5. Political Power and the Saudi State[1]

Ghassan Salamé

The absence of a central political power has been a prominent feature throughout the history of the Arabian peninsula. The focus through most of early Muslim society shifted rapidly from Mecca and Medina in the western part of the peninsula, to Damascus and then Baghdad, and in its wake the web of tribal authority reasserted itself. Power was exerted primarily from the outside, or by local forces sustained from the outside. But more often than not, authority was restricted within the tribe. Foreign forces were reluctant to control with a direct physical presence this huge, barren heartland of the peninsula. The Ottomans (as well as European powers) largely confined themselves to its perimeters.

The Saudi regime, in this setting, is noteworthy for its indigenous Najdi character. Subdued by Muhammad 'Ali of Egypt in 1818, and then by an alliance between the Ottomans and various eastern tribes late in the 19th century, Saudi power rose again when 'Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud conquered Riyadh at the beginning of the 20th century. A few years later he moved successfully against the Shammar tribes to the north, consolidating power in central Arabia. During and after World War I he collaborated with the British, and after the war he granted oil concessions to more recent arrivals in the area – the Americans. The indigenous 'authentic Arabian' origins of the Saudi regime have allowed it a margin of independence from the British and the Americans, and substantial 'legitimacy' when compared with other Arab rulers (such as the kings of Iraq and Transjordan) who were directly installed on their thrones by the British.

It is remarkable in a tribal society that one tribe has been able to gain the degree of hegemony attained by the Sauds. This can largely be attributed to the crucial Wahhabi connection which gave the Sauds a supra-tribal ideology to manipulate in their drive to establish a permanent principality, rather than one of those numerous volatile and short-lived tribal confederations. Saudi access to revenues from the Mecca pilgrimage after 1926, and from oil exports after World War II, has enabled the family to add money to its religious, military, and other (notably, politically arranged marriages) means of maintaining hegemony.

Control over urban areas posed a more complex problem for the Sauds. Outright military occupation was appropriate in the small oases of the interior.

in B. Berberoglu, ed,
"Power and Stability in the Middle East",
Zed Books 1989 - London

but a more sophisticated method was required in the coastal Hijazi cities. There, after some hesitation, Ibn Saud permitted a certain degree of local autonomy and some continuation of local laws. But this autonomy was gradually whittled away and, in 1932, the country's name was changed from the Kingdom of Najd, Hijaz, 'Asir, Hassa and Their Dependencies to Saudi Arabia. Provincial names were replaced by geographical nomenclature – for example, Hassa became the Eastern Province, and Hijaz the Western Province. Wherever threats to Saudi power might arise, large military installations and garrisons sprang up, such as in Dhahran, Khobar, and Khamis Mushayt in the 'Asir area.

In the late 1920s, Ibn Saud himself disbanded the *Ikhwan*, the military religious brotherhood of mainly Bedouin warriors who had helped the family reconquer four-fifths of the Arabian peninsula. More and more Ibn Saud came to rely on alliances and a family presence throughout the territory. One element which he assiduously maintained, though, was the intimate connection of the regime with the *ulama*, the religious leaders charged with interpreting Muslim law, who are still consulted today on many public issues. For a long while, religious power was centralized in the al-Sheikh family, the descendants of 'Abd al-Wahhab; this power is now more widely distributed among generally Najdi-born *ulama*, however.

From Saudi power to Saudi state

The time when Ibn Saud could govern his kingdom with the help of a few Syrian scribes and tribal councillors is past. Today the Saudi state has a council of ministers, ministerial departments, an army, an official newspaper – all features common to most modern political states.

The emergence of the Saudi state apparatus was much less an internally generated transformation of a tribal power than a response to systematic external pressure. The first challenge facing the regime was the absorption of the Hijaz province after the defeat of the Hashemites in 1925–26. The integration of this province into the kingdom posed two series of problems. First, the government had to avoid provoking the population of Hijaz – a largely urban, commercial, educated people prone to flaunting their superiority over the fanatical, warrior–nomad people of Najd who had defeated them. Hijaz had a constitution, municipal councils, and a regular army – things the conquering Sauds knew almost nothing about. In addition, as a result of foreign trade and pilgrimage activity, this province had long-standing ties with other countries, notably with Egypt.

To attack the historic administrative structures of Hijaz would have risked rebellion; allowing these structures to remain intact threatened a progressive detachment of the Hijaz from the Saudi orbit. The choice between these alternatives was all the more difficult because it came at a time when Ibn Saud was barely able to restrain his *Ikhwan*, who wanted to impose their simple, tough and fanatical worldview on more sophisticated Hijazis. He settled on an intermediate solution: permitting Hijaz to keep some of its laws and

institutions from former times, while naming his own son, Faisal, vice-regent of the province to ensure a Saudi presence at the head of governmental structures left by centuries of Hashemite–Ottoman rule. Consequently, the Hijaz administration was considerably better organized than that of the central government.

On September 18, 1932, the country was unified under the name Saudi Arabia. Following the example of Hijaz, Ibn Saud named governors to the different provinces, giving them considerable latitude, in view of the large area of the country, the lack of modern communications, and the very peculiar conditions of each of the various provinces. Whereas in Hijaz Faisal regularly consulted local notables, in Hassa 'Abdallah Ibn Jiluwi governed in the patriarchal manner of Ibn Saud, with scarcely matched severity.

The vice-regency model developed for Hijaz indirectly established the notion of the delegation of power. Gradually, this concept was extended to the various sectors of governmental activity. Although under Ibn Saud such activity was rudimentary, it was already clear that the king could not involve himself in every little administrative detail. He developed the practice of delegating personal representatives, both in the central administration and in the government of the provinces.

Faisal, situated in Hijaz with easy access to foreign communications, was made responsible for diplomacy. He served as a sort of diplomatic jack-of-all-trades – at once minister of foreign affairs, representative to the United Nations and roving ambassador. The foreign ministry, then at Jeddah, was integrated with the personal secretariat of Faisal, the vice-regent of the province. The kingdom responded very slowly to requests from other countries to open embassies, with only five or six established instead of the 30 expected. Poor finances, a good deal of chauvinism, and lack of interest in routine diplomacy explain this reluctance.

