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SAUDI ARABIA: THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY?

CORE COURSE IV ESSAY

LTC MICHAEL N. HAWRYLAK/CLASS OF 1995

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SEMINAR H

FACULTY SEMINAR LEADER: DR MARVIN C. OTT

FACULTY ADVISOR: COL WILSON

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SAUDI ARABIA: THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY?

INTRODUCTION

Islam continues to be an important ideological political force in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. The growth of Islamic resurgence in recent years has developed to combat popular and western influence for liberalization, democratization, and socioeconomic reforms. To Saudis, Islam represents a total way of life, a framework for personal behavior as well as for the state and society. Westernization, in contrast, reflects the separation of church and state, materialism, and individualism and thus the root cause of political, economic, and social ills. Though westernization is condemned, modernization is not. Science and technology are accepted to the extent change can be subordinated to Islamic beliefs and values.

In the post Gulf War period, Saudi Arabia has been pushed to address popular pressure for greater political participation. Some argue that the very reason the Middle East remains unstable is the scarcity of democratic government in the region. The idea that democracies do not make war with each other and facilitate free market economies encircles current Washington foreign policy thinking.¹ The Clinton Administration has embraced this concept completely incorporating it into its own security policy. Given that democracies do not make war with each other, the administration contends, the United States should seek to

¹Thomas Carothers, "The Democracy Nostrum", *World Policy Journal*, XI, 1994: 47-53

guarantee its security by promoting democracy abroad. This paper will examine the compatibility of Islam and democracy within Saudi Arabia.

BACKGROUND

The Saudi state began in central Arabia in 1750. A local ruler, Muhammad Bin Saud, joined forces with an Islamic reformer, Muhammad Abd Al Wahhab, to establish a state ruled according to Islamic principles. Over the next 150 years, the fortunes of the Saud family rose and fell several times as Saudi rulers contended with Egypt, the Ottoman Turks, and other Arabian families for control on the peninsula. The modern Saudi state was founded in 1932 as a result of the conquests of Abd Al Aziz Al Saud who unified the separate regions as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 1938 was the major catalyst that transformed various aspects of the Kingdom. The huge revenues from the sale of oil enabled the government to launch large scale development programs in the 1970s. These programs focused on the creation of a robust infrastructure centered on transportation, telecommunications, electric power, and water. Programs were also implemented to address education, health services, social welfare, expanding and equipping the armed forces, and the creation of petroleum based industries.

The central institution of the Saudi Arabian government is a monarchy based on Islamic Law (Sharia). The ability of the King to rule effectively depends on his ability to retain a consensus of the Saudi royal family and religious leaders (Ulama). The Council of Ministers, appointed by and responsible to the King,

provide advice on the formulation of general policy and direct the activities of the bureaucracy. Legislation is by resolution of the Council of Ministers, ratified by royal decree, and must be compatible with the Sharia. Justice is administered according to the Sharia through a system of religious courts.

OBSTACLES TO DEMOCRATIZATION

LEGITIMACY. The legitimacy of a government rests on the people's acceptance of and support for its right to rule. The cornerstone on which the Saudi state and political system is built is Islam. For the regime to be and remain legitimate, therefore, it must retain the fundamental values of the Wahhabi Islamic society it governs. Muhammad Wahhabi taught that authority was legitimate only if it conformed to divine law. Muhammad Al Saud therefore claimed to rule on the basis of religious merit, the enforcement of the Sharia (Islamic Law), and the protection of Wahhabi Islam. The Al Saud's long standing right to rule is a source of great underlying strength.

Wahhabi Islam views the government's principal purpose as a means to guarantee the purity of the faith, to protect and defend the faithful, and to preserve order in the Muslim community.² The Ulama possess a direct legitimizing role unparalleled in the Sunni world. The close relationship between the King and the Ulama is one of mutual support and dependence. In exchange for the recognition of their political influence, the Ulama provides public approval, when requested, on potentially controversial

²Michael C. Hudson, "Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy," (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) 2

policies. In return, the Ulama exhibits influence over the media, judicial system, and to some extent economic policy.

