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A Political Quagmire

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I am currently a freshman biology major. Although I am majoring in the sciences, I have an avid interest in world politics and am a member of the Honors Program. Throughout this process, Professor Harry Mason has provided invaluable guidance to me. His expertise in this field was irreplaceable. This paper was presented at the Showcase of Scholars this April in an oral presentation. I also serve as a writer for the Triple Helix, a national

undergraduate journal, which publishes articles related to all disciplines of science, a CATS tutor, and an officer in Tri-Beta and SPUR.

A Political Quagmire

Abstract

This paper is intended to characterize the precarious situation the House of Saud is facing. By exploring previous historical and current events, this analysis provides an insight into the complex web the House of Saud has woven; analysis of these events allows a glimpse into the future for this political regime and the uncertainty it faces. This paper is not intended to offer a solution or support a particular course of action, group, or individual.

A Political Quagmire

The House of Saud currently finds itself at the heart of controversy. It is being pressured by the United States to be a key partner in the war on terror and to improve the quality of life for the average Saudi, while having to maintain its role as the guardian of the holiest sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina. On the other hand, numerous liberalizing forces believe that the country lags behind many Western nations and needs to increase the pace of modernization. The royal family is believed to be corrupt, and this does not please the general public. The House of Saud is walking a political tightrope by trying to placate those with whom it interacts, while trying to cement its role in the current political system. All these factors have resulted in an unstable political regime that has to constantly satisfy the wishes of others just to ensure that it remains in power.

In order to study the issue more closely, it is necessary to review the structure of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia and its relation to Wahhabiism, the Islamic reform movement that follows the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. In the mid 1700s, Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud agreed that any territory controlled by Ibn Saud or his heirs would adhere to the strict Islamic teachings of Al-Wahhab.



Mentor:

Harry E. Mason

Adjunct Professor, Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce

Vinay provides the historical background and a current assessment of the obstacles faced by the House of Saud in this paper. He has done excellent research and his work is factual and of current interest in light of the key role of oil resources and success of the War on Terror. The roles of religion, politics, and commerce are explained in a succinct manner and the paper demonstrates the tricky balance of political arrangements of the United States in the Middle East.

(Gold, 3) Both benefited from this agreement because Saud would have a religious reason to conquer other parts of the kingdom, and the teachings of Al-Wahhab could be spread to others.

Although Saud's territory at that time was relatively small, Saud's heirs conquered much of the surrounding area and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The holy cities of Mecca and Medina had been under the control of the Hashemites for many centuries. However, by 1924, King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud had established his base at Riyadh and amassed a vast army. Saud finally consolidated the kingdom by expelling the Sharif of Mecca, Ali bin Hussein, in 1925, thereby taking over tutelage of the holy cities. Since then, the House of Saud has adhered to the agreement and has implemented Al-Wahhab's teachings. However, the House of Saud soon discovered that a monarch alone cannot claim religious legitimacy, but needs the help of clerics.

The House of Saud asks clerics, usually ones who have studied the *Qur'an* for years and are considered experts, to give approval to its decisions, so that the regime appears legitimate to the people of Saudi Arabia. (Gold, 79) However, clerics did not always have the power that they currently have. In 1979, the Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, the holiest site of Islam, was seized by dissidents. The dissidents claimed that the royal family was not legitimate due to its policy of rapid Westernization after the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia. The royal family was in a state of panic, because they did not know what course of action to pursue. They could not send troops inside the city, because the *Qur'an* strictly prohibits violence in Mecca. (Qur'an, Al-Baqara [191]) The royal family had to first consult with clerics and gain permission from them to enter the mosque and drive out the dissidents.

One of the main tasks of the Saudi monarch is to ensure that pilgrims have safe and easy access to the holy sites. The general populace was furious that innocent pilgrims were taken hostage inside the most sacred of all Islamic sites. After Saudi forces retook control of the mosque, the royal family tried to restore order, but some damage was already done. An unexpected effect of the takeover was that clerics ended up gaining an enormous amount of influence after realizing how much the Saudi government depended on them. (Kechichian, 61-62) Since then, clerics have wielded much power and advise the royal family on a regular basis.

