

Javier Solis

Professor Malnight

IPE of MENA

23 February 2018

Saudi Arabia: A Theocracy in Trouble

Saudi Arabia's political, social, and economic institutions are dominated by the country's ruling clan/royal family, the Sauds. All power decision making power is ultimately vested in the king, while Saudi princes oversee nearly every other aspect of Saudi society, from finance to education and everything in between. The Sauds have maintained their legitimacy through the support of the *ulema*, influential Sunni Muslim clerics who have longstanding ties with the al-Saud clan (Obaid 1999, 2009). Though Saudi Arabia's vast oil reserves made them an integral piece of the global economy during the Second World War, the country has been wary of globalization and entrenchment by western powers. In contemporary times, Saudi Arabia watched anxiously as the 2011 Arab Spring protests engulfed neighboring country after country. Though Saudi Arabia did see a few sporadic protests, they were not anywhere near the level of countries like Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Saudi Arabia was simply better equipped to handle the protests because they had more oil-funded government money to serve as a panacea for angry citizens, legions of loyal soldiers willing to crack down on dissidents, and vast patronage networks which grant the royal family legitimacy and authority (Gause 2011). Saudi Arabia's disdain for globalization can be partially explained through their clan-based approach towards politics and governance, which has placed the focus of their foreign policy ambitions on regime survival rather than geopolitical stability in the region (Khashan 2017). Though deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has undertaken some economic and social liberalization reforms to avoid meeting the same fate as many of his neighbors, these reforms are not accompanied with the political and structural reforms necessary for them to be successful (Bayoumi 2017). Under Solingen's classification of inward-looking versus outward-looking models of political survival, Saudi Arabia clearly pursued an inward-looking model: they prioritized self-sufficiency, military strength, and nationalism (in the form of religious clannism).

## Annotated Bibliography

Bayoumi, Alaa. "Challenges of the political change in Saudi Arabia." 15 November 2017.

*Middle East Monitor*. 2018 February 2018.

<<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171115-challenges-of-the-political-change-in-saudi-arabia/>>

Whereas Chulov's interview provides a brief overview of the reforms pursued by MBS, Bayoumi takes a more nuanced look at the political context in which they take place. Bayoumi warns that plans to liberalize the Saudi economy will come too abruptly and without "an institutional framework that would ensure a degree of transparency on one hand, and reassurance on the other". None of these reforms will be accompanied with political or structural reforms which are arguably necessary for these reforms to succeed. Power and influence is already concentrated in the hands of the royal family, but MBS appears to be centralizing it even further under his control. As power becomes more centralized, MBS will bear the sole responsibility for the copious internal and external challenges that face his country. Bayoumi concludes that the centralization of power will make it easier for potential adversaries to rally together and seize it for themselves.

This source confirms the information presented in Chulov's and Obaid's writings and extrapolates it using contextual information of Saudi Arabia's institutions and civil society to make predictions on the future of MBS's reforms and the regime's chances of survival. Bayoumi is a well-known Arab journalist who has written extensively for Al-Jazeera and the Middle East Monitor, so he is a credible source on this information.

Chulov, Martin. "I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says crown prince." 24 October 2017. *The Guardian*. 21 February 2018.

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>>

The Saudi royal family, under the guidance of 32-year-old deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud (MBS), has undertaken some reforms to alleviate some of the rising social tension described by Obaid. MBS lifted the kingdom's 35 year old ban on cinemas as well as the ban on female drivers and also launched an ambitious anti-corruption initiative which some have criticized as a final move to consolidate power.

This was an interview with the MBS himself, so his words and promises must be taken with a grain of salt. It is very possible that he is disguising his selfish ulterior motives under the guise of altruism. However, he appears to have genuinely embraced some social and economic liberalization reforms—at the very least, for the sake of regime survival. Anti-corruption campaigns, altruistic or otherwise, will give the impression to foreign investors that Saudi Arabia is suitable for investment, something Saudi Arabia has struggled to do in recent years.

Gause, F. Gregory, III. "Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East." December 2011. *The Council on Foreign Relations*. 21 February 2018. <<https://www.cfr.org/report/saudi-arabia-new-middle-east>>

Gause examines why Saudi Arabia's political and social structure made it out of the Arab Spring relatively intact. Gause postulates that unlike its neighbors, Saudi Arabia had enough money in their coffers to increase payouts to the public as a panacea in the face of

social turmoil. The royal family also benefitted from the unwavering support of their security forces, which are often handpicked disproportionately from tribes with longstanding loyalties to the Saud clan. These security forces have been able to crackdown on political dissidents and protestors quickly and effectively, compared to the security forces of Tunisia and Libya, where many soldiers defected to the other side. Finally, Gause states that the al-Saud regime is able to effectively mobilize their extensive patronage networks, the most important of which is the Sunni religious establishment. Gause discusses how the royal family uses these networks to micromanage different aspects of Saudi society and ensure that citizens are kept in check.

