

From fragility to stability: a survival strategy for the Saudi monarchy

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This paper gives a detailed, insider's look into the history and intricacies of the royal politics of the Āl Saʿūd examining the factors that characterize and define the course of modern Saudi Arabia from tribal affiliations to Wahhābī *muṭāwʿah* and *muftis*. The author examines the internal power struggles amidst the famous 'Sudeiri Seven' and their rival claimants to the throne as well as repercussions of the system and its underpinnings on the population as a whole. Oil, power-politics, alliances with the United States and the particular means and apparatuses of control emanating from the Najd all factor in a regime that has marginalized significant sectors of society from inhabitants of the Ḥijāz to the Shīʿah of the Eastern Province and which may or may not survive the effects of a population boom and high unemployment that coincide with an ever-increasing number of claimants to a rule predicated on the 'custodianship' of Islam's two holiest cities.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Saudi royal family; Sudeiri Seven; Wahhābism; ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz bin al-Saʿūd; *muṭāwʿah*; oil; Prince Nayif

For the Saudi regime to be stable, for it to survive domestically and operate regionally, four necessary conditions must be met. The first is that the Royal Family must retain near complete unity and establish clarity and transparency in its system of succession. The second is that it must provide a coherent and persuasive ideology. The third is that it must be economically viable – oil in the short-term and economic diversification in the future. The fourth is that it must control society effectively through the institutions of the state.

The royal rivalries

The Āl Saʿūd rulers have never been united since they established the kingdom to which they gave their name – Saudi Arabia – in 1932. Divisions within what is the largest ruling family in the world are a permanent feature of Saudi politics. However, current schisms are particularly threatening for the future stability of the Kingdom. This is because the increasing size of approximately 22,000 members makes the question of succession far more problematic than normal due to increasing factional clashes and a greater number of possible claimants. Furthermore, the octogenarian line of successors to the present aged King ʿAbdullah resembles the final years of the Soviet Union when one infirm leader succeeded another in power – a formula which made for brief and inert rule. Many Saudis sense a similar pattern of continuous uncertainty and leadership instability.

The history of this 'magnificent' ruling family is rife with deadly competition within the court. The founder of the Kingdom, ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz bin ʿAbd al-Raḥmān

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Āl-Saʿūd (Ibn al-Saʿūd) who ruled from 1932 to 1953, had to first eliminate the right of his own father in order to rule, and then distance and contain the ambitions of his five brothers – particularly his oldest brother Muḥammad who fought with him during the battles and conquests that had given birth to the state. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s cousins posed an additional threat to his succession strategy which focused on securing the role of his sons as future Kings (ʿAṭṭār n. d., p. 34; Al-Rīḥānī n. d., p. 30; Ṣādiq 1956, p. 30).

King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz had 43 sons. The status of a prince is based on his mother’s tribe and his alliance with other princes. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s marriages were contracted mostly to consolidate power among the various tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. The more powerful the tribe of the mother, the more influence and status that attach to the son. Power was grouped on the basis of coalitions of full brothers, the most significant of whom were the seven brothers born from ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz’s wife, Ḥiṣṣah bint Aḥmad al-Sudeiri, whose eldest became King Fahd (who ruled between 1982 and 2005). Alternatively, power was also grouped according to smaller, but equally significant wings such as that of Khālid (who ruled between 1975 and 1982), with his full older brother Muhammad (Abū al-Sharrayn–‘father of the two evils’), whose mother was al-Jawharah bint Musāʿid al-Jiliwī. Or, finally, it was also grouped such as in the case of Saʿūd’s rule (from 1953 to 1962) that included his full brother Turkī. Their mother was Waḍḥah bint Muḥammad bin ʿAqab, who belonged to the Qaḥṭān tribe.

There were those who lacked a full brother, such as Fayṣal (who ruled between 1962 and 1975), whose mother was Ṭarfah bint ʿAbdullah al-Shaykh. Fayṣal was backed by the religious establishment, which is headed by the Āl Shaykh the descendants of Muḥammad bin ʿAbd al-Wahāb. In addition Fayṣal sought authority through significant Sudeiri backing which he cemented by his marriage to a Sudeiri.

ʿAbdullah, king since August 2005, also does not have a full brother. His mother was al-Fahdah bint al-ʿĀṣī bin Shuraym who belongs to the Shammar tribe. ʿAbdullah managed to group a large number of fringe and marginalized princes discontented with the prospect of the succession being passed among the Sudeiri brothers one after the other. His control of the National Guard also was a key factor.

King ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz managed to conquer and unite the vast territory of the Arabian Peninsula and to alienate and control his cousins and brothers so that a clear and undisputed succession process could be established; however, he could not secure solidarity among his sons (Abū al-Naṣr 1935). His last words to his two sons, the future king Saʿūd and the next in line Fayṣal, who were already battling each other, were: ‘You are brothers, unite!’ But, their father’s hope was in vain (Foreign Office document 1968). Fayṣal ousted his half brother Saʿūd after a fierce struggle which involved the opposition of ‘The Free Princes’, al-umarāʾ al-aḥrār (*Le Monde*, 31 December 1961),¹ and the threat of the use of the Royal Guard.

