

THE DOMESTIC CHALLENGES FACING

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SAUDI ARABIA

by

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B.A. Economics 1985.
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Art in International Affairs

Division of Social Sciences and Education

LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Beirut



Thesis Approval Form

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Program : M. A. in International Affairs

Division/Dept : Social Sciences and Education

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For Karim

Acknowledgment

Throughout the various stages of the Thesis work, I was given guidance and support by my advisor Dr. Fawwaz Traboulsi, to whom I am most grateful.

Sincere appreciation and gratitude are due to Dr. Ohannes Geukjian and Dr. Paul Tabar for being on my Thesis Committee.

Finally I would like to thank my husband Karim for his endless love and support.

ABSTRACT

Saudi Arabia is going through political, social and economic internal changes that might constitute quite a challenge to the Kingdom's stability and to the ruling family's continuity.

This research aims at studying these challenges and evaluating the risks they represent to the Kingdom and to the *Ál Saud*.

The thesis is composed of five major parts and a conclusion. The first chapter gives a historical background as to the formation of Saudi state and the consolidation of King Abdel Aziz's reign.

Chapter two studies the patronage pyramid along with two major issues of concern to the ruling dynasty: protecting their image through the control of books and media, and a succession issue that the family might face.

Chapter three examines political dissent in the Kingdom in its four aspects: the secular and nationalist trend, the royal opposition with the Free Princes episode, the Liberal-Islamists, and finally the religious opposition which constitutes the major source of concern to the regime. An entire section is devoted to the Shiite question.

Chapter four reveals the various causes of the social malaise reigning in the Kingdom: segregation of the sexes, homosexuality, drugs, criminality, huge population of expatriates, increasing western cultural influences..., with a special emphasis on the situation of Saudi women.

Chapter five studies the various stages the Saudi economy has gone through, with the latest challenges it is facing since the Kingdom has joined the WTO in 2005.

The conclusion evaluates all these challenges and their impact on the stability of both the country and the regime.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the political, social, and economic internal changes that are shaking the Saudi society, putting in jeopardy its legendary stability as well as the continuity of the Āl Saud dynasty. Political analysts in the Gulf believe that the greatest danger to Gulf stability is not a nuclear Iran or a traditional border conflict, but rather internal political and socioeconomic changes that might be increasingly hard for leaders to control.

After the attacks of September 11 2001, with 15 out of the 19 hijackers being Saudis, the Kingdom has been put under close scrutiny with hawkish think tanks prevailing in the Bush administration such as the JINSA and the PNAC¹, and President George Bush setting for himself "the enormous challenge of fostering democracy in a region noted for its absence"². The fate of the West's leading Arab ally and most important supplier of energy, (Saudi Arabia produces 15% of world oil production with 9.5 million barrels/day³, possesses the quarter of the world's total proven reserves 262 billion barrels and is the single largest producer of oil⁴) is not of mere Saudi concern, but affects also Saudi Arabia's neighbours and co-religionists, hence threatening the stability of the Middle East and the Muslim world. With regard to Saudi Arabia's role in the areas of finance and Islam too, in addition to that of oil, any serious changes or social unrest in the country may have far reaching international consequences.

¹ Joel Beinin, "Pro-Israel Hawks and the Second Gulf War" *Middle East Report Online*, April 6, p.4.

² Augustus Richard Norton, "Making War, Making Peace: The Middle East Entangles America", *Current History*, January 2004, p.6.

³ Saudi Aramco, premier producteur mondial, s'engage à maintenir sa capacité additionnelle, *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Tuesday, 13th of June 2006, p.9.

⁴ Michael Renner, "Post-Saddam Iraq: Linchpin of a New Oil Order", in Micah and Sifry, *The Iraq War Reader*, p. 581.

In their willingness to retain power, the ruling elite has carried out, from above, some limited but necessary reforms that were previously thought of as *bidaa* (innovations) to protect itself from any serious social unrest, for instance education has gone through radical transformations as discussed in chapter IV, the economy became submitted to quinquennial plans and subject to reforms in compliance with the IMF, OECD, and the WTO recommendations as seen in chapter V, even political reforms were undertaken as discussed in chapter III.

The regime has always played the role of a super-tribe (see chapter II) by distributing the colossal oil revenues to a broad social base consisting of the merchant class, businessmen, the noble bedouin tribes, the urban middle-class and the bureaucracy. Also, the regime has secured for itself a strong and heavily equipped army, police and National Guard, and was harshly criticized for that by the religious opposition (chapter III).

With respect to the political opposition, the regime opted for either banning the leftists, or paying off those who were considered as *wasatiyyun* (centrists) such as the Liberal-Islamists, so that they became integrated in the establishment.

But what will happen to the Islamists who demand radical changes? And with the rising wave of discontent, will the regime be able to contain any eventual coming unrest as it has done so far? To draw a parallel with similar regimes is not an easy task, since there are no historical precedents because the socio-political and economic Saudi patterns, along with other Gulf oil countries, are unique.

Literature review

The sources used for the writing of this thesis rely mostly on books, other media of information being scarce if they exist at all.

As for the authors, they come from different horizons. Most of the Saudi ones are either fierce opponents to the regime so that they have to publish their books in foreign countries such as the United Kingdom or Lebanon. King's College lecturer in social anthropology and writer Madawi al-Rasheed, author of *A History of Saudi Arabia* and *Maazaq ul-islam fi as-Soudiya fi al-qarn al-hadi wal ishreen* is one of them. Another one is Mai Yamani. According to John Bradley⁵, anthropologist and Sheikh Ahmad Zaki's daughter, Mai Yamani has been asked by the Saudi Minister of Interior to stop writing after having written a controversial book about the Kingdom, so that she has chosen London for publishing her books. Other authors deal with taboo issues not tolerated in the Kingdom such as Rajaa al-Saneh's *Banat al-Riyadh* discussing homosexuality, conjugal infidelity, men harassing their wives..,in brief all what is taboo in such a conservative society. As for Rania al-Baz's, *al-mushawwaha i'ndama tatahawal jarima a'tifiyya ila qadiyat dawla*, her book reveals the misfortune of a former Saudi TV speakerine brutalized by a depressive husband. Both al-Saneh and al-Baz opted for Beirut to release their books. Other female writers such as the Lebanese Mouna Ayoub were banned from the Kingdom after publishing *La Vérité Autobiographie* in Paris in 2000. She has been judged so insolent and risen the ire of King Fahd himself. As for half Persian half-Swiss Carmen bin Laden, Yeslam's (Osama's half brother) divorcée, and author of *The Veiled Kingdom*, she left the Kingdom for cultural and personal reasons.

Mona alMunajjed's research *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* was quite helpful to study the evolution of women in Saudi society particularly with respect to education. Her approach was scientific relying on case studies, interviews and figures. The same could

⁵ John Bradley, *Saudi Arabia exposed, Inside a Kingdom in Crisis*, New York, 2005, p.29.

be said of Mai Yamani's *Changed Identities The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*. Ahmad Abodahman's *The Belt* depicts life in Asir in a poetic and allegoric way. The originality of Abodahman is that he was the first Saudi author to write in French. The original title was *La Ceinture*, published by Gallimard in 2000.

Concerning other books or articles of valuable interest to this research, particularly to chapter III dealing with the political opposition, are Ma'moun Fandy's *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* and Stéphane Lacroix's article *Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New "Islam Liberal" Reformists* discussing the Liberal-Islamists' rise and future as well as the F. Gregory Gause III's article *Saudi Arabia Challenged* relating that part of the Saudi reluctance to proceed with more thoroughgoing reform stems from the ruling family's desire to keep its monopoly of power. Michael Scott Doran's *The Saudi Paradox* proved to be very helpful with respect to the dichotomy *tawhid/taqarub* adepts among whom are senior *Âl Saud* Princes. R. Hrair Dekmejian's *Saudi Arabia's Consultative Council* is a comprehensive study on the evolution and formalization of the first *Majlis* of 1993 as well as its functional roles: consultative, cooptative, legislative, mediational, representational, symbolic and honorific. Dekmejian is the author of *The Rise of Political Islamism in Saudi Arabia*, an excellent and balanced overview of the Islamist opposition.

With respect to the Shiite question the International Crisis Group's report *The Shiite Question In Saudi Arabia* is quite a helpful tool.

Gerald Posner's *Secrets of the Kingdom: The Inside Story of the Saudi US-Connection*, and John Bradley's *Saudi Arabia exposed, Inside a Kingdom in Crisis*, revealed some political and social developments taking place inside the Kingdom such as the Shia' fear, the segregation of the sexes, the urban crime wave, the expatriates' conditions...

The censorship issue is widely debated by Bradley, but also by London-based journalist Saïd Aburish in his book *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*, with however a biased and clear antagonistic position towards the Ál Saud. Biased too in some aspects is As'ad Abukhalil's *The Battle For Saudi Arabia*. Abukhalil's thanks go "to all the Saudi Marxists, socialists, feminists, anarchists, and Arab nationalists"⁶ that he has known.

For a scientific and objective approach, Alain Gresh's article *Saudi Arabia: reality check* and Pascal Ménoret's book *The Saudi Enigma A History* are helpful tools too, particularly with respect to the economic section, as well as Daryl Champion's *The Paradoxical Kingdom*. Alexei Vassiliev's *The History of Saudi Arabia* is a reference with respect to any research to be done about Saudi Arabia.

Concerning Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the sources used relied on Jonathan Randal's *Osama*, as well as on a series of internet articles either issued by Osama himself or al-Qaeda or written about him by Maha Azzam, *Al-Qaeda; the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of violence*, Christina Hellmich's *Al-Qaeda-terrorists, hypocrites, fundamentalists*, and Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner's *Killing in the Name of Islam: AL-Qaeda's Justification fo September 11*.

As for the interviews, the lecture given by Jeddah radio journalist "Women and the Media: The Challenges to Empowerment in Saudi Arabia" in the Irwin Conference Room at LAU, May 24th 2006, was very interesting with respect to the evolution of the situation in the Kingdom with respect to highlighting the role of the new generation in women leadership and their access to high positions in a variety of working fields.

⁶ As'ad Abukhalil. *The Battle For Saudi Arabia, Royalty, Fundamentalism and Global Power*. Seven Stories Press, New York, 2004, p. 15.

Otherwise, interviews broadcasted by different TV channels Saudi or others were interesting too such as Prince Talal's, in addition to female writers Nadine Bdeir's and Rajaa al-Saneh's. The Saudi TV broadcasting channels do provide a lot of information about events taking place in the Kingdom but they relay the official point of view of the regime only.

The movies attended are made by Western producers either American (Michael Moore) or British (Anthony Thomas). The movie industry does not exist in the Kingdom nor do movie theatres. As a matter of fact, the first Saudi fiction movie, *Keif al-hal?* was released in November 2006 in Bahrein. It depicts the frustrations of young Saudis, their unsatisfied dreams and ambitions. The scenario is written by a Lebanese and an Egyptian, the actress is Jordanian.

The Press is also a helpful tool especially when it comes to up-to-date news, such as the sucession issue or the newly instaured economic and curricula reforms.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY

A. THE FORMATION OF THE SAUDI STATE

As a start, here is a brief insight into the formation of the Saudi state. The original formation of the Saudi state was an endogenous matter; making of the Āl Saud, initially the masters of Diri'yya oasis, also the masters most of the lands of Arabia. The first Saudi-Wahhabi state emerged in the 18th century (1745-1811), centered along the Riyadh-Hael axis. It was a religio-political relationship, based on a combination of the military force of Mohammad ibn Saud, Amir of Diri'yya and the spiritual influence of Mohammad ibn Abd el-Wahhab the puritan Hanbalite Sheikh. Thus a centralizing process was started with the intention of supporting Islam over discordant nomadism, hence giving the theological concept of *tawhid* a political function. But the movement was defeated by Mohammad Ali of Egypt with Ottoman, British, and Gulf Shiites support and was replaced by the al-Rasheed rival tribe.

The second Saudi state (1843-1865) was confronted with the Qassim problem, particularly the Unaiza rebellion of 1862 and internecine rivalries between the four sons of Faisal bin Turki, the founder of the second dynasty: Abdallah who controlled the central province, Saud who controlled the southern regions, Mohammad who controlled the northern areas, and Faysal who upon his father's death, contested his brother Abdallah's authority and used his mother's tribe, the 'Ujmans, to combat his brother. However, the catalyzing factor that led to the disintegration of the second Saudi state was the Rashidis, rulers of Hael, attack on Riyadh. Their rule lasted from 1890 until 1902.

The Saudi-Wahhabis (via the *Âl Saud / Âl el- Sheikh* alliance), what Madawi al-Rasheed calls “an alliance not so holy”⁷ were to come back with a similar process of tribal conquest and pacification, with an important part from the *ikhwan*, a religio-tribal corps that subjugated Arabia for ibn Saud, and constituted the main force in defining the new Bedouin state in Arabia in the name of Islam. John Habib defines the *ikhwan* as “those Bedouins who accepted the fundamentals of orthodox Islam of the Hanbali school as preached by Abdel-Wahhab which their fathers and forefathers had forgotten or had perverted and who through the persuasion of the religious missionaries and with the material assistance of Abdel-Aziz abandoned their nomadic life to live in the Hijrah which were built by him for them”⁸.

Al-Rasheed quotes Abdel-Aziz in another definition of the *ikhwan* as:

“Those who agreed to settle and endorse the *mutawwaa*'s teaching became known as *ikhwan*. They were taught to obey the legitimate *imam* and respond to his call for jihad”⁹.

As early as 1902, ibn Saud engaged the *mutawwaa*, Najdi men of religion, a typical Najdi phenomenon described as: “religious ritual specialists, or *fiqh/ibada* experts, who used to teach and apply Hanbali *fiqh* only, and considered other branches of the religious and linguistic sciences as intellectual luxuries that were not needed in their own society”¹⁰. Thus they differed from the *ulama* whose knowledge and expertise often included other branches of religious sciences, in addition to *fiqh*. Most Najdi men of religion belonged to the *mutawwaa* type, with the exception of some descendants of Mohammad ibn Abdel Wahhab, also known as *Âl el-Sheikh*, and a few other

⁷ Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge, 2002, p.62.

⁸ J. Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and their role in the creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930*, p. 16 in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.59.

⁹ M. Abd al-Aziz, *al-Hujjar wa nata'ijuha fi 'asr al-malik 'abd al-aziz*, [al-Hujjar and their consequences during the era of King 'Abd al-'Aziz], p.105, in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.60.

¹⁰ al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.49.

personalities who maintained their tradition of wide religious scholarship that goes back to the eighteenth century.

Since the Riyadh meeting of 1928, the role of the *ulama* within the Saudi formula was becoming more and more defined: their role would be limited to giving their opinions regarding matters of Islamic ritual and technologic innovations, whereas running the country's political affairs was the domain of the ruling dynasty, a division of labour between the political *imam* and his men of religion that goes back to the first alliance of 1745.

B. THE CONSOLIDATION OF IBN SAUD'S REIGN

To consolidate their role, the *Al Saud* resorted to various methods. The consolidation of the Saudi state in that early period did not depend on institutions, bureaucracies or administration, because there were not any, but was function of informal social and cultural mechanisms, specific to the Arabian Peninsula. In 1925, the government attempted at weakening the tribal *assabiya*, and subsequently the tribal political autonomy, by cancelling the tribes' right of collective property of the *deera* that was historically considered as theirs. The next step was the redistribution of these lands according to the discretion of the authorities to the most loyal persons. The durability of the Saudi state of 1932 is due to the fact that although upon his return from his Koweiti exile in 1902 ibn Saud relied on familial ancestral claims to rule over a region that once belonged to his ancestors, ibn Saud's leadership was drawn from outside the major tribal groups of the Arabian peninsula, and hence he was able to play the role of mediator between the various tribes, the sedentary communities, and the more cosmopolitan regions of Hasa and Hijaz.

Another measure taken by the new ruler was tribal alliance through inter-marriage in order to expand the social base of the ruling clique, and in order to maintain loyalty

and control. The continuity of kingship needed the creation of a royal lineage able to provide future kings. After having marginalized collateral branches of the Āl Saud, ibn Saud consolidated his own line of descent with the forty three sons he had from his several marriages with Arabian nobility and religious families. According to Aburish, "Most of Saudi Arabia is related to the House of Saud by marriage"¹¹. Paradoxically, the royal family has witnessed an opposite transformation. Whereas society has been losing its tribal cachet, the Saudi ruling family has been transformed into a ruling and owning tribe. As said by Aburish, "the numbers of the House of Saud became big enough to make it a tribe"¹². The Āl Saud have managed to be above regional loyalties, presenting themselves as a symbol of national unity not as a Najdi family. With an estimate of five thousand members, the royal family represents thus the largest and most cohesive group in the kingdom, related to almost all the major tribes of Saudi Arabia through marriage.

Another measure the Āl Saud resorted to is forced sedentarization that was imposed on most of the remaining nomads to accelerate the move towards a modern-looking society in order not to obstruct the expansion in trade and the beginning of activities related to oil. So, the nomads under the leadership of their sheikhs were needed for several purposes: protecting the oil installations, pipelines and ports, for the safety of the railways network and roads linking all parts of the country. The sheikhs were rewarded financially for the services rendered to the state which was trying to adjust society to the requirements of a peripheral capitalist mode of production. The sheikhs of the tribes were thus turned into employees whose main function was to provide the loyalty of the tribe's sons to the state.

¹¹ Saïd K. Aburish, *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of The House of Saud*, London, Bloomsbury, 2005, p.31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.69.

As ibn Saud needed a religious rationale for his military expansion, and understanding that nomads could not be subjugated by force or money, he therefore opted for containing the movement of the *ikhwan* until he needed no more religious connotation to his conquest, at which point he crushed the leadership of the *ikhwan*.

Riyadh was re-conquered in 1902, al-Ihsa in 1913, Asir, Taif and Mecca in 1924, Medina and Jeddah in 1925. The new state was declared on 22 September 1932 (with Najd, Hijaz, al-Ihsa, and Asir united)¹³. Ibn Saud declared his realm (so far called the Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd and its Dependencies) *al-mamlaka al-arabiyya al-saudiyya*, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, hence emphasizing the merger of the two main regions, al-Hijaz and Najd, and also commemorating ibn Saud's part in creating a unified state under his authority.

It has been argued that the adoption of the term Kingdom by ibn Saud in 1932 was an attempt to associate the divine attributes of *mulk* with those of the Wahhabi imamate, in addition to other factors such as the absolute quality of *mulk* so it does not depend on conditional authority, as is the case with *sulta*¹⁴. Of all the states in the region, it is only Saudi Arabia that can claim a degree of legitimacy in terms of traditional Islamic constitutional theory, because of the alliance between Mohammad ibn Saud, and the founder of the Wahhabi movement in 1744¹⁵.

So after having consolidated his reign ibn Saud was able to bequeath to his heirs a Kingdom characterized by a well defined division of labour: the religious affairs are run

¹³ Ayubi Nazih, "State Formation in the Modern Era: The Colonial Indigenous Mix", *Overstating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London, 1995, p.131.

¹⁴ George Joffé, "Concepts of Sovereignty in the Gulf Region", in *Territorial Foundations of the Gulf States*, Richard Schofield ed., New York, 1994, p.80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.81.

by the *ulama* whereas the affairs of the state are run by the Ál Saud. But for how long will this “holy alliance” of 1745 still be valid?

CHAPTER TWO

THE RULING FAMILY: CENSORSHIP AND SUCCESSION ISSUES

A. THE PATRONAGE PYRAMID

Modern Saudi Arabia has a surface of 2,240,000 square kilometers and is divided administratively into 13 emirates, called provinces: Mecca, Madina, Riyadh, al-Qassim, al-Ihsa, Asir, Jizan, Najran, Tabuk, Hael, the Northern Frontier (al hudud al-shimaliya), al-Baha and al-Jawf, and a population amounting to 19.7 million Saudis.

At the summit of the patronage pyramid there is the Saudi elite circle. These people work primarily to maximize the gain of their own family first and of their other relatives in the second position. They also control all the strategic functions, ministries (Interior, Defence, Foreign Affairs, Petroleum), and provinces, with three major axes within the family after King Fahd's death: Abdallah's, Nayef's and Sultan's, each of the three endowed with a military machine: the SANG (Saudi Arabian National Guard) for Abdallah, the Security Forces for Nayef and the Army for Sultan. Going down the pyramid, we find aristocratic families with tribal bases, then follows a third tier of people including commercial families with limited tribal connections, and then a fourth tier, far remote from political governance, of ordinary, not wealthy, and with no reputable tribal standing Saudi families who cannot intermarry with tribal families to achieve political ascension: assistants and bureaucrats, who follow a patron-client relationship. At the bottom, the productive base is assigned to the 6.3 million foreigners whose majority constitutes the "proletariat class"¹⁶ although since the last decade, an attempt to a "saudization" of jobs has been undertaken.

