

## The Irony of *Islah* (Reform)

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Along the surface of Saudi Arabia's political terrain, there are municipal elections, the trial and imprisonment of noted intellectuals, and weekly shoot-outs between jihadis and state security forces. The tendency has been to focus on the discrete events themselves rather than on the complicated process in which they are embedded. That process, with historic roots in 1979 and 1991, reveals a larger struggle about making a nation or a community of belonging that gives meaning to its members.<sup>1</sup> Beneath the surface in Saudi Arabia, people are asking: who or what constitutes the nation? Competing narratives exist inside Saudi Arabia on what it means to belong—what it means, if anything, to “be Saudi” and how that relates to the larger Arab and Muslim world.

It is a contest over the prevailing norms that form the very bases of political and social life. These encompass the relationships among the state, ruling family, religion, and citizenry. More precisely, it is a contest over the substantive terms of citizenship, or the appropriate distributions of rights, obligations, and resources and the appropriate uses of force and wealth. Citizenship (*muwatana*) and nation (*'umma*) are sites of privilege, exclusion, and marginalization.<sup>2</sup> Among diverse populations such as that of Saudi Arabia, full and equal inclusion is a sensitive subject.

The ruling family, the al-Saud, is far from neutral and has long endorsed its own narrative to establish the proper meaning of citizenship—its own civic mythology. The al-Saud now reinforces its version to push the citizenship debate into the social realm and away from its distinctly political di-

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mensions. Reform (*al islah*) is carefully choreographed to consolidate the ruling family's centrality in national political life and reassert its authority. The state crackdown on jihadi forces remains intense. By capitalizing on the fear of jihad and Al Qaeda, the regime also continues to crack down not only on national, liberal, and Islamist discourse but also, perhaps most importantly, on any cooperation between social forces. Although meaningful reforms are being implemented, none address the essential question of political power. Genuine political change is absent.

## **Narrating Citizenship**

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What exists inside Saudi Arabia today goes beyond the usual material contests. There is also a larger contest of ideas over the proper relationship between rulers and ruled and over the character of the just state and the just society. These underlying narratives fuel the discourse on citizenship.

### **THE OFFICIAL CIVIC MYTHOLOGY**

The official narrative meticulously weaves together the power of Islam and the al-Saud family as protector of Saudi Arabia's moral integrity. It equates the modern state with the fusion between the ruling family and a particular manifestation of Islam. This dominant narrative views people as subjects (*ra'ya*) following a shepherd (*ra'y*) who cares for them and to whom they are loyal (*wala'*).<sup>3</sup> Long disseminated in textbooks, by the media, and in museum exhibitions, it tells a story about the unification of the tribes under the banner of Islam and the wise leadership of Abdulaziz. The official narrative has produced a civic mythology in which citizenship has four social and economic components: family, personal behavior, Islam, and welfare.

The first component, identity with and loyalty to one's family, is of critical importance. Loyalty to the family structure is linked with loyalty to the state under the al-Saud; the private family reinforces the public family. The second component, expected norms of social behavior, is defined fairly rigidly, and women bear the brunt of social expectations. Some behavior is declared taboo on religious grounds (*haram*), while other behavior is circumscribed by social norms of shame (*'ayb*). This fuses social norms and religious interpretation, and the state identifies itself in turn with this fusion. The protection of a woman's honor is aligned with the protection of the family unit, which, as society's core institution, is expected to serve and obey the state. The third component refers to the regime's association with Islamic values. The regime promotes itself as the protector of the faith. The Koran is Saudi Arabia's constitution, and the *shari'a* is the law of the land. The

state merely upholds these. The fourth component concerns the population's access to economic benefits provided by the state. With the oil-driven expansion of the economy in the 1970s through the mid-1980s, the number of foreign workers grew until they constituted about 95 percent of the private sector's labor force. The state began to codify what it meant to be Saudi to distribute the windfall benefits of oil revenues. Citizenship was defined in a way that differentiated the local population from the millions of foreign workers brought in to staff the country's burgeoning economy.

In sum, belonging was historically defined in social and cultural terms. An economic component was added during the frenzied growth spurred by the oil boom. "I am Saudi" came to mean "I am not an imported laborer." Belonging was based only on this negative frame of reference and was expressed through cultural, social, and economic qualities. Neither inclusive nor mutable, this dominant narrative could not grow with the nation.

This is a  
struggle to  
make a nation.

### COUNTER-CIVIC NARRATIVES

Other narratives have been developed that contest the dominant historical account on the kingdom's founding. These versions are coherent, intricate, and internally consistent; they are woven from a fabric of cultural symbols and language that resonates among the population. Many social groups relay alternative narratives about the domination of regions rather than their unification, violence rather than wisdom, and the exploitation of Islam rather than its embrace. The memories on which such versions are based form the backdrop for the current effort to construct a national narrative that is more inclusive and less arbitrary than the official version.