The Ministry of Finance was also created in 1932. Here the problems were more serious: the sovereign's personal expenses were not separated from the state budget, and remained so until the end of the 1950s. Maintenance of the currency (whose parity had to be set) and a minimum of bookkeeping were essential. 'Abdallah al-Suleiman, an old client of the king, was appointed to distribute sacks of rice or flour, and later dollars, to the allies and clients of Ibn Saud. For a long period of time he monopolized the title of *wazir* (minister), and he was indeed the only one.

Even this modest organization, however, could not develop further as long as Ibn Saud was alive. Jealous of his royal prerogatives, he did not hesitate to involve himself in very trivial issues, – arbitrating between individuals or tribes, drafting diplomatic dispatches, personally receiving visitors. The king did not like the ministerial organization tolerated in Hijaz. But just as exchanges with other countries compelled him to name a minister of foreign affairs, relations with the petroleum companies forced him to establish a Ministry of Finance.

In 1944, the American decision to install a base at Dhahran prompted the king to establish a Ministry of Defence as well. But these offices, arising purely as a result of external pressure, did not affect his personal power in the slightest.

and he often ignored them. Finally, just a few weeks before his death in 1953, he agreed to establish a Council of Ministers in order to have certain of his sons and councillors share in the power of his heir. Saud. and because he was finally convinced that this was a requirement for all states. The main motivating factor was that Ibn Saud did not want to transmit to only one of his 37 sons a power as absolute as that which he himself had exercised.

Besides the death of Ibn Saud, the other factor that hastened the emergence of a state apparatus was oil. Saudi crude was only produced in major quantities after 1945, but its development then became very rapid. Oil revenues were spent in the most careless manner, despite the anxieties this created for ARAMCO, fast becoming a kind of state-within-a-state upon which the royal power was growing increasingly dependent. In return for royalties the government had nothing to offer ARAMCO but its signature at the bottom of a contract – no armed forces to defend installations, no administration capable of handling complex negotiations, no skilled labour, no educated personnel, no real infrastructure of any sort, much less a governmental body capable of regulating the corporate giant at the heart of the kingdom.

As a result, ARAMCO engaged not only in all phases of Saudi oil production, but also built housing, airports, hospitals and schools, laid down roads, founded educational centres, dug for water, launched agricultural research and, above all, encouraged the US government to install a military base near the oil fields that would protect them and the people who worked there. This activity posed a double challenge to Riyadh; it stimulated the Saudi government to improve its negotiating position vis-à-vis the foreign power, and also to prepare itself to rival and replace it in the domain of oil as well as the many sectors of civil life where it was now involved. In 1953, at the death of Ibn Saud, the kingdom found itself in an absurd situation: oil, its principal resource, was formally nationalized, but there was no state apparatus capable of administering it.

The Council of Ministers met for the first time on March 7, 1954, in Riyadh. Ministries of the interior, education, agriculture, health, industry and commerce, and information were added to defence, foreign affairs and finance. Rivalries between ministers, as well as inexperience, caused numerous problems. The Ministry of Economy was created in 1953, but closed the very next year. The governor of Hassa province in the east categorically refused to submit to the minister of the interior and continued to organize the police of the province in his own way. Committees, supreme councils and special commissions came and went like the wind, sometimes becoming ministries, but more often falling into oblivion.

It was not until much later, mainly under the influence of Faisal, that an organizational framework began to emerge from this chaos. A royal decree clarifying the duties of the Council of Ministers, issued on May 12, 1958, remains a cornerstone of government. According to this document, the council is responsible for the budget and internal affairs, but only the king can legislate and issue laws, treaties and concessions. The king can oppose a proposition of the council, but he has to justify his veto. The regional organization of the

kingdom is based on a decree of October 1963 which divides the kingdom into six provinces (*muqata'a*), which are further subdivided into a number of regions (*mantika*). Each governor is appointed by royal decree. A vice-governor and a 30-member provincial council, chosen by the Council of Ministers, assist him.

The royal family and its allies

From the composition of the government, little has changed since 1975, and it is easy to see that the sons of Ibn Saud occupy all the important posts: first and second deputy prime ministers, defence and aviation, public works and housing, interior and municipal and rural affairs. Foreign affairs has fallen to a member of the third generation (Saud, son of King Faisal and nephew of the present king) as has the position of deputy minister in all these (and other) departments.

Outside the council this nepotism is only increased. When he was only a crown prince, Fahd was at the head of a series of supreme councils that brought under the direct authority of the Saud family sectors formally entrusted to non-family officials: national security, education, universities, oil affairs, youth, pilgrimage, and industrialization. These councils thus extended the personal imprint of Fahd and his so-called 'Sudayri' clan over the whole administration. Provincial government is entrusted only to near relatives of Ibn Saud. His sons are governors of Medina, Mecca, and Riyadh, and his nephews and grandsons are at the head of other provinces. In 1986, King Fahd named his own son to be governor of the oil-rich Eastern province, breaking a tradition of uninterrupted rule of this province by the Jiluwi branch of the family, and clearly showing an inclination to re-concentrate provincial government in the hands of the king.

From the beginning, the power of the Saudi monarchy has depended on alliances with other forces inside the kingdom. The new governmental apparatus also permits the ruling family to repay these faithful supporters through co-optation. The al-Sheikh, descendants of the founder of Wahhabism, are one of the most well-known of such allies. Their influence has been cemented by their permanent presence in the Council of Ministers. Other traditional tribal allies include the Sudayris, a tribe from which Saudi princes often choose a wife, and the Thunayyan, who brought to the family administrative experience gained in the service of the Ottoman Empire. Within the family itself, certain branches are given more influence than others, depending on the goodwill of the king. While Khalid once had Jiluwis as advisers, King Fahd has reopened the corridors of power to the descendants of King Saud and the now pardoned renegade branch which fought against the family in the 19th century. Loyal but less prominent tribes are accommodated through financial transfers and the national guard, where the sons of the chiefs naturally serve as officers, and their clients as soldiers.

