Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads? Notes from a Recent Visit

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 2 (February 2004)

by F. Gregory Gause, III

Two recent, important articles on the domestic politics of Saudi Arabia—Michael Scott Doran's "The Saudi Paradox"[1] and Amb. Edward S. Walker's "The Quiet Revolution: Saudi Arabia"[2]—present very different views on what is happening in the kingdom. After a visit to Saudi Arabia (January 9-17, 2004), I end up somewhere in the middle between Doran's pessimism and Walker's optimism.

Saudi Reform and Family Politics

Doran has become quite a star in Saudi Arabia. His contention that the ruling family, the Al Saud, are split into a pro-reform wing headed up by Crown Prince Abdallah and an Islamist-inclined, anti-reform wing headed up by Interior Minister Prince Na'if, excited the interest and comment of many in the kingdom. Prince Na'if himself felt constrained to go on *al-Arabiyya*, one of the new Arabic-language satellite news channels that are now competing with *al-Jazeera*, to deny Doran's account. When the Interior Minister goes on television to refute one's work, it is clear that it has caused a stir.

Doran captured many elements of the important debate in Saudi Arabia about where the country should be headed. There is, however, some dispute as to the accuracy of his depiction of the bifurcation of the royal family. I am very leery about making blanket statements about what is going on in the upper reaches of the Al Saud. The Al Sauds play their cards very close to the vest on the issue of family politics. Saudi Arabia is closed and secretive, and court gossip is rife. There is much merit for the aphorism that, when it comes to family politics, "those who know don't talk, and those who talk don't know." I do not doubt that Prof. Doran heard from a number of Saudis the theory of an Abdallah-Na'if confrontation. I heard it, too, though some of that talk might have been generated by Prof. Doran's article itself, which was just published when I arrived. But I also heard other accounts of family politics that run against this theory.

It is entirely possible that the conflict over "reform v. conservative Islam" portrayed by Prof. Doran is not between Abdallah and Na'if as leaders of family factions, but within every member of the top elite of the family. They all recognize, in the wake of the bombings in Riyadh in May and November 2003, the ferment in Saudi society and external pressure from the United States, that reform is necessary. But they also realize the value to them of the religious establishment. That establishment has been a bulwark of the state for generations, and has proven its ability to be of service to the rulers on countless occasions. Most recently, at the end of 2003, three Wahhabi religious figures who had issued *fatwas* (religious judgments) legitimating violence against the Saudi state, publicly recanted their positions and condemned violence in the kingdom. It was not Saudi liberals who brought what the Saudi press called the "instigating shaykhs" to admit their errors. It was the religious establishment bringing to heel some of their own. They have done this repeatedly throughout modern Saudi history.

Doran's labeling of Prince Na'if as the head of the "pro-Wahhabi" party within the ruling family falls into the trap of being too schematic about a more complex and nuanced reality. Na'if is the top policeman in the country, a position he has held for the past 29 years. The security breaches of recent years, from the

Saudi participation in the 9-11 attacks to the bombings in Riyadh, have fallen squarely on his shoulders. Like most politicians, his first response to these failures was to deny that any problem existed. He was the senior Saudi who denied most vociferously and publicly that there was evidence to substantiate the involvement of Saudi citizens in 9-11. Shortly before the May 2003 bombing, he said that the al-Qaeda presence in Saudi Arabia was weak and almost non-existent. He blamed, at various times, Israel and the Muslim Brotherhood for the upsurge of extremism in the Muslim world. He very publicly defended the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and denied that it had any relationship to violence (so did the other senior princes). It is not difficult to see him, in this light, as someone standing against an honest evaluation of the problems in Saudi Arabia and for the status-quo.

Yet, in the wake of the May and November 2003 bombings, it is Na'if's internal security forces who are hunting down, and in some cases killing, Islamist extremists in Saudi Arabia. If he is sympathetic to the Islamist line of thinking (a possibility, but not a certainty), he is making it clear that he will not tolerate anyone in that line working to undermine his family's authority. His first priority is the maintenance of Al Saud rule. Similarly, Abdallah recently refused to meet with the organizers of a petition calling for a "constitutional monarchy" in the kingdom, sending them to Na'if instead for the kind of dressing down that only the chief of police can administer. If Abdallah is the leader of the "reform" party, he is not going to get too far out in front of it.