The explicitly political qualities of citizenship are missing in the official interpretation. As it is currently envisioned, being Saudi is to be devoid of political power, its distribution, and its use. All people value the primary subjects of social and economic citizenship—family, Islam, social relations, and welfare—but the regime has borrowed the potency of these ideas and used them to devalue the explicitly political components of citizenship, such as fairness, accountability, and freedom of expression. Various social groups now offer counternarratives that contest this devaluation, revise the official civic mythology to incorporate political qualities, divorce the social and economic components from allegiance and subordination to a particular ruling family, and transform people from subjects (*ra'ya*) into citizens (*muwatinun*). These social groups also attempt to define a positive frame of reference that emphasizes who Saudis are, rather than focusing on who they are not. What

makes Saudi Arabia's diverse population a nation? What does it mean to "be Saudi," the very name being a problem for many people? People want their rights as citizens.<sup>4</sup>

The importance of these narratives is that they emanate from multiple sources, across sect, region, gender, and ideology and, because they do, provide an indication of the skepticism with which the official narrative is received. Nationalists, Islamists, and their many permutations seek to create a

community of belonging that provides individuals with meaning and membership, although they define community differently. A community could be considered the Muslim nation (*'umma islamiyya*), the Arab nation (*'umma 'arabiyya*), a sovereign territorial entity (*al dawla al 'umma al ssayida*), or the believers within a territory. Although tension may exist among such affinities, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Counternarratives in Saudi Arabia are imbued with moral dimensions. There are many principled orientations toward the middle and away from the contending extremes of jihad and secularism. Many Saudis do not question the coexistence of religion and the state. Instead, they ask which manifestations of religion have what relation to the state. Islam is part and parcel of an entire discourse on progress and nation. It is ultimately an issue of accountable governance. For almost everyone, the ruling family must serve the state and the nation, not be the state and the nation. Its members cannot be above the law, whether one values shari'a or civil law. Further, corruption is not just a material issue; it is regarded as morally wrong. The stakes have risen. Today, it is less about "I want mine" and more about "we want ours—as a people, as a nation, and as a community (*mujtama'*).” Contentious voices resonate against Saudi Arabia's exclusionary structure of governance. From above, the sprawling religious and political bureaucracy does not represent the heterogeneity of the population. From below, there is precious little room for people to organize and contest the state. In between, old social contracts that linked the ruling family and the citizenry, however tenuously, are no longer relevant. The domestic struggle is further complicated by regional crises and U.S. hegemony.

**Emphasizing September 11 as the critical date in Saudi Arabian development is a mistake.**

### **PRELUDE TO CONTEMPORARY STRUGGLES**

People contest the state on moral grounds because of corruption and authoritarianism, on material grounds because of inequality, on national grounds because of a lack of true representation, and on religious grounds

with charges of deviation from the Koran and sunna. Today's struggle did not arise in a historical vacuum. There is a tendency to emphasize September 11, 2001, as the critical date in Saudi Arabian development. This is a mistake. Saudi Arabian domestic politics must be understood within the context of two watershed years, 1979 and 1991.

Four dramatic events unfolded in 1979: the Islamic revolution in Iran toppled the shah; a Sunni rebel, Juhaiman al-Utaibi, forcibly took control of the Great Mosque in Mecca; the Shi'a community rioted throughout Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province; and Saudi Arabian youth began to wage jihad in Afghanistan against Soviet Communists. The regime's panicked response to these events ushered in two decades of political paralysis and social stagnation. The regime chose to embrace rather than confront religious radicalism to protect the centrality of the ruling family in national life. King Fahd wrapped himself ever tighter in the mantle of official Islam, changing his title from "Your Majesty" to "Custodian of the Two Holy Cities." Seeking to bolster his family's legitimacy in a time of crisis, King Fahd sought to appropriate the power of Islam and to bind religion and state institutionally.

**Saudi Arabian domestic politics must be understood within the context of 1979 and 1991.**

Throughout the 1980s, religious conservatives were entrenched in institutions, as evidenced by university funding and in the expansion of the religious bureaucracy, both of which the state funded generously even during the mid-decade downturn in oil revenues. The Islamic University in Mecca, Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, and Umm al-Qurra University in Mecca continued to grow even as other programs were cut back. That generation of students now serves as bureaucrats, police officers, judges, professors, and preachers.<sup>5</sup> The entrenchment of extreme conservatives was coupled with the return of young, ideologically driven, and battle-hardened Saudi Arabian mujahideen from Afghanistan. Although the conservatives were empowered in the 1980s, this religious resurgence was transformed in 1991 with the Gulf War when an Islamist social movement took root to oppose the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia. In the previous decade, the resurgence of Islam was largely inchoate, private, inwardly focused, and concerned with the purity of social norms and religious practice. With the Gulf War, however, the private became public, the spiritual became political, and individual efforts became organized. Religious believers became political activists.<sup>6</sup>

To bring this transformation full circle, the Gulf War gave popular power to the sheikhs of the *al sahwā al islamiyya* (Islamic Awakening) and an Is-

lamist social movement that challenged the regime. A crisis arose in the old relationship between the *ulama* and ruling family. The *sahwa* sheikhs were jailed during the domestic turmoil following the Gulf War. In their absence, a new generation of more radical, fiery sheikhs arose who expanded the ideas of jihad, or struggle, and *takfir* (to declare someone an infidel). Later, the September 11 attacks and the ensuing war on terrorism ushered in fears of U.S. occupation or even division of the country. The jihadis engaged in the war in Iraq are returning to Saudi Arabia much younger and perhaps more independent than the mujahideen who returned from Afghanistan in the 1980s. Religious extremism and royal authoritarianism are the extremes within which the battle for the soul of the nation is being waged today.

