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Saudi Arabia Enters The 21st Century:

III. Politics and Internal Stability

Final Review

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III. Politics and Internal Stability

No country is free of political problems and uncertainties. Saudi Arabia faces domestic challenges in terms of the political and religious legitimacy of its royal family and ruling elite, Islamic extremists, problems with its Shiites, potential problems with foreign labor, population growth, and the need for social and economic reform. Its political system must adapt to the socioeconomic impact of radical modernization, rapid population growth, and the need to radically restructure its economy. It faces domestic problems because of its de facto alliance with the United States and the resulting of hostility from its religious radicals and conservatives, and it cannot ignore the fact that Iran, Iraq and other states may support internal opposition movements.

At the same time, outside observers have exaggerated Saudi Arabia's political instability for half a century, more often because its closed society that is hard for outsiders to understand than because of any clear evidence regarding the actual fragility of the regime. Speculation about tensions within the royal family has become an international, as well as a national, sport among journalists and area experts. The same is true of speculation about the political impact of social and economic change, and the potential threat posed by Saudi Arabia's Islamic and reform movements.

It is important to preface any political analysis with the caution that it is far easier to speculate about the Kingdom's domestic stability than it is to find facts upon which to base that speculation, and far easier to talk about what might go wrong than to predict the actual path of change. In practice, economic problems, demographic pressures, and the threat from Islamic extremism at the margins of Saudi society, also seem to pose a more serious threat to internal stability than contemporary "politics" and internal opposition movements.

The Monarchy, the Majlis al-Shura, and the Royal Family

The Al Saud family currently seems to be in secure control of the country, and be able to rely more on co-opting opposition rather than repressing it. The monarchy remains the key source of power at every level in the Saudi Arabian government, and the king and senior princes have great authority and considerable freedom of action. However, the Saudi system of government is anything but an absolute monarchy by Western standards.

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There is no formal constitution and there are no political parties or elections, but in practice the king's power is limited and consensual. The Saudi political tradition is one of consensus, not authoritarianism, and of pragmatism not ideology. As a result, the Saudi government has considerably more popular "legitimacy" than many of its outside critics seem to realize. The King's power is limited by other power centers within the royal family, by religion, by custom, and by the need for high degree of consensus within Saudi Arabia's key tribes, technocrats, business leaders, and religious figures. The Saud family may not meet the Western tests of legitimacy in the sense it is elected, but it has long had to seek to achieve and preserve a broad social and political consensus

Much of the criticism of the royal family focuses on those princes that are corrupt, venal, and incompetent. Such clear cases exist and do raise political problems inside Saudi Arabia. Members of the royal family sometimes privately criticize such princes themselves, and divisions over such issues are often a major aspect of the Royal family's internal politics. At the same time, such criticism ignores the fact that many other princes are highly educated, focus on careers within government rather than simply acquiring wealth and privileges, and form alliances with technocrats, businessmen, and other influential Saudis.

Almost all major policy decisions require the input of both Princes and senior technocrats. Senior technocrats and leading business families have a considerable amount of influence, both as principal advisors to the King and as operational decision makers. As a result, the Saudi monarchy consists more of patriarchal rule by a consensus-driven extended family with large numbers of alliances to other families, than rule by an autocrat who acts upon his personal desires.

This consensus is not simply a matter of pragmatic politics. Tradition and religion are powerful political forces in Saudi Arabia and within the Royal family. The king must observe Islamic law (*Shari'a*) and other Saudi traditions. In Saudi Arabia, enforcement of the Shari'a is based on Sunni sources and largely on the Hanbali School of Law. Although this school is relatively liberal in terms of commercial practices, it is more conservative and binding in the areas of family law and social practices. The Saudi clergy play a powerful role in ensuring that it is fully enforced and limits the pace at which the king and royal family can modernize and still maintain a Saudi social consensus.[1] The Royal family has also had to pay close attention to the

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views of the descendants of Muhammed Al Wahhab, the Al Shaykh family. While the Al Shaykhs have rarely played any open political role, they exert a powerful influence on the actions of the Saudi government.

Saudi monarchs have long recognized that they must maintain the support of senior members of the Saudi royal family, as well as the support of religious leaders (*ulema*), leading technocrats, key businessmen, regional and tribal leaders, and other important elements in Saudi society. Like the other Southern Gulf countries, the king and royal family must also be accessible to the people. Saudi Arabia has a long tradition of public access to high officials (usually at a *majlis*, or public audience) and the right to petition such officials directly.

Saudi Arabia also has a long history of consultative decision making, with an emphasis on reaching consensus. King Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud founded a Shura Council of the Hijaz as early as 1927. [2] This Council was later expanded to 20 members, and was chaired by the king's son, Prince Faisal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud. The Council was expanded to 25 members in the early 1950s, under the troubled reign of King Saud ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, but its functions were then transferred to the Cabinet as King Saud came under political pressure from the other members of the royal family.[3] The Majlis al-Shura was not formally dissolved however; it merely ceased to operate until King Fahd revived it.[4]

In 1953, the king appointed a Council of Ministers, which has since advised on the formulation of general policy and helps direct the activities of the growing bureaucracy. This Council consists of a prime minister, the first and second deputy prime ministers, 20 ministers (of whom the minister of defense is also the second deputy prime minister), two ministers of state, and a small number of advisers and heads of major autonomous organizations. King Fahd also appointed a Board of Grievances (Diwan al-Mazalim) in 1995, although some sources indicate that the Board of Grievances was established under the Office of the Chief Judge during Faisal's reign. This body has judicial powers, and investigates and resolves complaints between Saudi citizens and the government.[5]

King Fahd issued decrees in 1997 that expanded the consultative role of the Council. Under the new decrees the Council will approve loan contracts as well as the national budget, international treaties and concessions. Ministers on the council cannot hold any other public or

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private positions and are forbidden to buy, sell, or loan government property. The ministers are also limited to terms of no more than five-years unless extended by the King.

Saudi laws are promulgated by a resolution of the Council of Ministers, and are proposed by the King, senior ruling princes, and key Ministers. They must be ratified by royal decree, and be compatible with the Shari'a, and are increasingly subject to informal debate or review within the Majlis. The Saudi legal system is administered according to the Shari'a by a system of religious courts. The judges in these courts are appointed by the king on the recommendation of the Supreme Judicial Council, which is composed of 12 senior jurists. The Council of Senior Religious Scholars, an autonomous body of 15 senior religious jurists, including the Minister of Justice, establishes legal principles for lower courts.[6] Law protects the independence of the judiciary, although the king acts as the highest court of appeal and has the power to pardon and commute death sentences.[7] Saudi Arabia is divided into 13 provinces, governed by princes or close relatives of the royal family. The king appoints these governors.

There has also long been an informal decision making body whose main function has been to legitimize royal succession in the form of the *ahl al-aqd wal hal* (those who bind and loose). This body lacks any official organizational structure, but consists of about 100 members, most coming from the Al Saud family and its allies in the Jilwi, Sudayri, Thunayan and Al-Shaykh families. The remaining elements include influential members of the ulema, a few influential princes not blood related to the royal family, and selected influential commoners. These members are selected by "origin, seniority, prestige and leadership qualities" in accordance with previous tribal traditions.[8]

Evolution and Stability

The stability of the Saudi royal family is critical to the security of the Saudi government, and this has led to constant speculation over divisions within the royal family and possible conflicts over the succession. This speculation is not simply Western. Rumor-mongering regarding the royal family is a Saudi national sport -- although a discrete one -- and few educated Saudis seem to feel they lack inside information on the detailed political maneuverings of the major princes. The fact that there appears to be nearly as many different "authoritative" rumors about the politics of the Royal family as there are Saudis does little to discourage further

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speculation, Saudis from the Hijaz region take a particular delight in reporting possible divisions between princes and conflicts over the succession.