The political battle between the royal brothers lasted until 1964 when official clerics headed by al-Shaykh issued a *fatwā* (religious decree) in support of Fayṣal, resulting in the official exile of Saʿūd and his death in Greece in 1969 (Lacey 1981, pp. 321–336). After ten years as king, Fayṣal was assassinated in 1975 by his nephew Fayṣal bin Musāʿid, in a revenge killing.

Since then, the Sudeiri branch of the family has been the dominant faction especially as Fayṣal’s successor Khālid was ill and left political control to his half brother Fahd, the eldest Sudeiri. Fahd reigned for 23 years, the longest period for a

Saudi king. Since Fahd's death, they have been reduced to *al-thaluth*, ('the trio'): Crown Prince Sultan, who is also defence minister; Prince Nayif, the Interior Minister; and Prince Salmān the Governor of Riyadh. The three powerful princes and their prominent and ambitious sons have also become known as Āl Fahd.

ʿAbdullah's accession to the throne in 2005 was undermined by Sudeiri power in a continuing struggle for authority where rule of succession is ambiguous and the next in line is uncertain. Furthermore, ʿAbdullah has changed the rules for succession and thus made things more obscure and unpredictable than ever. ʿAbdullah's authority proved insufficient to appoint the 'Second Deputy' in line of succession which had been the tradition since ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and which had afforded some degree of predictability to the process.

To block a Sudeiri restoration, ʿAbdullah created the *hayʿat al-bayʿah* – 'Allegiance Council', a very ambiguous and mysterious family council (Al-Rashīd 2006). This Council resembles the Vatican's College of Cardinals but here restrictions are not entirely based on age but on family bloodlines and include the remaining sons of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz and the sons of his deceased brothers. For example, among members in the Council are the sons of the late King Fayṣal known as Āl Fayṣal, and these include: Saʿūd, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Turkī head of the King Fayṣal Foundation and previously the head of intelligence as well as ambassador to both the UK and the US; and Khālid, governor of Mecca and previously the governor of ʿAsīr. Fayṣal's sons are known to maintain their father's alliance with the Sudeiri wing while working closely with King ʿAbdullah – especially in matters of foreign policy.

The question of whether or not ʿAbdullah's Succession Council will succeed in blocking the Sudeiri group hinges upon the longevity of Minister of Defence Crown Prince Sultan, a Sudeiri who is 84 years old and one year younger than King ʿAbdullah. If ʿAbdullah dies first, the Sudeiri will simply lobby and pay off any opponents in order to ensure their return to the throne. The Minister of the Interior, Prince Nāyif, a Sudeiri of 80 years, is certain to emerge should this scenario become reality, with Salmān Governor of Riyadh, a Sudeiri, assuredly in-line for the succession.

Just as ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz wanted to secure rule for his sons at the expense of his brothers, senior princes also have ambitions for their sons. So Sultan favours Khālid, Deputy Head of the Army. Meanwhile, his other son Bandar, head of the National Security Council and former ambassador to the US, has obvious ambitions. Nāyif's son Muḥammad is also being groomed by his father as the second man in the Ministry of the Interior. King ʿAbdullah has his son Miḥib running the National Guard which he heads. Even Prince Ṭalāl, who is excluded from the succession, publicly expressed the right of his son al-Walīd to be Crown Prince.

Despite ʿAbdullah's innovation in the succession process, nothing can guarantee an effective ruler. But, this story of the Āl Saʿūd struggle for the succession is no longer whispered behind closed doors. The Internet has opened a window on all the family plots, ambitions and double dealings.

The Wahnābī Nexus

The Saudi rulers base their legitimacy on 'custodianship' of Islam's holiest sites, and, like communist parties vis-à-vis the working class, claim to be the special representatives and defenders of the faith. To be sure, the fact that the regime derives its religious authority from Wahnābism, a narrow, austere Sunnī sect, limits

its popular legitimacy among a diverse population that does not subscribe to the Wahhābī doctrine.² However, the Kingdom's leaders believe that control of Mecca and Medina is sufficient justification for authoritarian rule, and that there is no need for popular representation or for democracy in any form. Regionally, their religious legitimacy remains questionable because of the narrow, defensive tenants of the regime despite Custodianship of the Holy Places.

Indeed, it is obvious that a struggle for mastery of the Muslim world is now under way. The two major states involved in this struggle, Iran and Saudi Arabia, represent the rival sects of Shī'ite and Sunnī and both are expansionists. The ultimate desire of the Saudi-Wahhābī leaders is to protect and promote their politico-religious ideology and achieve leadership within the Islamic world. They have often had the financial clout to do so: during the late 1970s and the 1980s, King Fahd, spent more than \$75 billion funding schools, charities and mosques abroad (Bronson 2006, p. 10). With this Wahhābī explosion, Islamic pluralism and heterogeneous religious culture was deliberately suppressed.

Having conquered Mecca from Hashemite rule in 1926, 'Abd al-'Azīz came to rule over the Kingdom of the Hijāz and the Sultanate of Najd until 1932. Throughout, the Saudi regime was confident that it could reshape Islam in its image and exclude non-conforming Sunnī Islamic schools of thought and Shī'ite sects from the Great Mosque (Yamani 2006b). The Saudi rulers put an end to the practice known as the 'Circles of Knowledge' connoting an inter-religious debate that represented the pluralism of the religion. No more diversity or debate was allowed. Instead, a compulsory Wahhābism was in effective control.