Saudi Arabian domestic politics cannot be decontextualized. Resistance to U.S. hegemony in the Arab and Muslim world resonates among all segments of the population. It would be a mistake to underestimate this sentiment. Nevertheless, there is great uncertainty over what will happen when the thousands of Saudi Arabian jihadis in Iraq return home. The regime can respond with a wide variety of measures, ranging from amnesty, rehabilitation, and co-optation to arrest, punishment, and violent confrontation. The extent of the response and its effectiveness, however, will almost certainly depend on whether the jihadis return in triumph or defeat. What happens in the region, therefore, and particularly in Iraq matters greatly for the struggle to make a nation in Saudi Arabia.

### **COMPLEX CONTEMPORARY STRUGGLES**

On the ground, in everyday politics, the political terrain is complex. Few people are satisfied with the status quo and, in one way or another, everybody is a reformist (*al islahiyyun*). The sociopolitical landscape is messy, with competition and cooperation between different groups. The division is not simply Al Qaeda versus the al-Saud family, but a nuanced field in which many participants offer different concepts of what it means to belong to the nation. The terrain cannot be described as a spectrum of right to left or top to bottom. It is not a set taxonomy but instead is fluid and mutable. People have multiple affinities and may move around the map as a strategic ploy, as a result of being co-opted by the regime, or in some cases after profound self-examination. Real power dynamics are also at play in Saudi Arabia, and it is not always clear, even to the players themselves, who is using whom. At a moment of crisis, whether prompted by succession, assassination, U.S. maneuvers, or other exogenous shock, the most organized will likely triumph.

In general, the political landscape contains four broad categories, each of which has multiple parts. The first is the Saudi Arabian state. It consists of the al-Saud family, whose members show some differentiation, and the in-

struments of official Islam, all of whom are employees of the state and include the religious authorities (*ulama al dawla*), the enforcers of public moral behavior (*al mutawa'a*), and the Ministries of Islamic Affairs, Education, and the Judiciary. Over the decades, the *ulama* have shaped the official discourse on religion and politics and codified trivial social absurdities into law. These religious authorities were further discredited by their ruling during the Gulf War that allowed foreign forces on holy soil. They then lost their only respected leaders with the deaths of two sheikhs in recent years. There are also a wide array of state organizations, including the consultative assembly (*majlis al shura*) and the Human Rights Association. Although each is made up of skilled, bright individuals, they operate within strict parameters and are unlikely to alter the status quo.

The second category consists of the many Islamist social forces not under the rubric of the state. Perhaps largest in number are the people of the awakening (*ahl al saḥwa*), often described as an effective combination of the Muslim Brotherhood's organization and the *al salafiyya's* ideology. People of the *saḥwa* seek to transform society. An activist argues

**What will happen when the thousands of Saudi Arabian jihadis in Iraq return home?**

that *saḥwa* is, in practice, a political party because it has a radio station, a satellite channel, and the power of the mosques. In reality, the term "saḥwa" is used very loosely and now refers to widely divergent groups and ideas. There are many shades and hues of *saḥwa*. There are also neo-*salafi* (*al salafiyyun al judud*) who seek to revive what they consider a purer Islam, one free from centuries of accretions. They are more politicized and oppose the regime. Jihadis—extremists who use violence—directly confront the regime and seek to end U.S. hegemony in Saudi Arabia and the region. The intellectual counter to jihadis are those who refer to themselves as *al 'aqlaniyyin* (rationalists) or *al tayyar al tanwiri al islahi* (adherents to an enlightened reformist trend).<sup>7</sup> All these extraordinarily divergent social forces are Islamists (*islamiyyun*) at some level.

The third category in the political landscape includes the nationalists (*al wataniyyun*) who struggle for equal participation in a just and strong nation-state. These diverse voices often reflect different regions and come from marginalized social groups; various ideologies such as old-fashioned Arab nationalists (*qawmiyyun*) and humanists (*insaniyyun*); both genders; and all religious groups, including Ismailis, Shi'as, Sufis, and other Sunnis. A small but potentially influential domestic player was a tenuous and ad hoc network made up of Islamists of several orientations and nationalists of all ori-

entations that came together in 2003 and 2004 to articulate dissatisfaction with the status quo.

The fourth category is Saudi Arabia's silent majority. Its members tend to be religiously devout, socially conservative, and mostly apolitical. Nonetheless, parents and youth alike want a better future. Many complain that girls are bored, that boys are unemployed, and that they are weary of corruption. According to a man from the center of Saudi Arabia, "The mainstream is religious and nonpolitical, but the issues that concern them are things like corruption, how people get jobs and positions, and why princes get privileges in hospitals."

