

# ALTERNATIVES

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## **Modernising Legitimacy: Saudi Strategies**

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Saudi Arabia is a state that draws upon a range of impulses. The imagery of Saudi Arabia has long soured the flavour of liberal tastes. The idea of heavily-veiled women, enslaved maids, hostaged migrant workers and vulgar opulence have somehow accompanied images of Arabian nobility, Islamic piety and an 'oriental' mastery of the desert. Of course, oil has despoiled most of the noble images of Arabia, once captured by the early explorers, who courted the desert emirs and etched maps into our psyches.

The oil boom of the 1970s served to reshape the imagery of the Arabian Peninsula, and in particular, Saudi Arabia. Within the public psyche, the Saudis emerged from the desert with wallets full of petrodollars; and they were eager to spend their easily earned money. Awash with oil wealth, the Saudis public image dropped from desert nobility to sleazy playboys (note the gender bias of the imagery). This image prevailed until the early 1990s, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the Saudis permitted U.S. troops to defend their Kingdom. The ghost of the noble Arabian was finally laid to rest when women, dressed in desert fatigues and desert shorts, formed part of the Desert Shield protecting the Kingdom and its valuable oil deposits from Saddam Hussein.

The clipped image of U.S. women defending Saudi territory, which houses the most holy sites of Islam, was incongruous with the reality that the Kingdom's women could not travel

between cities without permission and a chaperone. The machismo of Saudi society drooped, as the coalition forces defended its territory and liberated Kuwait.

Nevertheless, prior to 11 September 2001, the Saudis were largely disinterested in their public image abroad – there was little reason to be seriously concerned. Buoyed-up by twenty five percent of the world's known oil reserves, they were able to brush aside criticisms of their foreign and domestic policies with impunity. However, the participation of 15 Saudi dissidents in the al-Qaida operation has compelled the Saudis to re-image themselves and unveil a more nuanced foreign policy, at the very least.

The U.S. press has focused its energies upon anti-Americanism in the Arab world, and in particular, the Saudi government's role in sponsoring terrorism against the U.S.. As part of its campaign, the press has come to question the loyalty of Saudi Arabia's expansive royal family, perhaps numbering 5,000 princes, to its key ally, the U.S.. The campaign has focused upon supposed 'instability' in the country, and attributed the emergence of Islamic terror to the Saudi system of governance. The release of the Arab Human Development Report, by the United Nations Development Programme in May 2002, lent weight to the argument that Arab states were essentially failing their societies by denying them choices in determining their social, political, cultural and economic futures. In other words, the oppressive relationship between state and society is thought to be partially responsible for producing a generation of dissidents, intent on practising terrorism.

Thus, the relationship between state and society has fallen under the spotlight, and concomitant doubts over the issue of succession have come to dominate popular debate. It has become fashionable and commonplace to question the durability and vulnerability of the Saudi state vis-à-vis the internal struggles within the royal family, and the challenges posed by

discontents to the regime. The super-image of Osama bin Laden has captured the imagination of the world's publics, both positive and negative; his forthright challenge to the U.S. and the Saudi regime has gained an almost mythical edge.

However, the tendency to project imagery about Saudi Arabia, rather than deduce analysis from reasoned debate has served the interests of certain political alliances operating within Washington and led to the trivialisation of debates over succession and stability. One cannot afford to discount the power of the U.S. press in influencing public opinion or shaping the policies of U.S. administrations, but one can seek to inform that debate with research that goes beyond oil, expediency, the veil and Israel.

Instead of focusing upon stability and succession, this article examines how the Saudi state has maintained its legitimacy, and which strategies it has employed to do so. The authors argue that a legitimate relationship between state and society ought to be based upon a continuous discourse shaped and informed by both state and society – the ebb and flow of experiential existence.

Until the Second Gulf War, the Saudi regime had proven adept at accommodating the interests of oppositional figures; however, the invasion of Kuwait changed the political landscape of Saudi Arabia's domestic politics and gave rise to a number of vocal opposition groups. These groups set a clear challenge to the authority of the state; they questioned the legitimacy of the Al-Saud family to protect Islam's most holy sites. Unlike earlier protests, the opposition's appeal seemed to be more far reaching and was predicated upon the state's inability to protect the Kingdom, Mecca and Medina without depending upon foreign (non-Muslim) forces. This article will place the nature of these protests into a context where the legitimacy

debate can inform the current discussion over events leading up to 11 September 2001, and the Saudi state's domestic responses to the U.S.-led war against Iraq.

The authors' propose that the state in Saudi Arabia suffers from a deficit of legitimacy. Although the state enjoyed an earlier phase of legitimacy, it failed to appreciate the dynamic quality of legitimacy, and as the values of society have moved, the state itself, remained stagnant. The state has retained its legitimacy; however, it has experienced a deficit of legitimacy, and more recently, erosion. This article will chart the Saudi state's response to its deficit and erosion of legitimacy, and the consequences of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the impact of U.S.-led war against Iraq for its legitimacy.

Since the establishment of the Kingdom, the royal family has presided over both state and society and has managed to dominate the religious, political and economic spheres. The Saudi state has resisted sharing its monopoly over power, as much as possible; moreover, it has employed a range of strategies designed to accommodate intermittent challenges to its authority. In order to meet new challenges, the state has continuously updated its strategies as a means of bolstering its legitimacy and discrediting its opponents. It has delineated its relationship with society by setting state-society boundaries according to spiritual, and material values. The ownership of these values has given the state an assumed 'right' to shape Islamic discourse within Saudi Arabia; and this has toned the tenor of legitimacy between state and society.

### **The Saudi Model: Forging Legitimacy**

States are not static entities and neither are societies. The discourse between state and society often redefines the normative, legal and social parameters of their mutual development, and both parties can provide direction and leadership. Saudi Arabia is a naturally conservative country, and the policies of the state, more often than not, reflect the bedrock values of its

society. On the whole, the Saudi state prefers not to take policy initiatives; moreover, its policies are usually predicated upon events as they occur. In other words, there is very little *a priori* decision-making; and the process of designing and implementing decisions usually follows an unexpected event. This policy enervation can be attributed to the largely conformist nature of Arab societies, and the relationship between governing and governed.

To date, the Saudi regime's legitimacy has been based upon a mix of religion, rentierism, patrimonialism, and tribalism. The mix has often determined the degree of legitimacy enjoyed by the Al-Saud family. On two earlier occasions, the Al-Saud produced the wrong mix and brought about the collapse of the first and second Saudi states. The contemporary Saudi state, therefore, is cognisant of its predecessor's failures and has invested considerable energy into devising strategies to prevent an erosion of legitimacy.

The alliance between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, in 1744/45, enjoined an essential relationship of religious zeal and secular power. Until this point, Ibn Abd al-Wahhab had been unable to propagate his Islamic message; he needed the protection of Muhammad ibn Saud to preserve his word, and his sword to subdue the tribes that had deviated from the righteous path. The effective combination of spiritual and secular power compelled many tribes of Central Arabia to acquiesce to the dictates of the first Saudi state. Nonetheless, the flux between spiritual and secular power, coupled with internal strife and a burgeoning Ottoman empire brought about the demise of the first two Saudi states.<sup>1</sup>

The alliance between the Al-Saud and the al Al-Sheikh families, a marriage of political and religious means, respectively, allowed the founder of the third Saudi state, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud to utilise Islam as a mobilising force to extend his influence throughout the Arabian peninsula. Despite the distinctive tribal affiliations, the Arab families of the peninsula ceded to

the zealous call of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's Islam, and pledged their allegiance to the political skills of Ibn Saud. Indeed, Ibn Saud was a skilful leader, who understood the value of dispensing political favours, intermarrying amongst the tribes and instilling a religious zeal into their holy mission. Islam proved to be a durable adherent that stuck the tribes together in their pursuit of exporting Islam, and defining the boundaries of a new state. In the meantime, Ibn Saud was able to subjugate rival tribes, particularly in Hail and the Hijaz, and forged a new territory that became Saudi Arabia.