The sources of Saudi legitimacy do not provide for western participatory democracy, especially when compared with Wahhabi Islamic beliefs. Western democracy sets up human decisions as a substitute for the eternal will of God expressed in the Sharia. This is a violation of the Wahhabi principle of looking for guidance only from God. To Saudis, the will of the people is not the supreme law of the land, Islam is.³ God has established the Ulama as the sole interpreters of his law. Elected parliaments, found in democratic governments, trespass on this divinely ordained prerogative. The turbulence typical of the democratic process is precisely the kind of civil discord that the government is duty bound to suppress. As viewed from Wahhabi Islamic Saudis, democracy is thus an innovation of people, not God, and is therefore unacceptable.

The government's legitimacy is based on its adherence to the Sharia and upon the consent of the governed, who are obliged to obey the ruler as long as he continues to govern by Islamic law. Religious resistance to serious democratization goes well beyond the official religious establishment, it encompasses the people and government as well. The religious based legitimacy of the Saudi rule is therefore in direct contrast to western concepts of democracy, specifically the separation of church and state.

SOCIAL CULTURE. In spite of the rapid economic transformation

³Muhammad Asad, "The Principles of State and Government in Islam," Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, 2-4.

of Saudi Arabia dramatic changes have not occurred in the nature of Saudi society. The extended family remains the fundamental unit of political and social order. For Saudis, the family is the primary basis of identity and status and the focus of individual loyalty. Families align by bloodline and affiliate within tribes under the control of a tribal leader. Leaders rule by consensus and exercise a critical role in relations between individuals and the government. It is this same tribal framework that stands as the model for the relationship which exists between the monarchy and all Saudi citizens. Loyalty to the state is not a matter of nationality, it is a matter of loyalty to the Al Saud family.

At the heart of the Saudi decision making system are the fundamental concepts of consensus and consultation. Leaders are to create a consensus for action, and only then implement their decision. Under western styled democracy this process would imply disagreement and debate, and require a degree of toleration unacceptable in Islamic society. Under Islamic law, differences of political opinion would amount to heresy. The supremacy of God's will must always come before personal will. It is also the relationship between individualism and equality which differentiates Wahhabi Islam from western democratic societies. Islam emphasizes equality within the family structure and discourages individualism. Western democracies, on the other hand, tend to encourage the notion of individual independence. Under Islam, the family provides the social welfare net for all members of the extended family.

Islam is more than a religion, it is deeply entwined within

the cultural values of the family and community through Islamic family law. Concepts of sex roles remain extremely traditional. Western style women's emancipation will be impossible in the near term. However, women are able to attend college and retain selective employment opportunities. Wahhabi principles still maintain a firm grip on public morality and social behavior.

REFORM MOVEMENTS. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed an increase in the demand for change. These demands have represented both a conservative and liberal view point. Religious fundamentalists are pushing for a return to basic Islamic values and the withdrawal of western influence from the Kingdom. The technocrats are demanding increased participation in decision making and relaxed restraints on public discussion and the press.⁴

After a period of religious relaxation in the 70s and 80s religious fundamentalism is on the upswing. Fueled by growing resentment over the maldistribution of wealth, double standards and hypocrisy with the royal family the fundamentalist movement is attempting to reaffirm the Islamic values of the past. The movement contains a small minority of extremists, Islamic university graduates, unemployed, and disenchanted with government policies, but their numbers are growing. The fundamentalists movement provides an acute challenge to the King because the legitimacy of the regime rests on Islam.

Since the religious establishment wields significant

⁴Judith Miller, "The Struggle Within," The New York Times Magazine 10 March 1991 27-46.

influence in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi monarchy must pay close attention to what the religious leadership says. So far, it has not inhibited the Kingdom's strides towards modernization. The religious community by itself does not represent a major threat to the Saudi regime. However, a combination of several other factors, the dissatisfied elite among the technocrats, human rights movement (Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights - CDLR), in concert could jeopardize the current regime.

The Saudi government has historically provided the Saudi citizenry a number of generous subsidies in an attempt to prevent confrontation. To continue modernization the King will need to challenge the religious extremists. To do so, he will need the support of the technocrats. The fundamentalists stand as the largest roadblock to any form of democratization within the Kingdom. Fundamentalists actively condemn any form of westernization. The King has, and must, take the fundamentalist's activities seriously. Recent history has shown us that the Shah of Iran's fall was caused by his attempt to secularize Iran and push it to rapidly toward western ways.⁵

Saudi changes resulting from government sponsored development projects helped create a new class of Saudi, the technocrat. These urban based, western educated individuals emerged from the merchant class and low status families. The technocrats, recruited by the Al Saud family, were given the responsibility of orchestrating the country's economic development programs. Although maintaining a degree of access to political power, the

⁵Casper Weinberger, "Saudi Arabia," Forbes 6 June 1994 35.

technocrats grew dissatisfied with their exclusion from the political process and their required adherence to Islamic social behavior.