Wahhābī control has severely circumscribed the process of political modernization. There is a deep-seated antagonism between Wahhābism and democracy, which is rooted in the ideology itself. Saudi Wahhābī clerics stand *in principle* against democratic reform, owing to their belief in both the infallibility and immutability of Wahhābī interpretations of Islamic texts and *al-bay'ah*, the unquestioning political allegiance to the ruler.

Furthermore, Wahhābism is a minority sect, both in Saudi Arabia and in the Muslim world as a whole, whereas democracy implies the distribution of power through institutional arrangements – particularly universal enfranchisement and elections – that ensure some form of majority rule. This does not mean that the Āl Sa'ūd–Wahhābī system is incapable of adopting *forms* of democratic rule. But the form itself is inconsequential and hollow. To appease the US in its calls for democracy after the Iraq war in 2003, and so as not to appear behind other Arab states in this regard, municipal elections were held in 2005. These were only partial, heavily managed, and of no consequence, reflecting the authoritarian regime's tendency to manipulate electoral reforms in order to strengthen its hold on power (Al-Hassan 2006, pp. 98–99).³ The success of the 'Islamists' was tailor-made by the Saudi regime and intended to warn the US that electoral reforms are undesirable in the long term. In the absence of free, fair, and genuinely competitive elections, the Wahhābīs' share of power as co-rulers of the Saudi monarchy remains highly disproportionate to their share of Saudi Arabia's diverse population.

Moreover, the alliance between the Āl Sa'ūd and the Wahhābī clerical establishment permeates the regime. The Wahhābī clerics are the kingdom's *de facto* rulers. The Wahhābī establishment controls the judicial system, the Council of Senior 'Ulamā'; the General Committee for Issuing Fatwās, al-Da'wah (Islamic call),

and Irshād (guidance); the Ministry of Islamic Affairs; the Supreme Headquarters for the Council for International Supervision of Mosques; and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prohibition of Vice. The latter includes the *muṭāw'ah* (religious police), whose head is a government minister. The Wahnābīs also control all religious education, which comprises half of the school curriculum; Islamic universities in Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh; the Ministry of Hajj; and the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*). Moreover, they influence the Ministry of Finance through control of *al-zakāh* (the religious alms tax), and control magazines, radio stations and websites, as well as exercising power over the military through religious indoctrination. In addition, in the 'Consultative Council' (*majlis al-shūrā*) more than 50 per cent of the members are Wahnābīs, and it is headed by a Wahnābī cleric.

This powerful religious body acts to obstruct reform. While King 'Abdullah announced judicial reforms, in October 2007, there is little indication that his agenda will bring the introduction of an impersonal rule of law. On the contrary, gross and systemic miscarriages of justice continue apace, forcing 'Abdullah to exercise benevolent intervention by pardoning victims through royal decrees (Yamani 2007).

Indeed, the judiciary, led since 1983 by Sheikh Ṣāliḥ al-Ḥaydān, remains entirely controlled by the Wahnābī religious establishment. All of the more than 700 judges are Wahnābīs, and the minister of justice is always a senior member of the Wahnābī hierarchy. The courts subject all legal decisions to a narrow and selective interpretation of the Qur'ān and the *sunnah*, based solely on Wahnābī scholars' interpretation of Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Wahnāb and of wider Ḥanbalī Islamic thought. Even 'Abdullah's tinkering reforms have been met with stubborn and effective resistance from al-Ḥaydān and other senior members of this religious body. The Wahnābī alliance was at the outset certainly a legitimizing force for the Āl Sa'ūd but today it appears as a burden.

Oil revenues have historically strengthened the Saudi rulers' control over the Wahnābī clerics, especially in paying for *fatwās* that support their political interests. For example, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the highest religious authority at the time, the late Sheikh 'Abd al-'Azīz bin Bāz, issued a *fatwā* legitimizing US protection of Saudi Arabia. In addition Bin Bāz labelled Saddam Hussein an 'infidel' (*kāfir*). The following year he endorsed the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Indeed, Saudi Wahnābism has since become more addicted than ever to oil, as rising prices have strengthened control internally and paid for exporting the dogma regionally and elsewhere, partly through abundantly financed websites and satellite television stations that are bankrolled by the King and other Saudi royals. Exclusive *fatwās* can be launched 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Yamani 2006c). The latter are intended domestically as protection against the threat which developed since the Iraq war in 2003 posed by radical and violent Wahnābīs, referred to as 'al-fī'ah al-dāllah', 'the group gone astray' and regionally against Shī'ite expansionism, emanating from Iran through Iraq and to Ḥizb Allāh in Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia appears immersed in sectarian politics, and sectarianism has proven an effective political instrument in the past. Now, however, it is a double-edged sword and potentially a threat to Saudi national unity and security. The Saudi Wahnābīs have an exclusive vision of Islam even when compared to Iran's system. Whereas Iran is orchestrating Sunni politics; supporting Ḥamās and the Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Arabia remains in a self-imposed isolation dictated by Wahnābī zealotry.