¹⁶ Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, New York, 1999, p.30.

The number of male Princes is estimated between 2000 and 7000¹⁷. Although the size of the royal family has never been set for sure, some estimates have been ranging between 6000 and 10000¹⁸, others quote a range of 2000 to 7000 princes¹⁹, the 2000 figure seems to be an estimate of the really influential ones. Anyway, a number big enough to allow the Āl Saud to monopolize the state institutions, where key-positions have been held by several generations of the male royals in the military as well as in bureaucracy, in addition to the regional administration that has been dominated by branches of the Saudi royal family and its chosen aides. King Abdallah's mother belongs to the al-Rashid tribe from Jabal Shammar; so in order to become King he needed the support of members of the extended family and particularly the important religious Council of *Ulama*; otherwise the Saudi rule is currently dominated by the "Sudairi seven", also known as the "Sudairi clan"²⁰: the seven full brothers who are the sons of Abdul Aziz and his Sudairi wife Hassa bint Ahmad. The late King Fahd was one of them, Prince Sultan (the Crown Prince, Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Aviation, Inspector General) is another, Prince Nayef , Interior Minister, and Prince Salman , governor of Riyadh, are two others as well as senior candidates for the throne after Sultan; the other three being Abdel Rahman, Turki, and Ahmad. This branch of the family has chosen the state apparatus as a means to augment its power, by establishing a hegemonic influence on the government, "an amplified nepotism"²¹ according to Salamé. The "Sudairi seven" attempt to establish a dynasty within the dynasty as well as to eliminate or restrict the power of other groups within the family.

¹⁷ Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*, in Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, New York, 2003, p.71.

¹⁸ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.294.

¹⁹ Anthony Cordesman, in Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.71.

²⁰ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, pp.72-73.

²¹ Ghassan Salamé, "Political power and the Saudi state", in Berch Berberoglu ed., *Power and Stability in the Middle East*, in Champion, *op.cit.*, p.72.

However, the extended royal family has maintained its basic cohesiveness because otherwise too much was at stake. According to Madawi al-Rasheed, there is a total internal agreement between the three major axis (Abdallah's, Sultan's, and Nayef's) to perpetuate the hegemony of the ruling tribe regarding the decision-making as well as the ownership of the country²², despite some divergences that may appear to a novice eye. The Āl Saud have exploited the nation's oil wealth and modernized the country while at the same time, attempting to maintain a traditional, authoritarian, patron-client relationship, what it is also known as "desert democracy"²³.

With the discovery of oil and the advent of the rentier state, the rapid transformation of a traditional, tribal society has caused serious social strains. Reconciling Islam, hereditary authority, and development while staying in control in a stable socio-political order have constituted the obsession of the regime.

One way the Āl Saud have been able to manage socio-political pressures has been by playing the role of a super-tribe in manipulating the state revenues in order to buy a large degree of popular legitimacy as traditional patriarchs. This legitimacy of largess, also called "from-the-cradle-to-the-grave" welfare system²⁴ by Abukhalil has been a strategy adopted to ensure political stability which is in harmony with the social heritage of Arabia where leaders are supposed to fulfill certain responsibilities toward their tribes, in return for allegiance, this is what is referred to as the "Saudi social-contract"²⁵. Osama bin Laden, in tracing the history of the Saudi Kingdom from its re-foundation in 1902 to the second Gulf War in 1991 said:

²² Madawi al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul islah fi as-soudiyya fi al-qarn al-hadi wa al-ishreen*, Beirut, 2005, p.43.

²³ Daryl Champion, "Saudi Arabia: Elements of Instability within Stability", in *Crisis in the Contemporary Persian Gulf States*, Portland OR., 2001, p.142.

²⁴ As'ad Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, p.96.

²⁵ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.78.

“The regime started under the flag of applying Islamic law, and under this banner all the people of Saudi Arabia came to help the Saudi family take power. Abdul Aziz did not apply Islamic law; the country was set up for his family. Then, after the discovery of petroleum, the Saudi regime found another support—the money to make people rich and give them the services and life they wanted to make them satisfied.”²⁶

Even the clergy has long been enjoying many privileges that enabled its members to enrich themselves in counterpart of a blind fidelity to the ruling family. Speculation allowed them to sell at high prices lands received as a gift from the state. They were also accorded the same diplomatic immunity as members of the royal family. Clerics cannot be arrested or put on trial without the explicit authorization of the Palace. Small wonder then they remain faithful to their benefactors.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the only country besides Bolivia (named after Simón Bolívar) to be named after its ruler, in this case, Abdel Aziz Āl Saud, also known as ibn Saud, hence confirming the “cliché of the King being one with the State”²⁷. In fact the Āl Saud have been tempted to consider the country as their private property, their own fiefdom, with a bare consideration, if any, to their people. As a matter of fact, slavery used to be allowed in the Kingdom until the year 1962, date of its official abolition, under the rule of King Faysal, even little Princes used to possess a slave to entertain them, called *akiwaya*²⁸, little brother, but in reality hostage playmate, in addition to another type of slavery, called the “new slavery”²⁹, involving the expatriate workers. This state of mind has entailed the successive monarchs from King Abdel Aziz onwards to enjoy many privileges that only totalitarian rulers can afford; although things have been changing slowly with the Kingdom put under close scrutiny

²⁶ Robert Fisk. “Oussama Ben Laden par Robert Fisk”. *Le Monde*, 19 September 2001. reprinted from *The London Independent*, in Pascal Ménoret. *The Saudi Enigma*, pp.5-6.

²⁷ Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, p.89.

²⁸ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.15.

²⁹ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.90.

with hawkish think tanks prevailing in the Bush administration such as the JINSA and the PNAC³⁰ promoting Human Rights issues in the Middle East, and President George W. Bush setting for himself “the enormous challenge of fostering democracy in a region noted for its absence”³¹.

B. CONTROL OVER MEDIA AND BOOKS

The Āl Saud are very keen about preserving a decent image domestically of course, and in the outside world if possible. Therefore, their control of the press and other media is of major concern. The Saudi press is controlled by the Press Information Council, which is headed by Prince Nayef, the Minister of Interior, with Prince Saud al-Faysal and the Minister of Information as members. The importance the ruling family gives to the control of the media is obvious with entrusting Prince Nayef, the head of the police and the CAVES (Committee for the Advance of Virtue and Eradication of Sin), with the responsibility of censorship. The control of the Supreme Information Council begins with the licensing of publications: publishers should prove to be loyal to the ruling family and those “disinclined to take orders”³² are not qualified. The editors have to be approved of also, even newspaper and magazine retailers should acquire a special license, and must be Saudis; as Aburish puts it: “selling the written word is too important to be left to foreigners”³³. The control is permanent because editors are required to meet Prince Nayef to receive the instructions of what is “permissible” and what is “desirable”, so that a longstanding joke among the population is that the sports daily *Arriyadiyah* “is the most popular newspaper in Saudi Arabia because it is the only

³⁰ Beinin, J., *op.cit.*

³¹ Norton, A.R., *op.cit.*

³² Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.219.

³³ *Ibid.*

one that prints the truth"³⁴. Any attempt from editors in chief to publish stories that exposed the darker side of life inside Saudi Arabia was considered as an act of treachery, helping hostile outsiders to undermine "the home of Islam"³⁵. The situation is well depicted by the fallen into disgrace Gulf chief of the London based *al-Hayat*, journalist Dawood al Shiryan:

"We don't have much space in which to express our ideas. Be it religion, relations between ethnic groups, women driving cars... there are too many subjects where if you write about it you have to go round and round and can't come inside and write about it freely. It's still the case that when a Saudi journalist writes, he fears he might not be able to walk about freely the next day. One person in the Ministry of Information can just pick up the phone and say: 'Stop your column for three months.' He will never give you a reason. I was writing a column in a local newspaper. Sometimes they stopped me for one week or one month because I wrote about mobile phones or the ministry of health. I wasn't talking about politics. I wasn't talking about religion. Just normal things. So I stopped writing. And then I waited for another phone call telling me I can write again. We have a list of things we can't talk about. Not a blacklist. Everything is on the blacklist. What we get is a whitelist. This is just too much. Saudis don't trust their local newspapers about politics. They know we only put one side of the news. Most of the Saudi newspapers only publish positive developments. Anything even a little negative, and they take it out. The government says that it will not give us more freedom because we are still not professional. They say: 'we'll give you time to be professional, and then we'll give you freedom.' But this is wrong. Freedom cultivates professionalism. If you always tell me to do this and to do that, how can I grow up? It's like the chicken and the egg: What comes first, freedom or responsibility?"³⁶

There is many a case of harassed journalists, or co-opted by the regime after having been harsh critics such as *al-Watan's* famous editor in chief Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi was fired from his position by Prince Nayef; the religious leaders issued a *fatwa* calling for a boycott of the newspaper after Khashoggi launched a campaign against the religious police. In London where he exiled himself, he joined the al-Faysal's team as a PR man together with the reform-minded Prince Turki, at the Saudi Embassy in London. His transformation was visible within few days of moving to London, when

³⁴ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.186

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.144-145.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

he was reported denying on the BBC "that anyone has ever been tortured in Saudi Arabia"³⁷.

However, the fate of other writers was more cruel such as the kidnapping and assassination of dissident Nasser as-Saeed in Beirut in 1979. His writings against the ruling family upset the royals because he used to reveal constantly the misdeeds of the Āl Saud. According to Aburish³⁸, two million dollars were paid to an associate of Yasser Arafat so that the job was done in clear infraction to the Lebanese sovereignty.

Books too are subject to censorship. Writer Abdo Khal, an elementary school teacher, has written five novels that are not sold in his country because they "address the sacrosanct trio of taboos in the Arab world: sex, politics, and religion. But these are the things that make up people's lives"³⁹; so he publishes overseas. Another novelist, Mahmoud Trawri, a literary editor at *al-Watan*, has won the 2001 Sharjah Award for Arab Creativity for his first novel, *Maimouna*, a story which deals with the role of local merchants in the slave trade, and the racism that a family of African immigrants to Saudi Arabia has encountered. Nevertheless his book is officially forbidden in the Kingdom. According to Bradley, novels are banned in Saudi Arabia because "the Āl Saud have hijacked Islam's most sacred shrines and the royal family's legitimacy rests on their conflation of religious with political credentials"⁴⁰.

An illustration of how the Ministry of Information, also dubbed "Ministry of Denials"⁴¹ by Turki al-Sudeiri, editor in chief of *al-Riyadh*, daily controls the dissemination of information is the 1979 Mecca Mosque rebellion. The violent uprising against the House of Saud as unexpected as it was, took the establishment by surprise,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.203.

³⁸ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.65.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.218.

and the press had to wait twenty four hours for the instructions of the Ministry of Information in order to report the event. The ministry was in a state of confusion accusing Khomeini to be behind the siege of Mecca, then Sadat of Egypt, then the PLO, then Libya and finally a Zionist plot. After the siege was over, the Saudi establishment decided to make it look as if it were the work of demented religious fanatics, with a sort of blackout on the rebels' political demands, and particularly with respect to Juhayman al-Uteibi's (their leader) Wahhabi affiliation, a former student of Sheikh Abdel Aziz bin Baz, then Mufti of Saudi Arabia at the Imam Mohammad bin Saud University in Madina. The way the rebellion was smashed is again a *secret d'état* with non Muslim troops in this case French anti riot troops given special dispensation to enter Holy Mecca, and especially the Masjid al-Harām, the number of victims remains understated. The number of the rebels who surrendered was not revealed; the decision to execute them was announced the same day of their beheading, and the press stopped talking about the issue.

On the international scene, the ruling family's attitude vis-à-vis its image is as aggressive as it is domestically. This situation is very well depicted with the *Death of a Princess* episode. Although in the past, in more than one occasion a Saudi King was humiliated by the mayor of New York who refused to greet him or show him due respect, and although Islam and Muslims are represented negatively so that one Muslim is therefore regarded as typical of all Muslims, and there is hardly a prime-time television show without racist and insulting caricatures of Muslims, it is just when the royal family's reputation was offended that the Saudi regime did ask for retaliation. Hence Edward Said's pertinent wondering: "How was it that Islam was injured only in

the one instance and not in the others?"⁴² *Death of a Princess* is a film made by the British filmmaker Anthony Thomas in a docudrama form of a search for truth, based on the execution in July 1977 of a young Princess, Mishaal bint Fahd bint Mohammad, and her lover, Khaled Muhallal, a nephew of General Ali Shaer, Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon. Mishaal, who was already married to her first cousin who left her (as reported later by her German nanny Rosemary Bucheau), and her lover were caught escaping at Jeddah's airport. Although King Khaled was against a public execution, Prince Mohammad insisted on using his right to dispose of his grand-daughter and extended that right to her lover who under *shari'a* law should receive one hundred lashes and not be executed because he was single. Even if the condemnations were done in one of Prince Mohammad's moments of fury, such was his power and the respect for his seniority that even King Khaled felt impotent to prevent the drama, giving both the liberals at home and the westerners material to tarnish the Royal family. The outside world did not know of the story until five months later when London's *The Observer* published a version of the story. The release of the movie in 1980 created a diplomatic incident between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, because according to the Saudis, the film offended Islam and gave an erroneous picture of Arab society in general and particularly of Saudi justice. The Saudis argued that the Princess is no one's business but theirs, and that Westerners find her case interesting because it discredits the regime. Despite the Saudis' strong opposition to the film's showing, the Public Broadcasting Service ran the movie on May 12th 1980, followed by a sixty-minute panel discussion as a concession to the Saudi government.

⁴² Edward Said, *Covering Islam, How The Media And The Experts Determine How We See The Rest Of The World*, New York, 1997, p. 74.

On the Arab scene, the Saudi attempts at controlling Arab journalists and journalistic establishments began in the 1960's, as an attempt to counter Nasser's propaganda machine. The Saudi efforts at controlling the Arab press focused on Beirut because it was the headquarter of most of the pan-Arab newspapers, and after Nasser died in 1970, Saudi Arabia had replaced Egypt as the country which sponsored most of the privately owned Arab press in Lebanon, Morocco, Syria and Jordan. Salim al-Louzi, the editor of *al-Hawadess*, himself a "pirate" according to Aburish, divided the Lebanese journalists who were on the Saudi payroll into "pirates and beggars": "the first group threatened the Saudis until they paid them bounty, and the second just begged for money to do their dirty work"⁴³. After the death of King Faysal, "it became difficult to find an Arab journalist who did not receive a "present"⁴⁴. This situation even led President Charles Helou himself in 1966 to welcome a group of Beirut journalists saying "Welcome to your second country"⁴⁵, in an allusion to the first loyalty most of the Lebanese journalists had in those times, being in most of the times to Saudi Arabia.

By 1979, the Saudis were able to buy any talent available for sale, still they were unsatisfied aiming at extending their control of the Arab press to direct ownership. The ownership of the pan-Arab press started in 1979 by acquiring *as-Sharq al-Awsat* edited in London and transmitted to the Arab world via facsimile to printing presses, through the ownership of Prince Ahmad bin Salman, then *al-Hayat*, owned by Prince Khaled bin Sultan, the chief commander of the Arab forces during the Gulf War, then women's magazines such *as-Sharqiya- ELLE*, as well as other political and business weekly magazines in London and Beirut. With the Gulf War and the low profile of the Iraqis on the Arab scene, Saudi Arabia has been more free to dictate its terms whether directly

⁴³ Aburish, *op.cit.*, pp.211-212.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.214.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.227.

owned or government-run ones in countries seeking financial support from it such as Morocco, Egypt and Syria.

The Saudis are also interested by other media, they acquired in 1991, through King Fahd's brother in law, Walid al Ibrahim the *MBC*, Middle East Broadcasting Corporation, an Arabic language television station in London, also they own the *ANA*, the Arab radio station in Washington DC, the *Radio Orient*, the Arabic-language radio in France, 14.9 per cent of London's *TV-AM*, and recently the *United Press International*. So that, according to Madawi al-Rasheed, Saudi Arabia was able to acquire the biggest media empire ever available to any Arab country⁴⁶.

C. THE SUCCESSION ISSUE

But the ruling dynasty might face a succession dilemma. The 2000 figure seems to be an estimate of the really influential Princes. Most observers agree that the succession to Prince Sultan will be a crisis point. In 1999, the Internet Intelligence news agency Stratfor.com has reached the conclusion that "Abdallah's all but certain ascent to the throne will mark only a brief period of stability in one of the world's most important nations"⁴⁷. This means that Sultan is believed to be the last viable candidate for the throne among the sons of Abdel Aziz. At some stage, the royal family will have to pass power to the second or even the third generation of princes, and with no institutionalized succession procedure set, chaos may take place in the post-Sultan era. In an attempt to remedy this gap, King Abdallah has announced in a royal decree on the 19th of October 2006, a reform in the terms of succession to the throne. The reform consists of the creation of a committee comprising the sons of King Abdel Aziz, the founder of the Kingdom. The committee, which is based in Riyadh, is presided by the

⁴⁶ al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul-islam fi as-soudiyya*, p.11.

⁴⁷ Champion, *The Saudi Paradox*, p.294.

dean of the ruling family and needs the presence of at least two third of its members to take decisions by secret vote and a majority decision. It is constituted by Abdel Aziz's sons as well as by the sons of each of his deceased or ill or inable sons, as well as two other designated members by the King and his Crown Prince. This committee will be in charge of designating the Crown Prince as well as to authorize a medical commission to decide of the capability of the designated King or Crown Prince. The medical committee is constituted by three deans of medical schools in addition to two other members, its mission is to decide whether the King and/or the Crown Prince are unable to exercise power temporarily or permanently. However, this measure is not applicable to King Abdallah neither to his Crown Prince and half-brother Sultan. By virtue of this decree, the King suggests one to three names for the post of Crown Prince that can be refused by the family committee which might suggest its own candidate. If the latter is refused by the King, the committee is to settle the issue by vote in a delay not to exceed one month. Before the decree, the designation of the Crown Prince was left to the discretion of the *Ál Saud* family council. According to the Consultative Council member, Mohamad al-Zelfa, this is considered as a turning point for the continuity of the ruling dynasty and its transfer of power to the most deserving among Abdel Aziz's sons, in a way to appease the worries of the ruling family members as well as of the citizens⁴⁸. But this reform has not stood the test of time yet.

So far, the *Ál Saud* have been able to play the role of a super-tribe by manipulating the state's revenue in order to buy a large degree of popular legitimacy thus containing any rising wave of discontent. This so-called Saudi social-contract is quite in harmony

⁴⁸ "Abdallah annonce une réforme des modalités de succession au trône wahhabite", *L'Orient- LE JOUR*, Saturday 21st of October 2006, p.11.

with the traditions in Arabia where leaders are to fulfill certain responsibilities towards their tribes in return for allegiance.

The regime is always keen to keep a decent image of the ruling dynasty domestically of course, thus the strict control over the local media and book industry, but also on the Arab and International scene, whenever this is possible.

Another issue discussed in this chapter is the succession dilemma, with Crown Prince Sultan believed to be the last viable among the sons of Abdel-Aziz, and thus succession will have to pass to the second and even third generations of Princes.

So, will the “legitimacy of largess” be enough to do with any further wave of discontent, will the petro-dollars be able to ensure the ongoing control of the media, and will the succession dilemma be resolved by King Abdallah’s recent reform?

These issues the regime is to take into account in addition to many others. Political dissent is the one discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

POLITICAL DISSENT

In her article entitled "*Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East*", Lisa Anderson, Dean of School of International Public Affairs at Columbia University, says that: "Regimes get the opposition they deserve and that the opposition is a mirror image of the regime"⁴⁹. The fractured nature of the Saudi society demonstrates the country's pluralism that has been encouraged by the regime for political purposes. This diversity exists between the "Hanbali Muwahhideen" (Wahhabis), and followers of the other three Sunnis *mazaheb* i.e. Shafe'i, Maliki, and Hanafi, as well as the Saudi Shiites, between urban citizens and nomad population, between Hijazis, living in Jeddah-Mecca area, those of the Southern province, and those of Najd in the Riyadh province, between the traditional and the modern lifestyles. So, the Saudi society is not as homogeneous as it might appear to outsiders, and this diversity is also clear in the disunity of the political opposition. All this is to the benefit of the Āl-Saud.