Lacking the legal means from which to mobilize their efforts this group has been forced to address their concerns with the King through the use of petitions. In 1990, they petitioned the King for the creation of an elected maglis, a judiciary independent of the ulama, and a review of the restrictive codes that applied to women. It should be noted that the technocrat's desire for political participation was not a call for democratization (i.e. free elections) as defined by western standards. Instead, the political participation desired by Saudi technocrats encompasses the ability to critically and openly express ones concerns to the King.

The technocrats represent the best opportunity for change and liberalization of past political practices. These young Saudis are restless, unemployed, and discouraged by a lack of opportunity. They desire to lift restraints on public discussion and the press, end corruption, enhance government accountability, and limit the power of the religious establishment, especially the religious police. They have not asked for, nor do they desire western forms of democratization.

In May 1993, a new group of Saudi Islamic scholars and technocrats joined forces to form an independent human rights commission. This commission, the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) was organized by its founders to enforce what they believed to be a continued decline in Islamic

standards.⁶ After the loss of its more conservative members, Muhammad Al Massaui, a physics professor, became the CDLR spokesman denouncing the corruption of rulers and the lack of rights for the ruled.⁷ The government quickly cracked down by arresting 110 Saudi citizens for what was described as actions which undermined national security.

After his arrest by Saudi authorities, Massaui fled to London where he continued his attack on the House of Saud. Using faxes and toll free telephones the CDLR was still capable of circulating its message of repression, corruption, and lack of free expression in the Kingdom. The CDLR's stated objective is to achieve open representative government which is accountable to the people. Their desire, however, is to incorporate change, but only under the strict application of Sharia law.⁸

Although the CDLR is not now capable of acting with force, their actions must be taken seriously, as they provide an alternative to many intellectuals in and out of the universities who see little opportunity in their future. The CDLR and other reformers are seeking openness, checks on the government, and accountability of the Kingdom's wealth under Islamic law. None of these organizations have openly expressed a desire for western forms of democracy. They desire, instead, a purer form of Islam cleaned of corruption and tribal customs.

⁶Anonymous, "Challenge to the House of Saud," The Economist 8 October 1995: 41

⁷Ibid., 41.

⁸Ibid., 41

ECONOMY. Traditionally, the dissatisfaction of Saudi citizens has been silenced through an extensive system of subsidies and a lavish welfare system that provides free housing, free education and free medical care. The House of Saud's ability to please its citizens, however, has become increasingly more difficult. Lavish spending and declines in oil prices have caused the Kingdom's budget deficit to grow and forced external borrowing to meet financial payments. The Kingdom's financial and economic status, if not corrected, could cause political problems and instability. Worst of all a fundamentalist government.

The premature introduction of democracy may actually hamper economic development. Diversification of the economy, so as to make it less dependent on oil exports, must be accomplished first in order to reinforce the country's infrastructure. Continued economic difficulties plays into the hands of the fundamentalists who prefer a return to pure Islamic ways while turning away from western values, free market economy initiatives and foreign investments and privatization in the Kingdom.

Oil accounts for more than 90% of the country's exports and nearly 75% of government revenues. Due to a surplus of oil in the 1980s, oil prices dropped cutting revenues as the Kingdom was spending large sums to build its infrastructure. As a result, the government has cut investment, initiated spending cuts of 20% in 1994 and been forced to delay payments (i.e. \$10 billion of a \$25 billion purchase of American weapon systems). The Saudi debt has ballooned from nothing in 1988 to more than \$50 billion by the end of 1993. Central bank reserves, once more than \$100 billion,

are at an all time low of only \$4 billion.

Changes in the economy also brought change to the traditional means of livelihood for the Saudi citizen. The growing infrastructure now required increased technical training and expertise. Saudi university graduates hitting the job market found themselves totally unprepared for productive work.⁹ Only 2% of the workforce in the private sector today are comprised of Saudis. Although an excellent place for foreign investment, privatization requires foreign labor, increased exposure to western people and values, and does not provide the immediate answer of putting the young Saudi to work.