Mindful of the past, and conscious of their tied destinies, both parties have reinforced each other's status, and sought to continuously regenerate their mutual claims to legitimacy. However, there is balance of power in the relationship, and this has come to dominate the discourse between them. For instance, the discovery of oil gave the state a persuasive weapon through which it could foment stronger ties with its society, and at the same time circumvent some of its dependence upon the ulema. This proved to be particularly useful when the state intended to modernise the mode of production, and the ulema vocally resisted the introduction of new technologies into the Kingdom.

The balance of power is dynamic. During moments of societal uncertainty, the regime has depended upon the fatawa of the ulema to underscore its religious authority. Likewise, the official ulema, in most cases, have become dependent upon the state for their livelihoods; and their special status, vis-à-vis society, is preserved by the existence of religious agencies, such as the morality police. As long as they have been invested with the authority to conserve Islamic values in society, which is the declared mission of the Saudi state, the ulema will find full-time employment. Inevitably, this component of the relationship has affected the autonomy enjoyed by both actors; one can readily detect the swing in fortunes over the past seventy years. With the

commercialisation of oil, as mentioned above, the ulema experienced a drop in their influence; however, with the fiscal crisis of the state, and the 'failure' of the Al-Saud to address national (U.S. presence) and regional (Israel-Palestine and Iraq) security problems, the appeal of the ulema's authority has reset the balance once more.

Irrespective of the tribal, ethnic and economic divisions that shape Saudi society, the Shi'a community, notwithstanding, one factor stills forges the Saudi identity into one central die - Islam. The role of Islam in Saudi Arabia is not only central to the way of life, but it constitutes also an integral part of identity, destiny, kinship and leadership. The Saudi regime, with the support of the ulema, has placed Islam at the centre of its political, religious and temporal legitimacy.

Indeed, the bastions of the Islamic faith, the ulema, reinforce the Islamic credentials of the Al-Saud family within Saudi society. They play an indispensable role in legitimising the decisions of the ruling family, whether taken in the domestic, regional or international context. Moreover, the ulema are often called upon to justify unpopular policies, even when dissident clerics contest the Islamic nature of the ruling. In other words, the 'official' ulema have monopolised Islamic discourse within the country, and this has awarded them with the task of explaining the state's policy to its population. In some cases, the ulema have become the arbiter between state and society.

As the principal arbiter between state and society, the ulema are invested with considerable societal power, as their observations and directives are generally consumed by society. Thus, they are able to define the parameters of Islamic discourse and guide the conversations between state and society. In essence, they are defenders of the status quo, and their role is to check the Islamic content of state policies, whilst recognising the limits placed

upon them by their political leaders – it is the consummate marriage between state and Mosque, and not unlike Medieval Europe.

### *Guiding the Discourse*

As mentioned earlier, after the Iranian Revolution and the Second Gulf war, a number of opposition movements gained credence, both inside and outside the Kingdom, and they challenged the foundations of the Saudi state. Until this point, the opposition had amounted to individual campaigns that were easy to contain or one off incidents, such as al-Utaibi's seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, where the Saudi state and society enjoined in lamenting the un-Islamic nature of the protest. Indeed, the state was highly effective in de-legitimising its opponents; and by labelling dissidents as foreign agents, the government was able to associate dissent with disloyalty to Islam and Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, as a conservative regime, and one invested with unshakeable legitimacy since its rise to power, the regime has sought to accommodate and rehabilitate its discontents, especially Saudis from the Najd, with a range of strategies. Although the Saudi state has the means to govern by coercion, it more often than not chooses to govern by consensus, which has a cultural precedent amongst the Arabian peninsula's tribes.

Subsequently, the state has designed a range of rehabilitation packages. Each package, as such, has been custom-made to appeal to the peculiarities of each dissident group. For instance, throughout the 1980s the ideological Islamists were 'exported' to others' battlefields, such as Afghanistan, and their families were given honourable awards in lieu of their services. In this case, the Saudi state actively encouraged jihad – not inside Saudi Arabia, but in areas where the regime wished to extend its sphere of influence.



On another occasion, the Saudi state responded to the Letter of Demands issued by the Saudi liberals in November 1990, and the petition signed by religious scholars, judges and university professors, including prominent figures from establishment ulema, such as Ibn Baz and ‘Uthaimin, May 1991, and established a set of new state institutions formulated to inform the decision-making process. These political reforms had been tabled since the 1960s, but the Gulf War precipitated an internal crisis, and the regime moved to accommodate the various centres of discontent. This consensual tendency allows the state to absorb discontent, as and when necessary, according to the prevailing determinates of legitimacy.

In the two cases stated above, the state simply responded to the emerging crises. In doing so, it avoided unnecessarily antagonising society, and sought a consensual answer that was palatable to mainstream Saudi society. By exporting its dissidents to the Caucasus and Central Asia, the regime divested itself of an impending problem and, at the same time, illustrated its commitment to spreading the Islamic message to its hinterland in the north. In the latter case, the regime institutionalised and formalised an existing arrangement, whereby the regime’s leaders would consult their constituencies prior to taking decisions. The appointed council was intended to serve as a ‘sounding board’ for state policies, especially in the area of finance. Although this move did not constitute democratisation as such, it was judged sufficient to accommodate the needs of the liberals. Moreover, in 1997, the council was enlarged from 60 to 90 members, and its new composition, which favoured technocrats over religious figures, indicated which constituency the Majlis was primarily set-up to serve. This illustrates how adept the state has been in developing strategies, aimed at accommodating and co-opting its opponents, whilst not conceding any of its hold over deployable power.

## Strategies

The Saudi regime has developed 'collective strategies' to address the concerns of its discontents. The term 'discontent' does not simply refer to members of society who are unhappy with their state, but to individuals who no longer share the values of that state and seek to realign the relationship between state and society by any means.

Until the Second Gulf war, Saudi Arabia's discontents were, more often than not, transported to the frontier between Islam and the Soviet Union. This issue of discontents, therefore, did not constitute a threat to the Saudi state; on the contrary, by exporting its discontents, the Saudi state reinvigorated the foundations of its legitimacy in the name of spreading Islam. However, the Second Gulf war has produced a generation of discontents, who have either gained first hand knowledge of proselytising Islam in Central Asia, and/or remain ideologically critical of the Kingdom's decision to grant the U.S. access to its bases during the Second Gulf war. Both groups now constitute a threat to the regime; and in response, it has designed a model to monopolise state-society discourse and accommodate its discontents. Since the 1980s, the Saudi state has employed a multidimensional model, which entails at least six separate approaches. We might call them:

- i. Shaping public discourse
- ii. Islamicisation & Education
- iii. Consensus
- iv. Rentierism & Patrimonialism
- v. Exporting dissidents
- vi. Coercion

### *Shaping public discourse*

The Saudi state, in conjunction with the ulema, manages and hegemonises Islamic discourse both within the Kingdom and the Islamic world. By virtue of housing Islam's two

holiest cities, Saudi Arabia wields considerable vantage over other Islamic states, particularly when it comes to claims over Islamic authority, organising the Hajj (pilgrimage) and implementing shari'a (Islamic law). Islam has awarded the Saudi state with a non-convertible currency that has enabled it to command authority within the Islamic world; and Allah's gift of oil has added extra value to that currency. For example, in response to Gamal Abdel Nasser's call for Arab states to embrace Arab Nationalism, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, King Faisal established an alternative body, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), as an Islamic counterweight. The OIC has never been invested with a substantive mandate, and it remains an empty gesture in a run-down complex in Jeddah to this very day. Nevertheless, its establishment was indicative of the Saudi regime's monopolistic tendencies over Islam, and the centrality of Islam to Al-Saud's rule.