A. A BRIEF HISTORY

Since its beginnings, the Āl Saud family has been confronted to two major threats whether external or internal, leading to the collapse of the Saudi state, yet the Āl Saud in both cases managed to retrieve power. The disintegration of the first Saudi state (1745-1811) is mainly due to the invasion of Egypt's Mohamad Ali's forces (an external factor), and the internal dissent in the form of a refusal to pay zakat because the central state failed to offer them appropriate security. The collapse of the second Saudi state (1843-1865) is mainly due to internal factors, with the Rashidis, rulers of Hael, taking

⁴⁹ Lisa Anderson. "Lawless Government and Illegal Opposition: Reflections on the Middle East". pp.219-232. in Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.13.

over Riyadh in 1890, bringing the second Saudi sate to an end. In 1902, upon his return from his exile in Kuwait, the young Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Āl Saud killed the Rashidi governor of Riyadh, and with the support of the people of Riyadh win back the territory of what is now known as Saudi Arabia and proclaimed himself king in 1932.

The current Saudi regime has faced and is still facing many internal threats that can be categorized as follows: a secular opposition, a royal opposition, a liberal opposition, and a religious opposition, although King Abdallah in his speech broadcasted on Saudi TV channel 1 in the program entitled *sa'at hiwar*, June the 16th 2006, refused categorically this segmentation of the Saudi society, considering all Saudis as being part of a homogeneous nation.

B. THE VARIOUS TYPES OF OPPOSITION

1. The secular opposition

The secular and Arab nationalist trend was the ideological drive behind the opposition to the Saudi rule during the reign of King Saud (1953-1964). Saudis were angered by the US presence in the Dahran airbase, so workers in the then ARAMCO declared a strike in 1953. And in 1956, upon Nasser's visit to Saudi Arabia, Saudi nationalists wanted King Saud to emulate Nasser's nationalization of Suez Canal and therefore nationalize ARAMCO. These demonstrations were done mostly by the Shiite indigenous population concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province of the Kingdom. Although Saud was a supporter of Nasser to the extent of cutting off Saudi relations with France and Britain after their 1956 attack on Egypt, he did paradoxically endorse the Eisenhower Doctrine. During his 1957 trip to the US, King Saud made it clear that he supported the US policy and agreed to extend the lease of Dahran airbase for another five years in counterpart of economic and military assistance. This led to further anti-royal sentiment.

The secular opposition included also the Ba'athists and a Saudi Communist Party who called for Arab unity and socialism. The most important of these groups was the Union of the People of the Arabian Peninsula established in 1958 and headed by Nasser as-Saeed who demanded constitutional reforms as well as an elected Parliament, called for Arab nationalism and Arab unity. The Saudi dissident Nasser as-Saeed (born in 1923) came to ARAMCO camp from his hometown Hael in search for employment. Through his contacts with Arab workers he got involved into politics to the point that he became the instigator of the 1953 riots and the 1956 strikes that pushed ARAMCO to raise the workers' wages as well as to reconsider the material and social conditions of the camps. As-Saeed activism was looked at disapprovingly by both ARAMCO and the Saudi authorities, who considered him as a revolutionary and imprisoned him. Upon his release, he spent his years of exile with his family in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon where he disappeared in 1979. His family is still living in Libya. The movement faded and died down with the assassination of its leader as well as with the Arab defeat in 1967.

Other threats to the Āl Saud have come from some secular inspired army officers who conducted ad hoc coup attempts. In 1955 senior army officers wanted to establish a government similar to that of Nasser's Egypt and attempted to kill Prince Faysal and King Saud. In 1963 nine Saudi pilots defected to Egypt, and in 1969 some Hijazi officers attempted another coup, and the government arrested sixty three officers for conspiracy against the government. The opposition movements based on socialist or Arab nationalist ideas, who found support among the Shiite minority, or some peripheral provinces, were easily defeated by the regime, relying on the loyalty of the population of Najd under the banner of Islam.

Lately in the 1990s, a number of officers were preparing a coup but escaped to Libya when their plot was discovered. The Saudi-Lybian relations are still tense till

today because of the alleged plot against the then Crown Prince Abdullah. According to the Saudis, the dissident Saad al-Faqih took \$1.2 million from an operative of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi to help arrange the assassination of Crown Prince Abdallah. And in October 2003, they claimed that al-Faqih gave the liaison officer the name of four radicals ready to carry out the assassination. Although al-Faqih had denied all allegations, and Kaddafi's son had declared that "Libya wanted regime change in Saudi Arabia, of course, but would not stoop to paying someone to assassinate the crown prince..."⁵⁰ The plot theory is still alive.

2. The royal opposition

As for the royal opposition, it has been led by Prince Talal bin Abdel Aziz. From 1958 till 1962, Prince Talal led the Movement of the Liberal Princes whose intention was to reform the system and to transform Saudi Arabia into a constitutional monarchy. In June 1960 the Liberal Princes submitted their demands to King Saud: a plan for constitutional reform and a draft constitution that are quite similar to the 1992 *Memorandum of Advice* with one major difference, the Liberal Princes wanted the rule of law whereas the *Memorandum* accepted the rule of *shari'a*, the Islamic law. Both King Saud and then Prime Minister Prince Faysal rejected the proposal for constitutional reform, but King Saud made a gesture towards the liberals by including Prince Talal and the Arab nationalist Abdullah al-Tariqi in his December 1960 cabinet as respectively finance minister and oil minister, hence forming "the most progressive government in Saudi history"⁵¹, according to Fandy. Abdallah al-Tariqi (born in 1925) left his native Najdi oasis Zilfi seeking secondary education in Koweit then higher education in Egypt.

⁵⁰ Bradley. *op.cit.*, p.197.

⁵¹ Fandy. *op.cit.*, p.45.

Upon his return to the country he found employment in the Ministry of Finance under the leadership of Abdallah al-Sulayman, the finance minister. He worked also as a translator for ibn Saud in his dealings with ARAMCO, and then took a grant to continue further studies in Cairo and Texas, and upon his return he was appointed director of Petroleum and Mineral Resources. During the reign of King Saud, he became oil minister of the newly created Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources. Under the influence of Nasserism, al-Tariqi demanded the nationalisation of ARAMCO, arguing that oil concessions with Arab countries were negotiated at a time when these countries were either under foreign occupation or were too unexperienced in such matters to fully understand the importance and intricacies of the agreements. Al-Tariqi participated in the first Arab Petroleum Congress which was held in Cairo in 1959 where he proposed that all petroleum agreements should be reviewed when they no longer suited one of the parties. He was also the main precursor behind the establishment of OPEC in September 1960, for which he forecasted to play a major part in preserving this irreplaceable natural resource, preventing economic waste and stabilising markets. OPEC had the Saudi full support as long as al-Tariqi was oil minister, before it became a tool in the hands of the oil companies.

Al-Tariqi's radical, nationalist and liberal views made him unpopular with Faysal who saw to it that he was dismissed from his post and leaving to Beirut where he established his own petroleum consulting firm. It is just in the 1980s that al-Tariqi's desire to see oil under complete national control was accomplished when ARAMCO became Saudi ARAMCO with Saudi Arabia taking full control of the company.

This free rein accorded by the King to the nationalists did not please the rest of the family whom he was in need of support mainly because of internal economic problems. So Saud asked Faysal's assistance, Faysal agreed to join the Cabinet only if the leftists

were dismissed. In August 15, 1962, Talal accused Saudi Arabia of taking his properties away arbitrarily, and three days later, Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz held a press conference blaming Talal for demanding a modification of the constitution while "Talal knows full well that Saudi Arabia has a constitution inspired by God and not drawn by man"⁵². Prince Talal left the Kingdom for Egypt with four of his brothers: Abdul Mohsen, Badr, Nawaf, and Fawaz, where he continued to attack the rest of the royal family verbally. Talal stayed in Cairo until 1964 until he could not stand any more the media campaign organized against him. In 1969 he was implicated in the Hijazi officers' military coup attempt and deprived from any political participation in Saudi Arabia.

3. The Liberal-Islamists

Dissent is not limited to secularists, royalty or Islamists, as it may look to a novice eye, because in the 1990s, Saudi Arabia has witnessed the rise of a new trend made up of former Islamists and liberals, Sunnis and Shiites, calling for democratic change within an Islamic framework through a revision of the Wahhabi doctrine. These people called themselves *wasatiyyun* (advocates of moderation), *aqlaniyyun* (rationalists), *tanwiriyyun* (enlighteners), but above all *islahiyyun* (reformists), and according to one of their prominent activists, Abdul-Aziz al-Qasim: "a bunch of liberal-Islamists"⁵³. In March 1992, those liberals got some satisfaction when the king issued a Basic Law in addition to two texts defining the characteristics of a consultative council and the role of the regions. In August 1993, the 60 members of the council were appointed by the king, with a majority of "modern elite" and a nominal number of *ulama*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Stéphane Lacroix. "Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New 'Islam Liberal' Reformists". *Middle East Journal*, Summer 2004. p.346.

The government's response confirms that the monarchy decided to co-opt the Westernized elite in order to help oppose the Islamists. In 1998, these activists began to reformulate their demands for political reforms in an Islamo-democratic fashion, while expressing unprecedented criticism on the Wahhabi doctrine, thus insisting on the necessity to combine political reform with religious reform. They have made alliances with individuals belonging to the remaining non-Sunni Islamist components of the Saudi intellectuals that is: the liberals and the Shiites. Through their efforts, they have succeeded to create a common democratic, nationalist, and anti-Wahhabi movement. This new trend differs from the previous by the novelty of its religio-political discourse, as well as by the diversity of its adherents who belong to very different generations, regions, and intellectual backgrounds.

The media *infatih*⁵⁴ which began in 1999 created more opportunities for the Islamic-liberal trend to express publicly their opinion. But it is the September 11 2001 attacks that served as a catalyst for them, when a nationalist atmosphere of unity in the face of adversity was created in the Kingdom. The Liberal-Islamists intellectuals took advantage of this situation to forge ahead their project of creating a wide consensus on their ideas and to present their aspirations into political manifestos and petitions that would unify the entire Saudi society.

The manifesto of April 2002, entitled *How we can coexist*⁵⁵ was a response to the open letter signed by 60 American intellectuals (among whom figured Fukoyama and Huntington), which was seeking to provide justification to the Bush's administration war on terror policy. The 150 signatories called for peaceful coexistence with the West, at the same time reaffirming their attachment to their Saudi and Islamic specificity.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.358.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.359.

They were able to rally almost all socio-political groups including liberals and women, even radical Islamists such as Salman al-Auda and Safar al-Hawali who belong to the *Sahwa al-Islamiyya* movement. Those religious scholars have been co-opted by the government and used by the latter as substitutes for the council of Senior *ulama* after the death of Sheikh bin Baz and Sheikh bin Uthaymin in 1999 and 2001. The intention behind this was for the Liberal-Islamists to make their political program appear as if it were the result of a national consensus, in addition to gaining the support of senior *sahwist* Sheikhs hence acquiring their legitimacy. But the Sheikhs from the Salafi-Jihadi trend as guardians of the Wahhabi orthodoxy and of the principle of *al-walaa wal-baraa* (loyalty to fellow Muslims and rejection of the infidels) criticized the manifesto, turning it into a fiasco. Even sheikh Safar al-Hawali and sheikh Salman al-Auda had to recant their positions.

In January 2003, a new manifesto, called *Vision for the present and the future of the Homeland*⁵⁶ tackled the internal problems faced by the country requesting the implementation of political, economic and social reforms. The political reforms asked for the separation of powers, the implementation of the rule of law, equal rights for all citizens regardless of their region, tribe, and confessions, the creation of elected *majlis al-shura*, freedom of speech, assembly, and organization to allow the emergence of a true civil society. As for the economic demands, they asked for a fair distribution of wealth, measures against corruption and waste, and the diversification of the country's revenues. The social demands dealt with the respect of human rights, the ending of discrimination, the struggle against unemployment, the role of women who constitute half of the society and should be given the rights accorded to them by the *shari'a*. The

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.360-361.

charter begins and ends with a pledge of allegiance to the Saudi royal family and asks the rulers to take immediate measures as a proof of their determination to accomplish such reforms as the release of the political prisoners, the recuperation of the jobs lost by some intellectuals, the right to free expression without having to lose a job or have a passport seized. But they avoided two controversial issues: the reform of the Saudi curricula and the exact definition of the role of women in society which remained rather vague. The signatories have been very careful to emphasize that *shari'a* is to be the framework for all their reforms as well as their attachment to *shura*, with no mention whatsoever of democracy and parliament, hence adding to the ambiguity of this Islamic discourse with liberal smell.

The first concrete step taken by the then Crown Prince Abdallah was the organization in June 2003 of the National Dialogue Conference and the adoption of a charter as a first response to the Liberal-Islamists' demands. On the political level, the Conference recognizes the necessity of implementing reforms and ensuring freedom of speech; the organization of the first municipal elections in the kingdom that took place on the 2nd of October 2005, albeit reserved for male participation only was an important tangible outcome. On the religious level, the Conference acknowledges the intellectual and confessional diversity of the Saudi nation, which is contrary to the traditional exclusivism of the Wahhabis, and criticizes the concept of *sadd al-dhara'i*⁵⁷ (the blocking of the means) one of the juridical pillars of Wahhabism. It is worth noting that it is by referring to this principle that for instance, women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to drive cars.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.363.

Also, no official Wahhabi religious figure was invited, as a sign of their marginalization.

However, the future remains uncertain, because the durability of such a heterogeneous movement is questionable as much as is the relation between King Abdallah and the Liberal-Islamists with respect to his ability to impose his views on his reluctant brothers, who are opposed to this new intellectuals' reformist and anti-Wahhabist views, or may fear that the Liberal-Islamists might reinforce Abdallah's position and legitimacy within the royal family. Whether Abdallah is able to impose his view on his brothers, and whether he is really ready to found a new Saudi Arabia based on the inclusive value of nation and not only Wahhabi exclusivism, will be known in the future. This would mean the transformation of the traditional tribal Wahhabi legitimacy of the Āl Saud dynasty into a modern nationalist one, which would imply radical change of socio-political alliances, a matter that could be politically risky. According to F. Gregory Gause III⁵⁸, it is unlikely that the Āl Saud jettison their historic alliance with the Wahhabi religious establishment in order to placate some forces whose strength in the Saudi society remains uncertain.

As for Madawi al-Rasheed,⁵⁹ the Liberal-Islamists do not constitute an opposition force any more since they are part of the establishment now. Also, she seems to be very pessimistic regarding any concrete reforms coming from the ruling dynasty, accusing any apparent divergence in the points of view between the three major axes amidst the senior Princes (Abdallah, Sultan, and Nayef) to be a mere camouflage because they are all secretly in accord to preserve the interests of the ruling family.

⁵⁸ F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia Challenged", *Current History*, January 2004, p.23.

⁵⁹ Al-Rasheed, *mazaq ul islah fi as-soudiyya fi al-qarn al-hadi wal ishreen*, p.63.

As for the ultra-liberals, Prince Talal bin Abdl-Aziz's point of view is interesting. According to him, in a private discussion with Eric Rouleau, the Kingdom has to adapt itself to the new world and become fully integrated to the globalized economy. In order to achieve this, more fundamental reforms are needed. The Prince is quoted to having said: "as a patriot and a democrat, I would like to see my country endowed with a transparent political system and with laws that are passed by a representative assembly, which would also approve the state budget"⁶⁰. Among other matters that the Prince demanded are equal rights for women, an independent judiciary, the removal of archaic laws from the book, the holding of municipal elections, a modernized educational system up-to-date, the "humanization"⁶¹ of penal sanctions, a liberalization of social life (for example allowing theatres and movies), and state neutrality and tolerance toward all religions. He argues that nothing in his proposals is contrary to Islam, and that on the contrary, the religious and political foundations of the Kingdom could be consolidated through them.

4. The religious opposition

At the political level, the Gulf War of 1991 has produced an ideological polarization in Saudi Arabia, it split the core opposition into a wide gamut of dissent ranging from liberals to fundamentalists, it has also created a crisis of legitimacy vis-à-vis the ruling group leading to the questioning of the rights of a government to rule after having mismanaged the economy, overspent on an inefficient defense system, and above all, having invited foreign troops to defend the land of Islam. Of the four above mentioned categories, it is the religious opposition embodied by the Islamic movement that has

⁶⁰ Eric Rouleau. "Trouble in the Kingdom", *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2002, p.86.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

constituted the only organized group that forced the Saudi government to respond to its demands.

Although in the past the Saudi regime had been confronted to two major situations fighting religious forces: the first one was Ibn Saud fighting the *ikhwan* in 1929 at the decisive battle of Sibla under the instigation of the British who were conspicuous of the increasing influence of the religious group on Abdel Aziz's authority in Arabia, hence rendering religion subordinate to secular power, and the second in 1979, an "annus horribilis" to the Āl Saud, according to Randal⁶², upon the taking over of the Mecca Grand Mosque in November 20, 1979 by Juhayman al-Utaibi and his followers that ended by the surrender of al-Utaibi and his execution later, as well as heavy casualties from both the rebels and the government forces, in addition to the Khomeini inspired Shiite riot in the Eastern Province during *Achoura* in November of the same year, yet in all above mentioned cases the challenge came from the margin of Saudi society, never from the mainstream religious *ulama* nor from the dominant tribes.

Seeking the help of non-Muslims in a war against Muslims and the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia alarmed the Saudi Islamists who felt that if Americans stayed longer on their soil, the authority of Islam in the kingdom would be eroded, with a worst-case scenario of Americans eliminating Islam in the kingdom gaining plausibility. Since 1990 Gulf crisis, also dubbed the Gulf War trauma⁶³, opposition movements against the regime have started with the systematic destruction of Iraq by the allied forces, and especially when the kingdom hosted five hundred thousands Western soldiers, at the same time being unable to defend itself despite purchasing billions of dollars worth high-tech arms.

⁶² Jonathan Randal, *Osama*, New York, 2005, p.74.

⁶³ Alain Gresh, "The Most Obscure Dictatorship", *Middle East Report*, November 1995, p.3.

4.a Ulama as-sahwa

The Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia is of two kinds. The first one is a group of Wahhabi *ulama* and *faqih*s who use mosques and lecture halls to show their discontent, with leading figures such as Sheikh Salman al-Auda and Sheikh Safar al-Hawali. They are also known as neo-fundamentalist or nonconformist *ulama*⁶⁴. They differ from the previous *ulama* because they don't limit themselves to theology and morality, they deal with issues pertaining to international and regional affairs, as well as domestic problems. Their preaching includes topics such as the peace process with Israel, the legitimacy of the Āl-Saud, and the building of a strong army. Their activities are coordinated by a society called the "Islamic Resurgence"⁶⁵, with an obvious influence of the Islamic revolution in Iran, aiming at creating a modern puritanical theocracy inspired by the Wahhabi doctrine. They criticize the Royal family on the basis of morality and corruption. The Islamists activities were confined to signing petitions to the King as the *Letter of Demands* dated February 1991 signed by Sheikh Abd el-Aziz bin Baz in addition to 52 members of the clergy. Its 12 points focused on *sharia* law as the guiding principle for the government, with the main aim of changing the fundamentals of the relationship between state and religion and establishing in the Kingdom a regime similar to that of Iran modeled on the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*. Another petition followed in September 1992, signed by more than a hundred *ulama* and addressed to bin Baz. *The Memorandum of Advice*⁶⁶ called for a greater participation of the clerics in all governmental posts, the establishment of a supreme religious court to review and purify all laws making them compatible with Islam, as well as the increase in censorship of foreign journals, the support of Moslem causes, the

⁶⁴ al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *Current History*, January 1996, p.17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

strengthening of the army. So it is the taped sermons from religious scholars such as Sheikh Awad al-Qarni, Dr. Saeed al-Ghamidi, Nasser al-Omar, Safar al-Hawali, and Salman al-Auda criticizing the internal and external behaviour of the Saudi state, as well as the presence of foreign troops and advocating greater role for the *ulama* that began circulating in the kingdom that constituted the catalysator behind the *Letter of Demands* and the *Memorandum of Advice*.

The importance of dissent coming from Sheikhs such as Safar al-Hawali (a Ghamidi from bilad Ghamid) or Salman al-Auda (a Najdi from the heartland of Qassim, a province that according to Fandy “remains a problem in Saudi politics even today”⁶⁷), the two leaders associated with contemporary Islamic resurgence, stems from their religious standing and their dominating the Saudi scene during the Gulf War period by spreading audio and video messages. Their discourse can be described as a new culture of dissent in Saudi Arabia or a new interpretation of Islam on a global scale. Their sermons show that they are not only theologians but also political activists who use the material selectively to infuriate their audiences against the internal Saudi order, as well as against the world order in general.