Given this background, it is not surprising that the long series of reports of imminent conflict within the Al Saud family that have emerged out of Saudi "royal watching" have rarely proved reliable. There have certainly been many quiet power struggles within the royal family. However, there have been few divisions within the royal family that have threatened the government's cohesion.

The one major division between the senior members of the royal family that did lead to open struggles over the succession occurred in 1958-1962. Abd al-Aziz was succeeded by his eldest son, Saud, who reigned for 11 years. King Saud proved unable to manage the nation's finances, however, and created serious problems in the Kingdom's foreign affairs. In 1958, this led to a meeting of a powerful and secretive body of senior princes known as the *ahl-aqd wal hal*, or "those who tie and untie," which forced King Saud to delegate direct conduct of Saudi government affairs to Prince Faisal and make him Prime Minister. [9] King Saud resisted this arrangement, however, and regained control of the government in 1960-62. This led to a struggle between members of the family who supported Faisal and other members of the royal family who supported Saud.

It was a struggle that King Saud lost decisively in October 1962. Faisal regained power as prime minister, and began to implement a broad reform program that stressed economic development, and was proclaimed King by senior royal family members and religious leaders in 1964. He continued to serve as Prime Minister, however, and subsequent kings have followed this practice. Faisal also proved to be an extremely competent ruler, and dealt effectively with the problems arising from the Six-Day (Arab-Israeli) War of June 1967, the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict (October War), the subsequent Arab oil boycott, the sudden massive increase in Saudi oil wealth that came out of the oil boycott, and the resulting rise in Saudi political influence. Since that time, the struggle between Saud and Faisal has become more a historical anecdote than any indication of continuing power struggles within the royal family.

After a mentally ill nephew assassinated King Faisal in 1975, the royal family dealt with the succession smoothly, quickly appointing Faisal's half-brother Khalid as King and prime

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minister. The appointment of the next Crown Prince was not quite as smooth, but was still resolved without open tension. Prince Fahd, Khalid's half-brother, was in line for appointment as Crown Prince, but his "Western" lifestyle as a young adult prompted criticism from the traditionalists in the family.

The result was a series of deliberations within the royal family that produced a compromise between the Western-oriented family members, who favored Prince Fahd, and the traditionalists. Fahd was appointed as Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister, with the expectation that he would conform to a less "Western" lifestyle once in power, and with the understanding that the next in line for this position would be Prince Abdullah, one of Prince Fahd's half-brothers and a traditionalist.[10]

During his reign, King Khalid empowered Prince Fahd to oversee many aspects of the government's international and domestic affairs. This period saw the continuation of rapid economic development within Saudi Arabia, and the Kingdom assumed a more influential role in both regional political and international economic and financial matters. According to some experts, Prince Fahd's growing prominence allowed his six full brothers, the aforementioned "Al Fahd" "Sudairi Seven", to begin consolidating their power within the government.[11] According to others, Prince Fahd's growing prominence was not the impetus for the Al Fahd to consolidate their power. Six of the seven brothers had already become established as a power bloc at the time of Faisal's reign, and when one dropped out (Turki in 1981), the seventh replaced him.

The next succession took place with equal smoothness. King Khalid died in June 1982. Fahd became King and Prime Minister. Prince Abdullah, the commander of the National Guard, was subsequently named Crown Prince and First Deputy Prime Minister. One of King Fahd's full-brothers, Prince Sultan, the Minister of Defense and Aviation, became Second Deputy Prime Minister. As a result, Fahd's reign allowed for a further consolidation of power among the Al Fahd. This posed a potential problem for the next succession, but there is little evidence that any serious political struggle took place.[12]

In 1992, King Fahd addressed the issue of succession by decreeing that,

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> "Rule passes to the sons of the founding king...and to their children's children. The most upright among them is to receive allegiance in accordance with [the principles] of the Holy Qu'ran and the tradition of the Venerable Prophet."[13]

Fahd's decree attempted to alleviate concerns over the creation of a perpetual gerontocracy in Saudi Arabia by opening the succession to the grandsons of Abd al-Aziz. However, Saudi officials qualified the statement by indicating that succession would still be according to seniority for the foreseeable future.[14]

Current Prospects for the Succession

These developments scarcely mean that princes are not rivals, or do not participate in competing coalitions. Political rivalry is a constant fact of life at every level in all political systems and the leading princes are both competitors and jealous of their power. Competition over the succession and senior appointments has been a factor in Saudi royal politics since long before King Abd al-Aziz first met President Franklin Roosevelt. Nevertheless, the Saud family has dealt with far more serious problems than exist today.

The ruling elite within the royal family is now broadly divided between the "Sudairi" and other sons of King Abd al-Aziz's (Ibn Saud's) 22 wives. There are a total of seven sons by Abd al-Aziz's Sudairi wife, Hassa bin Sudairi, and they have often been called the "Al Fahd", after the family's eldest brother Fahd, or the "Sudairi Seven."[15] The key Sudairi leaders now include King Fahd; Minister of Defense Prince Sultan; Prince Naif, the Minister of Interior; and Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh; although some add Abd al-Rahman, the Deputy Minister of Defense. Most analysts see Prince Sultan and Prince Salman as likely to be the last real candidates for the succession after Abdullah in this generation of Saudi leaders.

Their power is balanced by that of the sons of the other wives of Abd al-Aziz, which have their own alliances. The most important son is Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah, who now acts as de facto regent and who has commanded the Saudi National Guard ever since November 1962. Abdullah does have six sons, including Prince Mitab who is being groomed as a potential new commander of the National Guard. Abdullah is also the son of a Bedouin mother; a fact which gives him ties to a number of leading tribes. In Saudi Arabia, however, younger sons do not inherit from their father. Abdullah has no brothers, which means

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he lacks the kind of broad power base shared by the Sudairis, but this also means he does not create a fear that his rule might lead to a new "dynasty" within the royal family.

Other influential members within the royal family include Prince Badr bin Abdul Aziz, the Deputy Commander of the National Guard; Prince Turki, the former head of the General Intelligence Directorate; Prince Saud al-Faisal, the Foreign Minister and son of King Faisal; and a number of other senior princes.

The relations between these senior princes, their competition and alliances, and any frictions between them, make up the most important aspect of royal family politics, and often lead to struggles over the allocation of oil reserves, the Saudi budget and actual spending, and ways to use government revenues and jobs for patronage.

The formal succession issue of Crown Prince Abdullah has remained an issue for more than half a decade because of the ill health of King Fahd, who is over 75 years old. On November 30, 1995, Fahd was rushed to a hospital emergency room suffering from what most experts believe was a stroke. One month later, he temporarily turned control of the government over to Crown Prince Abdullah, who proceeded to attend the summit of GCC leaders in Oman in place of the King. Prince Abdullah ruled in his absence until King Fahd formally reassumed his position as head of the government on February 21, 1996. Since that time, Prince Abdullah has continued to play the key role in ruling the Kingdom, and King Fahd has sometimes been incapable of exercising power and has often been weakened or incapacitated by his physical condition.