Clan and state: the officer-princes

The mineral wealth of the country has increased its vulnerability. The kingdom must have a strong armed force to cope with many formidable threats. These armed forces number about 70,000 and are men, equipped increasingly with sophisticated weapons. But the military has some severe handicaps. A military career holds little attraction for young Saudi men, despite very attractive incentives for the recruit and his family. At best, only 2 percent of the population is in the army, and the ratio of personnel to territory is even less impressive: one for every 16 kilometres. Nor does the quality of the Saudi army's training readiness compare favourably with that of neighbouring states, even poor ones. Nevertheless, in 1982, the defence budget was $26 billion, of which a considerable proportion went to the US as payment for arms, equipment, and services. Today, the kingdom spends more on defence on a per capita basis than any country in the world, with a per capita expenditure of $2,500 (compared with $520 for the United States). Despite improvements since 1975, particularly in weaponry, Saudis remain sceptical about the military's prowess.

One detects in the royal family itself a reluctance to undertake major development of the armed forces. The monarchy, anxious to defend its wealth, seems to fear the potentially high political price of a strong army. Too many dynasties and civilian regimes in the immediate vicinity of the kingdom have already paid it. Even aborted coups prove to be expensive. One attempt in 1969, originating in the Air Force, triggered renewed doubts about its officers' loyalty.

The dilemma between defending the country and defending the regime shows how limited the institutionalization of power remains. The insistence on 'protecting the cities against the enemy' leads to posting garrisons close to the principal urban centres. This is only one sign of how much the regime fears the army and how adamantly it intends to keep this force under its thumb as an insurance against a sudden uprising.

Another sign is the regime's reliance on two military corps – the army and the national guard – which were for a time almost equal in size. This is no mere holdover from the past, or a formal division with no practical meaning. The United States, responsible for the formation of both, considers them as two distinct forces, complementary certainly, but possibly antagonistic in case of conflict.[2]

The guard is an extension of loyalist tribal groups, while the army is an outgrowth of the Hijazi troops inherited from the Sharif of Mecca. They are commanded differently: the Ministry of Defence and Aviation is a stronghold of the Sudayri clan, represented by Sultan, the brother of the king. The guard is under the authority of 'Abdallah, probably the strongest counterweight to the influence of the Sudayri clan (the king and his six full brothers). The armed forces are charged with defending the borders and helping to put down internal rebellion. The guard is principally charged with the protection of the cities and oil wells. Both were used to quell the Mecca rebellion in 1979.

Although the armed forces of the kingdom share the same commander-in-chief – the king himself – the large size of the royal family allows it to place a great number of princes in positions of command. It is difficult to provide an exact count of these officer-princes, but they are generally estimated to be in the hundreds. Prince Bandar, the ambassador to Washington and Prince Salman, the astronaut, both belong to this category. This holds true as much for the national guard, the air force, and other services. As a rule, princes who have not received a military education abroad fill the higher posts in the guard or the army, whereas graduates of Lackland, San Diego, or Fort Leavenworth serve as officers in the other armed services.

The National Defence sector is not reserved for Saudis alone; but the regime is very reluctant to supply information on who the many foreigners are or what role they play in the Saudi army. The information that is available indicates three categories of people serving in the armed forces:

1. Contracted foreign officers serving in an individual capacity. About 1,500 of these are of Pakistani origin. Officers of Jordanian origin number in the dozens. There are also Syrians, Iraqis, Palestinians, Bengalis and Egyptians. These officers are treated like nationals; they seem to be most active in training and logistics.
2. Officers sent to the kingdom by virtue of bilateral agreements between the kingdom and their country of origin. The United States, French, British, and Pakistani governments, among others, are represented by such missions. It is possible that a full-fledged Pakistani division has been stationed in the kingdom.
3. Employees of foreign firms involved in Saudi military projects. The greatest number of military-related foreigners working in the kingdom belong in this category. American companies clearly predominate in this sector, employing at least 6,000 United States citizens. French and British number in the hundreds.

The presence of these foreigners poses many problems. Their political role is rather obscure, and one wonders whether their presence is due wholly to Saudi deficiencies. Is this not a mercenary type of force? Will these soldiers be more active in the concrete concerns of internal politics than in the hypothetical defence of the nation's borders? The fact that French gendarmes, and possibly American soldiers, participated in the repression of the Mecca rebellion is no more disputed, and this is only one example among many. One could also question the real role played by the American-manned AWACS stationed in the kingdom since 1980.

Property and wealth

At the birth of the kingdom, 80 percent of what was to become Saudi territory was the property of nomadic tribes. In this pastoral subsistence economy, founded much more on movement than on the settled holding of land, the

concept of private property was certainly primitive. Only afterwards did these lands come to be considered the collective property of the tribes who inhabited them in the past; indeed, they were once the source of an unlimited number of intertribal conflicts.

Thirty percent of all cultivated land, notably in the non-Saudi regions of Hijaz and 'Asir, belongs to the private sector. In other cases, inheritance rights are based not on ownership, but on usufruct. Some *miri* lands were given as *iqta'* (fief) to military chiefs who had supported the dynasty, but a decree of 1957 forbids these 'owners' to register their lands without the authorization of the king. Once registered, the land become *mulk* (property), a rare development outside of 'Asir. Other lands belong to tribes or sedentary communities in the east. These are *musha'* lands. *Waqf* (religious land) constitutes close to 10 percent of the cultivated land. Members of the royal family have accumulated fortunes by selling to the state the land they were allocated by this same state.