4.a.1 Case of Safar al-Hawali

Al-Hawali's opposition comes in the following hierarchy: the West in general, then the United States, the American religious right, the secular Arab regimes then the Saudi government. He is very skeptical as to Western domination and the US neo-colonialism. He thinks that Western hegemony as an external factor is directly in relation with local issues such as resisting the leftists and the secular forces within the Muslim world and particularly Saudi Arabia. His call for a Saudi state “purified”⁶⁸ from such interventions

⁶⁷ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p. 42

⁶⁸ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.86.

is the main theme of his preaches and sermons calling for resisting foreign interference, especially the US hegemonic role in the Muslim world. One of the sources of Hawali's increasing fear is the growing influence of the American Christian fundamentalists, whose activities should be of concern to all Muslims.

For Hawali, the source of evil is the West, the problem resides in the continued subordination of Saudi Arabia to the enemy, the US. Thus in his discussions the blame goes first to the arrogant West and second to the Saudi government, although these latter criticisms are connected to a set of global factors always interrelated with external variables such as the American troops present in the Kingdom or the Western global hegemony in the region, or the American biased foreign policy. Al-Hawali differs from other Saudi Islamists in that he does not question the religious or the political authority of the ruling dynasty. While he does not spare other Arab countries and their constitutions for their disregarding the true Islamic commands, his main aim is to warn the regime against "American and Jewish designs"⁶⁹, his criticism of the Saudi ruling elite is merely focused on them not doing enough as to propagating Islamic faith and preserving it from the Western "cultural and moral pollution"⁷⁰. In fact, al-Hawali was never a threat to the Saudi state itself, just a loyal critic of a regime that was not accustomed to public criticism. Recently and following the July 2006 crisis in Lebanon, Sheikh Safar al-Hawwali issued a *fatwa* on his website criticizing the Lebanese Hizbullah describing it as *Hizb asshaytan*, (the Party of the devil), and forbidding people to pray for him.⁷¹

Sheikh Safar al-Hawwali is not the whole story of Saudi political opposition, just a voice among others ranging from moderate to fanatic.

⁶⁹ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.87.

⁷⁰ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.86.

⁷¹ "rajul deen soudi yuhajim 'Hizbullah'", *an-Nahar*, Sunday August 6th, 2006.

4.a.2 Case of Salman al-Auda

The other activist is Salman al-Auda, one of Saudi Arabia's most popular preachers. He was one of the *ulama* behind the *sahwa* movement, a movement that contributed to the renewal of Islam at the end of the 1980s through the 1990s, enabling it to reoccupy its place in society after the modernists and liberals' attempt to seemingly having gained the upper hand in the 1980s. His criticism of the Saudi political system varies depending on his audience and the date of the sermon. At some times he sees Saudi Arabia as "an oasis of peace as long as the state reclaims its religious basis"⁷². At other times, (right before his arrest in 1994) he sees Saudi Arabia propitious for the type of political violence happening then in Egypt or Algeria, so in need of an urgent reform, with the dialogue as a means to achieve stability in order to avoid political violence as is the case with Algeria, in this respect he questions: "...Do you want to drag this country to a situation similar to neighboring countries where Muslims are slaughtering each other?"⁷³ He says that "Instead of having a dialogue with the Israelis and others, we need a dialogue at home"⁷⁴ in order to discuss more freely the grievances and the issues of concern to him as well as to other conservative activists. Al-Auda's demands did not stop at reforms but he also asked for the return of the original alliance and contract between the State and the *ulama*. In his sermon *We Are Advocates of Peace and Unity* taped in 1991 he says: "for the unity of this land to be preserved, we have to return to fundamentals and reform our society... This country can be only united under the *Shari'a* with the *Sunna* and the Quran as our only reference."⁷⁵ Although he does criticize the distribution of largess that buys loyalty, he does not blame the government

⁷² Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.95.

⁷³ Salman al-Auda, "Asbab Soqout al-Dewal" (Why do states disintegrate?), in Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.95.

⁷⁴ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.96.

⁷⁵ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.95.

alone, but rather the whole nation. His criticism vis-à-vis the regime may be harsh in some respects, particularly on its ability to do more with respect to teaching other Muslims the purity of Islam, because he considers Saudi Arabia as a state endowed with a mission: teaching Islam. But he remains a conservative nationalist. His nationalism is very clear in the two sermons *Jazirat al-Islam* (The island of Islam), and *Qadar al-Allah fi hazih al-Jazirah* (This island and God's will). He is certain that nothing will alter the stability of the Kingdom, because of Saudi Arabia's unique identity as the birthplace of Islam, and because "The Prophet has said that Mecca will never be invaded by external forces"⁷⁶.

As for his attitude towards the West, he expresses his approbation for democracy but does not accept it for his country, for Saudi Arabia he wants theocracy, he praises the West for the freedom of expression Westerners enjoy and would like Saudis to benefit from it, referring to Omar ibn al-Khattab, when he used to allow ordinary Muslims including women to criticize him. At the same time he rejects Western culture as morally corrupt and backward. Concerning the issue of normalization with Israel, he considers that the Israeli policy towards the Arabs is to dominate Muslims, to humiliate them, to attempt to control Arab oil and the water of Lebanon and Jordan. In his most famous tape, *Why Do States Disintegrate?*, he lists 12 points that need to be addressed by the Saudi government. Al-Auda believes that states disintegrate when some of the following conditions are met:⁷⁷

1. The state is incompatible with time and place such as a Shi'a state in a Sunni surrounding;
2. Tyranny prevails and *shura* disappears;
3. The ruler chooses incompetent advisors and subordinates;
4. The state's justice system becomes corrupt, selective, and arbitrary;

⁷⁶ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.102.

⁷⁷ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p. 96.

5. Lack of transparency because no system oversees both the private and the public conduct of state officials;
6. Corruption becomes endemic in the economic order, with a main emphasis on the royal elite;
7. The educational system becomes corrupt so that al-Auda sees in the rise of secular education the source of all ills in Saudi Arabia and accuses the society of religious laxity;
8. Moral corruption and extravagant spending, ;
9. The ruler fails to distinguish between his friends and his foes, as an indirect warning to the ruling family that a gap is growing between the royal family and the *ulama* in the society;
10. The state loses its *raison d'être*, as an indirect criticism of the involvement of Americans in the affairs of Saudi Arabia;
11. Outside powers conspire against the state;
12. The state suffers from internal divisions.

Al-Auda did not limit himself to preaching and recording sermons, he also took part in writing and signing petitions to the King asking for reform. Al-Auda was among the signatories of the *Khitab al-Matalib*, (Letter of Demands) presented to the King in 1991 asking some reforms in the system of governance particularly in the economic, political, and defense fields, in addition to have a *Shura* Council. Al-Auda also signed *Muzakerat al-Nasiha*, (*Memorandum of Advice*) in September 1992. In order to appease the critiques, King Fahd promulgated the Kingdom Basic Law of Governance *al-nizam al-asasi lil-hukm*, and in September 1992 he named a conservative scholar, Sheikh Muhammad bin Jubayr, as the chairman of the imminent Consultative Council⁷⁸.

4.a.3 The Memorandum of Advice

The *Memorandum of Advice* is the core document of the Islamists' *ijma'a* (consensus), regarding the type of reforms they expect of the Saudi government. It constitutes the frame of reference to al-Mas'ari, al-Faqih, and bin Laden's ideology⁷⁹. The *Memorandum of Advice* criticizes the Saudi government with respect to the following 'Big issues':

⁷⁸ Hrair Dekmejian, "The Rise of Political Islamism In Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, 1994, p.633.

⁷⁹ Cf. Fandy, *op.cit.*, note no.38 p.255.

1. The role of the preachers that they consider as restricted and marginalized by the government.
2. The laws and regulations where *shari'a* should be the supremereference.
3. The judicial system and the courts, where four ills are mentioned: the courts not being independent from the Ministry of Interior or the Governor interfering in decisions, *shari'a* courts in some provinces are underdeveloped, there is a delay in implementing some decisions taken by the ombudsman against the state agencies, and the existence of a dual system of justice based on state's law rather than Islamic law. The *Memorandum* reminds that all rights are derived from the *shari'a* and that all rights that are mentioned in the *shari'a* should be granted by the state, consequently, any violation of these rights such as the torturing of citizens, the arrest of citizens without trial, the search of homes, the inhibition of freedom of movement should be banned.
4. Public Administration: the main demand is that young average Saudis should be given a chance to move up the social ladder.
5. Economy and Finance, the *Memorandum* outlines the importance of the economy and its development for the Muslim community, as well as a reminder about money. Money constitutes a trust to the Muslim nation, it should be preserved in a way to ensure that the next generations are not left in need. Money should be spent in ways that fulfill God's commands because it belongs to God, thus squandering money is sacrilegious, as it is cited in many Qur'anic verses prohibiting "*tabzeer*".
6. The Army: the authors of the *Memorandum* stress on the fact that the Gulf War revealed deficiencies in the Saudi army. The Kingdom depended on foreign assistance to defend its soil, hence failing to fulfill the main function of an Islamic army that is to protect the Islamic state, its people and its faith in spite of the huge budget allocated to the army. The *Memorandum* advises the Saudi army to emulate the Israeli one by mobilizing and training all men, to stop cooperation with non-Muslim countries and replace it with Muslim countries external support, to recruit Muslim experts and to allocate more resources to build a competent military industry.
7. Information: the authors start by emphasizing the importance of media to the diffusion of faith, because Islam is not limited to one ethnic group or race or language, the activists denounce also the weaknesses in the Saudi media, the rulers are required to devise a new media policy that reflects the true Islamic face of the state by allowing greater time for preachers on television, by creating special programs for children and women that comply with the Islamic precepts, by banning the programs conveying un-Islamic images of unveiled women, by accepting *shari'a* as the only system of censorship, and by appointing sincere and pious men of religion at the Ministry of Information.
8. Foreign Affairs: the signatories define the notion of Islamic international relations as including three principles: the global propagation of Islam, the unity of the Muslims, and the need to aid Muslims and support their causes. The *Memorandum* criticizes Saudi foreign policy on many a level: the state's failure to support Islamic movements such as the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front, the state's support for regimes hostiles

to Islamists such as is the case with Syria, the ongoing relationship between the kingdom and the United States 'in spite of America's general hostile policies toward Muslims'⁸⁰.

Indeed "this curious and close liaison"⁸¹, bilateral relationship described by George W. Bush to Crown Prince Abdallah as "one of eternal friendship"⁸², or by Madawi al-Rasheed as *zawaj mut'a tawil al-amad*⁸³ (a long-term marriage of pleasure) was so strong (and still is), that Prince Bandar confided to a journalist in 1981: "if you knew what we were really doing for America, you wouldn't just give us AWACS, you would give us nuclear weapons"⁸⁴. Also, the critique goes against the support of peace with Israel, the Saudis missions abroad for their lagging in the propagation of faith, and the government for buying off political parties and journalists.

In September 1992, the 45 pages *Memorandum* was signed by one hundred seven men, half of them were Islamists 72% of Najdi origin⁸⁵, but also from other regions with different tribe affiliations, in an attempt to convince the monarch that the demands are unanimous. If they seemed to be agreeing on the content, the signatories did not achieve any consensus on the way to implement these reforms. Some limited their focus on the domestic public opinion, whereas others wanted to gain the support of Islamists in foreign countries, and still others wanted to gain the approval of Western governments to pressure the Saudi government for achieving the reforms. Some radicals even suggested violence as a means to bring about change.

⁸⁰ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.59.

⁸¹ Fred Hallyday, "A curious and close liaison. Saudi Arabia's Relations with the United States", title of the article, in T.Niblock, ed., *State, Society, and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, London, 1982.

⁸² Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, pp.173-174.

⁸³ al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul-islah fi as-Soudiyya*, p.169.

⁸⁴ Rachel Bronson, "The U.S.- Saudi Love Affair Predates Bush", *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2004, p.3, in Posner, *op.cit.*, p.116.

⁸⁵ Gresh, "The most obscure dictatorship", *op.cit.*, p.3.

The response of the Saudi government which felt threatened was the interrogation and arrest of the main activists, although many of them were to be released later and allowed to leave the country.

After having signed the *Memorandum of Advice* in 1992, and till 1994, Sheikh Salman al-Auda's ability to use the Gulf War and the focus of the world media on Saudi Arabia to popularize his criticisms made of him a symbol and a leader for what was to become the Saudi opposition both at home and abroad. His focus shifted from culture to politics, and the *sahwa* made him stress on the situation inside the Kingdom as well as on the Saudi-US relations. Ultimately, the state became disturbed by al-Auda's taped sermons, so on September 11, 1994, he was called to the governor's office in Buraydah and asked to sign a document in which he pledges to stop delivering speeches. He was arrested two days later upon his refusal to sign. He remained five years in jail. He has changed since his release, adopting a more moderate tone in his preaching, adhering to the statement issued by the OIC conference in Mecca in December 7th and 8th 2005, which states that "Islam is a religion of *wassatiyyah* (moderation) which rejects bigotry, extremism and fanaticism".⁸⁶ In July 2003, al-Auda participated in the first national dialogue instigated by Crown Prince Abdallah, he even met Shi'a religious leaders, an act of bravery if one knows the way Shi'a are looked at in the kingdom.

4.b The CDLR

Al-Auda's tapes remained popular in Saudi Arabia between 1990 and 1994, until a new phenomenon emerged, capturing the imagination of the Saudis: the faxes coming from London, criticizing the Saudi ruling dynasty, and signed by the Committee for

⁸⁶ Gresh. "Saudi Arabia: Reality Check", *Le Monde Diplomatique*. February 2006. p.2.

the Defence of Legitimate Rights, the CDLR, the first formal Saudi opposition group abroad.

This is the second category of religious opposition, represented by the CDLR and the CAR (Committee for Advice and Reform) led by Osama bin Laden. So it is the tightening of government control in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, and the arrest of the two leaders: al-Auda and al-Hawali that led to the creation of an Islamic opposition in exile. The Saudi opposition abroad used the events surrounding al-Auda's arrest, what was going to be labeled later Buraydah uprising, highlighting the power of the opposition in the province of Qassim. Saad al-Faqih considered al-Auda as: "the most influential preacher in Saudi Arabia"⁸⁷.

The CDLR was established in Riyadh on the 3rd of May 1993 and included in its ranks two university professors, a retired judge, religious scholars, poets, lawyers, doctors, and intellectuals. The CDLR members promote the language of reform rather than revolution, they call for an independent judiciary, an economy where wealth is fairly distributed, a foreign policy more sensitive to Islamic concerns, and a strong national army. They claim that their reform plan is inspired by the laws of the *sharia*, insisting that any criticism stems from the Islamic principle of *nasihah*, the duty of every Moslem. They are considered to be the moderate wing of the opposition. In their foundation document the signatories declared that their general intention was to remove injustice and to establish the rights of the individuals according to *shari'a* law. No criticism of the ruling family or the government.

The CDLR was immediately banned in Saudi Arabia, the Council of Higher *Ulama* labeled the organization as illegitimate, some of the committee's members were

⁸⁷ Interview with Saad al-Faqih, London, June 12, 1997, in Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.93

imprisoned and later released among whom was the committee's spokesman, Mohamad al-Mas'ari. He left to London in April 1994 to establish the CDLR's headquarters along with Saad al-Faqih. These two activists became the driving force after the committee ceased its operations in Saud Arabia. Mohamad al-Mas'ari is a professor of physics, he is the son of Abdallah al-Mas'ari a retired judge who had signed the committee's first letter, and Saad al-Faqih is a medical doctor. With the establishment of the CDLR in London, a new phase in the Islamist opposition began. The CDLR made intensive use of Western and Arab media to launch its campaign, it established a web site, it used telecommunication technology such as faxes and electronic mail to communicate with its supporters both inside and outside the kingdom, and above all, its critique of both the ruling family and the government became more virulent. In this respect, Saad al-Faqih director of the CDLR said: "Khomeini's was a cassette revolution, ours will be a fax revolution"⁸⁸.

The CDLR propaganda activity (fax, e-mail, toll-free phone numbers) was prolific and was considered as a source of trouble both in the Kingdom and in England. The CDLR claims first to operate in the domain of the humanitarian, and second of Islam. But the statements issued by the CDLR can only be described as political. For example in his description of the royal family, Mohamad al-Mas'ari, the CDLR spokesman affirmed that: "the members of the Āl-Saud are like dinosaurs. They should die out. The government is the state, is the monarch, is the family, is the mafia"⁸⁹. Or as shown in this statement where al-Mas'ari bemoans for the principle of *shura* that used to exist in the Kingdom since the sixties is dead with the reign of King Fahd. Al-Mas'ari says in this respect: "when professors were regularly consulted by the government, nearly every

⁸⁸ al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *op.cit.*, p.16.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.19.

week we would receive legislative bills and they would solicit our opinion. We would respond or we wouldn't, depending on our qualifications and our interest. This practice has disappeared with King Fahd⁹⁰. The *Majlis al-Shura* that exists in the Kingdom is not considered to be representative because the members are appointed by King Fahd himself. It has no legislative power. Its recommendations are presented to the King before submitting them to the Council of Ministers. Its members totalize 120, but recently Prince Sultan announced that it will be increased to 150 in three months time, with a renewal for the two third of its members in its next mandate, so he seems to be discarding the elections' demand that was raised in 2003⁹¹.

The committee director Faqih insists that "the leader of an Islamic state should be elected and accountable"⁹². Both conditions do not apply to the reigning dynasty. The CDLR members continued to insist that criticism and advice stem from the Islamic principle of *nasihat*, a duty incumbent on every Muslim. They criticize the *ulama's* blind acquiescence to the leaders particularly their mismanagement of the economic resources. Al-Mas'ari equates the silence of the *ulamas* with their death, saying that "Saudi Arabia became the *ulama's* cemetery".⁹³ However, he distinguishes between the truthful *ulama*, to be known later as *ulama al-sahwa*, and those "who sold their religion and faith".⁹⁴ Also, the CDLR tackled issues concerning government corruption, such as the mismanagement of pilgrimage affairs and the failure of public services, as well as the abuse of human rights such as the disappearance of dissidents. In this respect the plight of Salman al-Auda and Safar al-Hawali was pivotal.

⁹⁰ Gresh. "The Most Obscure Dictatorship", *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁹¹ "Le Majlis al-Choura sera élargi dans trois mois", *L'Orient LE JOUR*, December 26th, 2004, p.9.

⁹² al-Rasheed. "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *op.cit.*, p.19.

⁹³ Mohamad al-Mas'ari. *al-adilla al-shari'yya 'ala 'adam shari'yyat al-dawla al-sa'udiyya*, [Shari'a evidence on the illegitimacy of the Sa'udi state], p.156. in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.179.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

4.c The MIRA

In March 1996, the CDLR faced a serious internal schism. So, “the most organized and professional Saudi political opposition group”⁹⁵, according to Mas’ari split, as a result of several means of pressure via the Western governments, agencies as well as multinational interests. Mas’ari kept the CDLR and al-Faqih formed the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, (MIRA). The split in the CDLR proved to be prejudicial to the organization. Al-Mas'ari's communiqués became irregular and then stopped altogether in 1996. After 1996, al-Faqih continued to send weekly communiqués under the title of *Islah* (Reform) who were similar in their content to the previous CDLR publications: reports on cases of injustice, abuse of human rights, as well as other social and economic developments. In the late nineties, MIRA seemed to be the most efficient Islamist organization operating outside the kingdom. In fact, its website, the series of booklets written by al-Faqih, the Arabic newsletter, as well as the special monthly publications, *Arabia Unveiled* and *Arabia in the Media* revealed the outstanding skills on the part of its director and assistants and were used as media outlets for the post-Gulf War Islamist opposition. MIRA's principles supported reform within an Islamic framework, boosting the role of Saudi religious scholars, particularly *al-ulama al-shabab*, and trying to act on behalf of those who opposed the Saudi policies with respect to the Gulf War, some of whom were jailed as a consequence of their dissent.

However harsh in his critique of the ruling family, al-Faqih does not consider toppling the rulers, instead he advises the *ulama* to run the government for a transitional period otherwise the situation will be of temporary chaos or civil war, as

⁹⁵ Daryl Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.249.

he says in an interview in 1999 “we will return to the era of local warlords”, warlords meaning tribal sheikhs, whose leadership is rejected by al-Faqih.

