way of living," Mansour said. "They only lived for studying. They were so simple, so reserved. They were so appealing to me, and I thought maybe that's the way to happiness. But I was also so afraid."

Mansour told me that he then dropped out of school and told his family he wanted to become an Islamic scholar. His father warned Mansour he'd be on his own. His mother wept. His brothers threatened to beat and imprison him. He was forced to move out. But secretly proud of his son's choice, Mansour's father sent him \$350 a month until he died a year later.

Mansour moved to a Salafiyya community of about 300 families in a separate Buraida neighborhood with its own schools. Once he joined the Salafi, adopting their modest dress and long beards, Mansour wouldn't see or speak with most of his family members because they did not practice the true Islam. He'd also become dirt poor. After his father's death, all the family assets went to the first wife's sons, Mansour told me.

Mansour was a purist and epistemologist in his approach. As he wended his way deeper into Islam, whenever he bumped into an inconsistency, he had to stop and crush it. He was constantly skirmishing with the gray-haired government clerics. If Islam's rules were the word of God, he thought, then they must be taken literally. "Our official sheiks thought my activities were madness and would turn the people against us," Mansour recalled with some pleasure. "I said if our thoughts are right, we must tell the people."

At 18, he published his first opinion, objecting to congratulatory ceremonies for boys who'd memorized the Koran, or for men entering the priesthood, because Muhammad never practiced such rituals. The state-sponsored clerics (who run the justice system) threw the young upstart in jail for questioning their practices. Mansour sobbed, certain he was going to be hanged, but he wasn't, and he emerged defiant.

Mansour could not glaze over the contradictions between what was taught in the Wahhabi creed and what was practiced in the kingdom. At 19 he published a fatwa against the 1989 World Youth Cup in Saudi Arabia - kaffirs (infidels) should not be

allowed to compete in the Holy Land; and furthermore football is haram (forbidden). He got 55 days behind bars. Who was he to oppose the royal family's games?

Back in the Buraida mosque, he preached to his flock to take their children out of the infidel public schools. And back he went to jail. By now he was making a name for himself in Buraida and circles beyond. In a country where politics was forbidden, religion was the great equalizer. And the mosque was a public arena where you could prove your mettle and "box" with the older sheiks, as one of Mansour's friends put it. If you had talent to move an audience, if you dared to speak against the government, people would linger and listen.

In 1991, Osama bin Laden, who had visited Buraida to lecture on jihad, called Mansour to Jidda. But when Mansour got there, he was apprehensive, he told me, and had no idea whom to contact. After a week or so, he received a letter of apology from some associates of bin Laden's, saying that their leader had to flee the country before the government cracked down on him for fomenting rebellion, but the associates said they hoped to keep up the connection. Mansour was disappointed. The government had refused to give him a passport, and he would most likely never meet the then-Saudi folk hero.

Mansour was maturing into a charismatic preacher, indoctrinating young boys and commuting between Buraida and its Riyadh counterpart, Suweidi, a neighborhood south of the city -- busy, dense and conservative. Cigarettes weren't sold in shops. There Mansour met Mashari al-Thaydi and Abdullah Bejad, like-minded Islamists whose families migrated to Suweidi when they were both 9.

Mashari is a small Buraida man like Mansour, but more cautious and guarded. Now a rising columnist in Jidda at The Middle East Journal, a daily newspaper owned by members of the royal family, Mashari remembers the day when a mosque librarian handed him a recording of a famous Kuwaiti imam, who preached a harrowing tale of massacre two years earlier in Syria. The imam told how the secular President Hafez al Assad exacted revenge against Islamic insurgents of the Muslim Brotherhood by slaughtering 10,000 Muslims. "I couldn't sleep that night," Mashari said. The tape and the Salafi atmosphere percolating about Suweidi's mosques and student hangouts "made us all Islamically excited and on our toes," he recalled.

Abdullah Bejad grew up on Suweidi's streets, skipping school, getting into fights, mocking the religious geeks for their dourness and cowardice. He had one secret passion. He consumed novels by Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, whatever he could sneak under his thobe past his father, who thought reading made you crazy. Until one of those mesmerizing religious teachers fixed on him. "He was funny and brave, not how I expected religious people to be," recalled Abdullah Bejad when I met him at his home in Suweidi. Abdullah Bejad was intrigued. The teacher made religion so easy and rewarding, and he felt specially selected. He discovered the transporting power of the Koran. And he began to memorize God's words. Soon he didn't need the teacher. He hooked up with Mashari and Mansour and the flourishing Salafiyya movement, which by the late 80's was becoming something of a cult.