Against this backdrop, the Āl Saʿūd narrative of Islamic leadership and control is increasingly fragmented, as globalization gives rise to an ever greater complexity. The Āl Saʿūd achieved leadership and prominence as a result of oil wealth and control of Islam's holiest places, but the proliferation of new media and the free flow of people and information alarm them as these expose the flaws in their narrative both domestically and regionally. The complexity and perpetually shifting nature of the region's landscape, of threats and challenges, makes it all the more imperative that the Saudi rulers grasp opportunities to renew their political 'survival' strategies.

The oil chimera

Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer, with reserves of 267 billion barrels in 2006, according to the *Oil and Gas Journal*. Current sustainable production capacity is 11 million barrels per day, with recent oil production at 9.5 million barrels per day. However, the Kingdom's reserve capacity is debatable. According to *World Energy Outlook*, Saudi oil production is soon on its way to reaching its peak – if it has not done so already (Simmons 2005; Foster 2008), while others have estimated that Saudi production may be moving towards a period of sustained decline (Simmons 2005; Walker 2008).

Meanwhile, the increase in oil prices since 2002 has given the Saudi regime a new lease on life, enhancing the control of the Āl Saʿūd over the security apparatus and military and bolstering their ability to buy domestic opposition and to promote their interests internationally. Oil money has been used by the regime as a weapon against ideological-religious threat; both Sunni political Islam and Shīʿite Islam.

Oil has not only contributed to the economic resources of the Āl Saʿūd, but has also bolstered Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and position as a regional power. Despite the development of alternatives to hydrocarbons, the Saudi regime is likely to continue to benefit in economic and strategic terms as global energy demand continues to increase. Indeed, according to the *World Energy Report*, 'world energy demand is projected to increase by over 50% between now and 2030'.

Oil prices have quadrupled since 2002 and reached \$100 a barrel in February 2008, enabling King ʿAbdullah to raise the salaries of state employees by 15%, to offer 5,000 scholarships abroad – especially in the US, and to repair ageing infrastructure. ʿAbdullah's ambitious plans encompass the building of the world's largest petrochemical plant in record time as part of his \$500 billion initiative to build new cities, create jobs and diversify the economy (Mūʿawwad 2008).

The current oil boom – riding on global insecurity exacerbated by the disaster in Iraq – provides King ʿAbdullah with the opportunity to pursue his strategy. So the high price of oil is, in a way, good news. ʿAbdullah's plans include the inauguration of 'Jubail 11' estimated to attract industrial projects worth 210 billion Saudi Riyals and to create 55,000 jobs.

The money spent thus far has not improved public services for the vast majority of people; water, sewerage, electricity, education and health facilities remain abysmal and degrading. And in the past, these gargantuan projects have turned into 'white elephants' instead of helping to transform and modernize the economy. They have become a constant drain on the resources that, perhaps, matter relatively little so long as oil prices remain high but are more dubious if or when prices collapse.

Unfortunately, high oil prices also provide resources for the king's opponents. As is said in Saudi Arabia, 'the greater the money, the greater the corruption.' There is also rising social tension, emanating from the vastly unequal distribution of oil revenues. Ninety per cent of private sector jobs go to foreigners. The repressive structure of society conceals massive popular resentment and questions about destabilization (Foster 2008).

Oil prices are unstable and cannot compensate for actual reform. The oil wave buys the subservience of the people and delays political demands but high oil prices alone cannot solve the unemployment problems. In the light of the Kingdom's excess demand for labour, reliance on foreign labour is a major factor in unemployment. There are mismatches between education and the needs of the national economy (UNDP 2003). Significant changes to the educational system are crucial as well as a shift from the policy of discrimination based on sect, tribe or gender. Population growth fuels domestic economic and political pressures for reform.

The traditional patrimonial model is increasingly vulnerable not only to the inherent uncertainty implied by dependence on oil revenues, but also to a population explosion and the accompanying need to reduce unemployment. The Kingdom's population is now more than 22 million (including expatriates), while 50% of Saudis are under 15 years old and must be accommodated economically and politically (Ministry of Economy and Statistics 1999). The royal sphere is also expanding rapidly, with the ratio of royals to commoners at one to a thousand (compared to one to five million, for example, in the United Kingdom). This has intensified the challenge of managing princely privileges, salaries and demand for jobs. For example, royal perks include lifetime jobs and domination of the civil service, which enable the princes to award contracts and receive commissions on top of their salaries. Princes, especially important ones, also compete against indigenous merchants for contracts. The new generations of Saudi Arabia are demanding citizenship rights in contradistinction to the subdued, subservient subjects of the past.

Patrimony based on oil revenue is subject to modification and change. Kuwait, which possesses 10% of world oil, is an example of a rentier state that has embarked on a democratic experiment offering freedom of the press, increased political participation, and electoral choice. These reforms impact other oil-rich Gulf countries similarly ruled by emirs and sheikhs. Thus, while oil money has served the Saudi absolute monarchy at the expense of democracy, it not necessarily an obstacle to change (Yamani 2006a). Monarchies throughout the ages have had successful survival strategies. Most of these have opened themselves up to include rising middle classes who would otherwise be their most likely challengers; as can be seen, for example in the Moroccan, Jordanian and (more recently) the Bahraini monarchies.

America: the destabilizing patron

The Saudi regime is divided, its legitimacy questioned, its sectarian tensions heightened, and although oil prices are booming, the environment is highly revolutionary. The fact is that each of the three pillars of the Saudi state and regime discussed above is inherently unstable, and each has become a source of domestic discontent that is compounded by the US-Saudi alliance which makes the Saudi regime appear weak and dependent.