Islam has served Saudi rule in two critical ways: as a means of regulating society, and a mechanism for generating legitimacy. First, it served as a mobilising factor in the founding of the Kingdom, and was later developed into a means of social control. The presence of the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz reaffirms the significance of Islamic values and norms to Saudi society. Hence, one finds the state imbued with an Islamic mission, and this is partially fulfilled through the Islamic education system and the activities of the *muttawā'in*. Second, by virtue of its rule, the Saudi state promotes itself as the custodian of the model Islamic society. In doing so, it claims a monopoly over Islamic discourse, in conjunction with the ulema, and at the same time, it discredits would-be Islamic pretenders.

Before state policies are announced, the ulema are usually invited to preside over their Islamic intent and content, and their endorsement is usually a prerequisite before issuance. However, it would be incorrect to consider the relationship between state and ulema as anything

other than interdependent. The state requires the ulema to endorse its policies, especially when they are unpopular, and the ulema depend upon the state to maintain their exalted status vis-à-vis state and society. One might characterise the relationship as symbiotic, wherein the ulema nourish the Al-Saud's rule with Islamic sustenance, whilst the Al-Saud's political power affords the ulema a distinct politico-religious space.<sup>2</sup>

The determining factor as to whether a symbiotic relationship is successful concurs with the overlap of mutual interest, and the co-ordinates of compromise, gain and self-preservation. In the Saudi case, for example, the religious space enjoyed by the ulema is naturally constrained by the political parameters that guide the Al-Saud. As the arbiters between state and society, the ulema are sometimes obliged to lend Islamic legitimacy to state policies that might otherwise be deemed un-Islamic. For example, the decision to legitimise the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia during the Second Gulf war was seen by many Saudis as compromising inherent religious values. Nonetheless, the ulema shaped the path of Islamic discourse and justified the decision according to the Quran. The Council of Senior Ulema grudgingly blessed the regime's decision by proclaiming that it 'approves ... of the steps taken by the ruler may Allah lead him to success, in inviting some forces equipped with arms that frighten away anyone who thinks of invading this land'.<sup>3</sup> In this instance, the Islamic cloak was used to legitimise political expediency; and the ulema served the interests of the state.

Some issues have remained the exclusive preserve of the ulema, and the state has granted them some areas of complete autonomy. One such area is over the role of women in Saudi society. Although economics will eventually deprive the ulema of their special preserve, and the state will become dependent upon women in the labour force, policies concerning women continue to be guided by the religious establishment. In fact, women's issues are one area where

the ulema, state, dissidents and society's patriarchs concur. In sum, women should either be confined to the home, work in the caring professions or in women-only environments. Work practices should not include a convergent space where men and women (Saudi) can mix freely.

The collapse of the oil price to \$10 per barrel in 1998/9 alarmed the Saudi government. It was no longer possible to veil the fiscal crisis of the state, and two ideas that were exercised were the inclusion of Saudi women in the work force, and a staggered introduction of women drivers on to the streets. The growing dependency of the Saudi workforce on migrant labourers and drivers constituted a substantial drain on the national economy. Henceforth, in 1999, Crown Prince Abdullah noted how Saudi women could contribute in a more constructive way to developing Saudi society. His steer towards 'liberalism' was quickly scotched by the ulema. Subsequently, a raft of fatawa was issued to instruct women in the home, workplace and public spaces. As the ulema were on safe ground, they felt sufficiently comfortable to critique the Crown Prince's remarks. He quickly moderated his comments and made them more compatible with the new fatawa. The ulema scored an important victory over the Heir Apparent and preserved the values of Saudi society. This has enhanced the role of the 'ulema vis-à-vis society and helped perpetuate a society based on the religious values and norms of Islam.

Mainstream discourse pertaining to education and personal status law, for example, are issues that the ulema, on the whole, reach consensus, not only with the state, but also with society. Since the 1990s, however, several recurring issues have come to disrupt the consensus reached amongst the ulema.

On the other hand, issues, primarily concerning the role of the U.S. in the Middle East region, subjugation of religious discourse to politics, corruption of the royal family, tradition versus modernity, and the nature of Islamic-Western relations, have come to dominate the

ulema's agenda. There has been a discernible rift between generations of the ulema. The ideological difference became more explicit during the Second Gulf war. Until that point, the ulema had been considered a fairly cohesive unit, and their fatawa were consistent with state policy, and their advice to the Saudi leadership remained private. However, the verdict to authorise the Saudi government's decision to allow U.S. forces into Saudi Arabia disrupted the equilibrium and gave voice to a number of dissenting clerics.

A number of clerics, namely, Salman al-Auda and Safar al-Hawali, openly criticised the position taken by both the state and the ulema, and they charged both actors with complicity in devaluing Islam. Al-Auda and al-Hawali challenged the ruling of the ulema, and accused its leadership of betraying the values of Islam in exchange for political rewards. More importantly, al-Auda, al-Hawali, Muhammed Mas'ari, Sa'd al-Faqih and Osama bin Laden radically challenged the parameters of contemporary Islamic discourse within the Kingdom, and called for a re-Islamicisation of both state institutions and society.

The Saudi state has experienced challenges to its authority in the past, and some have culminated in open rebellion. The last major rebellion to be brutally suppressed was the crushing of the Ikhwan in 1929. Since then, the regime has not faced a substantive challenge, only isolated incidents that were readily managed. However, the broad appeal of Saudi Arabia's dissenting clerics has conveyed a more discernible and popular undercurrent than in the past; the attacks in al-Khobar, Tanzania, Kenya, Yemen and the U.S., coupled with the U.S.' uncompromising support for Israel and appetite for war against Iraq, suggest that an Islamic counter-current might significantly challenge the legitimacy of the regime. The Islamic credentials that clothe the Al-Saud state may be laid bare as a new generation of Islamists tries to expose the perfidy of the contemporary Saudi state.

The Saudi state, however, has continued to shape the Islamic discourse of the ummah, and within Saudi Arabia it has employed another strategy of reinforcing Islamist values. The relationship between the state and ulema has produced a mutual dependency pact, and the state has given the ulema free reign over non-political issues, including social behaviour, women's issues and education.

### *Islamicisation & Education*

Whenever the state reinforces the application of Islamic values, especially in the softer reaches of society, it fulfils its Islamic legacy. Although the secular demands of foreign policy tend to overshadow the state's Islamic mission, the Al-Saud has played an instrumental role in Islamicising society instead. By hegemonising Islamic discourse between state and society, the Al-Saud has successfully imaged itself into fulfilling an historic role.

However, this mission has left the state with a number of irreconcilable goals, namely, the pursuit of an Islamic foreign policy in an aesthetic international political order. As a result, there is often a significant disjuncture between state rhetoric and policy, and domestic and foreign policy. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia's discontents have seized upon these contradictions in their bid to expose the fallacy of the Al-Saud's claim to legitimacy.

As part of its strategy, the state often sought to Islamicise society even further, as a means of compensating for its non-Islamic foreign policy. Of course, this has never been a stated policy; but one can deduce the existence of this strategy from a number of examples discussed below.