The Salafiyya teachers were sweeping up young men all over the kingdom. They went for the softest targets -- the youth in conservative central Arabia, and in places like the southern, mountainous province Asir, which was poor and neglected by the government. The Asiris were simple, with fierce tribal loyalties, and practiced a moderate Islam. Men and women mingled; women wore flowered dresses and simple straw hats or head scarves -- until the influx of the Salafiyya teachers. The Asiris heeded their message, and as Mohammed al-Odadi, the Asir tourism official, said, "They became more Catholic than the pope." Today Asir is best known around the world for producing 4 of the 15 Saudi hijackers.

One of those scooped up by the religious teachers in the late 80's was a poet and novelist from Asir named Abdullah Thabet. Now he's the image of apostasy -- long sideburns, no beard, jeans, leather jacket, cigarettes. I drove with him around the province one day as a Muzak version of Lionel Richie's "Say You, Say Me" strained on his old Ford speakers. "You can't have a girlfriend in this society," he told me. "It's too expensive to marry, and as a young man, all you're thinking about is sex. So the 'teachers' would tell us, Don't worry, no need now, when you kill yourself you'll have plenty of girls in heaven." Unlike Mansour, who shaped his life into a narrative of intellectual evolution, Abdullah Thabet simply remembers himself as a PlayStation character in the grip of a sinister hand. "If there were girls in our high school," he said. "I never would have joined those groups."

Lost in a family of 11 siblings, Abdullah Thalbit was a lonely child dreaming of escape. "The religious teachers say run away with us, and go to heaven," he explained. "They lift you out of this society where it's so difficult to find kindness and friendship. They offer you unconditional love, brotherhood, money, cars, education and jobs -- because the religious people control all the jobs here," he went on to say. "The first year they teach you to love each other at weekend picnics and summer camping trips, where they're looking for the talented ones. They teach you to reject your family. Then they give you books and lessons and program your mind to build a new country like the old Islamic caliphate. They teach you that you're the only good Muslims, the others are not."

Despite Islam's emphasis on modesty, what was so compelling to smart young men like Abdullah Thabet, Mansour and the others was the idea that they among all other Muslims were the real keepers of the faith. It gave them a feeling of superiority. As Khalid al-Ghannami, a friend of Mansour's and a former cleric who gave up preaching and adores Martin Scorsese films, explained to me, all of them began to believe they were those special Strangers whom the prophet speaks about. "The prophet said: 'Islam began as a stranger and will return to being a stranger. So Tuba'" -- a tree in Paradise and the best part of heaven -- "'is for the strangers,'" Khalid said. "The people then asked the prophet: 'Who are the strangers?' And the prophet said, 'Those who do the good deeds when everybody else does not.'"

As Abdullah Thabet and I were winding through Asir's jagged, rock-crested mountains, we rounded an outcropping, and all along the stone banks there appeared hundreds of baboons, some of them fornicating, masturbating, howling and laughing. Thabet slowed down, lingering in their exuberance. "I want their life," he said, and drove off.

We rode on to a bleak rocky plateau between two hills where for seven years he used to camp out with the Salafi. "They gave me everything I wanted -- books, travel, prayer. All the things I missed in my family I found with them. I loved them. So I trusted them, and believed in them. I would have done anything."

The intellectual godfather for all these young jihadis was the Egyptian philosopher Sayyid Qutub, and the religious teachers liberally doled out Qutub's writings. He was a prolific author and political Islamist with a simple message: the Islamic world is in crisis. The Christians and Jews have the upper hand. We need a small group of true Muslims who will usher in a new era of Islamic purification. Executed for supposedly plotting to overthrow the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Qutub was an Islamic Che Guevara and a model for the young Salafi.

But it wasn't until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, and President Bush vowed to drive him out and stationed American troops on Saudi soil, that the young men embraced political violence. "It was the first time I listened to a radio," Mansour told me. "It was like an earthquake. I began to meet different kinds of religious men, political sheiks." Unlike Mansour's mentor, al-Hamid, in his Buraida mud hut, these sheiks were from a modern Islamic political movement. "And they said we need to change reality now."