Saudi Arabia's political landscape exhibits many visions of the nation and of citizenship. The Islamists and nationalists and the tenuous network between parts of them offer some of the most articulate counternarratives to the official version of belonging, making them vital to political discourse. Unfortunately, it also makes them targets of the regime's efforts to co-opt, coerce, or neutralize alternative voices.

### **The Irony of *Islah*: Reforms That Consolidate Power**

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A perennial problem in Saudi Arabia is that, once the government finally moves to institute a change, after years of study and committee work, social forces on the right and on the left have typically moved far beyond what is implemented. The regime's actions are always too little, too late and often represent lost moments of opportunity. The irony of *islah* is that, for the most part, "reforms" consolidate the power of the al-Saud family in political life.

For example, the basic law introduced in 1992 established a consultative assembly (*majlis al shura*) and provincial administrations. Nevertheless, it also consolidated the centrality of the ruling family rather than broadening political participation. The *majlis* remains fully appointed and has only an advisory role. The number of *majlis* members has recently increased, but the expansion was designed for the assembly "to represent all tribes." Yet, a significant portion of the population is not tribal, and even if it were, this justification casts light on parochial identities rather than on something larger and more inclusive.

The press has been given more leeway since 1998 but still faces redlines that cannot be crossed. Primary among these are direct criticism of the ruling family, the official religious establishment, and especially the fusion between them. There are several recent cases of journalists, including Hamza al-Mizeini, Abdullah al-Bikheit, Hussein al-Shobokshi, Jamal al-Khashoggi, and Qinan al-Ghamdi, who have found themselves in trouble for pushing the boundaries. In addition, journalist Khaled Suleiman al-Omaid was ar-



rested after he appeared on Al Jazeera television prior to the elections in the spring of 2005; he reportedly began a hunger strike in prison. The National Dialogue forums (*muntadiat al hiwar al watani*) initiated by Crown Prince Abdullah in June 2003 were a step toward tolerance, but they turned out to be a controlled dialogue to direct frustrations into acceptable channels rather than meaningful communication between social forces and the ruling family.

### **MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: WHY THE AMBIVALENCE?**

Elections for about 1,700 seats on 178 municipal-level councils were held throughout Saudi Arabia over recent months, demonstrating to doubters that Islam and democracy are compatible, the state is technically ready for elections, and the people are ready for participation. Yet, there was also a marked ambivalence about these elections in many quarters in Saudi Arabia: only about 20 percent of the overall eligible electorate voted. (The turnout was higher in the eastern part of the country where the Shi'a minority resides. They effectively used the elections to assert their presence.)

In the months preceding the actual casting of ballots, civil servants were warned, in no uncertain language, that they would face disciplinary measures, including the loss of their jobs, if they criticized state policies or any governmental programs.<sup>8</sup> To say the very least, this pressure inhibits democratic dialogue. Women were not allowed to participate. In addition, although outside observers celebrated the municipal council elections, three men who called for an electoral process and a constitutional monarchy, Matruk al-Faleh, Ali al-Dumaiyyini, and Abdullah al-Hamad, remain in jail. The ideas they promote offer one version of how to embark on the national project.

The elections themselves were for only half of the council seats; the government will appoint individuals to the remaining half of the seats across the country. According to activists who have worked for elections for years, "We had elections 40 years ago! And they were for 100 percent of the seats on the council!" One man lamented that "the struggle was never about this. People did not get into this fierce struggle for this ... not for half of municipal councils." In addition, the elections were only for seats on municipal-level councils, which are likely to be concerned with issues such as street paving, the size of billboards, and parking. Even though these are certainly important issues, especially in Saudi Arabia, where the infrastructure has not kept pace with population growth, activists fear that these meager reforms may distract people from the larger issues at hand, such as the current lack of freedom of expression. Although for dissenters elections are only a means to an end, from the regime's perspective the elections are a means and an end, aimed at diffusing dissent and satisfying international pressure.

In these unwieldy elections, voters had to choose perhaps six candidates from a ballot of several hundred. The *sahwa* sheikhs effectively used instant messaging and e-mail to circulate so-called golden lists (*al qawa'im al dhahabia*) of candidates, those whom religious leaders deemed acceptable and portrayed as “pleasing to Allah.” These candidates swept most of the elections. Their credentials are certainly not in doubt; by all accounts, these individuals make up a highly competent group. Nevertheless, there are different ways to interpret what has been called “the Islamist sweep.” The fact that these men are devout Muslims does not mean that they are all “political

**The irony of reforms is that they consolidate the political power of the al-Saud family.**

Islamists.” In addition, for many supporters of the winning lists, the results show how democracy works. They would argue that democracy reflects a society and their society is very conservative, Islamists played the game better and won, and liberals and nationalists never got their act together to put forward leadership.