It now seems likely that Prince Abdullah will continue to act as a quasi-regent until King Fahd is willing to formally relinquish power or dies. There have been reports that King Fahd would formally give up ruling because of his health, and retire to a foreign country where he could obtain continuing medical treatment. In July 1999, King Fahd went abroad to Marbella, Spain for a 10-week vacation. It was his first trip abroad since suffering from a stroke in 1995 and it fueled intense speculation that the King had informally turned over rule to the Crown Prince. However, King Fahd returned to Saudi Arabia on September 29, 1999 and soon after chaired a Cabinet meeting. This put an end to rumors that the King was no longer able to assume

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even titular official duties for several years, but similar rumors surfaces again in 2002 when the king again appeared to have serious medical problems.[16]

There are still occasional rumors of challenges to Abdullah's succession. The most popular of these rumors is the possibility that Prince Sultan, a Sudairi and the Minister of Defense, might try to seek the throne.[17] Other reports indicate this scenario may have become less probable because of the recent deteriorization of Sultan's health, although such rumors never seem to have had much credibility.[18] Other scenarios have speculated that Prince Saud al-Faisal might be promoted to Crown Prince in place of an aging Abdullah. According to one rumor, this might be accomplished through an alliance with Prince Salman, the governor of Riyadh and one of King Fahd's younger brothers. A variation indicated that King Fahd might make Prince Salman the Crown Prince, with the succession bypassing both Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan. A third scenario indicated that Sultan would become the next king, followed by Prince Mohammed bin Fahd bin Abdul Aziz, the son of King Fahd, and Governor of the Eastern Province.[19]

At this point, it is Abdullah's health, rather than any rivalry, that seems to be the only real issue. Prince Abdullah is 75, although his health seems relatively good, and it is impossible to totally dismiss such speculation. Prince Abdullah has steadily consolidated his authority and is a popular ruler. While Prince Sultan remains one of the most influential centers of power in the Kingdom, Prince Abdullah is a formidable figure and his succession to the throne now seems all but assured. He has signed joint communiqués with King Fahd, since the King's return to power, including the Eid Al-Fitr statement in February 1997. He has been able to command the support of the other senior princes, and has a strong power base of his own. He continues to command the National Guard, and maintains support from the large Bedouin tribes of the Najd, from which the Guard is drawn. Abdullah also has a Shammari link, as his mother was from the Bani Shammar, a powerful tribe which drove the Saud family into exile in the 19th century, but which King Abd al-Aziz then defeated before bringing into the royal family through marriage.

If Abdullah does formally become king, it will be something of an anticlimax. He has already shown over more than a half decade of defacto rule that he will bring an interesting combination of tradition, continuity, and reform to the throne. Abdullah is a strong Arab nationalist who has criticized the West's close association with Israel in the past -- criticism that has gained him support among traditionalist and conservative Saudis.

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Abdullah does maintain close ties to many Arab leaders. At the same time, Abdullah has already shown that there are good reasons to challenge reports that he is in any way less friendly to the US. Abdullah does face serious political problems because of the growing backlash from the Second Intifada and US ties to Israel, and because of the opposition of some Islamists to a US presence in the Kingdom. Some other senior princes have already criticized him for being too aggressive in making a new Arab-Israeli peace proposal in 2002, and then for meeting with President George W. Bush without getting a US commitment to putting more pressure on Israel. Abdullah has shown, however, that he fully recognizes both Saudi Arabia's vulnerability and its need for ties to the US. He has long relied on the US to train and equip the National Guard, and is credited with playing a major role in Saudi Arabia's decision to allow the US to base forces in Saudi Arabia after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and allowing the US to use several Saudi facilities during the Afghan conflict. Many Saudis and outside experts feel that Abdullah is better able to balance the conflicting needs of Saudi military ties to the West, Saudi military development, the Saudi economy, the problems created by the "Second Intifada," and the need to deal with radical Islamists than either King Fahd or Prince Sultan.

Prince Abdullah has already given the Kingdom added stability. He is widely viewed as a more traditional leader than King Fahd, and one who gives more weight to religion and Arab causes than some other leading princes. More important, he is seen as having a high degree of integrity and as actively attempting to curb the excesses and extravagances of some other members of the royal family.[20] He has banned influential relatives from taking lucrative government contracts without competitive bidding, and tried—albeit with limited success—to tighten control over national spending and keep such spending within the limits imposed by the budget.[21] He opposes the kind of massive showpiece purchases and projects that waste government funds and the kind of fees and corruption that affect many government purchases and contracts. US military experts, including those in USCENTCOM, hope that he will be even more cautious about Saudi Arabia's military purchases, limit its tendency to over-spend on flashy showpiece projects, and will emphasize training, sustainability, and military effectiveness over arms purchases once he becomes King.

Prince Abdullah's has shown that his ties to traditional elites and "conservatism" do not prevent him from understanding Saudi Arabia's needs for economic reform and the need to

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provide jobs for the Kingdom's rapidly growing population. He has good relations with many of the younger and more progressive princes, and technocrats. He has spoken out openly and consistently about the country's economic difficulties stating that, "the days of the [Saudi] oil boom are over."[22] Prince Abdullah's "conservatism" also has not hindered his vision of modernization in the Kingdom. He is a firm believer in economic reforms that will enable the Kingdom to be competitive in the 21st century. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a constant "wild card" in US and Saudi Affairs, and so are relations with Iraq and Iran. Barring some new crisis, however, Abdullah's succession seems more likely to change the personal style of the monarchy, while moving Saudi Arabia forward in the directions where it needs to go. It will be outside forces, not Crown Prince Abdullah, that leads to major changes in Saudi Arabia's relations with the West and the United States. [23]

In short, Abdullah's tenure as defacto ruler has shown there is little evidence that current rivalries will lead to any conflict between the top members of the royal family. Barring health problems, it seems equally likely that Prince Sultan will be content to take over the title of Crown Prince, once Abdullah becomes king.[24]

There are no certainties, since Prince Abdullah was born in 1921, and even the youngest of Abd al-Aziz's sons is now a relatively old man. However, evidence suggests that the succession is likely to continue to be determined peacefully and quietly by internal consultation among the *ahl-aqd wal hal*, or other senior members of the royal family at least until Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan are deceased. If Prince Sultan does become King, he may well not be the last prince in this generational line of succession. There are still a number of other surviving sons of Ibn Saud, and it seems likely that Prince Salman may be appointed crown prince if Sultan becomes king.

There are some in the Kingdom, however, who raise questions about whether Sultan has shown the capability to lead the Kingdom towards reform while preserving its character and political cohesion. One of Crown Prince Abdullah's great strengths is that he has been able to maintain close ties to Saudi Arabia's tribes, a reputation for honesty, and alliances to Saudi Arabia's technocrats and reformers. His ties to the Al Faisal branch of the royal family have helped in this regard. Prince Sultan does not command the same degree of respect. He does have ties to Saudi traditionalists, but there is little respect for his leadership of the Ministry of Defense

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and Aviation since the early 1990s, he has a reputation for careless spending and for ignoring financial and budget issues, and does not have Crown Prince Abdullah's reputation for integrity. Some senior Saudis question whether he will be able to show the leadership the Kingdom needs and make a suitable alliance with the princes and technocrats that are seeking to reform Saudi Arabia's economy.

There is also the possibility that Prince Sultan's weaknesses might interact with those of another prince who is not considered part of the succession. The Minister of the Interior, Prince Naif (Nayif) bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, has not shown that he can adapt to the changes in the internal threats to the Kingdom, and the need to shape and operate a modern intelligence system,. The problems in the Saudi intelligence and internal security system are described in detail in the companion volume in this series, and they include the need to adapt Saudi internal security efforts to the growth of Saudi public opinion as a major force, and to deal effectively with the threat of Islamic extremism. It is not clear that Prince Naif has the flexibility to make these changes. The problem of age and leadership capability goes be the succession, and the Ministry of the Interior is a particularly critical case.

Prince Salman is highly respected, and at least some senior Saudis feel he has the strengths that Prince Sultan lacks. It should be noted, however, that interviews scarcely produce any transparency into the affairs of the senior members of the royal family and there is a tendency among Saudi royal watchers to exaggerate their differences. It is more likely that Crown Prince Abdullah, Prince Sultan, and Prince Salman share a broad agreement over the need to Saudi economic reform and social evolution than that they differ in any radical way over the future path the Kingdom should take. Certainly, outside rumors and journalistic reports that the Sudairi are in alliance with Islamic extremists while Abdullah and the sons of Faisal are pro-western reformers are just as silly and unfounded as earlier reports that Crown Prince Abdullah was anti-Western.

Moreover, there are some indications that the royal family may take a more structured approach in an attempt to ease any future intra-family disputes and debates over the question of succession. In June 2000, the Saudi Royal family set up a family council chaired by the Crown Prince and 18 other princes, marking a break from the traditionally informal nature of intra royal affairs. The council will deal with issues pertaining to the royal family, and having excluded the

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Prince Naïf and Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal is unlikely to influence the day-to-day running of the Kingdom.