The radical sheiks attracted enormous followings. They were educated men with haunted eyes, like Safar al-Hawali, who later praised bin Laden for Sept. 11. They skewered the royal family for allowing infidel soldiers on Muslim soil, for seeking aid not from God but from America, who'd come to steal oil and destroy Islam.

Abdullah Bejad and Mashari shared a house in Suweidi that became an infamous hangout for anti-government Salafis. Mansour, who was still wretchedly poor, stayed there on a few of his trips to Riyadh. From the roof they would watch Iraqi Scud missiles fly overhead. In the living room they spent hours debating what kinds of political activism were Islamically legal.

Mashari decided to take action by boarding a plane to get military training in Afghanistan. "We all believed that the infidels were here because the Islamic world was militarily weak," Mashari said. He returned after a month and caught up with Mansour and the others. "We felt like everything was so polluted and poisoned that talking and educating wasn't enough. We had to get physically active," Mashari recalled.

As always, Mansour was obsessed with religious hypocrisy. "If you ask any sheik, he will say the Western values sold in video stores are forbidden in Islam," Mansour said. "But the government sheiks won't give you the right to destroy them. So we decided to make our own decrees." In 1992, in the middle of the night, Mashari and Mansour and several others who knew how to handle explosives staked out the biggest and most popular video store in Riyadh and firebombed it. Up in a blaze went all those American movies. Inspired by their success, Mansour got the idea to destroy a women's center in his hometown that catered to widows and the poor. "We thought it wanted to free women,

that it was just pretending to be a charity," Mansour recalled. Late one night, he and several other Salafiyya activists slipped inside the charity. Mansour rifled through the director's office to convince himself that they were doing the right thing. All he could find were medical supplies and aid for widows. "I was surprised that some of my relatives were so poor they were taking money from the charity. I felt bad, but ideology took over."

Partly in response to American pressure, and partly out of fear that their radicals were getting out of control, the royal family began to crack down on extremists while still allowing young men to be dispatched to wage jihad in Afghanistan's civil war. Nearly a year after the firebombing, the police picked up a Yemeni student who was sleeping in the Suweidi house where Mashari and Abdullah Bejad lived. He was accused of smuggling weapons. Then the police raided the place and rounded up everyone. "For three days they beat me until the blood ran to the floor," Abdullah Bejad said. "They wanted me to confess that we gave the Yemeni money to buy weapons to assassinate royal family members and blow up things, that we met in the desert at a training camp where we fired machine guns." Though Abdullah Bejad had nothing to do with the Yemeni or the firebombings, he was locked up along with Mashari.

Mansour was arrested and confessed to the firebombings, which he said were a matter of principle. He argued with the judges, quoting Islamic law and the sheiks who preached against Western values. He invoked a fatwa of the 14th-century scholar of Wahhabism, Ibn Tamiya, who had decreed that if the governor does not change or clean up places of corruption, the people have the right to do so. The judge wasn't interested in Mansour's scholarship. "They said, 'It's not your right to make such decisions. It's up to the government.'" And he sentenced Mansour to 16 years in prison.

In prison Mansour, Mashari and Abdullah Bejad slowly began to question their actions, and to read books that exposed them to more moderate interpretations of Islam. Mansour told me about a Jordanian author he read who raised the possibility that the Koran is not a living thing, but just a book. It shocked him. Their intellectual transformations, however, were just beginning. As Mashari put it: "It's like a glass of water. You can't find the first drop."

After a year and nine months, the cells were unlocked and Abdullah Bejad, Mashari and even Mansour were sent home. Mansour remained an imam in a Riyadh mosque, with one foot still in the world of the jihadis who wanted him to go to Afghanistan and be their sheik and the other in a more modern world, exploring new ideas.

Abdullah Bejad and Mashari were lost and confused. It was the mid-90's, and the kingdom was in the grip of an Islamist rebellion. American soldiers still hadn't pulled out. The royal family, at the instigation of the United States, imprisoned radical sheiks and rescinded bin Laden's Saudi citizenship. Then, in 1995, the jihadis struck back. A car bomb exploded at a National Guard training center in Riyadh, killing five Americans and two Indians. Prodded again by the United States, the government swept up hundreds of radicals. Among them was Mansour.