The Council on Foreign Relations is one of the leading foreign policy and international affairs think tanks in the country. The report is a little dated (7 years) so it does not account for more recent geopolitical developments in the region, such as the unfolding of the Syrian Civil War, the ratification of the Iran nuclear deal, a decrease in global oil prices, the rise in power of MBS, or President Trump's administration, among other factors that have changed or emerged since. This report incorporates some of the elements of tribal politics presented by Khashan's article and examines how that dynamic has been able to sustain itself in the face of massive civil turmoil in the region, but also the challenges it faces going forward (namely, a fiscal squeeze in response to declining oil prices, rising unemployment—especially among youth—, and seemingly never-ending sociopolitical instability in their backyard).

Khashan, Hilal. "For Saudi Arabia, All Politics Is Local." 22 November 2017. *The Middle East Forum*. 21 February 2018. <<http://www.meforum.org/7035/for-saudi-arabia-all-politics-is-local>>

Khashan discusses the influence of tribal politics on Arab domestic and foreign policy.

The Saudis, being the dominant tribe in the Arab peninsula, have often exerted their power and influence on lesser tribes in the region and have used Saudi-linked tribes in other neighboring countries to undermine the ruling regimes of unfriendly tribes.

Khashan observes that this tribal politics-based foreign policy is "a drive to preserve the kingdom's territorial integrity and political stability," but nothing more. The Saudis are not particularly concerned with maintaining a stability in the Middle East unless it might upset the balance of power on the peninsula; they typically relegate the task to the US.

Khashan is a reliable authority on MENA affairs and politics. He is currently a professor of political science and the department chair at the American University of Beirut.

Khashan has authored five books and over 90 articles in peer-reviewed journals. The information presented in this source seems to be consistent with the information provided in the Economist Intelligence Unit's report as well as Obaid's two articles.

Obaid, Nawaf E. "In Al-Saud We Trust." 17 November 2009. *Foreign Policy*. 21 February 2018.

<<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/17/in-al-saud-we-trust/>>

Obaid takes a critical look at the stability of the al-Saud regime, making the projection that if they continue down the path they are on, the Saudi royal family is "doomed to imminent overthrow at the hands of radical Muslims" much like what happened to the shah of Iran. Obaid draws various parallels between modern-day Saudi Arabia and pre-revolutionary Iran, including their close relationship with the United States and the strain this places on domestic society, influential religious fundamentalist groups, and economic difficulties.

Obaid is a very credible and reliable source on MENA politics. He is currently a visiting fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Furthermore, his experience as special advisor to Prince Turki, then-Saudi Ambassador to the UK, and his time spent on the Saudi Royal Court have given him a unique, inside perspective on the Saudi royal family. Though much of the information presented in Obaid's analysis, it is nearly ten years old and can be considered a little dated. See Chulov for a more recent analysis of Saudi civil society.

—. "The Power of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Leaders." *Middle East Quarterly* September 1999: 51-58. Digital. <<http://www.meforum.org/482/the-power-of-saudi-arabias-islamic-leaders>>

Obaid examines the power and influence wielded by Saudi Arabia's top Sunni clerics known as the ulema. The relationship between the al-Saud ruling family and the Sunni religious leadership has been around over three centuries and has been mutually beneficial: the al-Saud regime was granted legitimacy in the eyes of Islam while the clerics benefitted largely from the state's preferential treatment. Obaid explains that while their power and influence might not be observable by western observers, it should not be underestimated how much the ulema can shape public opinion towards the Saudi royal family and other matters. According to Obaid, the ulema was crucial in convincing the Saudi government to impose 1973 oil embargo during the Yom Kippur War, to allow US troops onto Saudi soil during the first Gulf War, and to financially and ideologically support several Islamic terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

"Saudi Arabia: Political forces at a glance." 20 April 2017. *The Economist Intelligence Unit*. 21 February 21.

<<http://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=945359078&Country=Saudi%20Arabia&topic=Summary&subtopic=Political+forces+at+a+glance>>

This analysis lays out the basic structure and decision making process of the Saudi Arabian government. All executive and legislative power is vested in the king, who must be a direct male descendant of the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, Abdel-Aziz al-Saud. Political parties are outlawed so there are no formal factions *per se*, but rather, a group of senior princes and their followers vying with each other for more power. Many of the Saud princes also hold key positions in many of the government's industries, including finance, telecommunications, and business. On domestic issues, the king often consults high-ranking Sunni Muslim clergy members, but these recommendations are nonbinding and the king retains supreme power over foreign and domestic policy making.

The analysis presented is very credible and objective. It states quantitative information that can be consistently rather than qualitative information that is prone to change. *The Economist* is also a very reliable source for this type of information.