Table 5.1
Land holdings and cultivated land (in hectares)

Emirate	*No. of Villages*	*No. of Holdings*	*Total of Cultivated Land*
Eastern	111	11,372	6,947
Riyadh, Afif & al-Khasira	374	9,668	35,064
Gassim	284	6,695	21,046
Hail	241	6,645	5,669
Jawf, Qurayyat & Northern Boundaries	95	2,655	597
Medina	264	7,815	2,832
Mecca	2,423	37,000	32,808
Asir	1,317	31,302	11,905
al-Bahah	961	19,534	3,988
Jizan	1,406	34,802	387,066
Majran	71	2,389	3,067
Bisha & Ranyah	258	10,912	13,737
Totals	*7,805*	*180,789*	*524,726*

Source: Saudi Ministry of Planning, *Second Development Plan, 1975–80*, p. 119.

Even more important in the Saudi system of land tenure are the property rights that the state holds over the subsoil. The state appropriated the right to displace entire tribes in order to facilitate the exploitation of mineral wealth. Thus, Ibn Saud initiated oil agreements by simple royal decrees.

The financial structure was dominated after 1952 by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA). In 1954, the Ministry of Economy and Finance was created to supervise the country's revenues and fiscal activities. The statutes of the Council of Ministers of 1954–58 charged this agency with

approving the annual budget published by royal decree. The emergence of these bureaux, along with new ministries of agriculture, commerce, industry, planning and oil, accompanied a net reduction by two-thirds of the sums annually allocated to the princes of the royal family.

Institutionalization of the financial sector continually runs up against the same obstacles encountered by the administration in general – the exclusivity of political power, the personalized division of power among members of the royal family, and the lack of a skilled workforce. No one knows how much money is distributed to members of the royal family under diverse and vague categories. Because the royal family holds the political power, it 'directs and is able to appropriate Saudi national income to itself, and has the last word in the investment policies.'[3] It is estimated that some $300 million is allocated to the princes of the royal family individually, not including the large tracts of land they personally possess. The amount the budget officially allocates to members of the royal family occupying official posts, and which they may spend almost arbitrarily, must be added to this already considerable sum. Habits of easy income and luxurious spending were, however, curtailed in the mid-1980s due to a decline in oil revenues. The necessary readjustments led to tensions within the ruling circles in the kingdom, as well as in the smaller oil countries of the Gulf.

The people of Saudi Arabia

The five million people of Saudi Arabia[4] presently experience the contradictions that naturally arise when an extremely traditional society becomes, almost overnight, intimately linked with the international capitalist system.

Has the tribal nomadic life become a simple memory for the people who came from it? Nomads are now an estimated 6 percent of the population – 'an essentially precarious, nonmonetary, socially-particularized subsistence economy, in the face of a hypermonetary economy based on oil and related only to a small part of the population.'[5] This gap cannot endure indefinitely. Today, the bedouin are 'in a state of cataclysmic transition.'[6] This transformation is not due solely to oil. Greatly fearing the hostility of the cosmopolitan cities, the Saudi regime has, since the beginning, relied on the bedouin. Between 1912 and 1927, Ibn Saud tried to settle a number of them to form the backbone of his troops, the *Ikhwan*. Tribal loyalties were to prove much stronger than the new supra-tribal identity which the regime tried to foster in them, and tribal cleavages were too obvious when the *Ikhwan* rebelled and were defeated by the settled tribes which remained loyal to the king – with some help from the Royal Air Force.

Today, the government seeks to settle all the nomads. The government's intervention seems to have a double aim: to forestall the formation of an urban *lumpenproletariat* which could, sooner or later, pose a threat; at the same time, to take advantage of this potential workforce to stem the tide of immigrant workers. In addition, of course, it is easier to exercise political control over a

settled population than over groups perpetually on the move.

The transition to sedentary life is occurring very rapidly, and the government seems incapable of mastering this development, which is largely independent of its will. Communications have had a great deal to do with this transition, which has been speeded up by the collapse of the old desert economy. The nomadic economy is disappearing, while tribal loyalties remain. Yet the regime fears them less than it does the disillusionment and sense of betrayal caused by rapid urbanization. The nomad problem does not disappear with their sedentarization. It only changes form.

The Saudi regime owes its survival and expansion to the combination of a Najdi thrust and a Wahhabi religious current. This combination of regional and religious expansionism imposed itself through systematic recourse to raiding, war and enforced tribal alliances. Resistance to this political and religious hegemony was considerable. Today that resistance is weaker, due to the political unification of the country, the diffusion of the benefits of oil revenues and, of course, more efficient tools of repression. But the hegemony of the clan in power is not equally accepted with enthusiasm by the whole population. Indeed, the tribal, geographical and religious heterogeneity of the population holds the potential for revolt of a traditional sort.

Tribal factors

The increasingly exorbitant privileges awarded to the members of the royal family and their near relatives are difficult to justify to the rest of the population. They are, first of all, contrary to Islam, especially to the egalitarianism of Hanbali and Wahhabi schools, based on a fundamentalist, literalist interpretation of the Qur'an. Invoked as the exclusive ideology of the state, Islam also does not sanction the practice of hereditary succession, and favours personal aptitude as the criterion for choosing the leadership. Are the Saudi princes thus fit to govern? Or, posing the question differently, are there not other people just as capable outside the Saudi family?[7]

The hegemony and these privileges, moreover, are recent. Only two centuries ago the Sauds were notables in a small oasis of Najd, like so many other families who have since disappeared or who today perpetuate the memories of a 'fief' destroyed by the Sauds. The Shammar, that illustrious tribe of the Arabian north-east, fought against the central power until the 1930s, and had to see their centuries-old *imara* around Ha'il satellized by the Sauds. The Mutayyir of the same region, the Harb of Hijaz, the Baun Khalid of Hassa, the Zahtans of southern Hijaz, and others have been conquered or neutralized by marriages, money, and the commissioning of their chiefs, but they have hardly, in themselves, been broken apart. The experience of *hijra*[8] demonstrated the unrealistic nature of inter-tribal integration schemes, especially in a society where political power is maintained by internal tribal cohesion. The royal family has been content to institute a supra-tribal order that does not profoundly affect traditional alliances and that could one day turn against the royal family itself.[9] One could easily find signs of tribal solidarity in all protest movements known to have occurred in the kingdom, including the 1979

rebellion in Mecca, where a young 'Utaybi succeeded in drawing his brother-in-law (designated as *al-Mahdi*, or the Messiah) and several members of his tribe into a confrontation with the authorities.