Alone again in his prison cell, Mansour began to retrace the genesis of his religious odyssey. When his sister came to visit, he asked her to bring books on Sufism (a strain of Islamic mysticism considered heretical by the Wahhabis) and by authors of Western philosophy and history, like Will Durant and Thomas Carlyle. Mansour passed through an intellectual paradigm shift, reading books that based their arguments on historical research. "Before, everything we learned was by ideology," he told me. Wahhabism does not believe in history except insofar as it illuminates God's plan. Like a pathologist, he conducted a dissection of his own thinking. He questioned two of the defining tenets of Wahhabism: "loyalty and dissociation," or loving Muslims just like you and holding hatred in your heart for Jews, Christians and Muslims not like you; and takfir, the practice of accusing fellow Sunnis of apostasy, which is a crime punishable by death.

Once the doubt crept in, it took on a logic of its own, spiraling through every stage of his life: if Salafism was flawed, then Wahhabism was flawed, and then so, too, were Islamic history and all the assumptions he had made about the universe. He couldn't stop.

As Adel al-Toraifi, Mansour's close friend explained, Mansour didn't change because he wanted music and wine and women. "There is no politics in Mansour," he said. "He didn't change because he found a new ideology. He changed from thinking deep inside Islam."

In the wake of the 1995 Riyadh bombing, Mashari and Abdullah Bejad feared that they, too, would be arrested. By then they knew the routine. They'd heard about two of their friends who were chained to the prison ceilings, stripped, whipped with handcuffs and encouraged to confess to exactly what the authorities wanted. Mashari and Abdullah Bejad made other plans, they told me. They grabbed some money and took off for the Yemeni border.

Abdullah Bejad showed me a selection of passport photos he had made up in various guises -- change the headdress slightly and you're a Kuwaiti or a Yemeni. A little creativity and anyone can disappear in this region. Especially in Yemen, where they bought fake Yemeni passports. Off went the two newborn Yemenis to Damascus, Aden and finally Amman, thinking they'd stay a few weeks till the dust settled.

In fact, they had no desire to go home, they told me. They'd rented an apartment in Amman. They admired King Hussein's internal politics. They attended lectures by Islamic scholars who weren't Wahhabis, listened to music, read about human rights, traveled to Qatar and Turkey. They said they'd never been so happy in their lives.

"We were reborn in Jordan," said Abdullah Bejad. "It was the first time I could think freely with no one supervising or watching over me. I realized the community that cultivated me had controlled my mind, always talking about stability, stability. 'The steady man is right. The right man never changes his mind.'"

The mantra fell apart in snow-covered Amman that winter. "I felt a happiness I'd never felt. I had no conflict between what I thought and what I said. I promised if I went back to Saudi I wouldn't let it go," Abdullah Bejad said. Each felt ashamed about the changes

they were experiencing and hid their activities from the other. Mashari was reading novels by Gabriel García Márquez and Naguib Mahfouz. Without telling Abdullah Bejad, he went to watch "Braveheart" and "Lawrence of Arabia," which he adored. One scene in particular deeply moved him, for it was so contrary to everything he'd been taught. This is how he remembered it:

Lawrence asks Sharif Ali why they left a man behind in the desert. Sharif Ali says they don't have enough water, and they'll die if they wait for him. Lawrence spins around and heads back for the man, as Sharif Ali yells, "It's fate, Lawrence." Lawrence returns exhausted and dehydrated, the man in tow, and now it's Sharif Ali's turn to ask why.

Lawrence replies, "That is also fate."

In 1998, Mashari and Abdullah Bejad did go home, quietly, to Suweidi, where they lay low. Mashari told me that he wrote a narrative explaining his actions to the Ministry of the Interior, and had to serve only 30 days for fleeing the country illegally. Abdullah Bejad appealed to his tribal chief to intervene with the royals, and he got three months. Mansour was released around the same time. Soon after, they began their new careers writing in the newspapers. But it wasn't until after Sept. 11 that Mansour stepped out and broke the taboo against attacking the state religion, naming "Wahhabism as the source of terrorist thinking" and "Salafism as the carrier of the terrorism ideology." The response of the government clerics was swift. He was banned from writing.