After 'Utaibi's seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979, the state reinforced a number of societal restrictions, which included the following:<sup>4</sup>

- Obliging migrant workers to observe the Islamic values of society
- Passing regulations that prohibited girls from continuing their education abroad

- Closing down video stores
- Closing down women's hairdressing salons and clubs
- Dismissing female announcers from television, despite their modest appearance
- Temporarily recalling Saudi students studying abroad in the middle of the academic year

These measures were accompanied by a raise in the salaries of ulema, the building of new mosques and the propagation of Islam both inside and outside Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the state was responding to the challenge set by 'Utaibi and his followers. Furthermore, the seizure of the Grand Mosque reflected poorly on Saudi Arabia's commitment to guard the holy places, and an injection of Islamicisation provided the necessary antidote to inoculate the state against international criticism.

The same policy of Islamicising society was soon applied after the Second Gulf war, but not until the liberals had voiced their concerns. The Saudi public capitalised upon the Gulf war moment and began to express their opinions more freely. For instance, petitions were made to the King for better representation, and some women argued that they ought to be allowed better access to employment opportunities, and permission to drive cars. Under pressure from the middle class, King Fahd 'declared that in certain circumstances he foresaw the possibility of women's deployment in the areas of human and medical services, while fully preserving Islamic social values and behaviour.' In an attempt to assuage its domestic Islamist critics, however, King Fahd retracted his statement and proclaimed that the political liberalisation requested by some Saudis 'may be premature'.<sup>6</sup> Subsequently, the state clamped down on liberties, such as the temporary relaxation of the strict supervision of freedom of speech and censorship.

The *muttawa'in* were granted more freedom to enforce societal values and apprehend miscreants; even 'companions of the royal princes' fell pray to their zeal. The ensuing social environment was re-charged with Islamic values, and the moment of liberalism faded.



This policy handed the state four aces. Firstly, it gave the state space to compensate for its 'diversion' during the war and to reclaim the higher Islamic moral ground. Secondly, it allowed the state to draw a distinction between the demands of the official ulema and the dissident ulema. Thirdly, it distanced the state from the set of liberal demands placed before the King. Fourthly, the state displayed its commitment to the Islamic mission of preserving values and propagating the faith.

However, this policy also left the state with three jokers. Firstly, the state's decision to grant concessions to the signatories of the Letter and petition meant a denouement in its balance of power vis-à-vis the ulema. Its post-war policies were dressed in Islamic garb, and the accompanying fatawa awarded the ulema with a new sense of indispensability in uncertain times. Whereas the ulema had seemingly compromised during the Second Gulf war, in the post-war phase, they were able to recoup their territorial losses and assert their influence once more. Furthermore, the state ascribed to a reinvigorated social code, incumbent upon all members of state and society. In other words, the conduct of the royal family, whose excesses are infamous inside and outside the Kingdom, fell under close scrutiny.

Secondly, the Islamicisation policy served to radicalise society and enforce a worldview essentially incompatible with the rest of the world. In doing so, the state re-occupied the space enjoyed by dissident clerics, and the official ulema were able to restore their claims to be the rightful guardians of Islamic discourse. The state placed its faith in Islamicising society, as a means of restoring order, reducing the appeal of dissident clerics, and reinforcing its own legitimacy. This distinctive shift away from any liberal policies, however, carried a set of consequences that continue to plague the economy today.

Thirdly, the policy produced a near-universal consensus on the role of women, amongst Saudi men. One could argue this unduly reversed any trends, which might have already been present, towards releasing women's energies to develop society, state and the economy. Irrespective of the societal, tribal and religious divisions that exist in Saudi society, the patriarchs of society seem to agree upon one point – the role of the woman should be subordinate to that of the man. Accordingly, men and women are created differently; thus, their functions in society are defined by an indiscrete division of labour and responsibility. This conceptualisation of human society has meant that women are at one time considered to be the link in the human chain and the paragons of family honour. Subsequently, women have become the lowest common denominator in political and Islamic discourse and this has provided the state with a useful 'catch-all' mandate when appealing to its masculine audience. Hence, one can account for the state's decision to punish the 47 women (and their spouses) for driving in Riyadh in November 1990,<sup>7</sup> as satisfying the consensus of patriarchal attitudes prevalent in Saudi society. The state's response was resoundingly endorsed by the whole of society. It was commonly agreed that the 47 women had contravened the boundaries of honour and broken a dangerous taboo during a moment of state crisis. They had, in the eyes of the male and female population, simply gone too far.

In one stroke, the state had managed to offset the shame of depending upon the U.S., and firmly placed the responsibility of the society's ills on those Islamic deviants who challenged the state's authority, which included misguided clerics and liberals, and disobedient women. In a classic move, the state designed a new consensus in order to accommodate the demands of its critics.

## *Consensus*

Governing by consensus conforms to the traditions of an Arab nomadic lifestyle. The Al-Saud has based its governance on consensus; and the role of local, regional and national majlis has provided a vital channel of communication between governor and governed. This informal network allows information to percolate both up and down ranging from issues of national concern to individual concern. The majlis provides a forum, whereby citizens can address the local ruler or governor in an informal setting. Likewise, a local leader would consult with his peers prior to taking a decision that would affect the family, tribe, region or homeland. In fact, the majlis has also provided the perfect setting for issuing favours, influence (wasta), and finance.

After the Second Gulf war, both liberals and radicals presented the King with letters demanding a change in the nature of governance. The Islamists, for instance, wanted to enhance their role in the decision-making process, whilst the liberals pushed for a more consultative model of governance. In the post-war environment, the state shifted its discourse towards the Islamists; however, it acknowledged the consultative deficit in the decision-making process, and thus established the much-promised Consultative Council<sup>8</sup> and Provincial Councils,<sup>9</sup> and formulated the Basic Regulations System in February 1992.

As has been pointed out by al-Rasheed, the message delivered by the King introducing the reforms constituted a powerful vehicle aimed at enhancing the King's legitimacy. He presented himself as following political and religious duties. On one hand, he was responding to mounting opposition and, on the other hand, was detailing his authority within a framework of continuity anchored by Islamic traditions.<sup>10</sup> As Asad contends, if a voice wanted to become authoritative, its discourse has to be formulated in terms of representing the present with a

positive evaluation of the past and using common symbols and institutions to which the speaker and the audience can relate.<sup>11</sup>

King Fahd's speech portrayed the reforms as part of a continuous trend within Islam, and they marked the state's commitment to defend Islam, its laws and the holy places. This continuity was put across as underpinning legitimacy, gained by the commitment to Islam and by the King receiving *bay'a* (allegiance), according to religious traditions. The legitimacy of King Fahd and his predecessors was seen as sanctioned, not only by the ruled, but, even more important, by the ulema and Islam. The King underscored three features governing the relationship between ruler and ruled: advice, co-operation, and obedience. Regarding the first, the idea conveyed was that the government should be prompt to react to criticism, and in this conjuncture the King was the initiator of the advice. The other two concepts stressed the fact that obedience to the King is not only a political issue but also a religious duty, such that the King's rule was founded upon religious legitimacy.

The Consultative Council was invested with the mission to discuss and provide suggestions on the general policy of economic and social development,<sup>12</sup> to study international law, charters, treaties, etc., to interpret laws, and to discuss annual reports submitted by ministers (Article 15).<sup>13</sup> It was established at the beginning in 1993, with sixty members (expanded to ninety in 1997), appointed by the King for a term of four years. According to the regulations, the choice of members was based upon scholarship, knowledge, and expertise (Article 3).

The geographical allocation of seats favoured Najd and, in particular, the area of Qasim, which is considered to be the cradle of Wahhabism. The Hijaz came second in terms of representation, while the other provinces enjoyed less representation. The inclusion of Shi'a members, one during the first tenure of the Council and two in the second tenure, signified a

slight rapprochement between the state and the Shi'a community. One third of the Council comprised tribal members, who represented the principal tribal elements within Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, the majority of members were selected according to their technocratic and bureaucratic skills rather than their connections to the Al-Saud. Thus, members who had hitherto lacked formal or informal channels of communication with the state were comfortably co-opted into the new system of governance.