Yet, in reality the explanation may be more complex. In short, the playing field is not level in Saudi Arabia. Conservative religious figures are frequently granted more leeway to

shape discourse than are liberal, national, and moderate Islamist reformists. Each time they put forward potential leadership, the individuals are arrested, jailed, or intimidated. They are prohibited from criticizing the status quo, especially the fusion of official religious orthodoxy with the state. Although there is some room to discuss social issues, political discussion is met with intimidation. In March 2004, 13 reformists were arrested after they promoted the idea of a constitutional monarchy in a petition and then met to form a human rights association. Most of these men were eventually released after signing a pledge to avoid discussing politics in public. Three men refused to sign the statements and remain in jail, charged with threatening national unity, challenging those in authority, criticizing the educational system, and inciting public opinion. Their trial started and stopped several times and was eventually conducted behind closed doors. The men were handed down strict sentences in May, with each now serving six to nine years. As a result, for the duration of the elections, some of the most articulate nationalist voices were in jail or had been released only after signing a statement in which they pledged not to engage in public politics again. Yet, through the golden lists, some sheikhs were allowed to engage in politics. Perhaps the ambivalence and cynicism surrounding the elections arose because they took place without the supporting norms of freedom of expression and assembly. After all, elections require not only an outward form, but also a civic sense of national belonging.

**REASSERTION OF AUTHORITY**

The completion of municipal elections notwithstanding, it has been suggested that, on one hand, the legitimacy of the ruling regime is now very weak, even to the point where cracks seem to be appearing in the state apparatus. These observers point to such issues as the domestic jihadi campaign, the string of assassinations in al-Jouf, parts of cities where the police cannot enter and where state authority has no relevance, and a military that includes many oppositional Islamists. On the other hand, the same people painfully acknowledge that the regime has successfully reasserted itself. How can cracks in the state occur simultaneously with a reassertion of the ruling family's authority?

Saudi Arabian social forces are engaged in a fight to fashion a moral order. A just political economy would contain corruption, cease princely land grabs, attach accountability to shari'a and/or civil law, and end arbitrary governance. The ruling family, however, has yet to reassert itself in moral terms or alter the behavior of some family members. Instead, it has reasserted itself through coercive power and material wealth. The ruling family arrested and jailed the liberals, nationalists, and participants in network politics; it also co-opted some articulate voices of *sahwa* and the rationalist Islamist trend. Most importantly, Saudi Arabia's rulers renewed their relationship with the official religious orthodoxy and with *sahwa* clerics.

What allows the regime to hinder the social forces engaged in nation-making? How does the regime frame its reform efforts to make them fit the legitimate cultural repertoire?<sup>9</sup> In its renewed relationship with religious authorities, the regime postures itself as the "Guardian of Virtue and Custodian of Change," which is reminiscent of its response to the events of 1979. When the ruling family feels threatened, it empowers the very forces that may pose a great challenge to them. This seems to be a reaffirmation of the old civic mythology and its emphasis on the al-Saud family as protector of the moral integrity of the nation. Once again, the regime uses this mythology to enhance its Islamic credentials and to keep its traditional religious constituency happy, to take the steam out of oppositional religious forces. Rather than quell debate after 1979, however, it fueled it. Likewise, although the regime may have silenced competing voices today, this is a temporary measure that may ultimately backfire yet again.

Indeed, the regime has empowered the clerics who may later become the official *ulama* of the state. These men may be the *sahwa al sultan*, so to speak. They are part of the state discourse in its fight on terrorism, providing the state with the intellectual and cultural means to fight jihad. If and when clerics become part of the state, they risk losing their voice and credibility with the population. Once co-opted by the state, the sheikhs can no

longer challenge the prevailing (im)moral order over which the ruling family that appointed them presides. Hence, their co-optation will later become a source of popular dissent.

### **DEFLECTING ATTENTION FROM INTERNAL POLITICS**

When the ruling family renews its relationships with religious orthodoxy and *sahwa* clerics, it placates those who are troubled by changes to the domestic social order, especially in matters of gender, education, and religious practice. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that only the sociocultural aspects of the *sahwa* are given safe space in the country. The political aspects of *sahwa* are instead directed outward toward, for example, Iraq, Chechnya, and Afghanistan.

The consequence is that the debate over political reform is deflected to foreign issues rather than focusing on domestic issues. In the context of regional crises, it has proven relatively easy to deflect attention outward.<sup>10</sup>

**The regime sought elections to diffuse dissent and satisfy international pressure.**

At the same time, the permissible domestic debate is about social issues, such as gender, media, globalization, and “re-

forming Wahhabism,” rather than the more difficult, explicitly political issues such as reforming the *al-Saud* or the fusion of official religious orthodoxy with the state. It is much easier to offer an intellectual critique of the excesses of official religious orthodoxy than it is to talk about the excesses of some ruling family members. There is much dancing around politics.