The external backing provided by the US makes ordinary Saudis wonder whether or not the state is a *de facto* American colony. In many ways, as a result of the American connection, the regime has staked its survival and authority on international necessity, rather than domestic legitimacy. Since the first oil concession to US companies in 1933, US power has grown to become the main guarantor of both oil wealth and regime stability (Sampson 1975).

The commitment of the US to provide supporting infrastructure – particularly the US military presence since 1945 in Zahrān, near the Dammām oilfields – has informed the Saudi rulers' perception of their regional security. The US ensured the Kingdom's survival in the face of external threats. It provided support in the fight against proxy enemies in Yemen from 1964 to 1967 (Safran 1988, p. 140). Military sales to Saudi Arabia during the 1970s reached \$5 billion; and, in 1981 following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the US sold Saudi Arabia billions of dollars worth of high-tech arms, including F-15 jet combat aircraft and Airborne Warning and Control System planes (Safran 1988, p. 328). These large-scale military expenditures bolstered Saudi security but also were a means of protecting ties with the US and maintaining Saudi influence in Washington.

Ultimately, however, the huge US military presence in the Kingdom delayed the development of its indigenous army. Indeed, the Kingdom's main problem is a chronic shortage of manpower, with Saudi armed forces numbering only 200,000 soldiers in 2005, including the National Guard. The Saudi regime opted to rely on US security guarantees rather than on its own population, and it trusted the US in regard to the development of the Army and protective military intelligence against coups.

In accordance with US policy-makers' belief that Saudi Arabia's extraordinarily abundant wealth should be put to work, the regime recycles its oil revenues through investments in America – through arms purchases, and loans to international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Riyadh's willingness to invest its revenue in American-supported causes earned it considerable favor in Washington but criticism from the Saudi population. Saudi Arabia also has been willing to increase oil production to advance US interests.

More broadly, the reliance of Saudi Arabia's rulers on external backing has entrenched a historical pattern of articulating national projects in terms of foreign policy – reflected most recently in the Kingdom's efforts to mediate in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict – rather than aligning their interests with the development of the nation. This has generated internal pressures in favor of strengthening domestically rooted authority that is aimed at realizing the idea of a nation-state, conceived in terms of a diverse society in which pluralism is institutionally acknowledged and channeled.

For example, many Saudi intellectuals believe that the strategic relationship with the US does not serve the Kingdom's national interests in the long term, as it diverts resources from internal investment and into military hardware and actually paid for American military presence in the Kingdom for many years – up until 2002. Such intellectuals have no objection to US protection of the Saudi regime but seek to break the link between the defense of international sovereignty and domestic repression in the name of 'fighting terrorism'. Indeed, several reformers were jailed in February 2007 on charges of funding terrorism, and they remain without legal representation – a tactic that has been enabled in part by US policy-makers who

ignore abuses of justice in the name of security (Human Rights Watch 2007). Repression thrives, enabled by myopic perception of Saudi Arabia as a homogeneous society rather than as a mosaic of significant but little-known communities that demand recognition.

The use of diversity

In fact, socio-cultural heterogeneity is central to the question of the Saudi regime's stability. The regime's reliance on oil revenue has contributed to the creation of a middle class that in some ways has become another key source of reformist pressure. However, as a historical and sociological phenomenon, the emergence of a Saudi middle class is not entirely comparable to historical political development in its significance. On the contrary, it is more accurate to speak of 'middle classes' whose concomitant emergence continues to be mediated by ethnic and culturally based cleavages that reinforce a restrictive political hierarchy that trumps socio-economic status.

Within this hierarchy, the Najdīs who come from the heartland of the Āl Sa'ūd maintain privileged status, while the Hijāzīs of Mecca and Medina are partly included and the Shī'ah in the Eastern Province as well as the southern tribes of 'Asīr, especially the Isma'īlīs, are practically shunned. Given these groups' divergence of interests, their middle-class members do not present a united front against the regime. On the other hand, separatist tendencies based on these cleavages render Saudi national identity itself fragile.

While the Saudi state is perceived by some as a colony from the standpoint of international relations, domestically the regime resembles a colonial power, ruling the Kingdom from the central Najd region. The 'Najdification' of the state gained force during the 1980s, and Najdī representation, starting from the Council of Ministers and extending to general establishments and local councils, is said to reach 80%. Other segments of the population thus feel alienated and inadequately represented, further weakening the regime's domestic legitimacy.⁴

As a result, the emergence of an economically empowered middle class, in combination with continuing repression, discrimination, and antagonism of minorities and other politically marginalized groups, could lead to disintegration. The most challenging group to the Āl Sa'ūd, are currently the Shī'ah, who constitute 75% of the population in the Eastern Province, the Kingdom's main oil-producing region especially as their political affiliation to Iraqi and other Shī'ite groups in the region has strengthened.

While a re-working of Saudi national identity in recognition of the country's religious and tribal diversity is possible, this would eventually require the Āl Sa'ūd to agree to some form of political empowerment of the Shī'ah and of other politically marginalized groups. After all, the response of today's disempowered Shī'ah has been to seek political connections and backing from the wider political Shī'ite movements. So, the choice for the Saudi rulers is a stark one as to whether to empower the Shī'ah, within the system or to see them increase in power because of their external alliances. This is no abstract threat given that today's borders are porous.