While we cannot know with certainty what is going on at the top levels of the Al Saud, we can refer to past incidents of open family policy/power struggles to see what kinds of public indications emerged during those times. The conflict between King Saud and Crown Prince Faysal for power in the late 1950's and early 1960's was characterized by frequent cabinet changes and by prolonged absences from the official scene by whichever of the two was "losing." The split in the family over how to react to the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979 was accompanied by a prolonged stay in Spain by Crown Prince Fahd, who apparently was on the losing end of that policy fight. Right now, we do not see these kinds of signals, indicating that, if there is a strong Abdallah-Na'if split, it has not reached the level of seriousness that these past internal family fights did.

So it is entirely possible that the Saudi ruling elite is torn not personality against personality, but within all the personalities involved over how far to go in changing the place. Undoubtedly some might be more willing to see accelerated change, others more fearful of that prospect. But there is no conclusive evidence that a profound family split is preventing the Crown Prince from implementing a vigorous reformist agenda. Add to that two other factors—the incapacity of the king, which leaves Abdallah with responsibility but constrained power; and Abdallah's own penchant for making grand statements but hesitating in the follow-through—and we get a situation where things do not move very fast, or at least as fast as outside observers might want.

Prof. Doran might be right about what is going on inside the family. I cannot disprove it. But right now, I would have to render the Scottish verdict of "not proved" on that particular part of his analysis. Again, I do think that the article captures the overall tenor of debate in Saudi, and accurately portrays what is a dilemma for the leadership.

Quiet Revolution or Noisy Diversion? The Saudi "Reform" Agenda

If Doran errs on the side of pessimism about the prospects for change in Saudi Arabia, then Walker is too optimistic. He depicts the trend of events in the kingdom as being overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, in the "liberal" direction. That is a mistake. There are certainly some important steps in that direction, the most important being the "national dialogue" meetings sponsored by the Saudi government in the past months, that have included women, Shi'a, and others outside the official "Wahhabi" religious establishment. The next meeting, scheduled for March 2004, is to focus exclusively on the role of women in Saudi society. It is the most tangible evidence yet that the government is committed to fostering a more pluralistic and tolerant notion of what it means to be a Saudi citizen, and to allow more open debate in the country.

But where is the follow-up on all of this talk of reform? The government in October 2003 announced a very limited electoral initiative, for half of the members of municipal councils to be chosen by popular election. But there has been, as yet, no public indication of preparation for elections. One of Abdallah's sons actually told a local Saudi columnist that his father's initiative was being undercut by a lack of follow-through by the bureaucracy. More liberal Saudis opined to me that the country does not need "dialogue" on controversial issues like women's driving. No amount of dialogue is going to reconcile the positions. What it needed is for the government to make decisions and stand firm in implementing them. This can be done. Saudi liberals point to the way that the government recently altered the textbooks for religious education classes in primary and secondary schools, excising many elements that outsiders and some Saudis had identified as encouraging extremist views, despite the opposition that this engendered in Islamist circles. Abdallah's commitment to reform is not questioned, but just how far he and the rest of the family are willing to go remains in doubt.

Discussion of "reform" in Saudi Arabia is complicated by the fact that the term means different things to different people. For example, after the Crown Prince's speech on January 14, 2004 reaffirming his commitment to the reform agenda (though without many specifics), the sister publications *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *Arab News* ran very different headlines. The Arabic headline read "Prince Abdallah: Saudi will not permit anyone to stand in the way of its considered, gradual reform" while the English language headline was "Freedom of Expression not at Cost of Islam: Abdallah." Two very different takes on the same speech. It brings home the point that, while many Saudis agree that "reform" is necessary, they will not necessarily agree on what its content should be.

The reforms imagined by those in the Islamist camp are very different from those in the more liberal camp. For some Islamists, "reform" means resisting outside pressures for any change in Saudi Arabia—the educational system, the role of women, etc.—and relying more openly on the religious establishment and the country's religious traditions. Some Islamists like the idea of elections very much, because they are confident that they will win. Some liberals do not like the idea of elections, for the very same reason. So "reform" could actually lead to an increase in the influence of those who advocate more "traditionalist" positions on controversial issues like women's rights and education.

There is an interesting trend among some of the more politically-inclined and "moderate" *salafis* (the preferred term in Saudi Arabia to what we in the West have termed "Wahhabis") to team up with liberal and nationalist critics of the government to find common ground. The "constitutional monarchy" petition of December 2003 is a good example. The two sides come together on a number of demands, most notably for more institutional constraints on the power of the ruling family and for more openness in government. It is unclear just how much social support this type of cross-ideological cooperation can garner. But it is an interesting trend that bears watching. Clearly, any political reform that can be cloaked in the mantle of "Islam" has a better chance of success in Saudi Arabia.