There was a vibrant time in 2002 through early 2004 when fear of state retribution for political activism declined. Social forces took advantage of the intense international attention paid to their domestic circumstances and took more chances in pushing for political change. This vibrancy was squelched, however, with a crackdown once the regime felt secure and the United States was bogged down in Iraq. Since the arrests in March 2004, elites are frightened, liberals are tired, and nationalists are worn down. The loose national reformist network, active only two years ago, is today largely silent. Religious television programming has increased significantly. The regime has made dubious moves, jailing reformists, appeasing conservative religious authorities, empowering the social *sahwa*, and frightening the vast majority of the population into silence.

On the ground, nationalist and Islamist activists, as well as interesting combinations thereof, working to forge a meaningful, larger community,

have been met with resistance from above. Social forces try to lay the groundwork for nation-making, but the state resists such efforts. Using its coercive power and material wealth, the regime set out to diminish or neutralize any sense of belonging that was larger than itself and any collective sense of being that is not directly dependent on the regime. The al-Saud family eliminates what it cannot control and diminishes the resonance of larger belongings. Given uncertainty about the future of the region, there is something of a corresponding resurgence of local identities in region, tribe, sect, or other communities that may provide a sense of security in crisis.

The regime has returned to its quadruped of tried-and-true methods: coercion, co-optation through disbursement of oil revenues, renewed relations with religious orthodoxy, and playing social forces against one another. At the same time, it has resurrected negative aspects of the rentier condition, where skyrocketing oil prices generate more revenue which may be used to co-opt dissenters and placate the population's material wants without addressing the messy political and social problems.

## Imagining Saudi Arabia

Labels and categories must be used with caution. Many Saudi Arabian activists and intellectuals take offense at the very idea of labels because they are routinely bandied about in domestic debates as a way to discredit people. Terms such as "*al zaydi*," "*al mani*," "*al liberali*," or "*al wahhabi*" can all be manipulated with tone to serve as an insult or epithet to incorrectly mean, respectively, Shi'a, secularist, Americanized, or irrational fundamentalist. Each of these terms has a respectable meaning but also can be a pejorative label used as a mechanism to exclude a person from contemporary discourse.

The words "conservative," "liberal," "religious," and "secular" do not adequately capture political sentiment in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, the terms "sahwa" and "Islamist" are too all-inclusive to be truly meaningful in any analysis of the political landscape. The term "Wahhabi" can be used only with several explanatory footnotes.<sup>11</sup> "Nationalist," however, may be a more appropriate word to capture the wide, though still shallow spectrum of people who plead for an inclusive nation and an accountable state, demonstrated by the steady flow of petitions and demands to the al-Saud regime from multiple sects and regions, representing both genders. Yet, the nationalist framework has never been given a safe space in which to grow, whether one speaks of a Muslim nation, an Arab nation, or a Saudi Arabian nation (*al dawla al 'umma al 'arabiyya al sa'udiyya*).

## MYTHOLOGIZING 'CONSERVATISM'

It is often argued that Saudi Arabian society is more conservative than the ruling family and that leaders seeking to initiate progressive change are held in check by a deeply conservative society. Yet, for three reasons, caution must be exercised before accepting this claim. First, political attitudes cannot be inferred from social attitudes. Much of Saudi Arabian society is generally conservative in social and religious affairs, particularly in the center of the country, less so along the coasts. Nevertheless, there are no necessary links among religious devotion, social behavior, and political beliefs. One

**Saudi Arabian social forces are engaged in a fight to fashion a moral order.**

does not always imply or lead to the other. There are political liberals who are social conservatives and social liberals who are political conservatives. Social conservatism and religious devotion do not translate into support for political authoritarianism. Saudi Arabian society is diverse and can largely be characterized as devout in religious terms, traditional in social norms, and mostly apolitical in terms of activism. Yet, most citizens have a desire for

fair distribution of resources and the rule of law.

Second, it is the ruling family that systematically empowers the most conservative elements of society, giving them institutional and public space in which to operate, for example, in the sprawling bureaucracy and the educational arena. For decades, other voices were forced to remain on the periphery of discourse and power. The state is not a neutral vessel. Instead, its representatives structure the playing field so that only one voice is heard and only one voice is safe to support.

Third, the problem in Saudi Arabia is not conservative interpretations of Islam, conservative clerics, or even "Wahhabism." The difficulty lies in the monopoly that extreme "Wahhabi" doctrine has over the interpretation of religion and its fusion with the state. Although denied, many people argue that *al madhab al wahhabi* is indeed the sect and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) of the state.<sup>12</sup> Further, the problem is not with conservative morality but that morality has been trivialized. It is conflated with the codification of social absurdities, demonstrated by religious rulings that regulate the plucking of eyebrows, the use of nail polish, and the length of gowns, rather than grapple with explicitly political issues that revolve around distributive fairness, governmental accountability, and social justice.

Ideas of social justice and political accountability are not peculiar to Western liberals. Indeed, in critiquing the harsh sentences imposed on the three men who called for a constitutional monarchy, writers have specifi-

cally invoked Islam to defend freedom of expression, debate, and tolerance of divergent opinions.<sup>13</sup> In sum, neither the al-Saud nor “Wahhabism” alone is the full story. Rather, it is the excesses of each, the fusion of both, and the exclusion of all others that inhibits meaningful nation-making.