Regional factors

Regional heterogenity is no less of an issue. In Saudi Arabia everyone is aware that the present power is, essentially, a Najdi power. The names of the provinces have been replaced by geographical terms. The existence of a single bureaucracy and the obvious economic interdependence of the provinces of the country have largely helped diminish provincialism, at least on the political level.

Provincialism has not disappeared and, given favourable circumstances, it could give rise to attempts at secession. All political opposition must be tempted to appeal to this sentiment. Saudi Arabia extends over 1.5 million square kilometres. Between one city and another, one province and another, the emptiness of the desert is often complete. At one time, this emptiness constituted a barrier, if not a boundary. The eastern region, separated by the Nafud, has been historically as intimately connected with Iraq, Bahrain, and even Iran and India, as with the Najd hinterland. In the western part of the country, ever since the emergence of Islam, the cities of Hijaz (Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah) have acquired renown, autonomy, and enviable contacts with the world at large. 'Asir was the locus of the autonomous Idrisi rule, and was marked by a certain way of life and a religious tradition different from that of its Najdi conquerors. Jizan and Najran had much stronger links to Yemen than to Najd. From oil-rich Hassa to commercial Hijaz, through bedouin Najd and the 'bread basket' of 'Asir, the history, traditions, accents and ways of life differ. In fact, they differ radically, especially with the tribal heterogeneity that further increases their specificity. For example, it is now beyond doubt that Hijazi merchants were involved both in the 1969 air force coup attempt as well as in the 1979 Mecca rebellion. To a large extent, Shi'i dissatisfaction with the regime has strong local roots, since it is confined to areas around Qatif which were historically autonomous vis-à-vis the Najd.

Religious factors

It seems likely that dissidents would channel their discontent into a lack of enthusiasm for the Wahhabism that the Najdi conquerors have imposed upon them as a 'state religion', for by no means all Saudis share 'Abd al-Wahhab's interpretation of the Qur'an, more compatible with the traditional customs and harsh life of the Najdi bedouin than with the urban ways of the Hijazi Sunni or the Twelver Shi'a of Hassa. Indeed, the Shi'a, some 200,000 of whom live in the eastern region, will not soon forget the Wahhabi fanaticism which has oppressed them for two centuries, nor their own religious affiliation, which has frequently cost them their lives. This stimulates them to maintain strong ties with the Shi'i centres, such as al-Najaf in southern Iraq, Qum in Iran, or Bahrain, where their co-religionists make up the majority of the population and enjoy a relatively better status.

The Sunnis, although they constitute the overwhelming majority of the population, are by no means unified. Despite the constant pressure of Wahhabism, the four recognized Sunni schools continue to exist in the country. Malekis and Hanafis are numerous in Hassa, while Hijaz and 'Asir respond to Hanbalism – in the Wahhabi version imposed upon them about 50 years ago – through a secular attachment to now Egyptian-centred Shafeism.

These variations would probably mean very little if the fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrine did not appear so inappropriate to the 'spirit of the age' that now chaotically pervades the kingdom. If Islam and modernity are reconcilable, Wahhabism certainly does not offer Islam's most supple or innovative interpretation. On the contrary, it seems to widen the gulf between traditional lifestyles and the new social forces that 'development,' whether chaotic or controlled, inevitably creates. And religious fundamentalism can be a refuge for those who have been left behind by the social and economic evolution of the country, as the events of Mecca have shown. These events have demonstrated that you can be more genuinely Muslim than the rulers in this Muslim country *par excellence*, where ritualistic and official Islam has largely lost its appeal. They have also shown that Hanbali Wahhabism, a politically quietist school of interpretation, could not be overly used to legitimize a status quo power.

Foreign workers

Official figures for 1975 claimed that 314,000 non-Saudis were working in the kingdom. The government anticipated an annual increase of 21 percent over the five following years, to a total of 813,000. This cumulative increase of 159 percent was well above the 18 percent growth in the Saudi labour force.

But these figures cannot be trusted. The 1975 figure was clearly underestimated. Wells thinks it should be doubled to 600,000 foreign workers (against 900,000 nationals), while *Le Monde* puts the figure at one million for the same year.[10] Just a year and a half later, Eric Rouleau made an estimate of 1.5 million. He mentioned the case of an industrialist employing 1,040 workers, of whom only four were Saudi. The Mercedes assembly plant near Jeddah employs no Saudis, except for the chairman; it is managed by 15 West Germans, and employs 250 Turks on the assembly line.[11] Until 1972, a large number of Yemenis were able to enter the kingdom without a passport, and they alone made up approximately one million workers. These individual estimates suggest that the foreign workforce passed the two million mark around 1980–81, far from the official figure of 813,000 foreign workers in 1980.