The Kingdom must strive to curtail spending and put its "House" in order. The surpluses have dwindled while discontent has grown. The Saudi response has been a call for a return to Islamic values, not democratization. Economic stability is critical if modernization and economic liberalization that will allow privatization can continue.

POLITICS. The Saudi King is an absolute monarch with no formal institutionalized checks and balances on his authority. His ability to rule effectively, however, is dependent on maintaining a consensus with his family and the religious ulama. Although the Al Saud family numbers in excess of 20,000, the most important branch is known as Al Faisal, the descendants of Abd Al Aziz's grandfather. Only these males of the Al Saud family, estimated at 4,000, are considered royalty.

⁹John Bossant, "Are the Saudis About to Shift Under Saudi Arabia?" International Business 18 February 1990 50-51

The ulama provide religious legitimacy for Saudi rule. These prominent clergy constitute the members of the Council of Senior Ulama for consultation between the King and religious community. As the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the King considers ulama support critical. In addition to the ulama, a number of important beduin tribes and several merchant families have political influence in the Kingdom.

The Saudi political system will not lead political change. This is because the fundamental legitimacy of the political system is grounded in Islam, the religious ideological basis of the Saudi state. In accordance with Islamic law, subjects are duty bound to obey the King as long as he rules by Islamic law. This religious ideology is in direct contrast to western styled democracy which requires loyalty to the democratic process. A system in which no group can guarantee that its interests will automatically or always prevail.

Post Gulf War Saudi has been pushed to deal with increased popular pressure and demands for liberalization. Years of over spending and borrowing have severely limited the Kingdom's availability of funds. The result, has left the regime unable to meet the demands of the population whose standard of living is not rising as quickly as the government had once promised. The Saudis are, for the first time ever, having to make choices.¹⁰

The Kingdom's long awaited promise to create a majlis, consultative council, to alleviate poor government responsiveness

¹⁰Anonymous, "Saudi Arabia Pressured Reform," The Economist 15 January, 1994 45-46

surprisingly came true. In December 1993, The King appointed a 60 member Consultative Council as well as 13 regional councils to advise, propose and review laws. The King's political experiment was not meant to introduce democracy. The King still retained authority for all foreign and domestic policy decisions. The King was quick to point out that the majlis was rooted in the Sharia and that pluralism and democracy were not for Saudi Arabia.¹¹

The political dissent which exists in the Kingdom is aimed at the specific members of the royal family, especially at the royal lifestyle, not at the Saud-Wahhabi system as a whole. However, any political modernization will need to be incremental and supported by the religious system. A new Bill of Rights coupled with initiatives to prohibit government authorities from violating basic human rights of citizens have put the Saudi government on the correct path. These actions for the time being have slowed the voice of discontent.

CONCLUSION

A policy of actively promoting democracy in Saudi Arabia by the United States would be counterproductive and jeopardize relations with the Kingdom. The cultural, religious, political, and economic traditions of the Kingdom are not yet compatible with the principles of democracy. To be successful, political reform must grow out of the culture of Saudi society. For believing Muslims, legitimate authority comes from God alone, and the ruler derives his power not from the people, but from God and his holy law. The Al Saud's right to rule is a powerful component

¹¹Ibid , 46

of its government's legitimacy and is thus a source of great underlying strength. History has shown that the lack of legitimacy has been behind most democratic revolutions.

The US needs to assume a more balanced, "Go Slow", foreign policy with the Kingdom. One that judges the Kingdom by the same standards it does other countries treating all parties fairly and equally. The failure of US policymakers to differentiate between Islamic movements (moderate revivalism versus radical and violent extremists) has led to the assumption that the mixing of religion and politics leads to fanaticism and instability. The US must respect Islam as a religion and understand that a return to traditional values does not lead to conflict with the west. Modernization can evolve under this system.

The future stability of Saudi Arabia will depend on its ability to balance demands for political participation with the traditional concentration of power within the Saudi elite. Modernization initiatives and the creation of the Consultative Council have shown that Saudi religious traditions are capable of having multiple ideological interpretations. It is possible for the Saudi citizens and government to evolve a form of government that will be compatible with their own historical, cultural, and religious traditions and yet bring individual freedom and human rights to its people. Limited democracy will be the best that the regime is prepared to offer its people. The Al Saud family will not tolerate political liberalization that jeopardizes their right to rule.

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