### **THE CONUNDRUM OF POLITICAL PROGRESSIVES**

Progressives in Saudi Arabia, alternatively called liberals, nationalists, or moderate Islamists, often refuse to use direct and explicit language to confront the regime. They have tended to criticize the religious radicals only. An intellectual observes that “[t]hey must take on the state too! But how can they subvert a state that is their protector? They are compromised from the start.” This has been the long-standing conundrum for progressive social forces. The relationship between the ruling family and Saudi Arabia’s politically progressive forces was historically a convenience for the former and a necessity for the latter. A nationalist argues that progressives “often served as a shield or a fence for the ruling family. But this is less true now. After the arrests and certainly the sentences handed down, the relationship changed.” Now, progressives no longer defend the ruling family so easily.

Nevertheless, progressive forces lack the four critical attributes that conservative forces have long possessed: a safe space in which to operate, ideological coherence, social connections, and organization. The regime keeps it that way by choice and capability. Clamping down on progressives has been less costly for the ruling family; it is more complicated to circumscribe conservative religious forces, on whom the ruling family so intimately depends. Ironically, in its desire to prevent any alternative leadership from arising among progressives, the regime may have actually sent an unintended message when it handed down harsh sentences. For some, there may be a painful recognition that legal and respectful dialogue will not be effective in producing political change in Saudi Arabia.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Politics of Resistance and Reform**

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For several years, social forces, including Islamists of many orientations, nationalists, women, representatives of various regions, and courageous networks of social groups, presented their visions of a just state and a just society to the government in the form of petitions. In the absence of real expression or elections, they articulated their vision in the form of advice and letters. What some people, both activists and nonactivists, say about the ruling family is that the question is not whether they govern but how they govern. The problem lies less in their authority and more in their abuse of authority.

Whereas committed jihadis oppose the ruling family itself, many others contest the choices made by the al-Saud family over the decades to exploit religion for its own ends.<sup>15</sup>

People want rules of the game; a needed structural change in Saudi Arabia is simply to have structure. Some consensus exists that much popular resentment and anger would dissipate if the ruling family were reduced and regularized, its privileges and immunities were curtailed, private property were respected, new advisers who represent the country's diversity were brought onboard, and institutional constraints were placed on the behavior

of all state officials, including members of the ruling family. Two common concerns are the lack of an independent judiciary and a legal, publicly known system for determining succession. When King Fahd's death seemed imminent, there were renewed family power struggles, particularly among the king's brothers—Naif, Sultan, and Abdullah—as well as with Fahd's son, Abdulaziz. People want to know ahead of time not only how succession

is to proceed among the brothers but when and how the next generation is to be involved.

There are other commonly held practical and principled concerns. The former include jobs, health, and education; the latter include free expression and assembly, respect for private property, transparency in public accounts, increased participation in government, respectful behavior on the part of the ruling family, and fairer distribution of goods. Many people point out that, if the principled reforms were implemented, especially expression and assembly, the practical problems would be more easily resolved.

There are real steps forward in Saudi Arabia, but they often go unnoticed abroad. Cinema was recently approved in the Eastern Province after decades of prohibition. Premarital genetic counseling is now mandatory, a significant reform in a country where negotiated marriages between first cousins are common. Identity cards will be required for all women, who no longer need male family members' permission to obtain one. An important religious authority, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al Sheikh, ruled against forced marriages for women. It is critical to note that none of these are explicitly political; explicit political reform remains peripheral.

In the end, tremendous respect is due to social forces that reach out across traditional barriers of tribe, region, sect, gender, and principled belief. People are taking risks to make a nation. Ordinary people want to participate in their country's development, particularly in meeting a young, boom-

## Debate over political reform is being deflected to foreign issues.

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ing population's need for education, housing, and employment. They want to write a new narrative on belonging that is moral and political. Saudi Arabians do not want to be tended by a caretaker. Instead, they want to be active citizens and long for a sense of control over their own lives.