These figures have enormous impact; the departure of immigrant workers would completely paralyse the country's economy, whether they were the European pilots of Saudi Airlines or the Yemeni port workers. They also constitute a gamble for the future because 'the fate of every attempt at industrialization will depend on the ability of the government to absorb the foreign workers.'[12]

Although the kingdom does not publish precise figures, available information indicates that, in the early 1980s, over one million Yemenis were

Table 5.2
Saudi Arabia: employment by economic sector and nationality, 1975

Sector	*Saudi Arabian*		*Non-national*			*Saudi Arabians' share of all employment*
	No.	*%*	*No.*	*%*	*Total*	*%*
Agriculture and fishing	530,700	51.7	54,900	7.1	585,600	90.6
Mining and petroleum	15,400	1.5	11,600	1.5	27,000	57.0
Manufacturing	21,550	2.1	94,350	12.2	115,900	18.6
Electricity, gas and water	7,200	0.7	13,150	1.7	20,350	35.4
Construction	35,900	3.5	203,400	26.3	239,300	15.0
Wholesale and retail trade	60,600	5.9	131,500	17.0	192,100	31.5
Transport, storage and communications	72,900	7.1	30,950	4.0	103,850	70.2
Finance and insurance	5,150	0.5	6,950	0.9	12,100	42.6
Community and personal services	277,100	27.0	226,600	29.3	503,700	55.0
Total	*1,026,500*	*100.0*	*773,400*	*100.0*	*1,799,900*	*57.0*

Source: J. S. Birks and C. A. Sinclair, ***International Migration and Development in the Arab Region***, International Labour Organization, (Geneva, 1980) p. 160. These figures tend to understate the number and proportion of non-Saudis in the workforce.

employed as unskilled manual labourers; colonies of immigrant Sudanese, Egyptians, Palestinians and Libyans, each ranging from 100,000 to 300,000, work in government offices, schools, or other 'white collar' positions. A large number of Indians, Pakistanis, South Koreans and Malaysians work in occupations as diverse as doctors, technicians, and unskilled manual labourers. Close to 40,000 Americans, and some 20,000 Western Europeans, are engaged in different aspects of modern technology or finance.

Such a large number of non-Saudis constitutes a real danger to the kingdom. Jeddah, the commercial centre of the country, is like Kuwait – approximately 50 percent of its 800,000 inhabitants are foreigners. Large salaries attract foreign workers – an unskilled worker can make at least $5,000 a year. A Sudanese MD is better paid as a nurse in Jeddah than as a surgeon in Khartoum, and an Egyptian unskilled worker in Saudi Arabia can earn a better salary than a cabinet minister in Cairo. Some 2,000 people who entered the country illegally, mostly on the *hajj* pilgrimage, are repatriated every month, and South Koreans who tried to strike were immediately deported.

In an effort to impose restraints on a situation threatening to get out of control, and despite strong opposition from neighbouring countries, the government in March 1976 issued a decree requiring foreign firms with a major contract (involving more than $28.5 million, more than 50 employees and lasting more than three years) to import the necessary workers, provide housing, and guarantee their loyalty. This policy favours Asian firms controlling cheap labour, especially Koreans, which ensure the success of their firms by sending ex-army officers as foremen to maintain order among their nationals. The decline in oil prices and revenues in the mid-1980s is not expected to lead to less reliance on foreign workers, as clearly shown by Roger Owen[13] and others. Unemployment in Europe has not led the French unemployed to replace the Senegalese in clearing the streets, and the observation would be all the more pertinent in a rentier economy like Saudi Arabia where work ethics are very poorly rooted. The decline in oil prices will, however, mean lower pay and more competition as far as the foreign workers themselves are concerned.

Rich and poor

There are important pre-capitalist features in the way wealth is distributed in Saudi Arabia.[14] The most impoverished in Saudi society are the bedouins (settled or nomadic), the non-Saudis (especially Yemenis), and the Saudis who have no access to the ruling clan – no family ties, no community or faith, no ancient nobility capable of selling its support.

Although the present phase of economic growth encourages increasing social mobility, individual success stories are real but too few to be considered a general trend in social mobility. Oil revenues remain in the hands of the state or, to be more precise, in the hands of influential members of the royal family who dominate the state.

Important urban families have infiltrated the state structure and established close ties at the highest levels. Thanks to a system of sponsorship and

partnership, this comprador bourgeoisie profitably concentrates on mixed industrial projects with the state, on franchises for the most powerful Western firms and, more recently, on large public works and consulting projects. This symbiosis of the traditional power and the urban bourgeoisie flourishes amid persistent and reciprocal suspicion. It has led to the bourgeoisification of the royal family through the increasingly open involvement of the princes in business.

The relationship is clearly unequal; a prince can become a businessman more easily than a Jeddah merchant can become a minister. This sort of transformation is limited to a small circle difficult to enter for persons outside the royal family, its close allies, or the traditional merchant families of Hijaz or Hadhramawt. The population as a whole remains dependent upon state assistance and is increasingly feeling the effects of the concentration of wealth as an automatic corollary to the concentration of power. Neither underdevelopment nor tribalism, nor a hegemonic religious superstructure can slow down, or even camouflage, the rapid emergence of increasingly distinct social classes. This fact became more evident when, faced with the difficulties of a new era marked by a sharp decline in state revenues, the ruler's appeals for 'economic patriotism' fell on deaf ears among the new comprador class. The large merchants, besides their own difficulties in adapting to the new, more competitive circumstances, were unwilling to invest in long-term projects, like so many of their colleagues across the Third World who have always preferred the safety of Zurich and city banks to investments in their own countries. On the other hand, some of them were reluctant to engage in such a 'patriotism' without receiving concessions from the royal family on the power-sharing issue. Political decision-making is still denied them despite the repeated and as yet (mid-1986) empty promises to give the country a constitution and a non-elected consultative council.

Men/women

The public Saudi society which confronts this colossal transformation is composed almost exclusively of men. Women benefit widely from the new wealth in the form of household appliances and other conveniences now at their disposal, but their voice is never heard in politics or business. A Saudi woman can now obtain a passport in her own name, but she cannot yet travel without a close relative. She cannot drive an automobile, visit a museum, nor with few exceptions, choose her own husband. Although women have been admitted to the University of Riyadh since 1962, they take courses separately through closed-circuit television, and are rarely able to enter professions other than teaching, or nursing in women's hospitals.