The policy of co-optation was also evident with the inclusion of Abdallah bin Humayd (the Imam of the Grand Mosque, who had criticised U.S.' support to Israel), Mani al Johany, Ahmad al-Tuwayjiri and Zayd Abd al-Muhsin al-Hussayn, who are considered leading activists at King Saud University (all had been jailed in 1993), as members of the Consultative Council.

The creation of the Majlis al-Shura institutionalised an existing political arrangement, and appeared to represent a significant compromise, on behalf of the state, in sharing the power of decision-making. In fact, the move was designed to co-opt the positive energies of the state's detractors and, subsequently, deny them a voice of opposition. By bringing clerics and liberals into the appointed council, the King compelled them to share responsibility for the decision-making process without affording them an independent critical voice. In sum, the Council was a useful mechanism for generating advice and muffling the credible opposition. It simply serves as an advisory board, and has successfully co-opted a new generation of potential dissenters, with western educational backgrounds.

In a bid to enhance consensus amongst the build-up for the war against Iraq, the regime, declared, in February 2003, its intention to introduce political reforms that would eventually lead - over a six-year period - to an elected parliament. One can surmise that this step was taken to serve two main purposes. First, concerned with the U.S. war on terror, and its plans to effect

regime change in the region, Saudi rulers noted a plan to introduce reforms. In other words, the notice of intention was thought to appease U.S. decision-makers. Second, the move was designed to accommodate the moderate opposition, on both sides of the liberal/Islamic divide, and enjoin them, albeit superficially, in the decision-making process. However, no clear plan has been announced, so far, and this casts some doubt on the sincerity of the Saudi leadership to institute reforms.

### *Rentierism & Patrimonialism*

With an endowment of enormous oil wealth, the state was not only able to co-opt its discontents with new institutional arrangements, but also the whole society by economic means. Since the discovery of oil and its commercial exploitation in 1938,<sup>14</sup> the state has appropriated Saudi Arabia's oil revenues and allocated its new wealth according to existing patrimonial linkages within society; thereby, it was able to cultivate bonds of loyalty based on a surfeit of wealth, in addition to Islamic piety.

Oil revenues awarded the Saudi regime with an additional source of legitimacy flowing from 'the just distribution of Allah's wealth'. Imbued with the oil proceeds, the state offered extensive welfare services to its subjects in the fields of healthcare, education, and energy consumption, in addition to establishing a substantial infrastructure throughout the country. Thus, during 1970-85, expenditure on human development (health and education as a proportion of total expenditure on development) ranged between 22.6-30.9%, and was increased to 50.7% during 1985-90, and 66.6% in 1990-95.

Ironically, state-society relations were not fundamentally affected by the commercialisation of oil production. On the contrary, the earlier contract between sheikh and community, imam and ummah, and king and state was simply taken to a new plane and

reinforced. The monarch was suddenly invested with considerable wealth, which was distributed according to tribal affiliation, loyalty and expediency. Instead of building influence only through intermarriage, war and favours, the Al-Saud family was able to dispense financial favours; the former patrimonial system became institutionalised and took on the characteristics of rentierism.

Accordingly, the state developed a predominantly distributive function from the 1940s onwards; and until the oil slump of the mid-1980s, it was able to provide a full welfare service to its subjects, whilst the economy was worked by migrant labourers coming from the West and the Indian sub-continent. The state used its wealth to embolden legitimacy and 'foster a sense of loyalty to the family for their services and accomplishments on behalf of the nation'. Thus, the mode of distribution was based more on patrimonial benefits than merit and productivity. As a consequence, the Saudi population came to perceive welfare as a 'right to citizenship rather than the happy consequence of a boom period'.<sup>15</sup>

With the decline of oil revenues throughout the 1980s, the heavy burden of fiscal expenditure on supporting Iraq's war against Iran (\$20 billion), and the shared cost of the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait (\$55 billion),<sup>16</sup> the resources of the state ran dry. This constituted a major challenge to the state's ability to purchase domestic support, and coupled with an Islamic dent to its credibility, the Al-Saud's claim to legitimacy started to look vulnerable.

Thus, the government was reluctant to initiate structural reforms. Instead, it bridged the gap between expenditures and revenues with deficit financing. This was made easier by the external reserves and assets the state had accumulated during the boom years of the 1970s. However, the economic recession persisted, assets depleted, oil prices declined, and the deficit reached its peak at \$27.86 billion in 1991. The regime was reluctant to bear the political cost of

contracting public expenditure, as the state's legitimacy seemed to be wavering, and the political fall-out from the war with Iraq was still emerging.

As part of its fall-back strategy, the state severely curtailed public expenditure and managed to reduce its budget deficit to \$13.33 billion by 1997. Reduced expenditure was achieved mainly at the expense of public investment rather than public consumption. The government could afford to cut down on public expenditure because it had invested heavily in infrastructure throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s most of its projects were completed. Moreover, the government cut subsidies on oil products, electricity, water for urban dwellings, telephones, domestic airline flights, and tried to generate new revenues from imposing levies on expatriate work permits.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, at the turn of the century, the government can no longer avoid painful structural reforms. Investment in infrastructure, mainly water supply networks, power plants, telecommunications capacity, housing and transport systems, is highly needed because of a growing population (estimated at 21.4 million in 2001). However, the government cannot finance these expenditures from its current limited resources. Hence, it has declared an intention to privatise the postal services and Saline Water Conversion Corporation, whilst reversing an age-old policy of attracting foreign investment into the oil and energy-related industries. Moreover, the government also authorised the sale of 72 million shares in Saudi Telecommunication Company, with the aim of raising US\$3-4 billion by the end of 2002.<sup>18</sup>

As a way of generating further revenue, the government is contemplating taxing expatriate workers. The decision was approved provisionally by the Consultative Council in May 2002; the bill is presently being drafted and will be returned to the council for final approval and referred to the Cabinet for endorsement.<sup>19</sup> It is suggested that this will serve two purposes:



generate income (US\$ 801 million per month)<sup>20</sup> and raise the cost of hiring foreign workers, which may speed up the Saudisation process, which has been limited so far. However, the achievement of the second goal depends on the skills of Saudi labour and their willingness to replace foreigners in certain jobs, as this policy is likely to result in low employment of expatriates in low-skilled jobs.<sup>21</sup> To date, the notion of taxing nationals has still not been entertained.

Thus, the state used its oil revenues to enhance its patrimonial legitimacy between the 1930s and the 1980s. During this period the state developed its allocative role, and provided wall-to-wall welfare in exchange for loyalty. The society, at large, considered the Saudi royal family to be magnanimous and the rightful heirs to the custodianship of Islam's holiest cities. With Islam and oil, the royal tapped into a rich vein of support and secured their legitimacy with faith, rent, tradition and patronage.

In the twenty-first century, however, the government is facing a challenge due to the shortage of funds and expansion of population (between 1995-2001, the population grew at a rate of 2.7%). The government faces a challenge to satisfy the needs of its population, and create enough jobs to absorb 125,000 graduates per year, and there is growing pressure to place a reserve army of highly educated women. The challenge is compounded by the spread of uncontrollable technology in the form of satellite and Internet, which continues to expose Saudi youth to a wide range of influences.