But lately, MIRA launched a campaign against the ruling family too. It called through its website to the march of December 16th 2004, which was called *al-zahf al-kabir* that took place in Jeddah but that was to be dismantled by the authorities. Another interesting statement is the one issued on the 14th of December which tackles the immediate steps to be followed after the toppling of the Āl Saud’s regime as if it is taking place immediately⁹⁶. In his booklet *How the Āl Sa’ud Think: A Psychological Study*, al-Faqih pictures the ruling family as illegitimate, arrogant and accuses them of misgovernance, in addition to the Āl Saud’s inferiority complex towards the West and their total reliance on money to solve problems. He is quoted saying: “The dollar has become the solution. It is used to dilute criticism, to bribe people inside the country and abroad: it is also used to silence criticism and cement alliances with foreign governments”.⁹⁷

Then MIRA tackles the issue of the Consultative Council that does not reflect the demands of the Islamists, because a real *shura* is established only “when members are chosen according to the consensus of the Muslim community and when such members are elected. One of the duties of the council should be to supervise public spending and enforce the accountability of rulers”⁹⁸. All of these conditions are not applicable in the Kingdom. MIRA calls for a Consultative Council becoming a higher political authority than the King and members of the ruling group, who should be accountable to the

⁹⁶ <http://www.yaislah.org>.

⁹⁷ al-Faqih. Saad. *Kayfa yufakir al-sa’ud: dirasa nafsiyya*, [How the Āl Sa’ud think: a psychological study], London: Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, pp. 41-47, in al-Rasheed. *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 182.

⁹⁸ Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA). n.d., *al-birnamij as-siyasi*, [The political programme], in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 182.

council. MIRA demands also a reconsideration of the *ulama's* role who should be more involved in running the country's domestic and foreign political affairs, as well as a renegotiation of the Saudi-Wahhabi pact of 1744, whereby the division of the roles followed this specific pattern: the Āl Saud run the political affairs of the country whereas the *ulama* were in charge of the religious affairs. Hence by calling for a greater participation of the religious scholars in the political process and the social affairs, MIRA's message was undermining this tacit pact.

4.d Osama Bin Laden

In addition to CDLR and MIRA, Saudi Arabia faced the challenge of a more global Islamist opposition, the group associated with Osama bin Laden known as Advice and Reform Committee, created in the late 1980s. Bin Laden is a marginal figure with respect to the tribal genealogy. Although he was born in Riyadh in 1957, Saudi Arabia is not his *deera*, because of his Hadramaouti origins in South Yemen. Another drawback to bin Laden's standing is that the family's wealth is due to their connection with Āl Saud, his father Mohamad bin Laden, being the contractor of the royal family par excellence. Bin Laden's ARC was established at the same period of the CDLR in Beethoven street, in what Jonathan Randal calls Londonistan⁹⁹. An appellation that Dominique Thomas used as a title of his book *Le Londonistan, le Djihad au Coeur de l'Europe*.

Osama is known to be a hard-line Islamist who supports the Islamist movements in Yemen, Afghanistan and Algeria. Osama was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, and particularly Sayyed Qutb's *Signposts Along The Road* and was consumed by Islamic causes in Afghanistan, the Grand Mosque siege, and Palestine's *nakba*, but most

⁹⁹ Randal, *op.cit.*, p 42.

of all the Muslim Brotherhood relentless campaign that almost toppled the Alawite regime in Syria, this Islamist challenge that began in 1976 and grew intense in the years 1979-1982 until it was crushed by Hafez Asad's regime in 1982, in what became known as the massacre of Hama.

Bin Laden's intentions for the ARC were: "an overarching Islamic organization working for the implementation of a religious program in all aspects of life"¹⁰⁰. The group's mission is defined as follows: "The Committee for Advice and Reform is an all encompassing organization that aims at applying the teachings of God to all aspects of life". The group's understanding of social and political change is based on "a comprehensive understanding of Islam, the holy book, and the Prophet's tradition as it was interpreted by our Sunni predecessors."¹⁰¹

The ARC's program consists of four points¹⁰²:

1. the ending of the rule of *Jahiliyah* and its replacement by God's *shari'a*
2. the establishment of true Islamic justice
3. the reform of all the state's institutions and its purification from corruption
4. the revival of the principle of *ihtisab* (accountability of the rulers).

Also bin Laden set up several guesthouses and training camps inside Afghanistan where the volunteers were hosted, the most famous one is the Base, *al-Qaeda*, established in 1988. Along with Abdallah Azzam, the Palestinian Muslim Brother who left Jordan to Saudi Arabia's King Abdel Aziz University to teach Islamic jurisprudence and then became a legendary Arab fighter in Afghanistan, Osama recruited, trained, and financed thousands of *mujahideen* of more than fifty nationalities. He wanted these holy warriors to continue the fight beyond Afghani borders. That was his intention behind the creation of al Qaeda. Osama is reputed to have said that "the safest place for me is

¹⁰⁰ al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *op.cit.*, p.18.

¹⁰¹ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.181.

¹⁰² al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *op.cit.*, p.20.

Afghanistan”¹⁰³. According to journalist Jamal Khashoggi “he went to Afghanistan not for the Afghans alone, but also to liberate the *umma* everywhere”¹⁰⁴, These activities, but only these were acceptable to Saudi Arabia, as explained by Prince Turki al-Faisal: “Osama was praised for his work in Afghanistan but told firmly to leave things at that”¹⁰⁵, but after the Gulf War they became threatening, when he criticized publicly the Saudi decision to invite foreign troops.

In an act considered as a première in the history of Saudi dissent, Osama bin Laden was stripped of his Saudi citizenship on the 5th of March 1994 for what has been described as a crime of lese-majesty, but yet was an act of retaliation, at the time when no other Saudi dissident had ever been deprived of his citizenship. After that, Osama became a nonperson to the Saudi regime, so that when asked about Osama the then Crown Prince Abdallah answered secretary of State Madeleine Albright:”I don’t believe that person is a Saudi”¹⁰⁶. However, in 2002, Osama was offered a deal to unfreeze his funds and restore his citizenship if he would just recant his criticism of the Âl Saud stewardship.¹⁰⁷ An offer he obviously rejected.

Osama bin Laden moves in two spheres of influence: a domestic sphere and an international one. According to a MIRA pamphlet bin Laden has two circles of followers: a close core of followers related to him by a chain of command and taking orders like a secret organization, a second wider circle of followers who look upon him

¹⁰³ Randal, *op.cit.*, p.238.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Jamal Khashoggi, Riyadh, December 4, 1999 in Randal, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁵ Randal, *op.cit.*, p.102.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.125.

as a 'godfather' and would regard themselves as obliged to perform some of his general orders¹⁰⁸.

In the Saudi society, his power base consists of three groups. The first one is bound to him by a *bayi'a* (oath of allegiance), and those supporters are willing to die for him and his cause. The second group does not form an integral part of his organization but considers him as godfather of Islamic activism in Arabia. The third tier is constituted by the Saudi Afghans, the Saudi youths who fought with him in Afghanistan and have different degrees of allegiance to him. The Saudi Afghans got frustrated and felt betrayed when they were not appreciated as they should have been upon their return to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, their anger grew bigger when bin Laden's offer to fight against Iraq was rejected, and instead foreign American troops were invited to the country.

It is probable that Saudi veterans of the Afghan war were behind most of the bombings inside the Kingdom, if not all of them. In November 13, 1995 a terrorist operation took place in Riyadh targeting the office of the SANG program manager where five Americans were killed and in June 25 1996 the al-Khobar car-bomb attack killed nineteen American airmen. Al-Faqih reported that 60 Afghanistan veterans were arrested by Saudi authorities in March 1998 and that secret cells of Arab Afghan were still being discovered in the Kingdom. Saudi citizens who were involved in the Afghanistan war in one way or another are estimated to be 25,000 according to royal Saudi intelligence's sources.¹⁰⁹ In addition to the Arab Afghans, reports show a large popular sympathy for bin Laden. Evidence of this popularity is shown in the following figure: 95% of the Saudis surveyed by the Saudi intelligence aged between 24 and 41

¹⁰⁸ Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), *Bin Laden Pamphlet*, in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p.184.

¹⁰⁹ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.240.

were found to rally bin Laden's cause¹¹⁰. Even Prince Nawaf bin Abd el-Aziz, the chief of the Saudi Intelligence Agency (who was released from his functions by King Fahd on the 26th of January 2005 allegedly for health problems) acknowledged that a large share of the young Saudis are sympathetic to bin Laden despite the fact that they condemned the attacks of New York and Washington¹¹¹, although Prince Talal bin Abdel Aziz when asked about the support bin Laden enjoys in the Kingdom, in an interview broadcasted on *al-Hurra* television Monday the 24th of January 2005¹¹², said that the support decreased a lot after the suicide attacks that hit home, acknowledging that bin Laden was very popular before. And from MIRA comes the following: "While we in MIRA as well as all Muslim elites in the Kingdom are with bin Laden in that the American presence is not acceptable in the peninsula, we believe that the effort should be directed to the removal of the foundation of their presence. The problem is more in the regime and the official religious establishment that provide this foundation"¹¹³.

But things took a different course after al-Qaeda hit home hurting Saudi citizens and other Arabs fellowmen. On May 12th 2003 suicide bombers attacked three residential housing compounds in Riyadh, and a second devastating attack took place on November 9th 2003. The Saudi regime lobbied the official religious establishment and some independent Islamist thinkers who were previously hostile to the regime to condemn the attacks. Even Sheikh al-Khudayr and his companion Nasir al-Fahd, previous dissidents who had been arrested for encouraging violent opposition to the regime, publicly rejected their position as opponents to the regime and condemned the bombings¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁰ Champion, *op.cit.*, p.241.

¹¹¹ Champion, *op.cit.*, p.240.

¹¹² Interview with Prince Talal bin Abdel Aziz, *al-Hurra* TV, January 24, 2005.

¹¹³ Champion, *op.cit.*, pp.237-238.

¹¹⁴ Gregory, F. Gause III. "Saudi Arabia Challenged". *Current History*, January 2004, p.22.

So it is until 2003 that most Saudis, including their government, came to realize that Sunni Islamist extremism was homegrown. Before that date, this used to be something foreign, the Saudis involved in the September 11 attacks were just operating outside the country. In this respect, the point of view of the Saudi historian and Human Rights' militant Hatoun al-Fassi is quite interesting. According to her, "the suicide bomb attacks that were perpetrated in Riyadh against the residential compounds constituted our September 11. Before that, nobody wanted to believe that extremism existed or even that Saudis committed the September 11 attacks. The Saudis refused to see reality"¹¹⁵. Prince Nayef even used to claim that al-Qaeda's presence in his country is weak and almost inexistent. And since that time, violence did not stop in Saudi Arabia mostly hitting foreign civilian, but also compatriots, especially members of the police force while doing their jobs. On the 29th of December 2004 the bin Laden network has claimed his responsibility for the attack that took place in Riyadh, and according to the speaker for the network, it was the Minister of Interior "the apostate in chief in the Arab peninsula"¹¹⁶ and his son that were the targets.

Concerning al-Qaeda's ideology, there are various descriptions with respect to the exact ideology of the organization and the affiliation of its founders. According to judge Jean Louis Bruguière, the French terrorism expert, al-Qaeda is like AIDS virus¹¹⁷, it constantly changes form but becomes more and more virulent; Maha Azzam, in her article *Al-Qaeda, the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of*

¹¹⁵ « Cinq ans après les attentats du 11 septembre, la polémique sur le système d'éducation saoudien se poursuit », *L'Orient- LE JOUR*, September 9, 2006, p. 12.

¹¹⁶ « Le réseau de ben Laden revendique l'attentat du 29 décembre à Ryad », *L'Orient- LE JOUR*, December 30th, 2004, p.11.

¹¹⁷ Randal, *op.cit.*, p.178.

violence,¹¹⁸ says that Osama Bin Laden himself, in addition to Abdallah Azzam (the legendary Arab fighter against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) started as members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is not a Wahhabi-oriented organization. They were joined later by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who would become the number two figure of al-Qaeda, but upon setting up al-Qaeda in the mid 1980's the Muslim Brotherhood departed from bin Laden and his group, not because of religious divergences, but because they disagreed on the scope of action.

On the other hand, Christina Hellmich's article reveals different descriptions of bin Laden, namely: "Bin Laden and his followers belong to a puritanical variant of Islam known as Wahhabism, an extreme and intolerant Islamo-Fascist sect that became the official cult of Saudi Arabia", according to Stephen Schwartz¹¹⁹. Also, al-Qaeda is being described as "a group of religious fanatics, lunatics mad mullahs or even fascists-embodiments of 'pure evil', aiming to galvanize the spirit of its supporters. Al-Qaeda corrupts, misrepresents or misinterprets the Quranic text"¹²⁰, is the terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna's point of view. Al-Qaeda is also described as an "Islamofascist movement seeking to create a 'Greater Islamic State' in which *shari'a* law will be ruthlessly enforced"¹²¹; it is also labelled: "classically imperialist", "wishing to craft the next chapter of human history in its own image"¹²². An original definition is also being given by Brendan O'Neill in his article *Osama bin Laden: more media whore than guerrilla warrior*, who sees al-Qaeda as a "new and peculiarly globalised movement", a "movement that is not tied by territory, history or politics, more like an outfit with a

¹¹⁸ Maha Azzam, "Al-Qaeda: the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of violence", *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, February 2003, p.2.

¹¹⁹ Christina Hellmich, "Al-Qaeda-terrorists, hypocrites, fundamentalists? The view from within", *Third World Quarterly*, vol.26, no.1, 2005, p.40.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Brendan O'Neill, "Osama bin Laden: more media whore than guerrilla warrior", <http://www.spiked-online.com>, October 21st, 2005, p.1.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.2.

chaos-theory reading of international affairs”¹²³. The individuals constituting al-Qaeda are described as coming from disparate cities like Riyadh, Paris or Huddersfield, not bonded by any common experience or oppression or shared political visions, rather by fluid relationships that characterise this nebula. Their war is therefore not for something tangible, like the Iranian revolutionaries in 1979 for instance. Devji describes their actions as “ethical gestures”¹²⁴. Hence, al-Qaeda has departed from all radical Islam fundamentalists who aimed to set up an ideological state through revolution.

Whatever the description given, Islam is very present in al-Qaeda's ideology, particularly the jihadi-salafi trend. Islam is the doctrine by which al-Qaeda abides shaping its rhetoric and framing its political agenda. A first proof of the presence of Islam in their ideology lies in the way recruitment and training of the members and the new arrivals in Afghanistan is done. Those people have to get acquainted with *ilm al-shari'a* that is the knowledge of Islamic Law, with a special emphasis on ibn Taymiyya's teachings, professing the necessity for Muslims to oppose tyrannical rule by force. Nevertheless, Maha Azzam sees that the connection between bin Laden, Taliban and Mullah Omar to be a collusion of interests and defiance in the face of a common enemy rather than a confederation of a “Wahhabi influenced Islamists”¹²⁵.

According to her, the key to the ideology of bin Laden lies more in his political view of the Middle East situation, rather than in Wahhabi or Salafi practices of Islam. The idea behind the creation of al-Qaeda was a base that would rally the different Islamic groups. However, at its inception, the mainstream of the radical Islamist movement in Arab countries refused to join al-Qaeda not because they were reluctant to acknowledge the leadership of Osama bin Laden, but mostly because of a divergence over the scope

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3

¹²⁵ Azzam, *loc.cit.*

of the Islamist action. Whereas Islamist groups thought that the revolutionary action should be confined within each group's nation-state borders, without interfering in one another's territory beyond providing moral support, al-Qaeda's outlook was more of an internationalist revolutionary movement. It brought together Islamists from different revolutionary backgrounds: from the *Mujahideen* Afghan, to fighters against their own regimes...

Islam and politics are quite intertwined, and this is very much clear in al Qaeda's ideology, with Osama bin Laden constantly turning towards the golden age Islamic tradition, and his criticizing of the existing status-quo, providing religious guidance and exhorting revolutionary changes. Islam is very present in bin-Laden's speeches whether in the format or in the content.

Osama bin Laden's critique of the Saudi political order is a recurrent theme in most of his communiqués and declarations. He does not acknowledge the very existence of the Kingdom Saudi Arabia as a country, and keeps on calling his nation *The Arab Peninsula*¹²⁶, hence withholding the legitimacy of the ruling family, the Âl Saud, whom he accuses of the bad conditions the Saudi people are suffering from: the deterioration of the economy, inflation, increasing government debts and jails full of prisoners.

His criticism is obvious in communiqué 17, issued on the 3rd of August 1995, entitled *An open letter to King Fahd* in which he blames the Saudi regime for its lack of commitment to the interpretation of Sheikh Mohamad bin Abdel Wahab's Sunni Islam, as well as the state's inability to adopt a viable defense policy, and the dependence on non-Muslims for protection, as well as the squandering of oil revenues. As for the state's lack of Islamic credentials, bin Laden attacks the state *ulama* appointed by the King as

¹²⁶ Bin Laden, Osama, "Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War (Part I). 'Expel the infidels from the Arab Peninsula' ", <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, September 21, 2001, p.1.

apologists for the regime whose main aim is to mask the degree to which Saudi policy has strayed from Islamic Law; they give legitimacy to the state's dependence on non-Muslims for protection.

Even Sheikh bin Baz, the then grand Mufti of the Kingdom is blamed for his *fatwa* accepting the normalization of relations and peace with Israel. This is very clear in Bin Laden's open letters to the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz. The first letter is a response to a *fatwa* published in *al-Muslimoon*, issued by bin Baz, in which he approves the peace talks between the Arab states and Israel. In this letter bin Laden accuses the Grand Mufti of legitimizing "the current terms of surrender signed by the cowardly tyrants of the Arab leaders and Israel".¹²⁷

Then bin Laden states the reasons why he considers this *fatwa* to be invalid: the first reason is that the parties to the contract in the Arab-Israeli peace talks do not meet the conditions stipulated in the *shari'a* with respect to legitimate contracts between Muslims and their enemies, because "they are a group of secular leaders who abandoned their faith (*murtadoon*)". So, according to bin Laden these parties acting on behalf of the Muslim party are not Muslims, and hence they are not recognized as legitimate Muslim leaders through the consensus of the *ummah*.

The second reason bin Laden invokes is the use of international law instead of the Islamic *shari'a*, as a frame of reference in a concept based on sovereignty in a system of nation states. Under this system, it is unlikely for Muslims to win back Jerusalem, especially with the Israelis insisting that it is their undivided capital.

A third reason bin Laden gives to refute bin Baz's *fatwa* is that the Grand Mufti is not an authority in the matter so he has no right to issue a *fatwa*, because *fatawa* of this

¹²⁷ Bin Laden, Osama, *An Open Letter to Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz Refuting His Fatwa Concerning the Reconciliation with the Jews*, Communiqué no.11, ARC, December 29, 1994, pp.1-4, in Fandy, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

type must be issued by a mufti who is well versed in the debated subject, and bin Baz did not read the treaties, he has only limited understanding of international law and the complex situation

A fourth reason is the apologetic attitude of bin Baz in his issuing fatwas, wanting to please the rulers whose interests change according to the politics of the situation, at the expense of Muslim interests, the teachings of God, and the consensus of the u'lama. A last reason bin Laden gives is the contradictory *fatwas* bin Baz issues because he follows the rulers' whims. For all these reasons, bin Laden asks bin Baz to resign his post of Grand Mufti and repent. Quoting a *hadith* he tells the Sheikh: "Hold your tongue and stay within the confines of your home and cry over your sin."¹²⁸

Bin Laden is also very concerned with the government suppression of dissent, particularly the arrest of "honest" scholars who "speak truth to power"¹²⁹, such as Salman al-Auda and Safar al-Hawali. In the conclusion of his letter, he advises the King to resign. He says to King Fahd:

"We have proven that your regime is un-Islamic. It is mired in corruption and applies non-Islamic laws to certain aspects of the human dealings such as commercial law. It also has failed in the areas of the economy and defense. Thus you should resign."¹³⁰

In an audio-cassette tape released on December 16, 2004 aired on *al-Jazeera*, Osama bin Laden reiterates his criticism against the Arab rulers in general and the Saudi royal family in particular. He starts his message by the following: "Today there is a conflict between the world heresy under the leadership of America on the one hand and the Islamic nation with the *Mujahideen* in its vanguard on the other".¹³¹ He starts by blaming the Saudi regime which has neglected its duties for the disagreement and

¹²⁸ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.188.

¹²⁹ Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.187.

¹³⁰ Communique no.17, August 3 1995, in Fandy, *op.cit.*, p.187.

¹³¹ <http://www.memri.org/bin/opener> special dispatch series-no. 838, December 30, 2004, p.1.

conflict between the “rulers of Riyadh” and “the people of this country”¹³². Bin Laden blames the ruling dynasty for neglecting the conditions necessary to provide security, life, harmonious relations, and social cohesion for its citizens, by disobeying Allah and committing grave sins which expose the land to Allah's warning and punishment. He is critical of then Crown Prince Abdallah for acting in a treacherous manner as a foreign agent in the Beirut summit¹³³ by launching his peace proposal, he blames him also for having helped the Americans to conquer Iraq, although bin Laden considers Saddam Hussein to be a thief and an apostate, the solution, according to him, should never have been to transfer Iraq from the indigenous thief to the foreign thief, because "helping the infidel to rob Muslims' land and to gain control over them is an act that removes one from Islam"¹³⁴.