The Need for Change in the Next Generation

In any case, it is the need for continuing change and reform that is the real challenge to the Saudi Royal family and the regime. The Saud family, already faces serious internal challenges, and at some point not to far in the future, a basic generational change must occur within the Saudi royal family. The choice of the King and senior ministers must then be made from the large number of junior princes that will compete for power once the sons of King Ibn Saud are gone.

There is no consensus over how many such "princes" there now are, and how many have the status to compete for power. It is almost certain, however, that there are over 5,000 males who can claim some kind of title as a "prince" in the Saudi royal family and well over 80 younger princes who have significant status as ranking members of the "next generation" and thus have some claim to power. Some estimate the total number of "princes" goes over 10,000 and the figure could easily reach 20,000 by 2020, although only a fraction are descendents. There are obvious limits as to what the Kingdom can or should pay members of the Saud family as these numbers increase, particularly because so many adult princes have shown they can make no claim to public funds except by accidents of birth.

The more influential younger princes are reported to already be forming informal alliances that they can use once a "new generation" of leaders has to be selected, although their status and ties to today's senior princes remains the more immediate issue. More will be involved than in the resulting jockeying for power or influence than power in the government. Approximately 2,000 princes already play an active role in the economy. Many play a substantive role in government or business, but some demand special privileges and/or use their influence corruptly and violate Saudi law.[25]

This mix of royal political and economic power has caused a substantial amount of jealousy and political friction within Saudi society. Saudi Arabia's economy and political stability has suffered from a failure to demarcate clearly the powers and rights of members of the

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royal family. The corrupt minority of princes has also sometimes seriously abused its political power to dominate major military and civil deals and developments, and at least some of the worst abuses attributed to senior princes have actually been committed by their younger sons.

There have been Royal abuses of government funds, property rights, and contracts. Royal influence has abused civil and criminal justice procedures, both against Saudis and foreign businessmen. Various princes have used their influence to obtain shares of private businesses and the profits from oil sales and state-financed corporations. They have interfered or profiteered in contract awards, the allocation of money from oil sales, offset programs, and contracts for the delivery of arms imports and military services. In some cases, they have seized the property of others or have been sufficiently corrupt to damage the reputation of the royal family.

These problems have steadily increased with the size of the royal family, with the decline in Saudi Arabia's relative oil wealth, and with the growing complexity of the Saudi economy. While a royal role in business is a traditional aspect of Saudi society, and major abuses have been relatively limited, there have been enough problems in the Royal family to cause growing resentment in all levels of Saudi society. Furthermore, not all of the princes involved in commercial and business abuses and corruption are outside the power structure at the top of the royal family. Some of the sons of Saudi Arabia's most senior figures have been deeply involved. In June 2000, an initial step was directed to clean up the internal corruption in the Saudi ruling system. An 18-man Royal Family Council, set up by King Fahd and controlled de facto by Crown Prince Abdullah, began examining the behavior and competency of the politically active members of the Al Saud family.

The need to redefine the role princes play in Saudi government, politics, and business extends to the military command level, where the divisions between members of the royal family sometimes lead to the poor selection of commanders or effective unity of command, and discourages the appointment of younger and more competent officers from outside the Royal family that might be competitive and demanding if given high ranks. Some princes in senior positions in the regular military have had to be shunted aside for corruption. Some have had undeserved promotions and some junior princes have insisted on keeping their titles rather than leaving out their royal title and only using their military rank.

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The politics of the ruling elite has, however, sometimes limited the careers of very competent princes. For example, Prince Fahd Abdullah, widely recognized as one of the most outstanding officers in the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF), was not promoted to a top command position. Prince Khalid bin Sultan, who successfully led the Arab forces in the Gulf War, was also not promoted to the post of military chief of staff and resigned in September 1991–although he returned to become Assistant Minister of Defense in 2000.[26]

It is becoming all too clear that demographics are a major problem in the royal family as well as within the Saudi population as a whole. The high birth rate within the royal family means the number of "princes" now doubles every 22-26 years and that there are about 70% more "royal" males under the age of 18 than there are above it. This same growth affects the Al al-Shaykh and other leading families. At some point in the near to mid-term, Saudi Arabia simply will not be able to afford subsidizing either its expanding royal family or the descendants of other leading families.

The exponential growth of the size and potential cost of the Saudi royal family is scarcely a unique problem in the Southern Gulf, but it reinforces the need to limit payments and subsidies, place clear limits on eligibility for state funds and support, and particularly to put a firm end to the favoritism and corruption of its middle and junior princes. Saudi Arabia also needs to reduce most of the subsidies and large numbers of special accounts and commissions given various senior princes. While many members of the royal family do provide active public service or engage in legitimate business, there are many that are little more than parasites and whose abuse of public funds threatens Saudi Arabia's political cohesion and popular support for the members of the royal family who actually rule.

At the same time, the need for such reforms and generational change hardly means Saudi Arabia cannot maintain its stability while being ruled by a monarchy. Many princes are highly respected and play a major role in public service. There is little evidence of popular opposition to the monarchy, and most opposition movements that do exist are from conservative Islamists, rather than the liberal reform minded Saudis.

The challenge is evolutionary. Saudi Arabia has time in which to find a stable answer to the problem of who will rule once the direct sons of Ibn Saud no longer participate in the

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succession, to add a steadily increasing degree of pluralism and a stronger rule of law, to lead the modernization of the economy, deal with the challenge of extremism, and to redefine the role of the royal family in ways that sharply reduce state subsidies as well as the abuse of royal status. The royal family must ensure that commoners can count on promotion for merit, and that the Saudi people do not believe members of the royal family abuse the courts and legal system. Western-style democracy may not be a critical aspect of Saudi Arabia's political and social development, but broad social and economic change is vital and the rule of law is essential. Difficult decisions do have to be made about the reallocation of power at some point in the near future or the growth and cost of the Saud family will become a much more serious destabilizing factor in Saudi politics.

The Saudi Cabinet or Council of Ministers

The Saudi Cabinet is of considerable practical importance and its composition reflects the distribution of power within the senior ranks of the royal family and Saudi Arabia's technocrats. The Cabinet is a large body headed by the king, with more than twenty members, including six ministers of state. There are 22 separate ministries, with the king acting as prime minister. Prince Abdullah is First Deputy Prime Minister and head of the National Guard. Prince Sultan is Second Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and Aviation. Prince Saud al-Faisal is Foreign Minister, Prince Naif is Minister of the Interior, and Prince Mutib is Minister of Public Works and Housing.[27] These appointments give the senior members of the royal family control over the government, defense, internal security, the budget and oil revenues and other key areas of patronage.

The Cabinet also includes and is supported by a wide range of technocrats, heading well-organized and relatively modern ministries. The following list of Saudi ministers and key officials make this clear. Only a limited number are members of the royal family – those highlighted in bold. A small additional number are direct descendents of Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab and are highlighted in italics. The rest are technocrats, many of which are "new men" without ties to other dominant Saudi families or tribal leaders. This point is often ignored in discussions of Saudi Arabia's government. Much of the planning and management of the Kingdom is conducted by Western-educated experts, who are supported by roughly 250 other senior appointments and a network of approximately 700 senior civil servants. Only about one-

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third of these appointments come from traditional leading families. The rest are "new men," a few of which are one generation away from nomadic tribesmen.