The penetration of information through technology has widened the gap between two major constituencies in Saudi society, namely, the conservatives and modernists. Both elements are pulling the state in different directions. The conservatives see technology as an 'agent of the devil', which should therefore be rejected, and they perceive social reform as innovation and

heresy. On the other hand, modernists would like to speed up the process of social development; however, they remain committed to Saudi traditional values of family and religion. The state's delicate role is to achieve a balance in satisfying the demands and needs of both groups without alienating either of them.<sup>22</sup>

### *Exporting dissidents*

During the 1980s, the Saudi state followed an already established tradition of exporting undesirables to 'far places'. The European states had found the policy particularly useful during the Reformation, and in most cases, the policy proved to be a fruitful way of creating outposts for territorial expansion. The Saudi government, on the other hand, exported its own troublemakers, as way of pursuing its ideological struggle with Iran and defusing potential problems in the Kingdom.

The export policies of the late 1970s transported a generation of radicalised discontents from Saudi Arabia into the regional and local struggles for power in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The export of the struggle enhanced the reputation of the Saudi regime amongst its population, as it was seen to be actively supporting *da'wa* (call). The Saudi government blessed their mission in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, when they were fighting the Soviet Union with the aim of containing communist influence.

It is estimated that 25,000 Saudis 'received military training (usually in Afghan camps) or experience abroad since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979'. Osama bin Laden became the primary export and his fame generated a near mythical figure. His 'noble' role in Afghanistan had earlier earned him credit from the state and society for his services to Islam and Saudi Arabia. Originally, Bin Laden had offered his services to the Saudi government when Iraq invaded Kuwait; and he suggested using the jihadi warriors to meet Saddam's secular threat. The

rejection of his offer, and later the renunciation of his citizenship, led Bin Laden to intensify his struggle against the *kufar* (infidels), who had now come to include the 'corrupt Saudi regime'.

The strategy of exporting its virulent and ideological discontents, however, has backfired. We have already alluded to the response of the more radical clerics within the state, but the threat posed by the Saudi-Afghans could be more substantial. Firstly, they pose a military threat to the Kingdom, with their access to funds, military training, and weapons; and their ideological vigour makes them less susceptible to the compromises of the state. The Afghan training camps produced a generation of Saudis who had undergone jihad at first hand, and were intent on continuing their struggle. Secondly, their appeal may mesh with the more radical clerics within the Kingdom, and this could generate a broad appeal amongst Saudi Arabia's anomic youth. Thirdly, as active members of al-Qaida, the Saudi-Afghans have played an instrumental role in spreading their discontent in the U.S., Europe and Asia. Subsequently, the Saudi state is forming strategies to deal with its virulent problem both at home and abroad. In other words, the problem has assumed a new dimension – national and international.

The Saudi government has denied that al-Qaida has been operating in the Kingdom; nevertheless, it arrested 13 suspects in June 2002, which demonstrated that al-Qaida is active in Saudi Arabia. The suspects are being held on charges of planning to attack 'vital installations in the kingdom, including an airbase used by U.S. forces, using explosives and surface-to-air missiles'. Significantly, the state has had to absorb 160 returnees from Afghanistan since the summer of 2002. These returnees were detained, interrogated and released once it was established they did not have links with al-Qaida; they are under close observation. In addition to the returnees, more than 100 Saudis, who were captured during the U.S. war against Afghanistan, have been detained by the U.S. in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The attacks on al-Khobar, the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Yemen, the World Trade Centre, the Pentagon, Tunisia, and Bali have been attributed to al-Qaida operatives. Hence, the international reach of al-Qaida's operations has precipitated a crisis in relations between Saudi Arabia and the U.S..

Martin Indyk argues that although the Saudi regime 'did not think this exodus of "holy warriors" would ultimately hurt the United States, "but that was the actual, if unintended, consequence of buying off the [extremist Saudi] opposition and exporting both the troublemakers and their extremist ideology."'23

The Saudi state has found itself caught between a rock and a hard place. Its export strategy was expedient during the 1970-80s, especially when Iran appeared to be the principal threat to Saudi and Arab Gulf security. It caught the imagination of Saudi society and illustrated the state's commitment to its Islamic mission. As far as the U.S. was concerned, equipping Islamic militants to resist the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan suited its strategy to contain the communist threat. It also drained U.S. allies in the Middle East region of their insurgents, and prolonged the life-span of these regimes. At first sight, it appeared to be a win-win situation for the West, its Arab allies and their Islamic discontents – only the Soviets and the Iranians stood to lose.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold war, many of the Afghan-Arabs returned home and challenged their respective states, particularly in Algeria, Egypt and Yemen. To a large extent, the Saudi state had managed to isolate itself from the excesses of its discontents, at least within the Kingdom. Recent events, however, have forced the state to confront a pending problem – resisting the challenge of a new generation of combatants, whilst maintaining its authority over Islamic discourse.

### *Coercion (Shi'a)*

The Saudi state has employed a less sophisticated strategy to address the Shi'a community's grievances. The Shi'a community amounts to 900,000 (6-7% of population) in Saudi Arabia, and they are concentrated in the oil rich Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, particularly Qatif and Ghawar, where they constitute 90% of the population. Traditionally, the strict Hanbali application of Islam in the Saudi Arabia has meant that the ulema and their followers have persecuted 'deviants' from the straight path – it has been a matter of religious purpose. Significantly, Bin Baz, the former Head of Supreme Council of Ulema, proclaimed Shi'ism to be a Khariji sect. As a matter of course, religious intolerance has been translated into state policy, and as a consequence, the Shi'a community has faced discrimination not only from Saudi Arabia's puritans, but also from the state's institutions. Limited access to the state's resources and few employment opportunities in government, army and professional careers characterises the relationship between the Shi'a community and the state.

The antipathy of the majority towards its minority, which is primarily based on religious grounds and a fear of Shi'a collusion with Iran, with the endorsement of the state and ulema, has meant that the Shi'a community's whole existence has been grounded in resistance and opposition. As a result, the Shi'a opposition has always been critical of the government. In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Shi'a opposition openly criticised the state and denounced its discriminatory policies. The Shi'a opposition, led by Sheikh Hassan al-Safar, was even reluctant to negotiate with the regime, as it considered the Al-Saud to be illegitimate. Unlike other opposition groups within the Kingdom, the Shi'a community was unwilling to be co-opted, as its ideological beliefs were incompatible with those of the ruling family and the religious establishment.

As a means of resistance, the Saudi Shi'as pursued clandestine activities through the Organisation of Islamic Revolution (*Munadhamat al-thawra al-islamiyyah*), later known as the Reform Movement (*al-haraka al-islahiyyah*), drawing support from Shi'a communities in other Arab Gulf states, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE. In 1980, the Shi'a community began an uprising in the Eastern province (*intifadat al-mantiqah al-shaqiyyah*), and organised a series of workers' strikes and mass demonstrations to protest against state policies. The actions of the opposition undermined the confidence of the regime, especially at a time when Iran's Khomeini was promoting the export of its own Islamic Revolutionary ideals. The state responded brutally and crushed the uprising. Whereas the regime could not afford to bring such a heavy-handed response with its Sunni population, it had the latitude to do so with the Shi'a community, almost with the blessing of ulema and society. Moreover, the compact between the Al-Saud and Al al-Sheikh was based on cleansing the Arabian peninsula of Islamic sects, Christianity, Judaism and polytheism; and the state was seen as fulfilling its mission.

The exiled Shi'a opposition operating from London criticised the regime's repressive activities against Saudi Shi'as by publishing reports and analyses in the monthly magazine *The Arabian Peninsula* (*al-jazirah al-arabiyyah*). These articles highlighted the corrupt practices of the royal family as well as human rights and civil rights abuses. In the late 1980s, the opposition changed its strategy and sought accommodation with the state. Instead of opposing the foundations of the Saudi state, its leadership embraced the language of democratisation and human rights. More recently, the Shi'a leadership has accused public officials of engaging in corrupt practices, and it has re-packaged its critique of the state in a manner that is less confrontational to the Al-Saud, and yet, more cognisant of issues that attract international concern. Thus, its discourse has softened, and as a conciliatory measure, the regime invited the

exiled opposition to return to Saudi Arabia in 1993, with the understanding that *The Arabian Peninsula* would cease to be published. The state and Shi'a community have arrived at a modus operandi that has more or less satisfied both parties.