So far, however, King 'Abdullah has shown no sign of creating a policy of inclusion aimed at the Shī'ah. Even a tokenism, say, in the form a Shī'ite minister

has not been attempted. ‘Abdullah is unable to stop the Wahnābī satellite television stations from denouncing the Shī‘ite ‘heretics’, or the hundreds of Wahnābī websites that call for the outright elimination of the Shī‘ah. (Some ‘religious guidance’ has even reached an extreme that suggests killing a Shī‘ite Muslim merits more *ajr*, or reward in heaven, than killing a Christian or a Jew.⁵)

Instead of active political change, ‘Abdullah’s strategy is one of political decompression: to make just enough concessions to appease Saudi Arabia’s subordinate and disheartened peoples and relieve pressure for reform. To this end, he appears to be constructing a centrist political alliance equipped to compromise between demands for recognition of diversity and Saudi repression in the name of homogeneity and national unity. King ‘Abdullah and his camp could vigorously pursue a policy of political liberalization and decompression – trusting the Saudi population with greater freedom of expression and influence over government. However, instead the time of the King and his loyalists is consumed by internal political fights and feuds within the Āl-Sa‘ūd family and Wahnābī co-rulers.

In this struggle, Wahnābism should be vulnerable to popular pressure for reform. Democratic experiments in Qatar, the only other Wahnābī state in the Arabian Peninsula, provide a telling counterpoint, and one that Saudi Arabia’s Wahnābī clerics clearly dread, for they suggest that if Wahnābīs accept democratic procedures, Wahnābism will be forced to change its guiding attitudes and principles. Similarly, in Kuwait and Bahrain, *salafīs* (a non-*madhahb*-specific designation for Muslims who seek to emulate the ‘pious ancestors’—*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, and who thus share an affinity with Wahnābīs) have become more moderate as a result of their participation in those countries’ parliaments, where they had to work alongside with the Shī‘ite and female ministers. It is noteworthy that the Salafīs in Bahrain and in Kuwait only joined parliament after securing permission from the highest Wahnābī authority sheikh ‘Abdul ‘Azīz bin Bāz and later from his successor, Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Āl Shaykh. The permission is indicative that while Saudi Wahnābīs object to democracy at home, they could be pragmatic about political reform for outsiders, but not in Saudi land where Wahnābī power would be weakened.

The fact is that it is not religion that obstructs democratic reform but its manipulation for authoritarian rule. Within the region, only in Saudi Arabia do members of the *muṭaw‘ah* (religious police), employees of the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, represent the ‘hand of God’ and remain above the law. But popular outrage at their brutal practices is indicative of pressures for reform. Since May 2007, the *muṭaw‘ah* launched an aggressive offensive, raiding houses and locking up individuals for days, with some tortured and others beaten to death.⁶ The *muṭaw‘ah* also have a negative impact on business and tourism; they patrol the streets of the kingdom in their government cars searching for sinful outsiders. The Āl Sa‘ūd are unable or unwilling to stop this state-sponsored violence, which many Saudis perceive as a form of official terrorism. Responding to renewed demands by Saudi professionals to bring the *muṭaw‘ah* to justice, Prince Nayif instead praised them, linking their mission to the fight *against* terrorism.⁷

Islam itself is explicitly presented by the Saudi Wahnābīs as an obstacle to reform. The strategy is to impress upon the Saudi population that other countries in the region which have embarked on democratic reform are fundamentally different, because they do not bear custodianship over Mecca and Medina. Hence, from this

perspective, Saudi reform must be carefully calibrated and engineered to meet the unique situation of a nation blessed with this awesome responsibility.

Thus far, defending Islam precludes modernizing the educational system and establishing social amenities like cinemas and youth clubs. But, demands for reform of the educational system are voiced by Saudis, including by members of the royal family. Prince Muḥammad ‘Abdullah al-Fayṣal in a television interview on Saudi-owned *al-‘Arabiyah* strongly criticized the Saudi curriculum which ‘produces terrorists’ and is totally unsuitable.⁸ Likewise, the sectarian dimension of the educational system was criticized during a session of the ‘National Dialogue’ (sponsored by King ‘Abdullah in 2004) and in the local newspapers.

To be sure, non-Wahhābī Saudis, such as the Ḥijāzīs and the Shī‘ah, continue to resist state dogma. However, they have not yet formed significant or open opposition movements. This is due to well-entrenched politics of fear. The Shī‘ah suffered a setback since their *intifādah* was crushed by the Saudi Army and security forces in 1979. For now their leaders have opted for dialogue with the regime (Ibrāhīm 2007). Interestingly, organized opposition movements are not confined to the excluded groups. Indeed, they are now found among the Najdīs themselves, and since the 1990–91 Gulf War, a new generation of radical Wahhābīs, such as Jamā ‘at al-Ṣaḥwah (the ‘Awakening Group’), have questioned the legitimacy of the old establishment in its own terms (Teitelbaum 2000). Some have been co-opted by the regime after being released from jail and other groups have fled the country and found a base for their activities in London.