- **King: Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- **Prime Minister: Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- **First Deputy Prime Minister: Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- **Second Deputy Prime Minister: Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- Minister of Agriculture and Water: Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz al Muammar
- Minister of Civil Service: Muhammed bin Ali Fayiz
- Minister of Commerce: Usama Jafar Faqih
- Minister of Communications: Dr. Nasir bin Muhammad al-Salum
- **Minister of Defense and Aviation: Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- Minister of Education: Muhammad Ahmad al-Rashid
- Minister of Finance and National Economy: Ibrahim bin Abd al-Aziz al-Asaf
- **Minister of Foreign Affairs: Saud al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- Minister of Health: Dr. Usama bin Abd al-Majid Shubukshi
- Minister of Higher Education: Khalid bin Muhammad al-Angari
- Minister of Industry and Electricity: Hashim bin Abdallah bin Hashim Yamani
- Minister of Information: Dr. Fuad Abd al-Salam Farsi
- **Minister of Interior: Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- *Minister of Islamic Guidance: Sahih bin Abd al-Aziz bin Muhammad bin Ibrahim Shaykh*
- *Minister of Justice: Abdallah Muhammad Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh*
- Minister of Labor and Social Affairs: Ali bin Ibrahim Namla
- Minister of Municipal and Rural Areas: Muhammad bin Ibrahim al-Jarallah
- Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources: Ali Ibrahim Naimi
- Minster of Pilgrimage Affairs and Religious Trusts: Iyyad bin Amin Madani
- Minister of Planning: Khalid bin Muhammad Ghusaybi
- Minister of Post, Telephone, and Telegraph: Khalid bin Muhammad Ghusaybi

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- **Minister of Public Works and Housing: Mitib bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud**
- Minister of Water: Ghazi bin Abd al-Rahman al-Qusaybi
- Minister of State: Madani bin Abd al-Qadir al-Alaqi
- Minister of State: Dr. Ibrahim bin Muhammad al Assaf
- Minister of State: Musaid bin Muhammad al-Ayban
- Minister of State: Dr. Ali bin Tala al Jihani
- Minister of State: Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah al-Khuwaytir
- Minister of State: Abd al-Aziz bin Ibrahim al-Mani
- Minister of State: Mutalib bin Abdallah al Nafisa

In the past, these technocrats and senior officials have usually served in the same position for much of their professional life. Many appointments have lasted 15-25 years. As a result, Saudi technocrats have often been slow to adapt to changing circumstances and many ministries have developed an institutional resistance to change. This problem became clear during the Gulf War, when many civil ministries had severe difficulties in meeting the sudden, new requirements necessary to support the Saudi military and foreign troops. As a result, King Fahd issued a decree in 1992, declaring that Cabinet ministers could not remain in their posts for more than five-years without a special royal decree. This decree, however, did not lead to rapid turnover within the Cabinet and senior ranks.

Between 1993 and 1995 Saudi Arabia experienced a growing economic crisis, partly as a result of Gulf War expenditures. It again became apparent that many ministries were slow to adapt to Saudi Arabia's growing debt, income, and cash flow problems. Many ministries were slow to control expenses. They continued to advocate very large and grandiose projects, and failed to give priority to social and political needs. At the same time, Saudi Arabia began to experience growing problems with Islamic extremists.

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By the spring of 1995, King Fahd and the Saudi royal family began to take dramatic action. Significant shifts took place in appointments within the Saudi bureaucracy affecting around 160 of 250 top posts. At the same time, changes were made in appointments to senior

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religious and educational positions. These changes reached a scale close to a "generational change" in the senior ranks of the Saudi government. [28] In late July 1995, King Fahd replaced 157 of Saudi Arabia's senior officials. On August 2, 1995, he made the first sweeping changes in the Saudi Cabinet in twenty years and replaced six members of the Majlis al-Shura. While the role of senior members of the royal family did not change, 16 of 28 Cabinet members were replaced and two ministers swapped jobs.

These changes in the Cabinet affected high profile ministries like the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources and the Ministry of Information. Hisham M. Nazer, the Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, was replaced by Ali al-Naimi, a "new man", who was chairman of ARAMCO. Mohammed A. Aba al-Khayl, who had been Minister of Finance for 25 years, was replaced by Sulaym al-Sulaym, the Minister of Commerce.[29] Other key ministries relating to the economy and social welfare services were replaced, including the ministers of Telecommunications and Electricity. These changes resulted in a Cabinet that included 15 members with postgraduate degrees from Western universities.[30]

It is impossible for an outsider to determine the purpose or exact scale of these changes, many of which went far beyond the Cabinet, or the meaning of most of the changes that have taken place since that time. It seems clear, however, that they reflected growing concern with the problems of dealing with Islamic extremism and finding jobs for Saudi Arabia's young population. They reflected a concern over the age and lack of flexibility of many ministers and other officials, and their failure to control costs and expenditures, scale back projects, be far more demanding in planning its investments, and emphasize privatization.

One factor that almost certainly influenced the King's action was Saudi Arabia's 1995 budget deficit, which was rising well above the planned $4 billion, although oil revenues were nearly $2.3 billion higher than forecast during the first five months of the year, and King Fahd had asked ministers to propose new cost cutting measures on July 9, 1995.[31]

Another Cabinet shuffle took place on June 16, 1999, once again following a time when Saudi Arabia had serious economic problems. There had been some speculation that Oil Minister Ali al-Na'imi would be discharged. Al-Na'imi was widely blamed for the 1997 Jakarta agreement which led to record low oil prices and insufficient oil revenues to fund Defense

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Minister Prince Sultan's defense budget.[32] However, al-Na'imi's central role in securing OPEC cutbacks and boosting oil prices enabled him to keep his post, presumably for another four-year term.[33]

Instead, the most drastic changes came in the area of labor and social affairs, where action was needed to stem the rise in Saudi unemployment, and "Islamic guidance", where a new appointee had clearly been chosen to allay conservative fears about social change. In all, four ministries changed hands and a new one was created to supervise civil service affairs.[34] The new ministers appointed included a Labor and Social Affairs Minister, Dr. Ali al-Namla; Islamic Affairs Minister, Salih bin 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Muhammad Al al-Sheikh; Planning Minister, Khalid al-Qusaybi; and Iyad bin Amin Madani as Minister for the Hajj.[35]

Saudi political appointments have tended to become somewhat younger and seem to be shifting towards the grooming of a younger generation for senior positions. Crown Prince Abdullah seems to favor such changes and seems likely to continue them once he becomes king. Saudi Arabia still, however, has a tendency to allow officials to serve too long and without proper regard to current performance. The appointments made since 1995 also have included important new officials who deal with key issues like private investment, and the creation of important new councils to deal with the economy and energy. However, there still seems to be a need for more rapid turnover to allow a steady process of promotion at all levels, and to create a structure of government where top-level positions depend on success in reform and effective government and not on seniority.

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The Creation of the Majlis al-Shura

There have already been some important movements toward increased pluralism. The issue of how to create some kind of Majlis first became a subject of serious concern during the time of Nasser. The flood of oil wealth into the Kingdom after 1973 deferred much of the public pressure for change, however, and although Fahd wanted to establish some form of Majlis as early as 1982, he faced opposition from puritanical Islamists who felt that Sharia should be the only basis for law-making. It was the complex mix of social and economic pressures that arose during the Gulf War, that finally led King Fahd to reorganize his Cabinet on August 5, 1990, and announce a series of reforms on March 17, 1991. These reforms included the formation of a Council of Saudi Citizens or Majlis al-Shura, the introduction of a basic body of governing laws, and increased autonomy for the provinces.[36]

King Fahd's announcement of his intent to form a Majlis al-Shura was a reaction to the demands of both traditional fundamentalists and modernizing reformers for greater participation in the government. His announcement was followed by further speeches by the king; by senior religious figures like Sheik Ibn Baz, who denounced religious extremism; and by senior political figures like Prince Turki Faisal, who gave a rare speech in a mosque condemning those who used Islamic extremism to attack Saudi society.