The modus operandi has led to the development of the Shi'a areas in the Eastern Province, and a loosening of employment restrictions. Two Shi'a representatives currently belong to the Majlis al-Shura. Nonetheless, the state heeds to the ulema's intermittent call for the closure of Shi'a mosques and celebration halls (*husayniahs*); the Shi'a call to prayer is prohibited, whilst the state remains indifferent towards materials that defame Shi'a expressions of faith. In the meantime, the Shi'a community is prevented from disseminating materials detailing the teachings and practices of their faith. The government has sent leading Shi'a clerics to prison, including: Said al-Zuair, who criticised the Grand Mufti's fatwa concerning Saudi Arabia's recognition of Israel; Mohamed al-Khayat, accused of teaching sorcery; and Abdul Lattif Muhammad Ali, Sa'id al-Bahaar, Habib Hamdah were jailed without charge.

Evidently, the regime has employed a repressive strategy in dealing with its Shi'a opposition. One could argue that the Shi'a opposition were not only more vocal in their opposition to the state, but they were also the most radical during the 1970-80s, as they refused to recognise the legitimacy of the Saudi state. This constituted a direct challenge to the Al-Saud's right to govern the country. However, the state was less conciliatory in its approach towards the Shi'a community, as it could afford to discriminate against the community, as a whole, and its clerical class. In the eyes of the Sunni religious establishment, the Shi'a are part of the polytheist community of the jahiliyyah.

Despite their numerical threat, and because of their possible alliance with the Iranians, the state was certain that Sunni opposition figures, be they religious or liberal, would never

enjoin a political union with the Shi'a against the state. According to the Wahhabi doctrine, Shi'a practices are an anathema to the Islamic faith; thus, co-operation amongst Saudi opposition groups, whether with the Islamists (who are critical of Shi'a practices) or liberals (who share a concern over liberty and human rights), is highly unlikely. This factor alone has served the interests of the Saudi regime, which only stands to benefit from an atomised opposition, and gave it scope to confront the Shi'a opposition – head on. Somewhat ironically, the Shi'a opposition tried to accommodate the Saudi state and, in doing so, convinced it to amend its coercive strategy in exchange for compliance and loyalty.

Although the regime has used a policy of co-optation, wherever necessary, it has also resorted to coercion. For example, it created the Consultative Council as a response to the demands of both moderate liberals and Islamists; however, it resorted to more drastic measures against the dissident ulema. In 1995, for example, Sunni opposition activist Abdallah al-Hudhaif was beheaded following a secret trial. Four young Saudis were also charged with bombing the headquarters of a U.S. training base, in 1995. They were obliged to confess to their crimes on air, and were subsequently executed after secret legal proceedings. These punishments are usually 'last resort', and are more the preserve of foreign labourers. The state's strategies, in general, are designed to be more inclusive, and they actively encourage reconciliation and rehabilitation. This approach emanates from cultural derivatives, and is grounded in the traditions of tribalism. Hence, the state will only punish its nationals (Sunnis) when all other strategies have failed. Foreign labourers, on the other hand, exist outside the rubric of Saudi society, and are readily punished with little room for clemency. In 2000 and 2001 respectively, following legal proceedings about which little is known, 121 and around 75 Saudis and foreigners were beheaded. The charges leveled included murder, sorcery and drug trafficking.



## **Looking for new strategies**

Legitimacy is not a static concept and neither is the trust between state and society. Saudi Arabia has undergone a profound change in fortune since the mid-1980s, and its impact has been felt both by state and society. This has indubitably affected the discourse between the Saudi state and its society, and a number of events, which include the collapse of the Soviet Union, Second Gulf war, U.S. war on terrorism and the impending U.S. war with Iraq, have compelled both actors to examine their relationship to one another. In doing so, the state has attempted to Islamicise the discourse, and through the agency of the ulema, monopolise the discussion. However, the strategies to address discontent and revitalise the Al-Saud's legitimacy have been less effective since the al-Khobar attacks in 1996. Indeed, events in the region, especially developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have precipitated a crisis between many of the Arab states and their societies.

The outbreak of the second intifada towards the end of September 2000 seemed to reignite the interest of the 'Arab street', as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict took a new twist. The collapse of the Camp David talks produced a political crisis, wherein Israel's principal hardliner, Ariel Sharon, came to power and helped redesign the discourse of peace.

The breakdown of the peace talks, the diplomatic and physical isolation of Arafat in his Ramallah compound, accompanied by Israel's widespread incursions into Palestinians towns, such Ramallah, Jenin, Beit Jala and Bethlehem, resonated throughout the Arab world. The sense of injustice has served to inflame the temperaments of the Arab public, and although most Arab states have managed to harness this energy, the deep-seated feelings of resentment remain – towards Israel, U.S. and regime.

In the region, U.S. influence has been in the ascendant since the end of the Cold War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Moreover, the distance between state policies and public sentiment in the Arab world has been well documented. It is no secret that the Arab public is highly critical of its leadership, and the distance between state and society is irrevocably widening. This tryst between state and society, whereby the state ‘toes the U.S. line’ in exchange for strategic comfort and economic dividends and society resists the hegemonic debate over normalisation and refuses to engage with Israeli business leaders, academics and professionals, has produced a gap rapidly filled with discontents, ideologues, projectionists, and anti-U.S. antagonists. These discontents share a common position with society at large – *disdain* for Israel’s policies in the region, and a *despair* of U.S. engagement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

This combination of disdain and despair manifested itself in the form of reflective rejoicing over the 11 September 2001 attacks on U.S. territory. The ‘Robin Hood’ appeal of the attacks unearthed a perspective neither known nor appreciated within the U.S..

### **11 September 2001**

A Saudi survey conducted shortly after the 11 September attacks concluded that 95 percent of educated Saudi men aged between 25 and 41 supported ‘Bin Laden’s cause’. Prince Nawwaf, the former director of Saudi intelligence, explained that this support is motivated by Saudi anger ‘over U.S. support for Israel’. Other analysts and observers claim that widespread support among the religious establishment is attributed to their admiration of ‘Bin Laden’s willingness to take on the U.S. and Saudi governments’.<sup>24</sup>

Bin Laden has aroused the interest of the global public. Henceforth, Saudi Arabia has now fallen under the spotlight. In the past, Saudi Arabia received scant media attention, other than negative and crude images of its society, which has resulted in snap-shot impressions,

almost subliminal flashes, dominating the global public psyche. Prior to 11 September 2001, the Saudis were largely disinterested in public perceptions of their imagery. They could easily afford to dismiss or simply brush aside criticisms of their domestic policies by either assuaging critics of their Islamic independence and piety or purchasing sycophancy and dispensing favours. However, the Saudis are clearly trying to reach out to decision-makers, influential pressure groups and the public in the U.S. and Europe; the Dallah Albarakah Group (DBG) is planning to launch a \$100 million media blitz in the United States and Europe to counter anti-Saudi publicity.

The international press, and the U.S. press, in particular, has placed Saudi Arabia under a journalistic microscope. Although most of the analyses accounting for Saudi Arabia's alleged complicity in 'raising and breeding' terrorists were weak, the press was successful in highlighting the state's inherent inclination to produce radicalised individuals.