Common to all the disparate groups is a rising tide of protests on the Internet in a sure sign of increasing public discontent with the official Wahhābī clerics, the squandering of Saudi money, and the corrupt judiciary. If the regime continues to suppress non-Najdīs’ rights, faith, and culturés, some may form opposition groups of their own.

Simultaneously, the formation of strong cultural identities among tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and regional groups in response to the US–Āl Sa‘ūd axis is not the only source of the main pressures facing the regime. There is also the risk of ‘blowback’ from the regime’s policy of exporting militant Islamists to Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 2004, many of these militant groups have become active within the Kingdom, exploiting the gap between religious rhetoric and political reality, which includes the squandering of oil money on personal greed.

Although the Saudi authorities have been successful in crushing ‘terrorist assaults’, some have been alarming. On 27 April 2007, the Ministry of Interior announced the arrest of 172 ‘terrorists’ whose aim was to attack official government buildings and oil installations – perhaps the most serious threat to the Saudi regime in decades (*Al-Ḥayāt* 2007). Indeed, the plan may have been an attempted coup d’état, as 61 of the detained are widely believed to have connections with military personnel, including colonels and generals (a fact not directly mentioned in official statements). Among the detainees were Saudi pilots who had been trained abroad, and whose aim was to take control of military bases, especially the Zahrān airbase (*Al-Ḥayāt* 2007).

The politics of fear

The Saudi state’s internal colonialism, an institutional model that serves the interests of only a small part of society, implies the need to ensure common obeisance rather

than consent. In order to defend this model in the face of mounting pressure for increased national integration, the regime pursues three tactics aimed at suppressing opposition and civil society activism, and these are the policies of assimilation, co-optation, and fear and repression.

Assimilation

The Najd colonizes the bureaucracy and the military. The Army, Air Force and the National Guard are almost exclusively Najdī. Saudi observers believe that out of five senior air force pilots, three are Āl Saʿūd princes. Prior to the 1980s, the air force was headed by Ḥijāzīs. But after a series of abortive coups during the 1960s and throughout the 1970s that involved small numbers of senior administrative and military Ḥijāzī personnel, those involved were jailed and all others were replaced and given 'early retirement' (Lackner 1978; Yamani 2004).

Furthermore, the imposition of Najdī cultural mores and habits including strict gender segregation are firmly enforced. These rules extend to matters of dress and public space. From the 1940s to the 1950s the deal was that other groups such as the Ḥijāzīs would participate in the national project but this political and economic participation meant renouncing their cultural distinctiveness. For example, all men had to wear the Najdī Saudi dress rather than their own if they seek employment. Hence, the Saudi rulers have effectively liquidated all regional clothing. Women who had never worn the severe black veil had to adopt the compulsory Saudi uniform when they leave home.

These regulations are assisted by the official endorsements and sanctions of the *mutawʿah* and of the judicial system and religious educational system. However, the importance of tribal and sectarian identity places limits on this tactic. Indeed, despite intense official pressure for public conformity, cultural and regional distinctiveness continues to be asserted in practices that are conducted in private (Yamani 2004).

Co-optation

Official recognition of cultural pluralism has occurred in cycles. The Najdī rulers have at times included Ḥijāzīs in the government, albeit at the price of outward conformity, for example in matters of dress. However, there has been no stability in this process: people are included and then excluded on shifting terms. During King Fayṣal's reign, for example, co-optation centered around allowing limited access and official space to people who were useful. King Fayṣal acknowledged the experience and expertise of educated Ḥijāzīs and brought them into the State bureaucracy. That approach came to a halt in the late 1970s owing both to King Fahd's change in policy that concentrated on 'Saudiification, and the absolute power of the Saudi rulers and especially that of the King and his full brothers – the Sudeiris. The allies of the Āl Saʿūd, the Wahhābī establishment also grew more powerful. Fahd's policy was also based on the fact that official space had grown full of new Najdī graduates alongside old princes who remain in their ministerial positions for 40 years.

King ʿAbdullah is sensitive to the need for inclusion in order to ensure the quiescence of professionals so writers, university professors, and the politically ambitious are on the payroll – a policy that some Saudis call a form of *rashwah*, or

thinly veiled bribe. Furthermore, the wealthy may continue to accumulate in number but they are merely allowed client-relationships with the royal family.

Saudi Arabia continues to have the most highly controlled media in the region, supplementing direct and indirect ownership with strict administrative measures. A censorship committee with representatives from various government ministries monitors all local and foreign publications (Amin 2001, p.27). A population amenable to the orders of the state delineates the expected dynamic of Āl Saʿūd's relationship with the subjects to whom they give their name. However, in order for the Āl Saʿūd to maintain the dominant position in their historical narrative, they must incorporate and accommodate rival narratives. This requires a certain degree of flexibility, a measure of give and take, and a willingness to engage in a dialogue with weaker and less powerful voices. A new narrative requires a revised conception of Islam and Saudi Arabia; a plural sense of Islam and a plural sense of Saudi identity.

Here, there are two possible directions for the regime: the first, a Wahhābī suppression of reform; the second, an opening up to a more diverse Islam and a more inclusive Saudi Arabia. The latter would entail sidelining the Wahhābis. The reigning narrative's dominance exhibits inflexibility and thus fragility, for it is both stuck in time and unable to modify and innovate in response to the ever-changing present. Thus, the relationship of the Āl Saʿūd with their subjects may not be as enduring as it appears, and any sudden and sustained exposure of the gap between appearance and reality – increasingly likely, to the extent that global media culture undermines policies aimed at ensuring isolation – may cause deeper fractures to the foundation of the regime. The dominant position of the Āl Saʿūd depends on maintaining a certain unity of purpose. But a distorted and aggressive mission to tame the media threatens to expose the regime's hollowness.