The King announced on March 2, 1992, that the Majlis would have 61 members, including the speaker of the consultative council. The Majlis would have a four-year term of office, and the responsibility to examine plans for economic and social development, question Cabinet members, examine annual plans submitted by each ministry, and propose new laws or amendments. He announced that similar 10-man councils would be set up in each of the 14 provinces, and that the provincial governors would have added power and autonomy.[37]

The King issued a long written list of decrees setting forth the basic rules of the government, the first codification of these laws since the founding of Saudi Arabia 60 years earlier. The code included the following provisions: making the king the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, calling for the succession to pass to the most qualified member of the royal family, rather than according to the order of succession; establishing an independent judiciary; guaranteeing the privacy of the home, mail, and phone; and prohibiting arbitrary arrest.

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On September 23, 1992, the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the monarchy, King Fahd appointed Mohammed bin Ibrahim bin Jubair as speaker of the Majlis al-Shura. At the same time, the King delayed appointing the council, stating that, "The democratic systems prevailing in the world are systems which, in their structure, do not suit this region and our people...The system of free elections is not part of Islamic theology."[38]

On August 21, 1993, the King appointed the members of the Council. King Fahd read a decree over state television that again made it clear that the role of the Majlis was purely advisory. He also stated that he was retaining the power of the monarchy, and that Saudi Arabia would remain an Islamic state and would not become a Western democracy.[39] The creation of the Council drew on the formal Islamic concept of Shura to institutionalize the method by which political participation in Saudi Arabia was conducted: the consultation of people of knowledge and expertise in order to legitimize public policy.

The King appointed all 60 members of the Majlis al-Shura, including one Shi'ite, to a four-year term. Among the first appointees to the Council were businessmen, technocrats, diplomats, journalists, Islamic scholars and professional soldiers representing all regions of the country. Most were young by Saudi standards and had exposure outside of the country

The Council began to meet in 1994. Its initial meetings focused on procedures and regulations, and the establishment of various technical and administrative committees, such as those on foreign affairs and defense. According to Saudi reports, the Council met 29 times in 1994, discussed 45 issues, and presented 25 recommendations. The Council's General Authority held 21 meetings and reached 23 decisions, and the various committees of the Council held more than 260 meetings, and submitted more than 50 studies and reports. There were no public reports of any debates or issues the Consultative Council raised during its first year, or any indications of differences with the royal family. [40]

The Council began the second year with its first session on January 8, 1995. It was the first time that King Fahd presented a national budget to the Council. While this did not lead to any open debate by Western standards, the Council expanded its coverage to include social and policy issues during the course of the 1995 and 1996 sessions, and increased its advisory role. It also began to have weekly meetings that sometimes lasted several days at a time, rather than

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meeting for a one-day, bi-weekly session. While little was published on the substance of the Council's work, the Saudi government reported that the full Council had held 103 meetings by the end of its first four-year session in mid-1997, and had passed resolutions on 133 topics, while studying another 49. Its eight subcommittees had held 727 meetings to discuss 143 subjects and issued 133 resolutions. It had also begun to regularly send delegations to other countries. [41]

King Fahd expanded the Consultative Council from 60 to 90 members at the beginning of its second four-year session on July 20, 1997. He held a high profile swearing-in ceremony, with Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan present. King Fahd's speech mixed a traditional emphasis on the importance of Shari'a and the Sunnah (the sayings and teachings of the Prophet) in shaping the Council's work, and the need for higher education and scientific and engineering training, and for more reliance on the private sector. Ibn Jubair, the Chairman of the Council, stressed the increasing activity of the Council, and announced the formation of eight ad hoc committees to meet twice a week. These committees had 8-16 members each, and included the:[42]

- Organization and Administration Committee
- Education, Information, and Cultural Affairs Committee
- Islamic Affairs Committee
- Services and Public Utilities Committee
- Health and Social Affairs Committee
- Foreign Affairs Committee
- Economic and Financial Affairs Committee, and a
- Security Affairs Committee, chaired by a retired Major General.

Further changes were announced in the Majlis al-Shura at the beginning of the third year of its second term in July 1999. At that time, four new members were added to the council and the number of ad-hoc committees was increased from eight to eleven as a result of the division of some of the current committees.[43] Among these were the Economic Affairs Committee and the Financial Affairs Committee as two separate bodies, split off from the previous committee that dealt with both issues. The Education, Information and Cultural Affairs Committee was divided into two committees: the Educational Affairs Committee and the Cultural and Media Affairs

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Committee. In addition, the Services and Utilities Committee expanded its role to become the Services, Utilities, Communications and Transport Committee.[44]

A study of the membership of the second Majlis al-Shura indicated that it was relatively young for a Saudi government Council, with an average age of 52, and members as young as 34 and as old as 69. While only 17% of the members were over 60, 30% were between the ages of 30 to 40, and 53% were in their 50s. The membership was broadly based in terms of occupation, although members of the bureaucracy and the business sector were underrepresented. Roughly 23% were modernizing academics, 7% were traditional religious academics, 3% were journalists, 19% were full time bureaucrats, 24.3% were bureaucrats with other roles such as academic or judge, 4.4% were from the police, 3.3% were from the military, and 7.8% were from the business sector.

Overall educational levels were high: approximately 64% had doctoral degrees, 14.4% had master's degrees, and 21.2% held bachelor's degrees. About 80% of the members with doctoral and masters degrees had been educated in the West. Historically, only about 17-19% of the first two Majlis al-Shuras consisted of members who could be classified as Islamists. The Majlis was heavily weighted in favor of members from the Najd, who made up 44% of the Council. Roughly 29% come from the Hijaz, 90% from the Eastern Province, and 18% came from the other regions of the Kingdom.[45]

King Fahd swore in the third Majlis al-Shura in Jeddah on June 4, 2001. He expanded the Council from 90 to 120 members, and expanded the role of the Shura's committees, which cover issues such as finance, the five-year plan, Islamic and social affairs, and education. The members had been nominated – along with the name of one substitute for each position -- by the provincial governors from leading doctors, lawyers, military, businessmen and financial experts, academics, scientists, and lawyers. Their nomination was then vetted by the royal court, and nominees were asked to confirm their willingness to serve before the King formally announced their selection.

The expanded body still had very high educational levels. All members had college degrees and extensive experience, and more than 60% had Phds. Sheik Mohammad Ibrahim bin Jubair, an Islamist and former justice minister, remained Chairman of the Council, and roughly half of the members of the previous Majlis were retained. (In theory, half of the Majlis serves

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only one four year term while half is retained in order to provide both a suitable turnover and new ideas, but the steady expansion of the Majlis has forced Saudi Arabia to alter these policies. New appointments are also made immediately if a member dies or cannot perform his duties.)[46]

In 2002, the expanded Majlis had 12 major committees with 11 members each. These committees operated along democratic lines with each member having one vote, as did the Majlis as a whole. The decree creating the Majlis specifies that voting shall be on a majority basis, and that issues that do not result in a majority shall only be sent to the King after an effort is made to create a majority in the next session.

By 2002, the Majlis had also established its the right to ask any member of the Cabinet or Council of Ministers to appear and answer questions, It still did not play a direct role in shaping security and defense policy and reviewing the draft budget, but it did review and approve the Seventh Development Plan. Both in its committees and the Majlis as a body analyzed and discussed the five year plan in some detail. Members of the Majlis also indicated that they could indirectly review the budget as part of their review of the annual reports issued by each Ministry, and that giving the Majlis direct review of the budget was under consideration. The review of the annual reports and the actions of each ministry is the subject to detailed review by the committees of the Majlis, who develop evaluations and recommendations for review by the Majlis as a whole.

There is one staff for each two members of the Majlis plus separate staffs for key committees and to analyze whether the recommendations of the Majlis are carried out. There is also a department to handle petitions and any Saudi citizen may petition the Majlis. Committee review is generally on an article-by-article basis and the committees sometimes hold extensive hearings. For example, the Finance Committee did this in reviewing a new tax law, and held follow-on hearings after several key articles were referred back to the committee by the Majlis as a whole.