Intellectuals and reformists in Saudi Arabia have now examined this Salafiyya movement and used these young radicals as examples to set forth a theory that traces the lineage of today's terrorists back to the early 20th century "Brothers" -- Bedouin tribesmen who embraced a Wahhabi revivalism so ferocious they were happy to die killing or converting other tribes as they conquered the peninsula. All Saudis know the story's ending: the Brothers revolted against the king who'd breathed life into them, and he slaughtered most of them. But in the 80's, the royal family resurrected the spirit of those "Brothers" during the "Islamic Awakening," and exploited the resulting Salafiyya movement to spread Wahhabism around the world through mosques and Koranic schools and jihad. "The famous leaders of the foreign jihadi groups in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Bosnia were Saudi," Adel al-Toraifi maintained. Bin Laden's top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri "depends on fatwas from Wahhabi ideology. We must be honest. Wahhabism was a creator of violence since the beginning of its history." Yesterday's pious heroes are today's terrorists.

As unfathomable as it may be given the horrific events of Sept. 11, many Saudis -- even those who are progressive -- feel an ambivalent sympathy for this jihadi generation left over from Afghanistan -- militants, not unlike the Vietnam veterans, who have been hung out to dry by their government, unable to readjust to civilian life and left to stew in their habits of violence.

"The strange thing," Abdullah Bejad said, "is that the bombers are victims and killers at the same time."

Mashari and Abdullah Bejad have evolved into accepted voices in the media -- too accepted, some intellectuals and reformists say. Abdullah Bejad now belongs to a liberal Islamist circle of intellectuals, judges and former radicals who are trying to position themselves as a bridge between the government and the radical sheiks who rebelled against the royal family in the 90's. Mashari has found a role at The Middle East Journal as a critic of radicalism but a loyalist to the government.

In private, say Western-educated elites, reformists, Islamist reformers and even conservatives outside the cities, it is the royal family that must change. The leaders are old and out of touch with one of the fastest-growing populations in the world, most of whom are under 25. The princes are siphoning off the country's riches. There is no accounting of public funds. The welfare state -- or rather the royal dispensation system -- is collapsing, crime and unemployment are rising. "It's an old political system like the Soviet system," one critic told me. "We have one party, one ruler, corrupt judges, and all we're supposed to do is praise the government."

Many in the royal family are aware that the kingdom must evolve. In December, Crown Prince Abdullah, the king's half brother and the royal thought to be the most reform-minded, convened a National Dialogue on extremism in Mecca -- an unusual event at which Wahhabi clerics were forced to listen to Shiites, Sufis and even women. But the royal family works in opaque ways. Crown Prince Abdullah, who is the most likely heir to the throne, talks about the need to change the education system, while Prince Nayef, the interior minister, finances both the much-loathed religious police, who drive around in new American jeeps preventing vice and promoting virtue, and those in the interior ministry who keep a vigilant eye on the universities, ensuring they toe the Wahhabi line. Are the princes working at cross-purposes?

Few know. What is known is that every prince has his fief, while the kingdom, as Mansour put it, is like an orchestra without a conductor. King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995 and has been a mostly absent leader. By all accounts he can barely recognize his family members. Yet the question of succession is unresolved. And as long as the kingdom has no conductor, little will change, except that the religious radicals embedded within the establishment will keep seizing more ground -- a reality confirmed by engineers, religious professors and civil servants whom I met in Buraida, Asir, Jidda and Riyadh.

Shortly before Crown Prince Abdullah held his National Dialogue, a petition written primarily by Islamic reformists advocating a constitutional monarchy was submitted to the crown prince and signed by about 300 people -- mostly Islamists, including Abdullah Bejad, along with some liberals. Some of the princes were apoplectic and called the petition a treason. The signers responded with their own outrage. "Seventy-five percent of countries in the world participate in planning their future," an angry professor who was one of the petition's authors ranted to me one night. "All we are saying is we must have a role in our future. The royal family wants us just to drink camel's milk, ride dune buggies and sit by the fire. After a time you begin to go mad. When people realize no conferences

or resolutions will get any results, they are going to do something primitive. And if things go worse here, America will be in trouble, too."