The founder of the family, Abdel Aziz ibn Saud, is not praised for having been a British agent receiving money from the English, as it was revealed by his own son Talal¹³⁵. Then bin Laden describes the acts of disobedience against Allah committed by the Saudi regime, which he qualifies as “grave”¹³⁶, worse than merely grave offenses and mortal sins, so serious that those who commit such things are no longer Muslims. These acts are "worse than acting iniquitously with the people and depriving them of their rights, humiliating them, insulting their intelligence and sentiments, and embezzling the funds of the *ummah*. Each day, millions of people suffer from poverty and deprivation, while millions of riyals flow into the accounts of the heads of the [Saudi royal] family who wield power. In addition to all this, services are being scaled back, they are stealing lands, they forcibly impose themselves as “partners” in

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1.

businesses without giving any compensation... But worse of them all, the regime "has reached actions that clearly remove one from Islam", it "has allied itself with infidel America and helped it [in its war] against Muslims, and has made itself a counterpart to Allah by legislating to people both what is permitted and what is forbidden, instead of [leaving this to] Allah..."¹³⁷ Bin Laden concludes this section on the conflict between world heresy –and with it today's apostates- under the leadership of America, on the one hand, and on the other, the Islamic nation with the brigades of *mujahideen* in its vanguard, by saying that it is this very same family which helped the Crusaders against the Muslims a century ago in Palestine, who is now repressing every movement for reform and is imposing upon the peoples policies that contradict both their religion and their worldly interest.

Then he tackles another issue pertaining to the domestic policy, which is the American interference in domestic affairs. This interference ranges from appointing the king or his viceroy, to blackmailing the competing princes in order to meet their demands¹³⁸, particularly the then Crown Prince Abdallah, so that he won't end up being deposited by his brothers as was the case with King Sa'ud, to changing the religious curricula in order to dry up what the Americans call: "The fountainheads of the Islamic awakening".¹³⁹

Osama was right about this issue because lately the King announced that religious curricula would be amended by September 2007 in a way to please other sects and religions, in order to get rid of the accusation of the Kingdom raising religious

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

fanatics.¹⁴⁰ Bin Laden considers this issue to be of utmost importance because its end result is harmful religiously because it is an apostasy, and materially because the altered curricula will "eventually produce educated slaves in our country, who will be loyal to America, sell the interest of the country and smile in the face of the Americans, while they conquer the land and defile the [Muslims'] honor, under the pretext of liberty, equality, and the laws of the United Nations"¹⁴¹. But the responsibility is not limited to the Āl Saud's, it is incumbent on all those apologetic clerics too. Osama ends his message on a threatening revolutionary tone urging the honest *ulama*, leaders, people of influence such as notables and dignitaries, businessmen... to "take action before it's too late", because the *mujahideen's* strikes are just an extension of the war against the Crusader-American coalition and are not launched yet against the regime, for "had they launched it in fact, the top priority would have been to get rid of the local leaders of heresy- namely the rulers of Riyadh".

In the article: *Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War (Part I), 'Expel the infidels from the Arabian Peninsula'*, bin Laden sees that the "situation at the land of the two Holy places became like a huge volcano at the verge of eruption that would destroy the *Kufr* and the corruption and its sources. The explosion at Riyadh and al-Khobar is a warning of this volcanic eruption emerging as a result of the severe oppression, suffering excessive iniquity, humiliation and poverty". He also says that people including *ulama*, scholars, merchants, economists as well as numerous princes privately express their concerns and object to the corruption and the intimidation taking place in the country, are fully concerned about their every day livings, and that "they even believe that this situation is a curse put on them by Allah for not objecting to the oppressive and

¹⁴⁰ « Cinq ans après les attentats du 11 septembre, la polémique sur le système d'éducation saoudien se poursuit », *L'Orient -LE JOUR*, Saturday 9th of September 2006, p.16.

¹⁴¹ MEMRI, *op.cit.*, pp.3-4.

illegitimate behaviour and measures of the ruling regime: ignoring the divine *Shari'a* law; depriving people of their legitimate rights; allowing the American to occupy the land of the two Holy Places; imprisonment, unjustly of the sincere scholars"¹⁴².

Bin Laden considers the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places –the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims- by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies, as the latest and the greatest of the aggressions committed by the Zionist-Crusaders alliance and incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet¹⁴³.

Bin Laden then tackles the issue of the regime deceiving the Muslim people allowing the presence of Americans in the Arab Peninsula as a pre-planned military occupation, according to Safar al-Hawwali, in the same manner the Palestinian *mujahideen* were deceived by Ibn Saud causing the loss of al-Aqsa Mosque in 1304 AH, 1936 AD. He accuses King Fahd of trying to deceive the Muslims for the second time to loose what is left of the sanctities.¹⁴⁴ So, instead of motivating the security forces, the army, and the guards to oppose the occupiers, the regime uses these forces to protect the invaders. To him, America is a land of war, its people are people of war, the only way to liberation from humiliation is the sword, and the acme of this religion is *jihad*, so he advises Muslims to continue with their policy of “bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy”¹⁴⁵, stating that “aiding America is the greatest apostasy of all”¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴² Bin Laden Osama, “Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of war (Part I), ‘Expel the infidels from the Arab Peninsula’”, *op.cit.*, p.3.

¹⁴³ Bin Laden Osama, “Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War (Part I), ‘Expel the infidels from the Arab Peninsula’”, *op.cit.* <http://www.washingtonpost.com>, September 21, 2001, p.2.

¹⁴⁴ Bin Laden, Osama, “Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War (Part II), ‘A suitable means of fighting must be adopted’”, p.3.

¹⁴⁵ Bin Ladin’s speech to *ALJAZEERA.NET*, Saturday 30 October 2004, p.3.

¹⁴⁶ *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch Series, No.837, December 30, 2004, p.2.

As a result, al Qaeda advances many a justification related to September 11 attacks. Despite the numerous provisions that Islam dictates limiting targets and tactics, stating what is permissible and what is not during wartime, demonstrating the importance of restraint and caution on the battlefield, al Qaeda disputes the broad prohibition against killing civilians on two grounds, thus departing from all the non-violent Salafis and conformist *ulama*. First, it does not recognize that the victims of September 11 were innocents, and second it does not consider the prohibition as an absolute one, and it sets seven conditions under which killing civilians becomes permissible even with just one condition of the following seven satisfied:¹⁴⁷the norm of reciprocity, the inability to distinguish civilians from combatants, the assistance of civilians in deed, word, or mind, the necessity of war, the use of heavy weaponry, taking of human shields, and the violation of Treaty by the enemy¹⁴⁸.

Al Qaeda has been declared responsible for attacking the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the October 2000 USS Cole bombing in Aden, the April 2002 explosion of a fuel tanker outside a synagogue in Tunisia, the several bombings that took place in Pakistan in spring 2002, the October 2002 attack on a French tanker off the coast of Yemen, and the Bali attacks in October 12 2002, the November 2002 car bomb attack in Mombasa (Kenya), also in Mombasa the failed attack to shoot down an Israeli jetliner with shoulder-fired missiles, the series of attacks on the 16th of May 2003 in Casablanca, the attacks against Istanbul's synagogue in November 2003, Madrid March 11, 2004, London July 2005, in addition to the attacks perpetrated inside the Kingdom such as the Yanbu' attack (as a retaliation to the services committed in the Abu Ghraib prison) the Riyadh attacks, and the 24th of February 2006

¹⁴⁷ Quintan Wiktorowicz, and John Kaltner, "Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qaeda's Justification for September 11", *Middle East Policy*, vol.10, no.2, 2003, pp. 86-90.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Abqaiq oil refineries in the oil-rich Eastern region. But it is following September 11 hijacking attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, that bin Laden has been labelled an international terrorist by the United States, according to their own criteria of terrorism as stated in Amal Saad-Ghorayeb's book: "the US' criteria for terrorism are the rejection of its domination and the refusal to succumb to Israel"¹⁴⁹; he has also been described as "Bush's favourite evil doer"¹⁵⁰ the 'godfather of terror'¹⁵¹ by *The Independent*, and 'the world's most wanted man'¹⁵² as well. President Clinton called Osama "the pre-eminent organizer and financier of international terrorism in the world today",¹⁵³ after having declared him: "America's public enemy number one"¹⁵⁴.

According to political theorist Yaron Ezraeli:

"The Arab world has rattled the world stage in the last fifty years with two larger than life figures: one was the Saudi oil minister Ahmed Zaki Yamani, and the other was Osama bin Laden. Each achieved global notoriety, each briefly held the world in his palm- one by using oil as a weapon and the other by using the most unconventional suicide violence imaginable. Each gave a temporary "high" to the Arab-Muslim world, a feeling that it was exercising power on the world stage. But bin Laden and Yamani were only the illusions of power: the Saudi oil weapon is economic power without productivity, and bin Laden's terrorism weapon is military force without a real army, state, economy, and engine of innovation to support it"¹⁵⁵.

The al Qaeda phenomenon remains difficult to study and assess, as the group is banned and its members pursued by Saudi security services, so one cannot measure the real extent to which bin Laden and his followers have succeeded in extending their influence in the country. But the fact that the Saudi authorities have fired hundreds of religious teachers and preachers after September 11 indicates that bin Laden enjoys a

¹⁴⁹ Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbullah: Politics and Religion*, London, 2002, p.94.

¹⁵⁰ Randal, *op.cit.*, p.257.

¹⁵¹ *The Independent*, 15 September 2001, in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 184.

¹⁵² *The Independent*, 16 September 2001, in al-Rasheed, *loc.cit.*

¹⁵³ Randal, *op.cit.*, p. 210.

¹⁵⁴ Randal, *op.cit.*, p.44.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat*, London, 2005, p. 405.

current of support in the ranks of the Sunni religious *ulama*. The way the Saudi battle against al-Qaeda and the deviationists, (as dubbed by the Saudi official authorities) is going is not clear in a country reputed for its lack of transparency with respect to such important issues. And according to Abukhalil, Prince Sultan affirmation that "80 percent of the terrorists" has been eliminated is to be regarded with suspicion¹⁵⁶.

C. THE SHIITES

Saudi Arabia's Shiites are estimated to be two million people constituting approximately 10-15% of the population. Most of them are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province, an important number lives in the capital Dammam, their demographic concentration being in the two oases of Qatif and al-Hasa. An estimated number of 100,000 thousand Ismaili Shiites, belonging to the Yam tribe, live in the southwestern city of Najran. Since the *ikhwan* epoch, a policy of marginalization was pursued. The *ikhwan* belief revolved around the call for jihad especially with respect to apostates to whom the Shiites belonged. Upon ibn Saud's refusal either to convert them by force or to kill them, the *ikhwan* started to revolt in 1926, and were defeated afterwards. With the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932, a variety of methods was followed in order to pacify and marginalize the Shiite minority.

Therefore, the issue is quite complicated due to the long history of marginalization the Shiites were subject to, as well as their readiness to take advantage of the events in neighbouring countries, particularly Iran and Iraq, in addition to the delicate situation of overture of which King Abdallah is a proponent at the expense of the hardliners whether from religious *ulama* or even from the conservative wing amidst the ruling family itself, because the Saudi clerics and al-Qaeda as well base their political analysis of the Shiites

¹⁵⁶ Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, p.172.

on two assumptions: first, Wahhabism is true Islam, and second Wahhabism is to hold the reign of state policy.

In this respect, al Qaeda's basic credo regarding the Shiite question is as follows: "We believe that the Shiite heretics are a sect of idolatry and apostasy and that they are the most evil creatures under the heavens"¹⁵⁷. Even the Saudi Wahhabi establishment, through the *fatawa*, sermons and statements of the clerics denounces the Shiite practices, as this *fatwa* delivered by a prominent official cleric, Abd el-Rahman al-Barrak revealing the degree of hatred against this community. Asked if it was permissible for Sunnis to launch a *jihad* against Shiites, he said that "if the Shiites as a minority insisted on practicing their religion openly in a Sunni-dominated country, then yes, there is no other choice for the state but to wage war against them"¹⁵⁸. Another hard-liner, al Qaeda's propagandist, al-Ayyiri believes that the Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia is conspiring with the United States in its war to destroy Islam. As part of this conspiracy scheme, the Shiite minorities all over the Persian Gulf countries are trying to occupy position of responsibilities in such countries to ally themselves with the enemies of true Islam." The danger of the Shiite heretics, he says, is no less than the danger of the Jews and the Christians"¹⁵⁹. Safar al-Hawali, the prominent cleric belonging to *ulama as-sahwa*, characterized the petitions signed by the Shiites as an attempt by the Shiite minorities to tyrannize the Sunni majority. According to him, the Shiites have started their plots with the foreign enemies of the Sunnis since the 13th century, when they aligned with the Mongols, and today they follow the same path conspiring with the Americans, therefore their demands should never be met by the Saudi state, otherwise we would end up either by a secular state or a Shiite government. Safar al-Hawali

¹⁵⁷ Michael Scott, Doran "The Saudi Paradox", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004, p. 7.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

warned the Shiites that, should they ever succeed in establishing a secular state, the end result would be a civil war that would annihilate them¹⁶⁰. The Saudi clerics are very suspicious of this minority, who is trying to offer an alternative notion of Islamic community, who tends to agglomerate in strategic areas, who has connections with co-religionists beyond the borders of their own country, and who is on the same wave length with the Sunnis reformers. Given a chance of participation, they would form a unified bloc, putting the regime in jeopardy since other regional minorities and sects would be tempted to do the same. Another cleric, Nasir al-Umar, a government employee in charge of a mosque, urged the government to fire Shiites from all the important positions they occupy in the country, as well as to find a solution to the Shiite domination in the Eastern province¹⁶¹.

Therefore the Saudi government/ Shiite relationship has evolved from the inherent hostility of the *ikhwan* period, to more suspicion of the Shiites following the Khomeini call and aspiring to independence following the Iran revolution in 1975, to a mix of cooptation and confrontation following the Achoura 1979 events, to lately a détente following the 1993 meetings. It is in 1993 that King Fahd realized what al-Mas'ari called a "masterly stroke"¹⁶² when he reached an agreement between the regime and prominent Shiite dissidents abroad which ended by an amnesty and political concessions in return for stopping the anti-Saudi campaign, at a time when voices calling for reform were increasing domestically from Sunnis. Otherwise, the relations have always been characterized by sectarianism and a deep anti-Shiite sentiment and

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pp.8-9.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* p.9.

¹⁶² Champion, "Elements of Instability within Stability", in *Crisis in the Contemporary Persian Gulf States*, p. 140.

incitement, as well as an approach that considered Shiites more as security threat than as a community to be integrated.

1. The Ismailis or "Seveners" in Najran

Concerning the Ismailis of Najran, Aburish reported the massacre of 7,000 people in Najran alone by the troops supporting Ibn Saud during the years 1916-1928, when the population was accused of setting an anti-Āl Saud tribal rebellion. These massacres form the historical framework for the violent clashes that erupted in Najran in April 2000 between the Saudi security forces and armed Ismaili tribesmen. The persecution of the Ismailis had increased since the arrival of Prince Mish'al ibn Saud as governor of the province in 1997, when officials have started a campaign of eradication of the Ismaili heritage and other symbols of their faith because, according to Sheikh Ali Khursa, one of the Wahhabi officials who had previously publicly announced their intention to convert Ismailis to Wahhabism, because they do not follow the Sunna, they do not believe that the Holy Book is complete, and they hate Sunnis. So, according to the same Sheikh "We don't eat their food, we don't intermarry with them, we should not pray for their dead or allow them to be buried in our cemeteries"¹⁶³. The director of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs declared that a new ministry office had been inaugurated in Najran with the sole aim of propagating the Wahhabi doctrine, and the government has allocated at least \$ 11 million to build nine new Wahhabi mosques in Najran. Other intimidation methods were used also such as land confiscation or an imposed attempt to demographically change the city by giving the Saudi citizenship to two Sunni-majority Yemeni tribes who were also allocated lands and offered jobs in a region where unemployment rate reaches nearly 40 percent among natives.

¹⁶³ Bradley, *op. cit.*, p.75.

But it is the religious oppression measures that sparked the April 2000 rebellion. Previously and since Ramadan of the year 1997, under the governor of the city Prince Mash'al's orders, the ritual of *Achoura* was banned from public spaces and mosques, therefore the Ismailis were asked by their spiritual leader to perform the prayers and ceremonies at home. Later the leader was arrested by the government authorities on charges of sorcery. The rebellion has sparked when the locals decided to perform the Achoura rituals in the mosque, hence defying the authorities. So, the government-backed religious police stormed a major Ismaili mosque, arrested three clerics and seized many religious texts, and closed the mosque. The local Ismailis who were armed fired the security forces and burned some of their vehicles. The rebellion ended with 40 persons dead and many other injured. Many Ismailis marched to the Prince's palace but he had already fled after having asked army reinforcements and close protection. The end result of the rebellion after the complete sweeping out of the region by the Saudi police, is that the majority of political or religious prisoners held in Saudi jails are Ismailis, hundreds of Ismaili employees in the ministry of Interior were deported to other regions, in August 2000 many teachers were transferred to al-Jouf, that is from the Kingdom's southern-most locality to its northern-most province, and no Ismaili students were accepted in the military academies any more.

2. The "Twelvers" in the Eastern region

As far as the Eastern Province is concerned, the frustration of the alienated Saudi population is even much greater. With the benediction of the *Âl Saud* an impressive number of Sunnis merchants and settlers from Najd populated the eastern regions helping to build new cities and businesses that did not benefit the Shiites much. On the contrary, Sunni settlers and merchants bypassed the local population of Shiites and preferred to deal with co-religionists from the heartland, as well as with the Hijazi

merchant class. The once prosperous date industry declined, and the production was put under state monopoly. So Shiites were to work mainly at ARAMCO camps without being able to hold important posts.

This situation made the Shiites receptive of various ideological trends from the 1950s to the 1970s such as Communism, Nasserism, and Baathism, all of them antagonistic to the Al Saud. Simultaneously, Saudi rulers repressed severely Shiite religious rituals: "restrictions included injunctions against publicly broadcasting calls to prayer, a ban on publishing and distributing religious or political texts, limits on mosque construction, the destruction of shrines, the dismantling of centers of religious learning, and prosecution and even persecution of those observing Shiite rituals, including Achoura and grave visitation"¹⁶⁴.

In spite of repression, the Shiite clergy carried on its activity in private, mostly homes and mosques, depending for guidance on foreign senior *ulama*, adapting to the situation rather than resisting it, limiting their complaints to quietly petitioning the state for relief from the harshest discriminations. Two reasons were behind this quiescence: an avowed one "Shiite orthodoxy historically discouraged them from interfering in political matters" and a pragmatic one "avoiding the repression of the regime instead of challenging it".¹⁶⁵ Thus the current generation of Shiite political leaders, such as Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the pre-eminent Saudi Shiite political leader, studied religion in Najaf, where they stated to adopt a more virulent attitude. After returning from his Kuwaiti exile to al-Qatif in 1977, al-Saffar and his colleagues' violent dissent departed from the more pacifist clerics.

¹⁶⁴ International Crisis Group. "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report No 45*, 19 September 2005, p. 2.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Encouraged by the Islamic Revolution, (with Radio Tehran news bulletins criticizing the *Ál Saud*) as well as by the local vacuum, al-Saffar and his colleagues started stimulating the youth, criticizing the regime through the distribution of flyers advocating public dissent, talking loudly about the community grievances and in *Achoura* 1979, causing the most massive civil disobedience launched by Saudi Shiites till today. So in November 1979, several thousand Shiites defied the government ban and decided to commemorate *Achoura* in the locality of Safwa. In al-Qatif and Khobar there were riots, vehicles were burnt, shops businesses and homes were damaged. ARAMCO's offices were closed in al-Qatif.

The state's reaction was severe: the mass protest was harshly repressed with more than twenty people killed, many arrests and hundreds of exiles including al-Saffar himself who fled to Iran then took refuge in Damascus. As of January 9, 1980, there was no longer any sign of the Shiite insurgency. Sixty-three of the main instigators in Mecca and the Eastern Province were split into small groups and sent to Riyadh, Tabuk, Abha, Buraydah, Hael, Dammam, Mecca, and Madina, where they were publicly beheaded, a clear sign of the ruling family that dissent is not tolerated in the Kingdom. But in 1988, with the end of Iraq-Iran war and the realization that Iran is not going to be able to liberate the Shiites of the Gulf, the confrontational phase decreased in intensity and the exiled religious leaders moderated their tone realizing that Shiites in Saudi Arabia could not pursue a successful revolution and that violence is not the way to obtain concessions in the political, social or religious domains.