During the Gulf War (1990-91), Saudi Arabia was a potential target of invasion by Iraq. Iraq had massed a huge army capable of conquering more than Kuwait. (Gold, 158) Saudi Arabia decided that it needed to defend itself and began to search for options, because its own army was not large enough. One option was the US military that could come into Saudi Arabia to lead the fight against Saddam Hussein. The other option was using Osama Bin Laden. (Unger, 143) Bin Laden suggested that the House of Saud allow him to use his mujahideen warriors so that non-Muslims would not be defending the holiest sites of Islam. He also promised to have more than 100,000 mujahideen warriors and to personally lead the fight himself. However, the Saudi government refused his offer and instead decided to let American troops defend the country. (Unger, 143) To many Muslim people across the world, this was an outrage. They perceived that the royal family gave up its religious legitimacy in exchange for support against Saddam Hussein; this created a rift within the population of Saudi Arabia. The royal family asked Sheik bin Baaz, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia at that time, to issue a fatwa that gave American

troops permission to be stationed on Saudi soil during the Gulf War. (Lippman, 303) Although Sheik Bin Baz reluctantly issued the fatwa, many commoners and clerics were still furious with the royal family's decision. Many clerics started to issue their own decrees that claimed the royal family was not fulfilling its role as the guardian of the holiest sites of Islam.

The presence of American troops on Saudi soil brought great concern to the Saudi populace and eroded support for the royal family. The United States had done things such as open up its own radio stations in Saudi Arabia; these stations broadcast programs that could be heard by the local citizens. (Gold, 160) Many Saudis feared that un-Islamic ideas could now easily be spread across the Kingdom. In 1990, a group of Saudi women drove their own cars, which violated Saudi laws and raised concern that there was no longer respect for the traditional Islamic values on which the country was founded. (Gold, 160) Many scholars and clerics in the country signed a petition that requested King Fahd to repeal Saudi laws that conflicted with Islam, but the King rejected the petition. (Gold, 160) Meanwhile, there were many international organizations that started to think that Saudi Arabia should become even more westernized and take a greater role in protecting human rights. Two distinct groups were created during this time period. One group favored the adoption of a Western legal code, while the other favored a return to the strict principles of Al-Wahhab.

Many new clerics began to rise to prominence during this time. Although these clerics may not have been among the officially sanctioned state clerics, they were able to communicate effectively with the common Saudis; the traditional royal-family-approved clerics had never communicated effectively

with the general populace. The new clerics were beginning to convince the population that the House of Saud was not working for Saudi Arabia, an accusation that had worried the royal family for a long time. They claimed that the House of Saud was serving the interests of the West, especially the United States. The clerics based this contention on one basic principle that the entire country could understand: unfair distribution of wealth.

Saudi Arabia draws much of its revenue from its vast reserves of oil and natural gas. In 2004 alone, the oil industry provided more than \$100 billion in revenue to Saudi Arabia. (International Monetary Fund [IMF]) However, ordinary Saudi citizens receive little of the income that the country gets from oil sales. American companies such as Texas Oil Company, Standard Oil of California, and Standard Oil of New Jersey helped to create the first oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government only acquired full control over its oil facilities in 1980 and in 1998 renamed the company Saudi Aramco. Saudi Aramco manages virtually all of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves, but is under the direct control of the royal family. The royal family still frequently outsources many of the contracts to American and Western companies such as Schlumberger, WesternGeco, Halliburton, and Weatherford, that provide a majority of the workforce in the oil industry as well most of the logistics for the daily operations. (Bradley, 208) For this reason, much of the money from oil revenues does not stay within Saudi Arabia and does not reach all classes of society.

The general public and many clerics petitioned the royal family to initiate a policy of "Saudiization" of these enterprises, because many Saudi companies are now acquiring the expertise needed to carry out these operations. The royal family,

however, automatically gets its share of the oil money, because the state owns Saudi Aramco directly. The princes have been reluctant to implement a policy of "Saudiization," because they have had long relationships with American companies and they additionally fear that oil production may slow during a transition phase of "Saudiization."