The reformists urged Mansour to sign the petition, but he refused. He objected to the fact that the Islamists had infused the document with far too much religion, that it was weak on human rights and democracy and women. Though he complains of feeling like a pariah, Mansour has chosen to fight alone for his principles. Other Saudis who abandoned the Salafiyya movement share the isolation. Abdullah Thabet, the poet in Asir, told me that back in the late 90's, after years of training him to become part of the new generation of religious organizers, the Salafiyya teachers discovered through informers (his friends) that he was reading Hemingway and Hugo and an Arabic Communist philosopher and that he was writing and reading love poetry -- absolute heresy. They beat him mercilessly. "They said choose: poetry or us." He cried for days, not wanting to lose that solidarity. But Abdullah Thabet needed music and poetry more than the harsh Wahhabi creed. Now that he has broken the spell and criticizes Wahhabism, openly writes poetry, advocates women's rights and the teaching of music and painting in school, his parents say they think he's an infidel, and his former Islamic brothers threaten to kill him -- as they did when they saw him with me outside an Asir restaurant.

Khalid al-Ghannami, a former cleric, is constantly harassed by other teachers and education officials who accuse him of spreading secular ideas and art forms (like music) at the school where he teaches in a poor suburb of Riyadh. His son is taunted for his father's "fall" from cleric to secularist. It's true, Khalid now reads books like Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," where he has discovered metaphors for individualism in Kurtz's rejection of the colonial project.

In mid-December, when the authorities released Mansour from prison for publishing his Op-Ed essay, they made one demand: that Mansour not publicize the incident. That night he went home and posted the whole affair in dramatic prose on a popular Arabic Internet site. But that is the last word he has published, because he doesn't want to return to jail.

With anti-American sentiment at its apex, Mansour has suffered from the perception that he was looking to America for help when he published his Op-Ed essay. "I wanted the world to stand beside us and bring the mirror close up," he told me. "But the community doesn't want this."

The isolation is bruising for Mansour. "I feel like I am in a community where everyone hates me," he explained. His mother, who adores him, is silently disappointed by his transformation, he says, and by his Sufi understanding of Islam that "it's enough to have the spiritual flame inside our hearts." In other words, organized religion is not necessary, nor can he stand its hypocrisy. "If you ask our sheiks, Can we marry a Christian or Jewish woman, they will say, 'Yes, and you can live together in love, but deep in your heart you must hate her.' How can you divide your heart? Human beings cannot accept such contradictions. Yet that is at the core of our culture."

Mansour has paid a heavy personal price for his unbridled tongue. "I wanted to marry a girl who was close to me, so beautiful, so intellectual," he said. "She begged me not to publish my thoughts until we married. I said there's no difference. But she was afraid her brothers would be shocked and refuse, and that's what happened. I haven't heard from her since the New York Times article."

When I asked Mansour if he envisions some kind of democracy in Saudi Arabia, he thought for a while and said: "A Buraida philosopher once said: 'If you bring Queen Elizabeth to rule in Yemen, she will rule like Imam Ahmad, one of the most radical religious leaders of Yemen. And if you bring Imam Ahmad to England, he will rule like Queen Elizabeth.' The culture and society will dictate the way you rule. We hear talk about democracy. But if we apply democracy now, we'll ride it like we ride camels. Democracy needs a liberal culture. In the beginning we need freedom, we need different parties to have their rights and a culture that allows people to be represented." He implies that the only way to ensure that parties do not bring about a Taliban-like government is to separate state and mosque. "As Voltaire said, 'No freedom to the enemies of freedom.'"

When he was still allowed to publish, Mansour advocated rights for women and the persecuted Shiites and Sufis. All of these issues, he argues, hark back to the battle he has been waging since his days as a religious extremist. "The core of what I used to write is that no one owns the truth," he said. His fight is with the uncritical, ideological religious education inculcated in Saudi society.

For all the thousands of children who have memorized the holy book at Koranic schools, it can make for a wonderful companion to carry through life. But it's also a dangerous tool. The emotional power of those divine lyrics, the soaring language chanted in half tones and minor-key strains can be overwhelming. As one of the younger generation of princes desperate for reform told me, "Without the proper guidance it can get out of control." And what if you deliberately do not teach a child critical thinking, if you stress only the verses of rage, threats of damnation and the awe that compels men to kill the infidels? "Who is guilty, the son who stabs his neighbor?" Mansour asked. "Or the father who everyday told the son that his neighbor is a devil with no human values, that he must be killed?"

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