## Notes

1. This analysis is not about "nation building" as embodied in U.S. policies. It refers to a serious, internal process that goes far beyond the imposition of institutions under foreign occupation. The fieldwork for this analysis was largely conducted in January–August 2003 in Riyadh, Jeddah, and several cities in the Eastern Province. The work was supported by a Fulbright Research Grant and supplemented with later interviews. More than 200 interviews crossed sect, gender, region, age, principled belief, and tribal/nontribal populations. All quotations are taken from these interviews.
2. On citizenship and nation-making, see Suad Joseph, ed., "Gender and Citizenship in Muslim Communities," *Citizenship Studies* 3, no. 3 (1999); Nils Butenshon, Uri Davis, and Manuel Hassassian, eds., *Citizenship and the State in the Middle East* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood, *Remaking the Nation: Place, Identity and Politics in Latin America* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1996); Sheila Croucher, "Perpetual Imagining: Nationhood in a Global Era," *International Studies Review*, no. 5 (2003): 1–24. On myths, see Rogers Smith, "Citizenship and the Politics of People Building," *Citizenship Studies* 5, no. 1 (2001): 73–96; Madawi al-Rasheed, "God, the King and the Nation: The Rhetoric of Politics in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s," *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 4 (Summer 1996): 359–371.
3. This is conveyed in the hadith sharif "kulukum ra'yi wa kulukum mas'ul 'an ra'iyatih," roughly translated to suggest that "you are all shepherds and you are responsible for your dependents (or flock)." It is given political meaning in the oath of allegiance "al baiy'a 'ala al sam' wa al ta'a," giving allegiance to hear and obey the ruler.
4. On citizenship in Saudi Arabia, see Fouad Ibrahim, "Al muwatana fi mujtama' ta 'addudi: halat al sa' udiyya" [Citizenship in a pluralistic society: the case of Saudi Arabia], *Qadaia al khalij* [Gulf issues], <http://gulfissues.net/>; Yusif Makki, "Al muwatana wa al wihda al wataniyya" [Citizenship and national unity], *Qadaia al khalij* [Gulf issues], <http://gulfissues.net/>; Khaled al-Rasheed, "Hal hunak hawiyya wataniyya sa' udiyya?" [Is there a Saudi national identity?], *Shu'un sa' udiyya* [Saudi affairs], no. 3 (April 2003): 26–27; Wajiha al-Howaida, "Fuduha sira" [Stop this talk], June 1, 2005, <http://www.hrinfo.net/>.
5. Gwenn Okruhlik, "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Dissent in Saudi Arabia," *Current History*, January 2002, pp. 22–28.
6. On the aftermath of 1979 and Islamism as a social movement, see Gwenn Okruhlik, "Making Conversation Permissible: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 250–269.
7. For an early and widely disseminated analysis, see "Kharitat al Islamiyyin fi al Sa' udiyya wa Qossat al Takfir" [The Islamist map and the story of Takfir], February 27, 2003, <http://elaph.com/>.
8. Hebah Saleh, "Saudi Warning to Critical Civil Servants Dents Hopes of Political Reform," *Financial Times*, September 16, 2004.

9. For provocative work on the notion of a legitimate cultural repertoire, see Rhys Williams and Timothy Kubal, "Movement Frames and the Cultural Environment: Resonance, Failure and the Boundaries of the Legitimate," in *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change*, eds. Michael Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann (Stamford, Conn: JAI Press, 1999), pp. 225–248.
10. The United States is complicit in this deflection. It emphasizes reforms of education, banking, the WTO, and gender. It does not press for meaningful and explicit political power sharing. On the U.S. role in this process, see Ali al-Ferdan, "The Prison of Reformers and the Reality of the Saudi Government," *Arabian News*, May 16, 2005.
11. A linguistic note: "Wahhabi" seems to have taken on a hegemonic meaning in the international press that does not accurately reflect its usage in Saudi Arabia prior to September 11, 2001. Believers would never refer to themselves as Wahhabi, as that implies worshipping someone—Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab—other than God. They prefer instead to call themselves *muwahhidun* or *ahl al-tawhid*, to emphasize the centrality of monotheism, or Salafi, to emphasize the purity of their beliefs based on the precedent of the Prophet. Usually, Salafi is a broader category than Wahhabi and the latter implies less tolerance of diversity than the former. It is a confusing state of affairs as the term means different things to different people. It may be useful to think of three meanings of Wahhabism: as a religious practice grounded in time and place, as a set of social norms dominant in the Najd, and as a type of jurisprudence. There is an emphasis on what actions are *haram* (prohibited) or *bid'a* (heresy). Wahhabism is opposed to Sufism, saint worship, and folk religious traditions. It is exclusionary, carefully delineating boundaries that distinguish believers from others. Believers reject sectarian divisions and perceive Wahhabism as the one, true Islam. To refer to those people who have broader political aspirations directed against the hegemony of the West, the more appropriate term is *al salafiyyun al judud* (neo-salafi).
12. Hamad Saleh al-Misfr, "Ittako Allah Ya ma'shara al Kodatt Fi Ahkamikum" [Fear God, oh judges, as you make decisions], *Al Quds Al Arabi*, May 23, 2005. Al-Misfr asks, "Do the judges [who sentenced the three men] know what they are doing or are they ordered by the sultan?"
13. In the above article, al-Misfr refers to "al amen al fikri fi sunnat Allah" [the security of ideas in the way of God]. See Muhammad Mafouz, "Watania wa 'adala al siyasia" [Citizenship and political justice], *Majala al Kalima*, May 27, 2005.
14. See Faiza Amba, "Saudi Crackdown on Dissenters," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 2005; Mai Yamani, "How to Make Violence Inevitable in Saudi Arabia," *Daily Star*, June 2, 2005.
15. Madawi al-Rasheed constructs five "political heresies" that this fusion (*al salafia al sultania*) has produced. Madawi al-Rasheed, "Muhakamat duat al islah fi al sa'udiyya" [The judging of the reformists], *Al Quds Al Arabi*, May 17, 2005.