The Majlis and its Committees hold oversight hearings and seek outside views and criticism of the behavior and effectiveness of given ministries. In several cases, these hearings have allowed the Saudi business community to force significant changes in the efficiency or structure of government operations. The Majlis reviews major foreign policy decisions and does

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hold hearings that include questioning of the foreign minister. The King or Crown Prince attend some sessions of the Majlis, and the King is supposed to make an annual address to the Majlis setting out his program for the year if his health permits.

According to members debate is now often heated by Saudi standards, criticism of the government is common, and differences do occur with the Council of Ministers. The Majlis does, however, emphasize consensus rather than divided recommendations and adversarial positions and an effort is made to avoid confronting the King with unresolved debates or recommendations that might force him to cast a veto. Members estimated that this meant the King upheld the decisions of the Majlis in "99.7%" of all cases.

The law of the Majlis ash-Shura states that its role shall be defined by royal order, and recognizes the King's paramount role under the Saudi interpretation of Sharia. At the same time, the Koran does call upon the King to consult with his advisors, and there is a potential precedent in Sharia that the King should not overrule any recommendation where both the Majlis and Council of Ministers agree.[47] In fact, some members of the Majlis complained that Crown Prince Abdullah had bypassed the Majlis when he unilaterally abolished a separate department for women's education in 2002. It should also be noted that the Majlis is bound by Sharia, and must defer to the judiciary on Islamic law. The Islamic Committee of the Majlis reviews its actions to ensure that they comply with Sharia. The Council of Ministers must also review any action by the Majlis if the Islamic Committee does not reach a consensus, as was a case in its review of drafts of a new insurance law.

The Majlis is due to expand to 150 members in 2004. This slow expansion of the role of the Majlis al-Shura scarcely marks a shift towards a Western-style representative democracy. Nevertheless, it does mark significant change towards a structured, formal broadening the base of power in Saudi Arabia. Members of the Majlis take their role very seriously and some members of the royal family indicate that the Majlis and the Council of Ministers may be made equal branches of government. It is also important to stress that Saudi society does avoid open confrontation wherever possible, and that the slow development of a technocratic body that develops precedents that take on some of the character of an unwritten constitution is an important evolutionary step.

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The Changing Saudi Political System

The Kingdom has made other reforms, including expanding the role of the 13 provincial assemblies that were created when the Majlis al-Shura was revived.[48] At the same time Saudi Arabia established the Majlis al-Shura, it established thirteen Regional Councils, made up of 15 to 20 members each. Membership is by appointment and members are chosen for their extensive experience in public service or business, and reflect sections of Saudi society from academia to clergy. Opinions from the regional council are submitted, when appropriate, for consideration to the Majlis al-Shura. These councils play an important countrywide role in allowing expression of local opinion, although their role in the Kingdom's movement towards political reform is unclear.

Another example of efforts at evolutionary reform is illustrated by the attendance of Saudi women at a Council session for the first time on Oct. 4, 1999. While they did not partake in the session, approximately 20 Saudi women followed the proceedings from a balcony overlooking the meeting hall. This event occurred a day after comments by Sheik Mohammad bin Jubeir, the Chairman of the Council, indicated that there was no prohibition on women attending meetings of the Shura Council, and that–even though they could not serve as members—their experience and opinions would be valuable and useful to the council's discussions.[49] At the same time, the regime's need to carefully stage manage this event is indicative of the difficulties associated with increasing the measure of political expression allowed by the Shura Council, and in increasing pluralism, especially in relation to widening the opportunities available to women in the country. Nevertheless the Kingdom has moved further even in religiously sensitive areas. For example, women—who hold 50% of the shares in the guide's organizations in Makkah and Medina were allowed to cast proxy votes in electing the boards of directors for the organizations providing pilgrim services for the first time in 2002.[50]

The US State Department assessed the structure of the Saudi government and the role of these bodies as follows in its human rights reporting in 2002,[51]

> Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without elected representative institutions or political parties. It is ruled by King Fahd bin Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud, a son of King Abd Al-Aziz Al Saud, who unified the country in the early 20th century. Since the death of King Abd Al-Aziz, the King and Crown Prince have been chosen from among his sons, who themselves have had preponderant influence in the choice. A 1992 royal decree reserves for the King exclusive power to name the Crown Prince. Crown Prince Abdullah has played an increasing role in governance since King Fahd suffered a stroke in 1995. The Government has declared the Islamic holy book the Koran and the Sunna (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad to be the country's Constitution. The Government bases its legitimacy on governance according to the precepts of a rigorously conservative form of Islam. Neither the Government nor the society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state. The Government prohibits the establishment of political parties and suppresses opposition views. In 1992 King Fahd appointed a Consultative Council, or Majlis Ash-Shura, and similar provincial assemblies. The Majlis, a strictly advisory body, began holding sessions in 1993 and

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> was expanded first in 1997 and again in May. The judiciary is subject to influence by the executive branch and members of the royal family.
>
> …The King is also the Prime Minister, and the Crown Prince serves as Deputy Prime Minister. The King appoints all other ministers, who in turn appoint subordinate officials with cabinet concurrence. In 1992 the King appointed 60 members to a Consultative Council, or Majlis Ash-Shura. This strictly advisory body began to hold sessions in 1993. In 1997 and again in May the King expanded the membership of the Council; it has 120 members plus its chairman. There are plans to expand the Majlis Ash-Shura again in 2005. There are two Shi'as on the Council. The Council engages in debates that, while closed to the general public, provide advice and views occasionally contrary to the Government's proposed policy or recommended course of action. The Government usually incorporates the Majlis' advice into its final policy announcements or tries to convince it why the Government's policy is correct.
>
> The Council of Senior Islamic Scholars (ulema) is another advisory body to the King and the Cabinet. It reviews the Government's public policies for compliance with Shari'a. The Government views the Council as an important source of religious legitimacy and takes the Council's opinions into account when promulgating legislation.
>
> Communication between citizens and the Government usually is expressed through client-patron relationships and by affinity groups such as tribes, families, and professional hierarchies. In theory any male citizen or foreign national may express an opinion or a grievance at a majlis, an open-door meeting held by the King, a prince, or an important national or local official. However, as governmental functions have become more complex, time-consuming, and centralized, public access to senior officials has become more restricted. Since the assassination of King Faisal in 1975, Saudi kings have reduced the frequency of their personal contacts with the public. However, during the year, Crown Prince Abdullah held a variety of meetings with citizens throughout the country. Ministers and district governors more readily grant audiences at a majlis.
>
> Typical topics raised in a majlis include complaints about bureaucratic delay or insensitivity, requests for personal redress or assistance, and criticism of particular acts of government affecting family welfare. Broader "political" concerns--social, economic, or foreign policy--rarely are raised. Complaints about royal abuses of power are not entertained. In general journalists, academics, and businessmen believe that institutionalized avenues of domestic criticism of the regime are closed. Feedback is filtered through private personal channels and has affected various policy issues, including the Middle East peace process, unemployment of young Saudi men, and the construction of new infrastructure.

Any analysis of Saudi efforts to broaden and restructure its political system must take account of the fact that Saudi Arabia a consensus-driven society that must recognize efforts to preserve the nation’s character as a “Wahhabi” Islamic state and the need to adapt religious and social custom to modern social and economic needs. It is easy to talk about “democratization,” but it is far from clear that any popular vote today would lead Saudi Arabia to modernize and reform its economy at anything like the rate its current government is seeking. A nation without well-established moderate political parties, and where the only serious opposition now consists of Islamic activists, is almost a model of the risk that a rush towards instant democracy would only result in “one man, one vote, one time” and then the creation of some form of traditionalist authoritarianism.

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As a result, the creation of an advisory Majlis, a focus on political consensus, a written code of law, and other limited reforms may well mark the present limits of how far the Saudi government can now go without increasing internal instability, rather than reducing it.

Given this background, it is a steady process of change, and occasional delay and compromise, that is most likely to serve Saudi interests, and protect the human rights of all Saudis. Any sudden efforts to make broad and more sweeping reforms might do little more than lead to open confrontation between Saudi Arabia's advocates of modern reform, its traditionalists and fundamentalists, and its militant Islamists.