The segregation of the sexes is profound. At home, at school, and in the street, the barriers are strictly preserved. The regime has encountered many obstacles in establishing education for women. The first girls' school dates back only to 1960, and the first secondary school to 1969. Traditional groups were firmly opposed to women's education, and they currently frustrate any attempts to introduce women into more active social roles. In 1975, 27,000

women worked in the few areas open to them compared with 1.2 million men in the same professions. The government hoped to bring the number of working women up to 48,000 by 1980 by increasing the number of posts in the fields already reserved for them, rather than by allowing them to enter other sectors such as office work.

The minister of information speaks of the necessity of 'utilizing this enormous potential which would otherwise be a great waste of labour,' but he runs up against the intransigence of traditionalists who insist that the Institute of Public Administration be reserved for men, and who instruct Saudi ambassadors to forbid women students abroad to enrol in the faculties of engineering, education, business, economics and politics out of a 'concern for the preservation of the dignity of women.'

The Saudi woman faces more than the well-known rules of traditional Islam; she faces the precepts of the fanatical Wahhabi sect upon which the legitimacy of the Saudi regime is based. The kingdom which so desperately needs labour absurdly excludes half of its population from public life.

Such discrimination could lead eventually to protests, but more than feminist opposition groups will be needed. The country must wait for the growth of the social and political opposition groups which place the liberalization of mores prominently on their agendas. Such a process would accentuate the dilemma of the regime, since liberalization could not be limited to the domain of morality. The film *Death of a Princess*, by invoking so much controversy has shown the vulnerability of the regime at this point, the revolt of a woman having unveiled the general hypocrisy of the system. Following the Mecca rebellion of 1979, the freedoms and social-professional activities of Saudi women were major casualties in the reassertion of traditional values (notably by Sheikh 'Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz, the highest religious authority in the country).

The contradictions emerging from the Saudi social transformation have yet to produce marked effects on the evolution of the political regime. The regime's short-term stability is aided by a number of factors: internal cohesion of the family in power, despite clan divisions and princely rivalries; the favourable regional context since the June 1967 war, the demise of Nasser, and the general defeat of Arab nationalist regimes and forces; financial resources more than adequate to fund a policy of appeasement and allegiances, both internally and regionally; Washington's fervid commitment to the regime's survival; an organized and efficient repressive apparatus; the clear majority of Sunni Muslim Arabs (thus avoiding divisions like those of Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan); and the weakness, disorganization and disunity of the opposition.

The political opposition

A royal decree of June 11, 1956 (No. 217/23) imposes a penalty of at least one year in prison for striking, or incitement to strike. The decree of 1961 forbids the profession of any ideology other than Islam, or the formation of political

parties. It calls for the execution of anyone who 'engages in violent action against the state or the royal family.' The state completely controls the radio and television media, and films are forbidden. The Ministry of Information was created in 1962 to monitor the press, and a 1964 code drastically restricted the right to start a periodical, and accorded the ministry the right to shut down newspapers and veto editorial candidates or demand their resignation. In 1971 the state established an information agency to feed the media 'selected' material. All this at least partially explains the low profile of political parties and their weakness.

The Saudi Communist Party originated in the National Reform Front, which was founded following the 1953 ARAMCO strike. By 1958, the front no longer satisfied the militants who disagreed with its practices and its reformist title. It became the National Liberation Front. In 1963, the NLF entered the Arab National Liberation Front, associated with the dissident Prince Talal and his brothers. The ANLF's programme sought to transform the country into a constitutional regime and to leave to a referendum the choice between monarchy and republic. The programme also included revision of the agreements with the oil companies and an international policy of active non-alignment, but the ANLF suffered from a very heterogeneous membership, which included, in addition to the four rebel princes, Nasserites, Ba'thists, and Shi'i religious leaders. Nasser, who supported the front, is said to have told its leaders to form a liberation army – a rather unrealistic proposal. The front also had some support from Iraq.

The communists decided it would be more to their advantage to maintain a presence at the heart of the ANLF, while acting autonomously through a secret group formed in Beirut – the Organization of Saudi Communists. The NLF and the OSC disappeared very quickly, and the few Saudi communists who remained used the name of the NLF until August 1974, when the leadership of the front appointed a 'preparatory commission for the first congress of Saudi communists.' The congress took place in August 1975 and adopted several resolutions, including a programme and a change of name to the Communist Party of Saudi Arabia. The congress also elected a central committee, which elected a political bureau and a first secretary.

The tenets of the CPSA do not appear to be very innovative.[15] Internationally, the alignment of the CPSA is unconditionally pro-Soviet: it believes that 'certain symptoms of liberalism are beginning to appear in the superstructure of the quasifeudal and capitalist social system;' it claims to be favourably disposed towards 'a patriotic, democratic and republican regime' which would establish a constitution, guarantee public liberties, parliamentary procedure, and the freedom of political parties and labour unions, institute citizen equality, re-establish diplomatic relations with the USSR, and move towards the nationalization of mineral resources and the industrialization of the country. In spite of its efforts, the party does not seem to have attracted much mass support.

There are innumerable other Saudi opposition groups – all with scant followings – which emerged from the fringes of Arab nationalism and are

closely related to the Ba'th party, the Arab Nationalist Movement, or Egyptian Nasserists. The Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula, founded in 1959 and supported by Cairo, was the most important and the most heterogeneous of these groups. The UPAP, led by Nasir al-Said from the Shammar capital of Hail, defines itself as 'a revolutionary Arab organization, believing in scientific socialism, and struggling to bring down the corrupt monarchy.' The UPAP is committed to the total unification of the Arabian peninsula.[16]

The Socialist Front for the Liberation of the Peninsula was, contrary to its name, a Hijaz group preaching the autonomy of that province. The Democratic Popular Movement constituted a local splinter of the party. There was also the aforementioned Arab National Liberation Front, led by Prince Talal. These groups on the whole experienced very brief lifespans, limited membership and severe repression. In the mid-1980s, Prince Talal was still convinced that 'only democracy and political participation' could lead to real development of the country.