Exclusion and repression

The Sudeiri divide-and-conquer policy ensures that people are unable to develop a national opposition. Educated professional Saudis from every corner of the country formed a coalition to lobby for reform at the end of 2001. Their demands included political and civil rights, gender equality, government accountability, anti-corruption measures, an equitable distribution of state resources, the creation of a Supreme Constitutional Court, an independent judiciary and, above all, regulation of the Wahhābī religious establishment's power forcing them to conform to the rule of law.⁹ This national coalition was immediately disbanded by Prince Nāyif, the Interior Minister, who ordered the arrests and imprisonment of its leaders.

The threat posed by the coalition is easy to comprehend, given the regime's reliance on managed antagonism between ethnic and regional communities. Indeed, the Āl Saʿūd have proven adept at controlling the degree of hostility between the Wahhābīs, the Shīʿah and the Hījāzīs, as well as between the conservatives and the liberals, limiting it to what is necessary for their survival and never allowing it to spill over into civil war. The regime carefully monitors the struggle between groups and maintains a dynamic tension, pouring water or fuel on the fire as the circumstances require. The security forces and the *mukhābarāt* intelligence services enforce the politics of fear. Hence a Shīʿite visiting Mecca avoids meeting with an influential Hījāzī for fear of being discovered and punished by the authorities.

The Possibility of Reform

Everything must change in Saudi Arabia so that nothing will change. By that Giuseppe di Lampedusa, the author of the famous novel *The Leopard* (1958), meant that serious political change can be undertaken with the preservation of royal traditions in mind. Saudi Arabia is stable. No immediate danger threatens the regime – high oil prices have seen to that. But below the surface cracks are visible. To prevent these cracks from becoming chasms, the Saudi regime must systematically address and reassess the four issues discussed: unity, ideology, oil and society. If it does, to paraphrase the Prince of Lampedusa, the Āl Saʿūd could remain in power.

Notes

1. The Free Princes was headed by Ṭalāl Ibn ʿAbul ʿAzīz who went into exile to Paris and then to Beirut.
2. Strictly speaking, the term Wahnābī has something of a pejorative connotation as it is not used by adherents of the sect for purposes of self-identification. Muḥammad bin ʿAbd al-Wahnāb (d. 1792) was a strict reformer of the Ḥanbalī *madhahb* who came out of the Najd and ultimately formed a close alliance with Ibn Saʿūd. Ostensibly adhering closely to the thought of Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328), Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahnāb's ideas were characterized by an uncompromising rejection of Shīʿism, Sufism (*al-taṣṣawuf*), and anything which might be considered an innovation (*bidʿah*) or deviation from the practices of the 'pious ancestors' – *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, a term which primarily connotes the Companions of the Prophet Muḥammad (*al-ṣaḥābah*) and the following generation (*al-tābiʿūn*). This focus has led to something of a shared affinity with other so-called *salafist* groups as the author notes. – Editor.
3. Half the office-holders were elected and half were appointed. The entire female population was excluded from the vote. The percentage of the total population voting in each region was Najd, 4.6%; Hijāz, 3.9%; Al-Hasa and Qatif, 8%; S. Region, 3.7%; N. Region, 6%. The national average was 4.8%.
4. There is, in addition, a third level of exclusion, inhabited by expatriate workers, who constitute more than half the population and have virtually no rights of citizenship whatsoever.
5. See: *Fatwa: The Shīʿah are more dangerous to Islam than the Jews and the Christians*. Available from: <http://www.ibnjebreen.com/ftawa.php?view=vmasal&subid=9546&parent=3959>; *The Net for the defence of the Sunnah. Fatwā: No apologies for the Shīʿah, religious evidence is against them*. Available from: <http://www.dsunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=21144>; *Fatwa: Commending the conversion from Shiitism, where there is sin and apostasy, to the true Islam*. Available from: <http://www.d-sunnah.net/forum/showthread.php?t=21101>
6. *Al-Waṭan* in April 2007 reported 21 incidents in the past year of confrontations between the muṭāwʿah and Saudi nationals involving firearms and knives. Also see *al-Quds al-ʿArabī*, 7 July 2007 and Vice Squad: The Power of Saudi Arabia's Morality Police is being Challenged, amid Allegations of Abuse and Violence, *Time*, 6 August 2007.
7. Prince Nāyif confirms that the 'Committee' will remain strong. Available from: http://www.islamtoday.net/albasheer/show_news_content.cfm?id=13181. For Nāyif's confirmation of the *mutawʿah*'s role, see also Prince Nāyif confirms his standing by the 'Committee', *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 22 September 2006. Available from: <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/details.asp?article=383995&issue=10160§ion=1> [Accessed 9 August 2008].
8. See: http://wasatonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&ud=2168&itemid=33#Scene_1

9. See: Petition entitled: A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation, January 2003. Available from: http://menberalhewar.com/forum.php?action=view&id=359&cat_id=40 [Accessed 19 August 2008].

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