The policy the Shiite leadership followed was that of improving relations with the regime while simultaneously expressing their grievances. In 1993 King Fahd invited to Jeddah four of al-Saffar's disciples in order to discuss their demands in return for their stopping their political opposition from abroad. The settlement with the Shiite

community has been described as “a masterly stroke”¹⁶⁶ by al-Mas’ari. The four activists: Jaafar al-Shayeb, Sadeq al-Jubran, Issa al-Mu’zil and Tawfiq al-Sayf were promised by the government that “major social and religious issues would be discussed, that school textbooks be amended to remove disparaging references to Shi’ism”¹⁶⁷, as well as the release of political prisoners imprisoned since the 1980s, the return of hundreds of exiles giving them their passports back and allowing them to travel.

However, the final outcome was somehow controversial, with the Shiites claiming that little has been done concerning their needs, except for healthcare, and the government not satisfied with the foundation of Saudi Arabia's Hizbullah in 1987, hence the refusal of some Shiites to adopt the conciliatory approach. The 25th of June 1996 al-Khobar attack was seen as an act done by the Shiite militancy reminding of the threat they still represent. Upon their return from exile in the mid-1990s, the Shiite leadership focused on defending the interests of the community vis-à-vis the state as well as other sectarian groups, but the advent of external (9/11 attacks and the war on Iraq) as well as of internal events (al-Qaeda striking at home) led the Shiites whether Islamists or liberal secularists to join the other forces in calling for urgent political and religious reforms in order to stop the tide of home-grown fundamentalism. In January 2003, a petition called *A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation* was signed with the basic conviction that although the reforms were inevitable, the kingdom would be better of if managed by the Ál Saud.

The war in Iraq led some other 450 Shiites from various political groupings (persuaded that the regime is to loosen its grip with the American invasion), to write in April 2003 their own petition following the previous national one, they called *Partners*

¹⁶⁶ Champion, “Elements of Instability within Stability”, *op.cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁶⁷ Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke. *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York, 1999, p.190 in “The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia”, *op.cit.*, p.4.

in the Nation in which they principally intended to show their allegiance but also their demands: to stop discrimination such as the under-representation of Shiites in the important official positions, particularly in the military and the police, and in the Consultative Council where just four out of the 150 members of the 1995 expanded *Majlis al-Shura* are Shiites, to curb sectarian hatred, particularly with respect to students complaining of prejudice and open hostility from Sunni teachers who refer to them as *kuffar*, *rafida*, or *mushrikun*. Crown Prince Abdallah promised the grievances would be addressed.

However, in December 2003, a petition was signed aiming to establish a constitutional monarchy. The government's response came in March 2004 with the arrest of the three prominent Shiite activists: Najib al-Khunayzi, Adnan al-Shukhus, and Amr Abu Khamsin, among others implicated in the national reform project, then their release after their promising not to get involved in other petitions. Although most of the Shiite leadership seems to be calling for a political system "that permits different interpretations of Islam", stressing that "sharing power and being a partner is the only way to unity and security for the community"¹⁶⁸, other Saudis remain suspicious as to the real intentions of the Shiites whom they see relying on external support, U.S. or other, in order to establish their own independent state.

Although King Abdallah has signalled his support for more Shiite rights mostly by enhancing national dialogues in which key members of the Sunni clergy were taken part, still, a lot needs to be done in order to achieve the political and social integration of the community, namely to encourage tolerance and diversity in order to achieve national unity, as well as to curb down the anti-Shiite sentiment of violence; also to lift the ban

¹⁶⁸ International Crisis Group, "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia", *op.cit.*, p. 5.

on construction of their own mosques and *husayniyyas*, as well as the free circulation of their printed materials (in this respect the decision by the Saudi government to allow them to observe the ritual of *Achoura* in 2004 is to the credit of the authorities); and finally to reinforce Shiite presence in governmental institutions, in particular the regional councils and the Consultative Council.

Although in the past the Saudi state has been confronted to two major threats (Mohamad's Ali invasion that led to the disintegration of the first Saudi state 1745-1811, then the collapse of the second Saudi state 1843-1865 due the Rashidis, rulers of Hael, taking over Riyadh), yet the *Âl Saud* have managed to retrieve power in both cases.

Modern Saudi Arabia has been confronted to four major types of political opposition. The secular and Arab nationalist opposition of the years 1953-1964 has had either to go underground or to emigrate, the royal opposition has been placated with their leader Prince Talal being authorized to go back to Saudi Arabia under specific conditions, and even the Liberal-Islamists were to be coopted by the regime thus becoming part of the establishment.

The only serious political opposition the regime is to count with is the religious opposition. The Islamists want to break the 1928 understanding whereby the ruling group runs the political affairs of the state whereas the *ulama* control the spiritual affairs of the *umma*.

Osama bin Laden is another major source of concern to the regime. Bin Laden has turned into a virulent critique of the regime particularly after the Gulf War trauma.

The Shiite question is an additional issue that King Abdallah is trying to deal with cautiously.

So will the Saudi regime be able to neutralize all these increasing political forces, in a climate of social malaise that is going to be discussed in the next chapter?

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOCIAL MALAISE

In Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to represent the scale of social problems in the absence of detailed statistics, trade unions or even an embryo of social sciences studies available, although since August 1st 2005, the date of ascension of King Abdallah to the throne, the press became more prolific about social problems such as marital violence, prostitution, homosexuality, drug addiction, poverty, unemployment, and expatriate complaints.

A. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

As a start, a special attention is drawn to the status of Saudi women in society. This has been recently made more accessible with the accession of King Abdallah to the throne, August, 1st 2005, reiterating many a time that the leadership holds women in high esteem; the King also has done a première upon receiving two groups of women, each of forty, on the occasion of the *bay'aa*,¹⁶⁹ (oath of allegiance) part of which has been broadcasted on television. According to Jeddah radio-journalist Samar Fatany this overture towards women, particularly the active ones, has enabled the media to highlight the emerging role of working women in the Saudi society, who are becoming better represented in businesses, bringing out figures such as Johara al-Anqari and Suhayla Zein al-Abidin (active members of the newly formed Human Rights Organization), Dr. Nahid Taher (first Saudi female CEO of a commercial bank), Dr. Nadia Bugshan (head of the first business center for women at the Jeddah chamber of commerce), Maha Yamani, (first woman lawyer), Amina Jassem (fashion designer), Haifa Mansour (first woman movie producer), Dr. Thurayya Obeid (first Saudi woman

¹⁶⁹ Alain Gresh, "Saudi Arabia: reality check". *op.cit.*, p.3.

to hold a key-position at the UN), Dr. Hatoun al-Fassi (History Professor at King Saud's University, and a columnist concerned with women's conditions). Saudi Arabia can even boost now its first woman airline pilot, Hanadi Hindi, 27 years old, quite a paradoxical career in a country where women are not allowed to drive cars. Mrs Hindi is employed by Prince's al-Waleed bin Talal private holding.¹⁷⁰Talking about newly created posts for women, an important step was taken too with the election of two women out of twelve representatives at the Jeddah chamber of commerce, also two other women were appointed by the Minister of Trade and Industry (out of six appointed members) to sit on the board; the four Saudi pioneer board members of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce are: Madawi al-Hassun, Lama al-Soleiman, Olfat Qabbani, and Nashwa Taher.

Another step was won when a woman, two years ago, became able to obtain her identity card, if she conforms to the following requirements: be 22, have the written consent of her guardian, and a letter from her employer if she is working. In 2001, the issue had infuriated the religious *ulama* who decreed that it was impermissible to have women's pictures on identity cards.¹⁷¹ Also, Saudi women have become the owners of most money deposits in Saudi banks¹⁷²,and according to Pascal Ménoret, Saudi women hold some \$ 27 billion as bank deposits.

1. Educating women

Women in Saudi Arabia are faring well with respect to health care, where first-rate medical care is provided free to all Saudis, and with the scarce sources available concerning health problems, (the population prefers to keep such information private)

¹⁷⁰ "La situation s'améliore dans le Golfe. mais l'Arabie est à la traîne", *L'Orient -LE JOUR*, Wednesday, March 8th, 2006, p.16.

¹⁷¹ "Getting Their Cards", *The Economist*, January 3, 2002, in Abukhalil, *op.cit.*,p.148.

¹⁷² Bradley, *op.cit.*, p. xvi.

the only serious reported physical disease that afflicts women is obesity due to the introduction of fast food in the eating patterns. Recent attempts to introduce physical education in girls' schools were opposed by the religious establishment, and for many of those who cannot afford the luxury of frequenting gyms, they are left prey with their sedentary life style and the ensuing diseases.

Education too is an important domain where women have been able to prove themselves and often make great achievements, by Saudi standards, hence breaking the famous maxim: 'Teach-them-home-making-and-stop-them'.¹⁷³ According to 2003 CIA statistics, the literacy rates are 70.8 percent compared to men's 84.7 percent, and 46 percent of girls in 1995 were able to receive College education compared to 8 percent in 1970¹⁷⁴. In fact, education is a staple of Islamic teachings; the *Hadith Sharif* of "seeking knowledge even if you have to go all the way to China" is more than famous, and during the Prophet Mohamad's time, girls were encouraged to learn about religion by the Prophet himself who consecrated special sessions for them.

Nevertheless, schooling girls was no easy matter because of the clerics' opposition to the education of women, fearing that any intended establishment of schools for girls would lead to the corruption of their morals and to the destruction of the foundations of the family. According to them, "girls should be kept at home and protected, and should not learn disruptive ideas at school"¹⁷⁵. It was then Princess Effat, King Faysal's wife in 1956, who opened the first private school for girls in Jeddah, *Dar al-Hanan*, and knowing the opposition that she was going to face from the conservative *ulama*, she "decided to open the school for orphans, for no one could object to this and people

¹⁷³ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.218.

¹⁷⁴ Abukhalil, *op.cit.* pp.149-150.

¹⁷⁵ alMunajjed, Mona, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, London, 1997, p.62.

would feel it was justified if it was for so charitable an object".¹⁷⁶ Four years later, in 1960, King Faysal was able to open the first official primary school for girls in Riyadh, convincing the conservative clerics that "education could help girls to learn the Qur'an and thus become better Muslim mothers, able to teach their children in the future"¹⁷⁷.

The general objectives for education programs are the following:

1. to give girls a clear understanding of their responsibilities towards their children, their own home, and society;
2. to satisfy the needs felt in Saudi Arabia for a body of women who would be capable of maintaining a balance between the changing patterns of today and the traditions of yesterday;
3. to ensure a flow of highly trained women for service in education and elsewhere;
4. to provide all girls with an avenue to higher education.¹⁷⁸

The concession King Faysal obtained came at a price, he entrusted all the affairs of women's education to a committee affiliated to the Ministry of Education, that later became to be known as the "General Presidency of Girls' Education", and the King appointed conservative religious leaders to run the education of girls. The origins of this alliance go back to the alliance that took place in the eighteenth century between the first ibn Saud and Mohammad bin Abdel Wahhab, the religious teacher.

But running the affairs of girls' education has witnessed a radical change in 2002, when fifteen trapped schoolgirls died in a fire, and fifteen others were injured in a Mecca school because the moral police, also ironically dubbed "The Promotion of Death and the Prevention of Life"¹⁷⁹ by the Press, would not allow them to escape without their veils and *abayas*, locking the school at the time of fire to ensure total segregation of the sexes. The scandal led to the transferring of women's education

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹⁷⁸ Abdul Wasi', Abdul Wahhab Ahmad, *At-Ta'lim fi-l-Mamlaka al-Arabiyya as-Su'udiyya*, p. 36, in alMunajjed, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁷⁹ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.200.

affairs from the domain of the religious clerical establishment, to that of the Ministry of Education.

Educating women in Saudi Arabia has been a "big leap forward"¹⁸⁰ in broadening women's horizons, giving them knowledge, self-confidence, self-assurance and culture, even affecting positively their personal and social attitudes towards their family, so that husbands are regarded more as companions and partners than husbands and children are treated with more patience. More importantly, education has endowed women with more value, they are no more considered a "piece of furniture"¹⁸¹, staying at home without having a say.

However, women are realistic as to the extent to which education alone can improve their lives without taking into consideration the heavy weight of traditions. As this twenty seven year single old woman with a BA in social sciences explains:

"Education alone cannot improve our lives. ...If local customs and values are deeply engrained in the life of a person, then a long time is needed before the mentality changes and new things are accepted.... You know, we need more enlightening and awareness about what constitutes social traditions and what is part of Islam."¹⁸²

Suhayla Zayn al-Abidin's point of view confirms what has been said above, "it is because of the traditions and patterns of thought prevailing in society that the situation of women is lagging. We demand a return to true Islam", she says. "The government is on our side. The resistance comes from society" because "Islam gives women substantial rights, more rights than western women have"¹⁸³.

According to Madawi al-Rasheed¹⁸⁴, the blame for Saudi women backwardness is neither to be put on Islam, as Western analysts do, nor on the heavy weight of traditions

¹⁸⁰ alMunajjed, *op.cit.*, p.74.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.76.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 77

¹⁸³ Gresh, "Saudi Arabia: reality check", *op.cit.*, p.3.

¹⁸⁴ al-Rasheed, *maazaq-ul islah fi as-soudiyya fi al-qarn al-hadi wal ishreen*, p.176.

but rather on the dictatorial political system that reigns in Saudi Arabia, as well as in many other Arab countries. This autocratic government deals very harshly with the male: it stabs him daily in his dignity and will, it dispises him, as well as it discards him from major decisions, so that the male is set to harm women, especially at home. Another reason Madawi al-Rasheed gives for Saudi women being oppressed is the presence of foreign troops on Saudi soil, which makes the male gender feel bitterness as for his loss of masculinity, and thus consider the woman to be his last line of defense. A last reason she lists is the physical transformation of the big Saudi cities from cities with a particular cachet, civilization, and culture to huge megapolis swarming with colonies of imported foreign workers of various origins, cultures and religions so that for women, going out for work or else is no simple matter.

Some reservations as to the quality of Saudi education are common, particularly emphasizing on its poor quality, and the doubtful structure of the education system, especially with regards to women's sections. Abukhalil states that "the clerical establishment injects a heavy dosage of religious indoctrination into the curricula and only allows for its conservative and consistently sexist interpretation of religious texts"¹⁸⁵, and assumes that "more resources go to men's schools than to women's"¹⁸⁶, as the government favours segregation in education.

This assumption is backed by the Head of Riyadh's University (Girls' section) who intervened in a program entitled *noktat daou* aired on the Saudi Television in April 2006, deploring the segregation in equipping the girls' section libraries and laboratories in comparison to their males' counterparts. The same point of view is approved by Madawi al-Rasheed, in her nineteenth chapter *al mar'aa al-so'udiya: nahdat nasawiya*

¹⁸⁵ Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, p.151.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

*tahta a'ba'a mustabada*¹⁸⁷. As for schools and universities curricula, males and females are treated differently because of the society's gender-based expectations. The curricula destined to girls emphasize courses that are fit for the biological and social function of a woman in the traditional society that constitutes Saudi Arabia: sewing, cooking, home management and childcare are all in the program besides religious studies, Arabic and mathematics. In the late fifties, a newspaper article summed up all the expectations from educating women:

“We want the state to establish schools that would teach our other half [women] the matters of their religion and life, and provide them with a female kind of education because we want to prepare them for the homes not for work. We want them instructed on how to manage their houses properly, on how to nurture their sons, and provide our coming generation with good manners and pride, on how to be the mothers of the future which we optimistically look forward to.”¹⁸⁸

Even nowadays in the university, the prevalence of sex-differentiated education specialisation is obvious in the difference between the curricula in men's universities and women's universities for instance architecture, engineering and pharmacy are not fields of specialisation available for women. And eighty per cent of the women interviewed by alMunajjed, both educated and non-educated, insisted that women should be allowed to enter all fields of education in order to prove their intellectual capabilities in the way that men can.¹⁸⁹

Besides some positive changes, the situation is still lagging, and even the picture might be bleak in some respects. Madawi al-Rasheed says that despite all the progress done in the education field, and the proliferation of universities, institutes and schools

¹⁸⁷ al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul islah fi as-soudiyya*, p.173.

¹⁸⁸ Al-Baadi, Hamad Mohammad, *Social Change and the Roles of Women in Saudi Arabia*, p.93, in alMunajjed, *op.cit.*, p.67.

¹⁸⁹ alMunajjed, *op.cit.*, p, 69.

destined to women, women still do represent 5 percent of the working force.¹⁹⁰ Strangely enough, and to compensate this deficit in women's accession to posts, the Saudi government has initiated a program of enrolling Saudi women as spies. Al-Rasheed refers to *Al-Hayat* newspaper 15th of November 2003 edition, that according to reliable Saudi sources, the Ministry of Interior has decided to mobilize Saudi women in its war against terrorism, so that Saudi women become endowed with security, search, and reporting missions, particularly inside women's gatherings and reception circles.¹⁹¹ Al-Rasheed raises a very pertinent question as to the intentions of the government by instauring such programs with respect to the unity of the Saudi family; because she thinks that this will lead for sure to its disintegration, by making members of the same family spying on each other.

2. The ban on women's driving

Nowhere the gender segregation is so rigid as it is in Saudi Arabia. According to As'ad Abukhalil, "women are doubly oppressed in Saudi Arabia, because on one level, everyone there is oppressed".¹⁹² For instance, it is still prohibited for women to drive cars, "lest they find themselves freely roaming public space in the company of 'strange' men".¹⁹³ In fact, it is after an attempt by some women in the center of Riyadh in November 1990 to defy the authorities and drive their husband's cars, that in 1992 the ban was officially codified into a religious law. Emboldened by the presence of foreign troops on Saudi soil, the attempt of 45 American-educated Saudi women in Riyadh to drive cars in a demonstration asking for their right to drive, some of them even stepping on their veils, was considered by the conservative clergy as an act of defiance to local

¹⁹⁰ al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul islah fi as-soudiyya*, p.173.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁹² Abukhalil, *op.cit.*, pp. 162-163.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.148.

customs and laws, accusing those liberals to try to undermine the foundation of the society, wanting to turn Saudi Arabia into America and wanting complete freedom. The leaflets attacking the women drivers accused them of being “communist whores”, listing their names and their husbands' names and professions as well, urging the Saudi public, the king, and the governor of Riyadh to take sanctions against them. Several women lost their jobs and their as well as their passports, they also received harassing calls at their homes for months.¹⁹⁴

Recently, in February 2006, and upon King Abdallah's instructions, his minister of Culture and Information, Eyad Madani, insinuated that nothing by law forbids Saudi women to ask for a driving license and he even encouraged them to do so.¹⁹⁵ However, the 1991 fatwa banning Saudi women from driving cars is still valid.

The ban on driving and therefore having to depend on a driver for transportation is one of the impediments that working women have to face in addition to other obstacles such as the need to have a male guardian or sponsor because they cannot be in contact but with kinsmen. Nevertheless, the number of working women is rising constantly with an estimate of a quarter million working women in 1998, and in the two cities of Jeddah and Riyadh alone, six thousand business licenses were issued to women, according to *The Economist*.¹⁹⁶ According to Jeddah radio-journalist Samar Fatani, it is this increasing number of women joining the working force that will permit the lift of the ban on driving in the near future. Recently, the Saudi Minister of Interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, has denied any intention of lifting the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, but he said that women do have the right to own a car. “Women have the right

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.123.

¹⁹⁵ “L'Arabie saoudite mène sans bruit une transformation en profondeur” *L'Orient- LE JOUR*, Monday, March 6th 2006, p.10.

¹⁹⁶ “Putting Saudi Women to Work”. *The Economist*, September 24, 1998, in Abukhalil. *op.cit.*, p.157.

to own a car(...) but driving in our desertic areas where distances are huge between two districts may endanger their life”¹⁹⁷.