It seems that there are "reform" positions that can gain quite a bit of support across the board in Saudi Arabia, but they relate (like most of the "constitutional monarchy" demands) to the power and position of the ruling family. Greater transparency in public funds is one such reform; greater institutional input for popular opinion (if not elections) is another. But this requires the family to give up some of its own arbitrary power, and is therefore very difficult. This is not an issue of Islamists versus liberal reformers. It is an issue of the power of the state and those who hold its levers in Saudi Arabia. It is something that the United States might profitably urge upon the Saudis, because it is *not* socially controversial, like other U.S. demands in the educational, Islamic affairs and women's rights fields.

Women's Rights and Saudi Reform

Perhaps the most controversial and sensitive issue on the reform agenda—both for outsiders pushing for change and for Saudis themselves—is women's issues. On January 17, 2004 Lubna Olayan, a Saudi woman who is a member of one of the kingdom's richest families and head of a financial services firm, gave the keynote address at the Jeddah Economic Forum. Women attended the conference, separated from their male colleagues by a partition, not segregated into a separate room as had been the case in

the past. A few days later, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the country's leading religious official (appointed by the government), condemned the mixing of the sexes at the conference and the appearance of some Saudi women unveiled in mixed company.

Saudi women are working for changes in their society. But they do not have strong social support. Such reforms will have to come by royal fiat. They will not emerge, at least in the short-to-medium term, from below. The "women's issue" is a political football for men in Saudi Arabia, as it has always been. It unites the socially conservative strain in the country with the religious establishment and with most of the religious critics of the regime. It is an issue on which the religious establishment, willing to accept just about everything that the government requires of it, can prove its independence. Because it is so emotional and symbolic, any move by the government on women's issues could mobilize much more social opposition than, say, educational reform measures. That is why the government will step very gingerly around it, allowing quite a bit of talk (the next national dialogue meeting) but doing very little.

Conclusion

"Doing very little" is the bane of all Saudi reform efforts. It is understandable that the government does not want to get too far ahead of its constituencies. And there are undoubtedly differences of opinion at the top levels about just what to do. But there is a growing expectation in Saudi society that the government will have to take important steps to address economic and social problems. Undoubtedly, such steps will disappoint and antagonize some in Saudi society, no matter what those steps are. But the impression of indecision and drift that avoidance of hard choices would give might be even more dangerous to the regime. If the Al Saud disappoint those expectations for political movement, they could face more serious problems later.

Despite the real issues which the Saudi regime faces, there is little evidence to support the view of many in the West that the place is coming apart, or that the regime's hold on power is under serious challenge On the financial front, with high oil prices over the past two years, the government is actually in a stronger position than it has been in the recent past, and being able to spread the oil wealth around more generously can undoubtedly help to smooth over current political tensions. But it is now widely believed among perceptive Saudi observers of their political scene that the old ways of dealing with political demands—a combination of oil largesse and security crackdowns—is no longer adequate. More significant political steps are expected.

Most probably, those steps, when they come, will not be exclusively in a "liberal" or in an "Islamist" direction. The leadership will continue to seek a balance among its domestic constituencies, foreign pressures and its own notions of what needs to be done. That is but one element of a real reform agenda, however. The more interesting question is not encompassed by the "Islamist v. liberal" debate. It involves the willingness of the Al Saud to literally and figuratively "open their books," moving away from the secrecy in which policy is now made and encouraging greater public input (through elections or other mechanisms) in decision-making. The future of the monarchy could well turn not on whether the Al Saud can "reform" Arabian society, but on whether they are able to reform themselves.

About the Author

F. Gregory Gause, III is an associate professor of political science at the University of Vermont, and director of the University's Middle East Studies Program. He was previously on the faculty of Columbia University (1987-1995) and was Fellow for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (1993-1994). He has published two books—*Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994); and *Saudi-Yemeni Relations: Domestic Structures and Foreign Influence* (Columbia University Press, 1990)—and numerous articles in scholarly journals and edited volumes. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard University in 1987 and studied Arabic at the American University in Cairo (1982-83) and Middlebury College (1984). His most recent publications related to Saudi Arabia are: "Saudi Arabia Challenged," in the January 2004 edition of *Current History* and "The Approaching Turning Point: The Future of U.S. Relations with the Gulf States," published in May 2003 by the Saban Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution.

References

1. In *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2004). Doran is on the faculty of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University.
2. Circulated by the Middle East Institute in Washington. Walker is former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and president of the Middle East Institute.