The Organization of the National Revolution, founded by one-time members of the Arab Nationalist Movement, tried to revitalize the opposition towards the end of the 1960s, but without success.[17] The Saudi branch of the Ba'th was founded in 1958. Support from Baghdad from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s gave it the means to spread its views – means which did not accord with its actual strength.[18] An independent Marxist group, the Democratic Popular Party, took over the Democratic Popular Movement and continues to publish *Al-Jazira al-Jadida* irregularly. But the secession and regrouping of part of the group around another publication, *An-Nidal*, has weakened this party.

The Saudi opposition, whether the potential opposition of the new middle class or the organized opposition of this or that political group, cannot expect a substantial change in the situation except through developments largely independent of its will, without which any initiatives appear suicidal. This was clearly shown in the fervently utopian and poorly organized Mecca rebellion in 1979, when the regime, after some confusion, successfully defeated the rebels and hanged 63 of them without visible negative reactions from the population.

The opposition could try to exploit to the fullest the few conflicts within the royal family. The most serious challenges to the regime originated in these conflicts – the Saud–Faisal struggle, Talal's dissidence, the assassination of Faisal in 1975. In the absence of some degree of disaffection in the royal family, it is reasonable to conclude that an alternative to the regime is very difficult to establish.

The Saud family holds an incontestable position – an opening to the population, a martial tradition, secular alliances, modern means of repression, a thorough infiltration of the armed forces. The Saud family, moreover, has developed a system of consensus-making formulae to circumscribe, at least up until now, the consequences of its undoubtedly numerous internal quarrels. The informal consultative assembly of influential princes organized the peaceful transitions which permitted Faisal to dethrone Saud in 1964, Khaled to succeed Faisal in 1975, and Fahd to succeed Khaled in 1982. It is evident that

if these formulae were to be weakened or fall apart, the regime could be very seriously threatened. Politics is at least as important among the small constituency of approximately 5,000 Saud princes as it is in the general Saudi constituency.

In this more general framework, it has often been predicted that the new middle class will ask for political power, be denied this power, and consequently be led to topple the regime. This model, although verified in many Third World countries, presupposes different important conditions, such as the existence of a full-fledged civil society, a unified national market, and a certain amount of class consciousness. The Iranian revolution has clearly shown that this model may easily be altered by forces allied to this 'middle class,' but eager to dominate it rather than represent it. In Saudi Arabia it is still difficult to state that this class now exists as such. Hundreds of millionaires living on the fringe of the regime do not make a class, especially when tribal and regional cleavages remain so strong. If an alternative to the regime is to be found, it is more likely to originate in a mixture of grievances made up of political, economic, tribal, and regional frustrations, with possible Arab references and support. But even then, it is going to be difficult to dispense with the monarchy, which has been, to date, the most important factor linking the country. It remains to be demonstrated that the so-called new 'middle-class' can play this unifying role, or is ready to risk its interests in a game which could destabilize the regime to the extent of threatening the country's territorial unity. It is difficult to think of such a development in the foreseeable future, although through careful co-operation a gradual opening to the élites outside the royal family has become inevitable.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article appeared in *MERIP Reports*, no. 91 (October 1980). Reprinted with permission.
2. Report of the Staff Survey Mission to the US House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, *US Arms Policies in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea Areas* (December 1977) p. 22. In April 1978, the National Guard signed a billion dollar contract with a British firm for an electronic communications system independent of that of the army.
3. J. Malone, *The Arab Lands of Western Asia* (Prentice-Hall, 1973).
4. The figure is hotly disputed; however, experts agree that the kingdom substantially inflates its population figures so as not to be unfavourably compared to neighbouring countries (North Yemen and Iraq), and to veil the crucial role played by foreign manpower in its economy.
5. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, May 1975.
6. M. M. McConohay, special report in *International Herald Tribune* (February 1978) p. 14.
7. The question at least poses itself on the provincial level. In a state otherwise highly centralized, there are no local allies on whom the ruling family can confer local government.
8. *Hijra* – literally 'migration' – refers to the break with the nomadic past which every *Ikhwan* believer must make: in the words of al-Rihani: 'leaving the abode among the unbelievers and moving to the realm of Islam.'

9. The assassin of King Faisal and numerous pro-Iraqi enemies of the king are linked to the Shammar tribes. The Union of People of the Arab Peninsula is also an organization almost exclusively tied to the Shammar tribes.

10. Wells, p. 10; *Le Monde*, June 21, 1975.

11. On January 24, 1977, Senator Mike Mansfield, during his visit to the kingdom, noted that there were as many Yemini workers living there as adult Saudi males.

12. Wells, p. 10. The problem is not new. In the early 1960s an observer noted that 'the Saudi government would not be able to function without oil revenues and technical aid. Without the Egyptians and the Palestinians there would be no administration, and no schools.' A royal decree of August 31, 1954, had stated that 75 percent of a firm's employees must be Saudi. This has clearly remained a dead letter.

13. Roger Owen, *Migrant Workers in the Gulf* (London, Minority Rights Group, 1985).

14. P. Bonnenfant, 'Utilisation des recettes pétrolières et stratégie des groupes sociaux dans la péninsule arabique,' *Machreq–Maghreb* no. 82, pp. 60–69, and no. 83, pp. 61–72.

15. See the documents of the first congress in *Watha'iq al-Mu'tamar al-Awwal 'al-Hizb ash-Shyui fia-Saudia* ('Documents of the first conference of the Saudi Communist Party'), August 1975.

16. Author of a violently harsh, poorly documented, and highly subjective book against the Saudi royal family, Nasir al-Said was successfully kidnapped from his Beirut refuge – reportedly with Palestinian help – into the kingdom where, according to Arab media, he was rapidly executed.

17. See the analysis of the Saudi situation in *al-Hurriya* (Beirut), June 10 and 17, 1968, and H. Lackner, *A House Built on Sand* (London, Ithaca Press, 1978), pp. 98–106.

18. This group enjoyed many hours of air time on Radio Baghdad and published some 20 issues of *Sawt al-Tali'a*. The Saudi branch of the Ba'th was founded in 1958.