Inflation in Saudi Arabia was increasing by only about 0.4% in 2004, but is now increasing by about 2.8% in 2007. (IMF) Gross Domestic Product increased by 1.3% from 2004 to 2005, however it has fallen by 1.8% since then. (IMF) Ordinary Saudis have begun to question where the wealth from oil is disappearing to, especially because the cost per barrel of oil is at an all-time high. To many people, it is simple. The royal family, which was already believed to be corrupt, is keeping oil revenues and, thereby, living extravagant lifestyles. (Bradley, 220) To many of the clerics and to much of the general public, this is another reason to believe that the ruling House of Saud is not legitimate.

However, the royal family has started to listen to many of the forces that favor the westernization of the country. In fact, in 2002, the Saudi royal family proposed a plan at the Beirut Summit (Arab Summit Conference) that would have required Arab countries to recognize that Israel is a state and has the right to exist, in exchange for Israel agreeing to create a sovereign Palestinian state and finding a just solution to the Palestinian refugee problems. (Gold, 198) However, the proposal did not meet the approval of all the delegates at the meeting and was not brought up again. Although the proposal did not succeed, the fact that it was even proposed serves to show that the royal family was paying significant attention to many of the more liberal elements in their country.

In March, 2007, the Saudi government again brought up the peace plan proposal and wants to present it again at a conference in Riyadh. The fact that the Saudi government wants to present a plan that was soundly defeated just 5 years ago shows the influence of these more liberal elements in their country. The only Middle Eastern countries that currently have formal relations with Israel are Egypt and Jordan; these relations were mediated at the Camp David Accords by President Carter. Saudi Arabia would have been the third Middle Eastern country to do so and if it had done so, that would have shaken up the Middle East as we know it, because Saudi Arabia is one of the most important actors in that region.

Was the Saudi royal family simply acting to please the more liberal elements of its society or were there other factors involved in the proposed peace initiative with Israel? One of the key factors that one would have to consider is the United States. It has long been acknowledged that the United States and Saudi Arabia have shared a close relationship, especially with the current heads of state, President Bush and King Abdullah. The Saudi royal family has given more than \$1 billion to companies in which the Bush family has had significant stake, such as the Carlyle Group and Harken Energy, especially when these companies struggled financially. (Unger, 15) Furthermore, former President George H. W. Bush has long had significant personal ties with Prince Bandar, who, until recently, was the Saudi Ambassador to the United States. Prince Bandar reportedly commented to King Fahd that he wanted to resign after former President George H. W. Bush lost the 1992 election to President Clinton; in fact, Prince Bandar stated, "It was like I lost one of my family, dead." (Unger, 152) With all of

these financial and personal ties between the Bush family and the Al-Saud family, it is surely possible to think that this plays a role in determining the policy between these two countries. After all, humans are not immune to affective bias while making their decisions.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States government started to push the royal family to do more in the Middle East, where the United States would not have been as welcome. For instance, Saudi Arabia was one of only three countries that recognized the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover of Kabul in 1996. However, after the 9/11 attacks, the Saudi royal family was quick to support the efforts of the US military in Afghanistan and withdrew diplomatic recognition to the Taliban just before the War in Afghanistan began. (Lippman, 342) Furthermore, Saudi Arabia allowed the US to use Prince Sultan Air Base to coordinate the air war against Afghanistan, and they provided the US Air Force with low cost oil, gas, and fuel worth tens of millions of dollars. (Prados and Blanchard, 9) This was a monumental decision by the Saudi royal family, because they still faced a backlash due to their decision to allow US troops to be stationed there during the Gulf War.

Furthermore, a vast majority of Saudis did not approve of allowing a Western country to use Saudi air bases to strike another Muslim nation. One of the reasons that Saudi Arabia may have let the US use Prince Sultan Air Base is that the royal family was eager to appear as a friend in the eyes of the American public. At that time, the American public was extremely skeptical of the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia, especially because 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudi citizens. (Lippman, 325) Although

the royal family knew that there would again be considerable internal backlash, they felt that they had to maintain their relationship with the United States and simply offering their condolences to United States would not have been sufficient.

