

Saudi Arabia: The Longevity of the Al-Saud Monarchy and the Threat of Islamic Revolution

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Many of the circumstances that made Iran ripe for revolution in 1979 have also existed in Saudi Arabia over the last several decades. However, unlike the Shah, the Al-Saud monarchy has shown consistent political skill in managing various potential sources of instability, thus sparing Saudi Arabia from experiencing a revolution similar to that in Iran. This essay will examine the key factors contributing to political instability that have existed in both Saudi Arabia and the Shah's Iran, followed by an analysis of the key differences between the two countries' political climates which have insured the preservation of Al-Saud rule.

It is necessary to first give a brief analysis of the factors that led to Ayatollah Khomeini's overthrow of the Shah's regime in 1979. Mohammad Reza Shah's regime was dogged by accusations of illegitimacy after the Shah was restored to the leadership of Iran following the CIA-led overthrow of the popularly elected Mossadeq government in 1953. Resentment of western cultural and political incursions into Iran had grown since its occupation by Britain and Russia during World War Two, and the involvement of the United States, on behalf of the British, in the removal of a government which had asserted Iranian sovereignty over its oil resources meant the Shah was thereafter seen as a puppet of the US government.¹

There was a degree of hyperbole attached to such allegations, which often overlooked the degree to which perceived US interests and those of the Shah coincided. According to Avery *et al*, 'Iran was largely subjected to the role of a dependent ally, increasingly susceptible to American dictates'.² It was, in fact, a complex relationship. But the brutal suppression of dissent practised by the Shah was deeply resented. While the 1973 spike in oil wealth increased economic inequality and allowed corruption to flourish, rather than achieving

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¹ Monte Palmer, *The Politics of the Middle East* (2nd ed, 2007) 266.

² Amin Saikal, 'Iranian Foreign Policy, 1921-1979' in Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly and Charles Melville (eds), *The Cambridge History of Iran – Volume 7: From Nadir Shahi To The Islamic Republic* (1991) 426, 445.

nation-wide prosperity.³ The close ties between the regime and the United States were exploited by opposition forces. And the brutal crackdown on a pro-Khomeini protest in 1978 'unleashed a cycle of violence from which the regime could not recover'.⁴

Palmer suggests that the failure of the Shah's regime, despite its US support, lay primarily in the personality of the Shah and his unrealistic visions of grandeur. This led to unpopular policies and hugely wasteful spending, and offended diverse sectors of Iranian society.⁵ His authoritarian leadership style was no match for the grassroots appeal of the Islamic fundamentalists and the left, who were able to take particular advantage of a poverty-stricken peasant class uprooted by the Shah's drive for rapid industrialisation.⁶ His modernisation policies were seen by the religious establishment as offensive to Islam, while the educated elites wanted greater political liberalisation and resented his subservience to the United States.⁷ Zonis concludes that Iranians had become disillusioned by the regime's corruption and incompetency.⁸

It has been noted that many of the conditions that left Iran vulnerable to revolution in 1979 have also existed in Saudi Arabia. These include an authoritarian regime with little political freedom; a close relationship with the United States; an economy dependent on oil wealth; and a powerful and politically active religious establishment. However, despite these similarities, the Saudi government has managed, consistently, to overcome destabilising factors and either successfully repress, or pacify, dissenting elements in Saudi society. An analysis of these potential agents of political instability illustrates the key differences between the conduct of the Shah and the Saudi monarchy that have allowed Saudi Arabia to avoid a revolution similar to that of Iran.

The legitimacy of the Al Saud regime is primarily based on two factors: religion and oil wealth. However it is first relevant to note the differing historical roots of the Saudi and Iranian monarchies. Reza Khan became Shah with British assistance in 1925, while his son inherited the throne and was restored to it by an American-led coup.⁹ Neither Shah gained power through legitimate succession based on popular support for the monarchy. Conversely, Champion points out that the Al-Saud family have ruled Saudi Arabia long enough to be seen as traditional leaders in

³ Marvin Zonis, 'Iran' in Michael Adams (ed), *The Middle East* (1988) 359, 361.