At the same time, even some reform-oriented members of the royal family have long called for more rapid political change. One well-known example is Prince Talal Bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, half-brother of King Fahd, and father of billionaire mega-investor Prince al-Waleed bin Talal. He has called for more democracy for many years. He repeated this point on March 4, 1998, when he urged the Kingdom and other Arab states to eventually hold “real" elections.

Talal is one of the “free princes” of the 1960s, and was speaking outside the country, during a visit to attend a UNESCO conference on higher education in Beirut. Nevertheless, he did make similar statements after the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 and his words provide possible indication of how Saudi Arabia may modernize the Shura and expand its role in the future:[52]

> “Are we more backwards than other countries to hold elections that are cosmetic? What is required now is the development of the Shura Council until we reach a stage in which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can hold real and authentic elections...This plan (expanding the role of the Shura), in my opinion, if the situation continues, it will lead to elections. I prefer them later rather than now. Now is not the time. I don't believe we are ready. The Arab countries that have elections, do you think they have real parliaments?...Some countries have elections. But the elections are cosmetic. They amount to decorations for the outside world. Do you want these kinds of elections?.... The majority in Saudi Arabia, like the majority in other Arab countries, prefer gradual steps towards a democratic life. If the citizen can express an opinion and take part in decisions in one way or another, that is what is important... The structure of the Saudi system is different than the outside world...These are customs and customs are stronger than laws....The small man respects the big man. And the big man listens to the little man. We are moving in this way. There are differences of opinion and this is healthy.”

Political Reform and Opposition

Evolution is not stasis. Saudi Arabia does need broadly based political, social and economic reform. Western critics need to understand, however, that such reform must evolve in a Saudi way

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and on Saudi terms. It is easy to say that Saudi Arabia must mimic the West. In practice, however, any such effort would ignore the religious, cultural, tribal, and regional character of the Kingdom. It would be destabilizing and impractical, a narrow focus on rapid "democratization" would result in political divisiveness, factionalism, "service politics," and the politization of Islam rather than progressive social change. Saudi Arabia's complex mixture of Wahhabi Islam, population and economic problems, regional divisions and a centralized government by monarchy supported by modern technocracy is anything but easy to change. Most important, peaceful change requires the evolution of a uniquely Saudi form of government.

The following chapters show that the Saudi government has begun a process of political economic and social reform that should help deal with these internal political problems as well as well as serious social, demographic, and economic pressures. At the same time, the regime's present approach to change is faltering and sometimes more regressive than evolutionary. The Saudi royal family sometimes seems to be in a state of denial when it deals with internal security problems, or moves so slowly that the problem grows faster than the implementation of the solution. To be specific, a proper approach to internal security requires the government and royal family to concentrate on many of the same reforms it must make to deal with the pressures of economic and demographic change:

- *The leadership of the royal family needs to set clear limits to the future benefits members of the royal family receive from the state and to phase out those special privileges and commissions that limit the competitiveness and efficiency of the Saudi economy and private sector*. It needs to transfer all revenues from oil and gas to the state budget, and to ensure that princes obey the rule of law and are not seen as "corrupt" or abusing the powers of the state. At some point, most members of the royal family will also have to earn their living on their own. It does not take much vision to see that the Saudi monarchy cannot give 15,000 princes the same money, rights, and privileges it once gave several thousand.

- *The Majlis al-Shura needs to be steadily expanded in influence and decision-making, and in regional and sectarian representation, to provide a more representative form of government*. The Majlis has made a good beginning, but it needs younger members, more members that are moderate critics of the royal family, and some Shi'ites that are permitted to speak for this ethnic group. It needs to play a more direct role in reviewing the Saudi budget, and its debates need to be more open and reported in the media. It may be some years before Saudi Arabia is ready for a fully elected Majlis or National Assembly, but it is time to begin open elections at lower levels. The Saudi government needs to be more open and some body other than the royal family needs to be seen as playing a major role in decision-making. The present closed, over-centralized process of government breeds extremist opposition.

- *Saudi Arabia must come to grips with the need to reform and adapt its religious doctrines to forge a path of modernization and competitiveness that will drive Saudi Arabia into the 21st Century.* Although Saudi does not need to change its Wahhabi character, its religious practices must become more flexible. Some reforms have already began in areas dealing with the sciences, modern media, education, investment and insurance, legal and social practices, and even difficult issues like reinterpreting pre-Islamic history and archeology. Saudi religious modernists have already shown that that the Kingdom can move forward in changing its economy, education,

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and social structure without losing any of its Islamic character. Qatar is already showing that a Wahhabi society can develop more pluralism and political flexibility.

- *There is an equal need to evolve interpretations of legal procedures and the required punishments that are as humane as possible and find ways to encourage peaceful opposition on Saudi terms and deal with opposition by responding with reform and effective governance.* It is unrealistic and impractical for Saudi Arabia to attempt to adopt Western standards of human rights. The West needs to be careful not to become trapped into supporting the efforts of Islamic extremists who claim to advocate human rights and democracy as a way of attacking the Saudi regime. It also needs to understand that Saudi law is an expression of Islam and Sharia, rather than Western or more secular interpretations of law—deeming every religious practice that differs from the West a human rights abuse means demanding that Saudi Arabia abandon its religion and culture.

- *Saudi Arabia must accept the need to give Saudi Shi'ites a special religious status and proper economic rights, emphasize the protections of the individual already granted under Saudi law, and sharply rein in the growing abuses of the religious police*. The government must reestablish public faith in the Saudi legal process and the rule of law.

Saudis often quite correctly criticize Western analysts for demanding that Saudi Arabia become a mirror image of the West. This particular form of "globalism" implies convergence on a kind of Western secularism that is the antithesis of multiculturalism, and which attempts to emphasize the strengths of the Western approach with little regard to its weaknesses. Saudi culture, and legal and political practices, have strengths of their own, as well as the weaknesses some Western critics focus upon. These include social cohesion, firm control of crime, tightly knitted and supportive extended families, and a patriarchal sense of the government's obligation to the people. These are not values that any practical observer can easily dismiss.

At the same time, it seems valid to criticize the current political structure of the Saudi royal family and government for being too slow to react to the seriousness of some of Saudi Arabia's problems and for recognizing the lessons from other Arab regimes that were too slow to change and evolve. The Saudi monarchy and Saudi society may not want to adopt Western democracy, and cultural and legal processes, but Saudis should pay close attention to the mistakes that have helped cause the fall of monarchies and which have produced political, social, and economic instability in so many Arab states—regardless of the nature of their regimes. The Saudi government must recognize that legitimate criticism can only be disarmed by recognizing its legitimacy and acting to make the necessary changes. Saudi Arabia must find a new "golden mean" between preserving its conservative Islamic character and meeting the need for change.

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Endnotes

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[25] Estimates range from 2,000 to 7,000 princes. The higher figure represents many sons with little or no influence who are descended from collateral branches of the family. The 2,000 figure is a rough estimate of the number who have any real influence. The main power is concentrated in first and second generation sons descended directly from Abdul Aziz. The high end of such estimates is 4,000 princes in the main lines of succession and a total of 30,000 including children.

[26] This dismissal was partly the result of the fact that Khalid had used US Green Berets during the build-up for Desert Storm to help reorganize Saudi forces, and remove some of their bureaucratic rigidities. This caused considerable resentment, and made Khalid's promotion more difficult, although it significantly improved Saudi performance during the Gulf War. New York Times, October 15, 1991, p. 1; Washington Post, March 15, 1992, p. A-35.

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[36] Saudi Arabia feels the Koran is the constitution under Islamic law. The Basic Laws, however, perform much the same function as constitutional guarantees in the West. The Majlis al-Shura was never formally dissolved, but merely ceased to operate until King Fahd revived it in 1991.

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