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SUNDAY, JUN 10, 2012 08:00 PM CEST

## Will the Middle East starve?

Saudi Arabia and others have oil but not enough water or farmland. So they're buying land from poorer nations

BY FRED PEARCE



TOPICS: MIDDLE EAST, EDITOR'S PICKS, FOOD, SUSTAINABLE FOOD, POLITICS NEWS



**A Saudi farmer harvests his crop on a farm in Al-Diriyah, on the northwestern outskirts of Riyadh.** (Credit: AP/Hassan Ammar)

Excerpted from **"The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth"** by

Fly over Saudi Arabia today and you will see that the desert sands are dotted with huge circles of green. They were not there 30 years ago. These geometric oases are man-made, the result of a \$40 billion national effort to create giant farms in the desert to irrigate fields of wheat, fruit and fodder crops. Look down carefully, and you may also see giant sheds holding tens of thousands of cattle in the desert.

The Tabuk plain in the northwest of the country, close to Jordan, gets an average of just 2 inches of rain a year. Yet it is a prairie of wheat fields. Fortunes are being made here. The biggest farm — covering nearly 90,000 acres, or eight Manhattans — is run by the Tabuk Agricultural Development Company (TADCO). Its irrigation pumps extract up to a million acre-feet of water each year from beneath the sands.

TADCO is part of the vast business empire of the al-Rajhi brothers — Sulaiman, Saleh, Abdullah, and Mohammed. As the Economist put it, they have made “one fortune from money brokering and another from farming.” Each brother became a billionaire as they turned a small money-changing business servicing migrant workers in Saudi Arabia into the world’s largest Islamic bank, the Al-Rajhi Bank. Then they joined the country’s 1980s cropping boom which, for a while, made Saudi Arabia self-sufficient in wheat.

But Saudis don’t live by bread alone. Dairy farming is the other big domestic agricultural business. Raising cows in the desert seems even odder than growing wheat. But in the center of the country, near the capital, Riyadh, the late Prince Abdullah al-Faisal, eldest son of the former King Faisal, has established the world’s largest dairy farm. At the heart of the Al Safi farm are six giant sheds, where 30,000 Holstein cows from Europe produce around 42 million gallons of milk a year, sold under the Danone brand. To keep their udders productive, the cows are cooled by a constantly circulating mist of water. Surrounding the sheds are 7,400 acres of fields, where dozens of movable irrigation units called central pivots, each up to a third of a mile long, irrigate alfalfa, sorghum, and hay destined for the cows’ feedlots. This too takes prodigious amounts of water, pumped from more than a mile below the sand.

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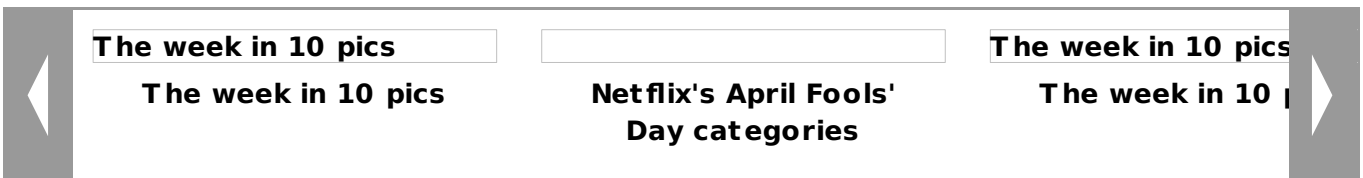




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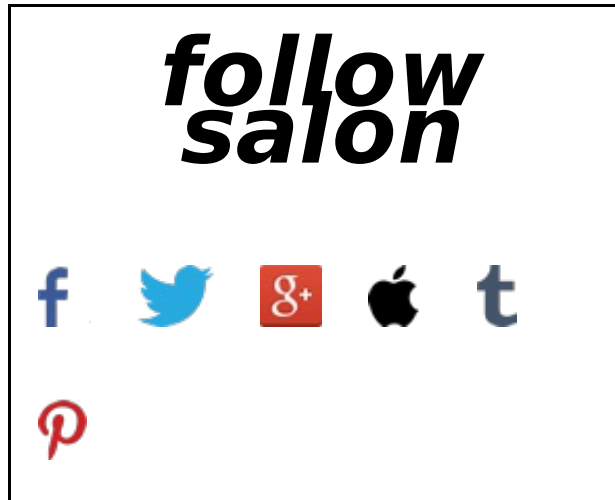
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