⁴ Palmer, above n 1, 270.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid* 271.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Marvin Zonis, 'Iran' in Michael Adams (ed), *The Middle East* (1988) 359, 364.

⁹ Palmer, above n 1, 266.

a country that strongly values tradition.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Al-Saud have retained their historic religious legitimacy through a continued close relationship with the Saudi religious establishment (the *ulema*).¹¹ Professing to uphold Islamic values in conservative Saudi society, and endorsement of the legitimacy of the regime by the *ulema*, has been a key element underpinning the durability of the Al-Saud regime.

The interdependent relationship between the Saudi government and the religious establishment in modern Saudi Arabia is essentially an extension of the religious-political 'contract' between Ibn Saud and Ibn Abdul-Wahhab that provided the foundation on which the monarchy was established in 1744.¹² A similar relationship was formed in fifteenth century Iran between the Shi'ia clergy and the Safavid dynasty; but, according to Al-Mani, by the late eighteenth century the clergy:

'had become so powerful and wealthy that they had freed themselves from the political tutelage characteristic of the Safavid era...to the point of achieving their own autonomy'.¹³

Bin Sayeed points out that in Iran, the clerics enjoyed enormous respect and prestige because of their autonomy from the government and considerable ideological influence. In contrast, the traditional alliance between the Al-Saud family and the religious establishment means that '[t]he *ulema* in Saudi Arabia do not enjoy the same kind of prestige because they are not autonomous and their role has been coopted by the regime'.¹⁴ In effect, the Saudi regime has largely managed to regulate the *ulema* by employing them through state institutions.¹⁵

Furthermore, in Iran, the Shah left the door open to theocratic revolution by ignoring calls for religious reform and repressing the religious establishment along with other dissident elements of society.¹⁶ The Saudi monarchy has taken a notably different approach by allowing the *ulema* to retain full ideological authority as well as benefiting from Saudi oil wealth. While the religious *ulema* in Saudi Arabia do not exert direct political control as in post-revolutionary Iran, the Saudi regime has allowed them to exert a sufficiently strong ideological authority

¹⁰ Daryl Champion, 'Saudi Arabia: Elements of Instability within Stability' in Barry Rubin (ed), *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf* (2002) 127, 129.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Saleh Al-Mani, 'The Ideological Dimension in Saudi-Iranian Elections' in Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi (ed), *Iran and the Gulf: A Search for Stability* (1996) 158, 159.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Khalid Bin Sayeed, *Western Dominance and Political Islam: Challenge and Response* (1995) 95.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 96.

¹⁶ Al-Mani, above n 12, 160.

over civil society and governance to be satisfied with their subordination to the state. This contrasts with the revolutionary tendencies that emerged within the Iranian clergy, which was forced to compete with the repressive state rather than cooperate with it.¹⁷ As Al-Mani puts it, the key difference is that ‘the power structures of the *ulema* in Iran have historically paralleled those of the state, while in Saudi Arabia they have historically been part of it’.¹⁸

However the Saudi regime’s relationship with religion has been paradoxical. The modern Saudi leadership has struggled to reconcile the religious conservatism, which has provided the stabilising basis for the monarchy’s power, with the need to build a modern nation-state in a globalised world. The 1980s was a time of crisis for the royal family, following Khomeini’s overthrow of the Shah in 1979 and the seizure of the Holy Mosque in Mecca months later by Islamists demanding that Saudi Arabia become an Islamic republic.¹⁹ This wave of religious zeal, which travelled through the region following the Iranian revolution and subsequent calls by Khomeini for the overthrow of the conservative Arab regimes, threatened the authority of the Saudi monarchy, who could not openly oppose the idea of an Islamic government since its legitimacy was based on rule which protected Islam.²⁰ The regime also faced a collapse in oil prices in the mid-1980s, which saw a sudden drop in income for the Kingdom.