The state's political, ideological, education and economic systems were held accountable for turning out would-be terrorists. In fact, it has been argued that the educational policies of the regime, coupled with the ideological export of Wahhabism and its own dissidents, made a significant contribution to fomenting Islamic terrorism.

President Bush's 'with us or against us' idiom has placed Saudi Arabia in a corner. Although official sympathies were shared with the U.S. over the attacks, a sense of satisfaction was felt throughout Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. The proverbial Goliath had been dealt a significant blow – if not in real terms, then in psychological terms. The hijackers had exposed the Achilles heel of the mighty U.S. empire, and this has paved a way for future attacks.

As a result, the Saudi state is caught in a dilemma, namely, how to appease its domestic constituency without compromising its relations with the U.S. and the international community.

Hence, the state hedged its bets and chose to express its displeasure with the U.S. instead of betraying the cherished values of its own society. As a matter of course, Saudi Arabia denied the U.S. access to its bases during the war against Afghanistan, and it has made the use of its bases, for an attack on Iraq, conditional upon a United Nations Security Council resolution.<sup>25</sup> However, to show its co-operation, the kingdom's central bank has monitored 150 accounts, 'including those of four Saudi charities and eight businesses, for links to terrorism'.<sup>26</sup>

The international media has been increasingly critical of the Saudi government, and this has served to catalyse the Kingdom's leadership into combating the negativity emerging from Western press agencies. Thus, Saudi Arabia is trying to re-market itself before the global public. Indeed, it has employed the services of two well-known public relations companies in Washington to re-image the Kingdom in a manner more befitting for a sceptical U.S. audience. Images of the Saudi ambassador to the U.S., Prince Bandar bin Sultan, relaxing at the Crawford Ranch in his jeans, and new images of the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud bin Faisal, meeting the press in western costume have been deployed to bridge the image gap and portray a relationship based on shared values rather than pure expediency. Nonetheless, the 11 September 2001 attacks have indubitably undermined the special relationship between the U.S. and the Saudi royal family; the Americans have not forgotten the high price they paid for fully embracing the Shah of Iran.

### **War against Iraq**

Saudi Arabia voiced its opposition to the U.S.-led War on Iraq. Furthermore, it denied the U.S. use of its bases and airspace – for the purposes of the war. The Saudi regime was caught between serving the interests of its domestic constituency and international allies. At first, it seemed that the decision served the regime well, as the domestic opposition – both liberal and

Islamic – criticised the U.S.-led war, which more or less vindicated the Saudi regime of complicity with superpower interests. In the meantime, Saudi-U.S. relations reached an all time low; and the Kingdom sought to defend its position. Nonetheless, the Saudi Kingdom became a target of extremism in May 2003, when three compounds were attacked by suicide bombers, and 34 people died in the attack. The initial recriminations, and then the kiss-and-tell diplomatic and intelligence exchanges between Saudi and U.S. officials, demonstrated the vulnerability of the Saudi regime.

Evidently, the Saudi regime suffers a deficit of legitimacy, and it needs to find new strategies to cultivate support based on new state-society formula. This will probably be the main occupation of the Saudi regime in the short-medium term. This might be facilitated by the plans of U.S. troops to pull out of Saudi Arabia.

## **Conclusion**

The Saudi state acquired its legitimacy through a combination of factors; namely, a religious compact with the Al Sheikh family, patrimonialism and rentierism. This combination of factors was not sufficient to hold the first two Saudi states together; however, the third Saudi state has proven adept at reinvigorating the terms of its legitimacy, over the past seventy years, whilst devising collective strategies to address its discontents. The success of those strategies has depended upon the critical connect between the Al-Saud and ulema, and the balance of power that exists between them.

The discovery of oil, and its commercial export since the late 1930s, gave the Al-Saud the upper hand; and the patrimonial cum rentier dimension of its legitimacy was enough to compensate for any lapses in religiosity. The Al-Saud was able to push ahead with a rapid modernisation process, at least terms of infrastructure, symbolic development and materialism.

Although these measures may have antagonised the sensitivities of the ulema, the population enjoyed its allocative rewards from the state, and this compensated for the Al-Saud's dip in Islamic piety.

Nevertheless, the fortunes of state and ulema, and Al-Saud and Al-Sheikh, have been irrevocably intertwined. They are interdependent – on one hand, the Al-Saud need the Islamic credentials and blessings of the ulema, and on the other, the ulema depend upon the Al-Saud to preserve their privileged position in society.

The most enduring determinate of legitimacy in Saudi Arabia remains Islam, and the state and ulema have successfully monopolised its value. This has allowed both parties to shape contemporary Islamic discourse and meet the philosophical challenges of dissident clerics. In doing so, the state has Islamicised society further, in terms of education, communication and social behaviour, as a way of convincing society of its inherent Islamic character. However, this particular strategy, along with its 'export' companion, has produced a generation of radicalised Islamists committed to overthrowing the state and establishing an ideal Islamic state in Saudi Arabia, free of nationalism, tribalism, rentierism and racism. Those dissidents have yet to return to Saudi Arabia en masse, and as they do, the state will need to deploy new strategies to address their substantive challenges to the authority and legitimacy of the Saudi state.

The events of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent U.S. War on Terror and war in Afghanistan may have precipitated the return of many Saudi and al-Qaida members to Saudi Arabia. With the fresh Israeli incursions into the West Bank and Gaza in 2002, and the U.S.-led war in Iraq, the Saudi state has begun to hatch new strategies to confront what could amount to its biggest challenge since its founding in 1932. The challenge is pressing as the bombings of May 2003 has pointed to mounting discontent with the regime. The regime can no longer ignore

dissent, especially as it jeopardises its relations with allies in the West, in a volatile regional and international environment. Thus, the choice of strategy may, in fact, determine the very survival of Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of the rise and collapse of the first two Saudi states consult Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 1998), 79-209.

<sup>2</sup> Gwenn Okruhli, "Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Current History* [volume], [no] (January 2002), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Vassiliev, 397.

<sup>5</sup> Ayman Al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 128-129.

<sup>6</sup> Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 187.

<sup>7</sup> Mordechai, 179.

<sup>8</sup> The Consultative Council was promised by Faysal in 1962. Later in 1980, during the aftermath of the Mecca Uprising, King Khaled also promised the council. And finally King Fahd announced the formation of it in 1984 and later in November 1990.

<sup>9</sup> BBC SWB ME/1319/6A/7, 5 March 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Madawi Al-Rasheed, "God, The King and the Nation: Political Rhetoric in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s," *The Middle East Journal* [volume], [no] (1996), 367.

<sup>11</sup> Talal Asad *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> BBC SWB ME/1319/A/6-7, 3 March 1992.

<sup>13</sup> See analysis of the role of the Consultative Council, its scope and functions in Aba-Ramay [first time citing please full reference] *Op. Cit.* pp. 73-76.

<sup>14</sup> Vassiliev, 318.

<sup>15</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States," *Comparative Politics*, (April 1999), 301.

<sup>16</sup> Rayed Krimly, "The Political Economy of Adjusted Priorities: Declining Oil Revenues and Saudi Fiscal Policies," *The Middle East Journal* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 257-258.

<sup>17</sup> Krimly, 264-265.

<sup>18</sup> *EIU: Country Report, Saudi Arabia, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2002* (London: EIU, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.arabnews.com>

<sup>20</sup> Saudi government would apply tax to all expatriates except those who originate from countries that have special agreements with the Kingdom to avoid double taxation.

<sup>21</sup> *EIU: Country Report, Saudi Arabia, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2002*, (London: EIU, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Change of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/coalition/saudi-arabia2.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/coalition/saudi-arabia2.html>

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/coalition/saudi Arabia.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.terrorismanswers.com/coalition/saudi Arabia2.html>