However, there were some issues on which the Saudi government remained firm. Saudi Arabia has long been accused by groups such as Amnesty International of violating human rights. These groups cite instances such as public beheadings, amputations, and alleged torture in Saudi Arabia. Public punishment (including beheadings) is commonly used in Saudi Arabia in order to deter crime. (Bradley, 137) However, beheadings are not announced in advance and even the convicted have no prior knowledge of when they will be executed. (Bradley, 135) Many human rights groups have tried to get the royal family to adopt a resolution that would outlaw these practices, but have been unsuccessful. The royal family, however, claims that these beheadings are the best way to deal with crime in society. According to Saudi law, a victim's family is the only group that can pardon a crime after a person has been convicted. The royal family maintains that this means no one is above the law and even cites as evidence that a son of the influential Minister of the Interior, Prince Naif, was almost executed but was pardoned at the last second by the victim's family. (Bradley, 137) However, many human rights groups have said this was a mere ploy staged by the royal family to convince the world that it treated everyone equally. Human rights groups claim that the victim's family would have had serious problems later if they had let the execution take place as planned, and cite this as evidence that the royal family has a double standard: one for the commoners and one for

themselves. (Bradley, 138)

There are other issues on which Saudi Arabia has been reluctant to change its stance. The United States has asked that Saudi Arabia cut off funding to many of the madrassas (religious schools) that operate in Saudi Arabia. However, this is an impossible request. Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state, first and foremost. It would not be able to shut down these schools; most Muslims agree that such an action would be un-Islamic. Not only do madrassas teach Islam, they also take in many orphans and those with no place to live. Closing these schools would not only be un-Islamic, it would seem to be a move against the general welfare of the country as well.

One of the main goals for any Saudi monarch is to make sure that Muslims can easily come and pray at the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, and that these sites are protected. Almost every Saudi king has issued a decree that cements the role of Islam in society, has worked to improve the conditions of the mosques in the country, or has attempted to ensure that pilgrims can safely perform the hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam. (Lippman, 317) These acts are the ones that lend the notion of religious legitimacy to the royal family of Saudi Arabia. Without them, the royal family would be in a political quagmire. Closing down these schools would be equivalent to an American president enacting a law that explicitly violated the Constitution. The king would face massive repercussions from the clergy and general population, as well as within the royal family itself.

Although traditionally stable, the House of Saud does have its own internal conflicts. In 1975, King Faisal was murdered by a nephew because the nephew believed that King Faisal was partly responsible for his brother's death. (Bradley,

68) Different factions ally with each other in order to consolidate more power within themselves and one day have a chance at the throne and the massive oil wealth that comes with the kingship. This adds another degree of uncertainty about the kingdom, because the reigning monarch has to ensure that the other members of the royal family are placated. Fellow princes often take opposing stands on an issue and need to be cajoled so that a compromise can be reached. In many cases, people suspect that this may mean diverting some of the revenue from oil to these princes; this extra revenue may satisfy the princes, but it cuts off much need revenue to other important sectors such as education and healthcare. The current monarch, King Abdullah, is over 80 years old and, although he has designated a Crown Prince, many princes are still competing with each other to move up the hierarchy and thereby closer to kingship.

The House of Saud has to make sure that it is religiously legitimate or it will lose the support of the clergy and, thereby, the general population. However, it must also try to work with other states and groups who believe that the country is behind times and needs to become Westernized in order to maintain a good public image. Compounding all this, the royal family has to remain united so that they can maintain the notion that they are the right people for the job. With all these commitments, the House of Saud is faced with a challenging situation, having to work to meet the needs of its citizens, pilgrims, other countries, fellow princes, and any other individuals or groups with which it interacts, just to ensure that it remains in power. In the future, the country may have to risk alienating one or more groups to meet the demands of another. This alienation could lead ultimately to toppling

the regime, if one actor feels as if it has been unfairly disregarded. These circumstances have led to an unstable political regime that is doing whatever it takes to remain in power.

The future holds many challenges for the royal family. During her recent visit to Saudi Arabia, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, commented that she would like to see more women involved in Saudi politics, although she refrained from directly criticizing the royal family. Furthermore, King Abdullah commented that if the United States suddenly withdrew from Iraq, Saudi Arabia would have to support the Sunni Arabs in Iraq to ensure that they would not be in jeopardy. Although Saudi Arabia has a Sunni majority, there is still a sizable Shiite minority, which composes 10-15% of the population located primarily in the oil producing Eastern region. The Shiite minority, may feel threatened by these possibilities and possibly retaliate against the government. The royal family will most likely face serious concerns from its citizens and interest groups, as well as other countries over its policies. With all these tumultuous events, only the future will tell whether the royal family will still be in the same state as it currently is.

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