Rather than cracking down on religious fundamentalists, the royal family ensured their longevity by drawing down the Kingdom’s massive financial reserves and affording more, rather than less, power to the *ulema* and morality police.²¹ Responding to Khomeini’s challenge to his authority, King Fahd changed his title from ‘His Majesty’ to ‘His Majesty, the Protector of the Two Holy Shrines’. Khomeini, on the other hand, responded by provoking deadly riots at the 1987 hajj.²² The king also acceded to the demands of the *ulema* for the imposition of increased religious piety on the Saudi population, without increasing freedom of speech and political representation, which could destabilise the regime’s authority. An increasingly educated and westernised middle class then protested this oppression with calls for liberalisation,²³ underlining the delicate balancing act between directly competing social interests—and particularly the tension between modernisation and conservatism—played by the regime since the 1970s.

¹⁷ Al-Mani, above n 12, 161.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Palmer, above n 1, 191.

²⁰ Ibid 192.

²¹ Ibid 192-3.

²² Ibid 193.

²³ Ibid 193-4.

Discontent in both an emerging educated middle class seeking greater political freedom and Islamists seeking the abolition of the monarchy in favour of an Islamic theocracy was evident in two ways. Firstly, through petitions handed to the king demanding the reduction of political and moral corruption amongst the royal family. And secondly, in outbursts of jihadist terrorism during the 1990s.²⁴ The 1991 petitions represented significant challenges to the regime's authority given that, traditionally, such criticism would be considered treason. However, the Saudis acknowledged the danger in excessive repression of the Islamic resistance in a deeply religious society. Rather than launching a crackdown, the Saudi king responded to the fundamentalists' petition with promises of concessions to assuage their concerns. The move was necessary given that the fundamentalists were gaining support amongst traditionally monarchist constituencies.²⁵ Bin Sayeed suggests that '[i]f the king had adopted a tougher line against the Islamic radicals, such a course of action might have spelled disaster for the country'.²⁶

Since the reign of King Faisal the Saudis have managed to maintain stability through leadership that has struck a careful balance between encouraging modernisation whilst respecting the conservatism of Saudi society. For example, whilst Faisal introduced radio and television to Saudi Arabia he 'ordered large portions of programming time be devoted to religious instruction and readings from the Quran'.²⁷ It is this level of cultural and social intuition, lacked by the Shah, which has kept the Saudi monarchy from reaching a similar demise to its Iranian counterpart. In contrast to the Shah's reliance on the brutal repression of dissent, a high level of cultural and social intuition has led the Saudi monarchy to make enough superficial concessions to political liberalisation to avoid revolution by the educated middle class, while carefully managing its relationship with the *ulema*, and retaining its strongly authoritarian political power. A Consultative Council was introduced in 1993 to appease stirrings for greater political participation. Rather than being a genuine step toward democracy, however, the council is merely a formalisation of the traditional Arab consultation-consensus system of *shura*, and plays an advisory role only.²⁸ According to Alaolmolki, the council 'is nothing more than a

²⁴ Palmer, above n 1, 197-8.

²⁵ Bin Sayeed, above n 14, 87-90.

²⁶ Ibid 91.

²⁷ David E. Long, 'The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' in Karl Yambert (ed), *The Contemporary Middle East* (2006) 185, 186.

²⁸ Ibid 194-5.

formalisation of the existing 50 or so members of the inner circle appointed by the monarch'.²⁹

The judicious use of oil revenue has been a key part of this process. Seznec suggests that a decision to genuinely open up the Saudi political system to allow participation by diverse sectors of society would have resulted in the demise of Al-Saud rule. Rather, the policy of effectively buying public docility through the rentier distribution of oil wealth has successfully avoided revolution.³⁰ In Iran, the Shah's distribution of oil wealth was widely perceived as unequal and wasteful, and the masses continued to live in poverty despite growing oil revenues. However Saudi Arabia's 'binary' economic system ensures that oil wealth is distributed relatively evenly across the population.³¹ So long as per capita oil income remains sufficient, and the Saudis continue to maintain a balance among the competing pressures on the regime, revolution has seemed unlikely.

In sum, the Saudi welfare state has produced a political climate where economic wealth and stability ensures political stability.³² However this long-standing social contract is increasingly compromised by demographic changes. Saudi Arabia's steadily growing population faces high unemployment. Champion suggests that as per capita income decreases and socio-economic expectations of the population increase, there may be added pressure placed on the government for greater political participation because the welfare state may no longer afford to buy social docility.³³ However for the moment this docility is sufficiently supported by a brutal security force, an ingrained national respect for authoritarian power and a sense of fatalism stemming from strict adherence to Islam.³⁴ It is also worth noting that in contrast to the united Shi'ite resistance in Iran, political resistance in Saudi Arabia is generally fragmented; discontented young people align themselves across a diverse political spectrum. According to Champion, this split works to the regime's advantage since 'the radically differing makeup of young, potential malcontents only serves to illustrate further the fractured nature of the opposition to the Al-Saud'.³⁵

²⁹ Nozar Alaolmolki, *The Persian Gulf in the Twenty First Century: Stability and Change* (1996) 132.

³⁰ Jean François Seznec, 'Stirrings in Saudi Arabia' (2002) 13 *Journal of Democracy* 33, 35.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Long, above n 27, 192.

³³ Champion, above n 10, 143-4.

³⁴ Palmer, above n 1, 213-4.

³⁵ Champion, above n 10, 144-5.

In Iran, the Shah's lack of legitimacy stemmed largely from his image as a puppet of the US government. However the US-alliance has been less dangerous for the Saudi regime, largely due to the fact that Saudi Arabia had never been colonised or subject to extended foreign occupation.³⁶ According to Long, it is due to this history of proud independence that the 'Saudis never developed the same degree of anti-Western xenophobia as other Arab states'.³⁷ Whilst this has ensured that the close Saudi-US relationship has not formerly been a significant source of instability, this has changed, particularly since the large US military presence in Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War. Along with other factors such as the US occupation of Iraq, continued US support for Israel, and strains in the US-Saudi relationship post-9.11, the close relationship that the Al-Saud regime has enjoyed with the United States has consequently become a source of internal instability and thereby fuel for radical jihadist resistance groups. As in Iran following US interference in Iranian politics, anti-American and anti-western sentiment has grown significantly in Saudi Arabia. Much of this anger has been directed toward the Saudi monarchy due to its continued close relationship with the United States.³⁸

A final element of the longevity of the Saudi regime is the strong political cohesion achieved through the structure and size of the Saudi royal family. This cohesion is partly a response to the significant security threats faced over recent decades; as Palmer puts it, '[e]ither they stand together or they fall together'.³⁹ An extensive power base is maintained by the sheer size of 'cadet' members of the royal family, numbering over 6000 princes whose respective circles of influence and presence at all levels of government ensures that 'very little escapes the purview of the royal family'.⁴⁰ Most royals hold weekly meetings with their subjects in order to address issues and build comprehensive links into Saudi society.⁴¹

Over the last several decades the Al-Saud regime has experienced varied threats to its authority. However the regime has consistently overcome these threats through a comprehensive network of allegiances and the ability to strike a shrewd balance between the competing interests of modernisation and conservatism. Whilst the regime will continue to face challenges in a globalised, post-9.11 world, most observers predict that its authority will continue into the foreseeable future. It is the unique possession of adaptability combined with

³⁶ Long, above n 27, 196.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Palmer, above n 1, 200-1.

³⁹ Ibid 202.

⁴⁰ Monte Palmer, *The Politics of the Middle East* (2nd ed, 2007) 203.

⁴¹ Ibid.

enduring conservatism and tradition that has allowed the Al-Saud monarchy to avoid a revolution similar to that of Iran under the Shah.

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