3. Books on women

In Saudi Arabia the inner circle of the harems is protected by a halo of secrecy as thick as the blind walls that protect the villas inside the Kingdom, so that whenever a breach is opened to this mysterious world it causes an outcry around the book and the author. An example of such controversial books would be the Lebanese Mouna Ayoub's *La Vérité Autobiographique*, published in 2000 at the editions Robert Lafon. Although the book is intended to be a mere justification for the jet-setter Ayoub (ex-wife of Nasser al-Rachid, the billionaire Saudi entrepreneur, King's Fahd right hand man, and Prime Minister Hariri's partner) in order to win her five children back, it depicts by the way, the life of Riyadh's upper society. Her book has aroused the ire of the King himself who estimated that as a Saudi she had tarnished the honor of the country, not to mention the fury of her ex-husband who engaged the journalist Bernard Pascuito to counter attack her in order to restore his version of the truth in a book entitled: *Mouna Ayoub L'Autre Vérité, Ce Que La Femme Aux Bijoux N'avait Pas Dit...* published by Presses du Châtelet in 2001. Her eldest son, Fahd al-Rachid, had previously published a communiqué through France Press denouncing his mother's book and the attacks perpetrated against his father and Saudi Arabia.

Another controversial book would be Rajaa al-Saneh's *Banat al-Riyadh*, published by Dar al-Saqi in 2005. Al-Saneh novel is quite a *première* for a pioneer Saudi writer, where she reveals what goes inside the girls' exciting world in Riyadh: she talks about befriending Shiites, homosexuality, conjugal infidelity, men harassing their wives,

¹⁹⁷ “Une Saoudienne peu posséder une voiture...mais pas la conduire”. *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Wednesday 15th of November 2006, p.16.

mixedness, women's feelings, needs and aspirations, in brief all what is taboo in such a conservative society. Rajaa al-Saneh was interviewed by Zahi Wehbeh in December 2005 in his program *khallik bil bayt* aired on Future Television, she received sympathy messages from the Saudi Ambassador to Beirut Dr. Abdel Aziz al-Khoja and from the Saudi poet and writer Ghazi al-Gossaibi, but also she received many a call criticizing her for being insolent.

The trend seems to be going on with the Lebanese Danielle Trad's *L'Arabie au coeur*, also published in 2005 by Tamyras, where as a Lebanese businessman's wife working in the Kingdom for decades in the heydays of the oil boom during the seventies and eighties she was able to enter the very select Saudi bourgeois society circle, and thus to narrate some of the adventures taking place there.

Carmen bin Laden's *The Veiled Kingdom* is another book narrating the whereabouts of the Saudi society, and particularly those of the bin Ladens, from the point of view of a European woman (in this case half Swiss half Persian, and ex-wife of Yeslam bin Laden).

4. Marital abuse: case of Rania al-Baz

But the picture gets darker and darker when marital violence is concerned. For instance, out of the five thousand cases reported to the National Human Rights Association, one third was related to marital violence. Also, cases of mothers abandoning their newborns have been reported by the press.

Hospitals list a catalogue of indicators for domestic abuse, stating: "large families with multiple wives, little education, straightened economic circumstances, and insufficient familiarity with the true teachings of Islam"¹⁹⁸; unfortunately these

¹⁹⁸ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p. 174.

conditions apply to a majority of Saudi households nowadays. Doctors at Jeddah's King Abdul Aziz Hospital have admitted treating incessant cases of domestic and child abuse cases. Saudi Arab News journalist Essam al-Ghaleb¹⁹⁹ was told that increasing cases of domestically abused wives with cigarette burns, broken bones and cuts are being admitted to the hospital, but ironically, it is the husbands who suffer from the most serious injuries as a result of the wives' family retaliation. A very sad case is the case of a woman who came complaining to the hospital not because her husband was beating her – for he has done so for years – but because lately he did beat her with a slipper, a sign of deep dispise in the Arab societies.²⁰⁰

Perhaps the most obvious case of spousal abuse is that of Rania al-Baz's, because she was a public person. In 2001, Rania was the first female speakerine to appear on Saudi television, defying the ultra conservative religious clerics who believe that nothing justifies a woman to go unveiled. But in April 2004, it was a quite different picture of the once beautiful Rania that was revealed to the press. The picture showed the "swollen, broken, and bleeding face of the unconscious announcer"²⁰¹. The story that accompanied the picture said that Rania's husband, a frustrated singer whose career was in decline, started to beat her in front of their little boy and the maid and would not stop until she says *as-shahada*, "because you are going to die"²⁰², those were his words. When he thought she was dead, he wrapped her in a blanket and put her in the trunk of the car with the intention to bury her in a remote place along the beach, but he got frightened when she started moaning, and luckily for her, they were near Bugshan hospital in Jeddah so he left the body there and ran saying that he "was going to get

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.164.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

others"²⁰³. Rania's case has caused an outcry in the Kingdom, she received the visit of Johara Al-Anqari, a member of the National Human Rights Commission, and the Hospital expenses were covered by the wife of Mecca governor Prince Abdul Majeed. The husband, Mohammad Al-Fallatta was sentenced to three hundred lashes and six months in prison, of which he served just three, because his wife forgave him. Her only crime to have been brutalized is answering the phone at home. Rania's story has been published recently in a book entitled *al-mushawwaha, indama tatahawwal jarima a'tifiyya ila qadiyyat dawla, (Défigurée Quand Un Crime Passionnel Se Transforme en Affaire d'Etat)* published in Beirut in 2006 by Oweidat for Printing and Publishing.

Unfortunately, some commentators reveal that her case is not even the tip of the iceberg, thus besides obesity as the major physical disease afflicting women, and as a result of long years of abuse, women are most likely to be afflicted by depression according to the head of the psychology unit at King Fahd Hospital, so that the plague became endemic²⁰⁴.

B. HOMOSEXUALITY

Another social problem that the Kingdom is facing and related to the segregation of sexes is that of homosexuality. It is worth noting that homosexuality under any form is not tolerated in Islam and many a verse in the Holy Koran²⁰⁵ depicts it as evil.

According to the Wahhabi mentality, females are always an object of temptation, whether they seek it or not, and subject to the uncontrollable passions of males, therefore segregation is the best option left to the authorities to maintain the purity of females in order to preserve the very important honor of the family. And it is this imposed segregation that compels men to turn to one another for sexual pleasure as an

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.165.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.174.

²⁰⁵ Holy Koran (7:80, 21:74, 29:28)

ersatz to straight sexual relations. With no cultural surveys or opinion polls in Saudi Arabia, there is no way of measuring the impact of the trend, but what is sure is that some gay-friendly coffee shops, gay-oriented Internet chat rooms are the best places to facilitate meetings for such a community. Recently, the number of gay-oriented Saudi websites has increased and some of these sites have been blocked by the responsables of censorship in the Kingdom. However with the purchase of a common software device the blocks can be removed. Gay pornography is available to any house equipped with a satellite dish. With a two US dollar card sold on the black market, all middle-class boys have unrestricted access to XXL – a hardcore sex channel –as well as Gay TV. These cards that are sold by foreigners near the main supermarkets last often for more than a year, which means that Saudi Arabia offers the cheapest access to hardcore pornography all over the world!

So everyone in Saudi Arabia, including the religious police, seems to agree that keeping the girls pure until they get married has as an ineluctable consequence to accept boys going with boys, although the gay behaviour is in contradiction with Islamic law. Hence this testimony of a twenty-three years old gay man coming back from the United States: "We have more freedom here than straight couples. After all, they can't kiss in public like we can, or stroll down the street holding one another's hand."²⁰⁶ Problems arise when homosexuality is declared publicly as with the Interior Ministry statement reporting the one case out of many, of three men "beheaded for homosexuality"²⁰⁷ in the southern city of Abha (county town of Asir) in January 2002. The Saudi treatment of gay men provoked condemnation from human-rights group in the West, and a weird clarification from Tariq Allegany, the Saudi Embassy spokesperson in Washington: "I

²⁰⁶ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p. 157.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

would guess there's sodomy going on daily in Saudi Arabia, but we don't have executions for it all the time"²⁰⁸. But in 2004, when three other men were executed again in the same region of Asir for the same crime, the Ministry of Interior did give precision as to the nature of the crime: it was the rape of a young boy, and rape is punished by public execution in Islamic law.

As for the lesbians' world, it is much more difficult for men to know what goes inside women's intimate circles because of the total segregation that governs social life in Saudi Arabia as well as the taboos inhibiting men to get first hand information on the issue. Therefore it is from female writers or journalists that lesbians' stories are made public. Carmen bin Laden narrates stories about the rich Saudi milieus where lesbian affairs take place. According to her, this is happening because of "the enforced idleness that their exclusion from the public sphere brings with it"²⁰⁹. The Hijazi anthropologist Mai Yamani who has claimed to be asked to stop writing by Interior Minister Prince Nayef after publishing a controversial book about Saudi Arabia in 2000, has shown that all-female discos catering for wealthy women are most of the times covers for lesbian get-togethers. Female journalists too are a good source to lift the veil upon such milieus. In 2002 two female reporters from *Okaz* newspaper broke the taboo by writing about lesbians. The article talked about "the brave confessions of Laila"²¹⁰, now in her thirties, who confessed to have been attracted at fourteen of age to her aunt almost of same age, and how she "used to create any kind of excuse so I could get to my grandmother's house to meet my aunt", where "we would play bride and groom in the afternoon. It became like an addiction"²¹¹. Other testimonies revealed by the article come from

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

school teachers. One of them identified as Hanan said that she was told by a student about some unorthodox behaviour taking place in the College, and after she caught the two girls in a shameful situation, she was brutally asked to be left alone to do what they were doing. Another teacher, Manifa, has discovered "peculiar patterns of behaviour"²¹² in the school toilets and after she called the concerned girls to a meeting, they moved to another school, probably so they can freely go on with their affairs.

C. DRUGS

Another problem facing the Saudi society is that of drug smuggling, dealing and addiction; the punishment for drug trafficking is public beheading, particularly when it turns out to be that dealers are of non-Saudi origin, such as was the case with the public beheading of two Pakistanis accused of smuggling heroin into the country described by Bradley.²¹³ But if the smuggler turns out to be a royalty, then the story takes a different turn. The Prince known as Nayef bin Fawwaz al-Shalaan had escaped from both US and French justice for having run cocaine smuggling operation using Saudi diplomatic passports and a royal Boeing 727 jet. According to a Drug Enforcement Agency investigator, Tom Raffanella, based in Miami, in a program aired on *ABC* in October 2004, the Prince is accused of being a major player in the transportation of about two tons of cocaine from Colombia to France, and that by seeking refuge in his country which has no extradition treaty with the United States, he remains " a fugitive in violation of federal narcotics law"²¹⁴. The *ABC* report also aired a testimony from a former French police investigator, Fabrice Monti, that Prince Nayef, Minister of Interior, threatened French business interests in order to dissuade the French authorities to pursue further investigations. He said: "The Saudi government acted as one to set up

²¹² *Ibid.*, p.163.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

a protective barrier between the prince and French justice and threatened not to sign a very important and lucrative contract in the works for a very long time".²¹⁵ From his side, the Prince has always denied any accusation, claiming that he travels to attract investors for a plastic pipe business, and that he has been absolved by the Saudi authorities from any smuggling affair. However, quite recently, on November 28th 2006, *L'Orient-LE JOUR* revealed that the French justice after having found some 800 kg of cocaine in a pavilion of the Parisian suburb, has layed again the Prince al-Shaalan's case before the court, so he is going to be juged in absentia for having transported two tons of Colombian cocaine on board of his private jet in destination of the European market.²¹⁶

Any way, heroin, hashish and speed are widespread drugs in the Kingdom by the very recognition of the authorities, as it has been recognized by the director general of the country's antinarcotics department, Major General Sultan al-Harithi, who took the pain to emphasize that in the Kingdom "drugs are considered 'a phenomenon not a menace'"²¹⁷. But the reality seems to be different from the director general's allegations: the security forces have announced in 2002 the arrest of the biggest drug smuggling gang in the Kingdom with 2,480 pounds of hashish in his possession and the number of people convicted for drug possession is in constant rise: from 4,279 in 1986 to 17,199 in 2001, according to the most recent published statistics²¹⁸. Drug busts are common news and are not considered scoops worthy of front page. And in big cities like Jeddah and Riyadh whole districts are considered safe heavens for drug dealers: Jeddah's Quarantina, Riyadh's Batha and Olayya, cities like Jizan on the Yemeni border, and

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ "Un prince saoudien soupçonné de trafic de cocaïne jugé en France". *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Tuesday, November 28th 2006, p. 10.

²¹⁷ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.149.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.148.

Arar on the Iraqi border. Many cases of drug-filled prayer beads and prayer rugs, even Holy Books opium stuffed pages were confiscated by customs officials from fake pilgrims. Many Saudis relax with a joint after work, even Bradley was offered to be provided by drugs from his students.²¹⁹ The market is that much penetrated and the demand so high that authorities deemed necessary to open a number of drug rehabilitation centres in the three major cities with qualified personnel in charge of curing and rehabilitating the addicts in order to reintegrate them in society. And according to the same al-Harithy, "they will never be questioned or punished, since they are victims of a 'malady'"²²⁰.

D. CRIMINALITY

As for urbanisation, it is the physical development that has mostly changed the face of Saudi society since the last fifty years, with a forecast of a population exceeding eleven million for Riyadh by the year 2020, hence one of the highest ratios of capital city to national population worldwide, turning it into the first megacity of the Gulf. Urbanisation also has led to a massive influx of migrants from the countryside into the metropolises. Due to poverty, Saudi migrants as well as immigrants of various origins squatt the suburbs of the major cities transforming them into slums, and by the same token transforming Saudi Arabia's labour market in a truly global one.

An extraordinary wave of crime insecurity is sweeping the Kingdom as a result of social transformations due to the population boom, urbanization and unemployment which are factors that may potentially undermine the foundations on which the Āl Saud

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.149.

regime is based. Therefore, a crime wave is sweeping the country, doing away forever with the label "crime-free kingdom".²²¹ In 1999, Islamic courts dealt with six hundred and sixteen murder cases, the majority of them taking place in Mecca. The daily *Okaz*, in a three-page report on the series of rising crimes in the country reported the following: "People here are totally confused. They don't understand how crime can keep rising in this Muslim society".²²² In the following years, the trend has kept its impetus.

A 2003 report by the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency said that crime among young jobless Saudis rose three hundred and twenty percent between 1990 and 1996, and was expected to be incremented by another one hundred thirty six percent by 2005. With the ever increasing cases of banks and stores robbery, burgled apartments, students' cars being stripped of valuables in parking lots one thing is for sure: "the days when people could leave their home unlocked, even when they went on holiday, are gone forever"²²³. As a result of such sweeping crime wave, prisons are overcrowded, and in 2002 Lieutenant General Ali Hussein al-Harithi, the general director of Saudi prisons, announced measures aiming at reducing the number of non-drugs incriminated prisoners, replacing imprisonment by social work and fines in order to alleviate the massive prison overcrowding. However, one year later after al-Harithi made his propos, Riyadh's al-Hair prison caught fire and more than two hundred casualties of inmates and staff were deplored, and "shocking conditions"²²⁴ of detainees were revealed.

E. EXPATRIATES

Another factor contributing to the social malaise reigning in the Kingdom is the presence of a huge multinational population of expatriates. Gresh's estimates are 6.3

²²¹ Bradley, *op.cit.*, p.143.

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ *Ibid.*, p.144.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.149.

million foreigners to 19.7 million Saudis, rendering the labor market, a genuine global one. Unfortunately, this labor market has never been looked at as a homogeneous one, but a segregated one, at least in the minds of the Saudi indigenous population who segmented the expatriate labor market as follows: Americans are called first-class nationals, FCNs, Saudis and Europeans are second-class nationals, SCNs, and Asians are third-class nationals, TCNs²²⁵.

Although Saudi Arabia was never colonized, Westerners, and particularly Americans, are top-ranked in the scale of Saudi businesses' preferences, enjoying a special status especially with respect to wages, housing accommodation and fringe benefits, despite the religious and social bias; and being able to have Americans on his payroll is glamorous in the eyes of Saudi businessmen. Before September 11, there were about 50,000 Americans, 35,000 British and expatriates from other CEE countries such as France, Germany and Italy. But after September 11 attacks, the figures have dropped drastically, with estimates around 27,000 for the Americans mostly concentrated in SAUDI ARAMCO base and other oil-related fields, and 25,000 for the British also in ARAMCO and British Aerospace. So the bulk, (in fact five million) of the 6.3 million immigrants is thus constituted from Asian workers: one million six hundred thousands Indians, one million Pakistanis, one million Egyptians, eight hundred thousand Filipinos and six hundred thousand Bangladeshis, and seventy five percent of these Asian expatriates are there to do servil jobs that Saudis consider degrading and unfit for them: maids, drivers, butchers, vegetable vendors, maintenance workers, etc...

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.120.

As for the TCNs, a sub-category ranking does exist with respect to nationality. For instance, Lebanese come first, followed by Jordanians, Syrians, Egyptians, and Yemenis. Indonesians, Filipinos, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans and Bengladeshis come at the very bottom of the scale. Although some Indians, Filipinos and Bengladeshis have succeeded to perform white-collar jobs, still the rule remains that it is such people who perform the menial jobs in very difficult conditions. The ordeal of the two hundred thousand maintenance workers is quite representative of the plight of such expatriates. They work under the hot sun of the desert, in a temperature easily attaining 40 degrees Celsius, most of the time living in insalubrious slums, with a derisory salary as low as sixty five dollars per month, if regularly paid; (despite the fact that their respective countries do have agreements with Saudi Arabia with respect to minimum wages, rarely any Saudi company follows the minimum wage rule). With no daily ration of food or other fringe benefits provided, they are left with no other choice but to making extras such as washing cars for instance. They are entitled to a trip back home after two years, but most of them do not go home because they did not save enough money.

Another anomaly characteristic of Saudi labor law governing foreign workers is that of sponsorship. Under this system, every foreign worker should be under the patronage of a Saudi sponsor, who is theoretically responsible for him, providing the entry visa, the residency permit, and acting as legal guarantor in the worker's relationship vis-à-vis the Saudi state. Strangely enough, reality does not follow this pattern all the time, and many cases of abuse are noted. Workers are expected to hand their passports to their employers in return for their residence permit, but sometimes the employers refuse to hand over the permits leaving the workers in an illegal condition, such was the case of those Bangladeshi workers who have been imprisoned by the Passport Department for not carrying their *iqamas*, although they were holding a letter of their employer attesting

that their permit is being taken care of in the Passport Department. They were released after a company representative presented the required documents, but only after a deduction of salary for the days they have been jailed.

The lot of the domestic staff is not better either, and with the Saudi Labor Law not defining any rights and duties of the employer of domestic staff, here again many abuses are reported: they are considered as lesser humans who should be grateful to their employer in any circumstance, even children copy their arrogant parents in such attitudes so that sexual abuses by adolescent boys following their fathers' footsteps are common. As a result, many maids are left prey to desperate measures as killing themselves or running away so that embassies such as that of Indonesia or Sri Lanka are equipped with shelters for "runaway maids".²²⁶ The phenomenon of disappearing maids, sexual harassment, rape, forced abortions and suicides is so widespread that embassies and consulates became apathetic to such complaints.

In contrast, the Westerners' conditions are quite different: it is them who look with disdain upon the Saudis. With few rare exceptions, their preconceived ideas about the Arabs and Islam make them see the cultural exchange just unilateral, i.e. it is them who "bring some of the blessings of their home countries to Saudi Arabia".²²⁷ According to them, Saudi Arabia is awful, the Saudis too, they missed real beer and nights at the pub with friends.... They live in protected compounds that could easily be compared to Club Med holiday resorts designed to provide the maximum comfort for the expatriate far from home: with school and swimming pools, where women do not wear the *abaya*, where groceries do not close at prayer time, and in the evening where parties are given by the pool with alcoholic beverages galore. Madawi al-Rasheed compares those

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.128.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.110.

compounds of highly qualified expatriates to “five stars ghettos”²²⁸, where the foreigner enjoys many social privileges that are denied to the common indigenous population, so that this segregation in the same country has created an “apartheid”²²⁹ situation, similar to the one that existed in South Africa during the era of the hegemony of the White race.

The reason behind the conception of these “compounds” was pragmatic: the western experts are asking high enough salaries in order to work in Saudi Arabia in climatically hostile conditions, if they are to comply with local Islamic traditions, then the compensations asked would become unaffordable.

So things were going fine for these compound dwellers until May 2003, when three residential compounds in Riyadh were attacked by al-Qaeda, one of them was inhabited by the US defense contractor, Vinnell Corporation employees. Vinnell is the corporation in charge of training the Saudi security forces, as well as developing weapons systems for the government. In November of the same year, another attack on a compound in Riyadh took place and in May 2004, al-Khobar was targeted this time: first the killers attacked the offices of a petrochemical company then they drove into the residential compound where they took hostages and occupied a building. A week before Islamic radicals had attacked a petrochemical plant on the Red Sea coast in Yanbu, killing five Westerners. So even secured compounds are no more the places where Westerners could enjoy safety anymore. The kidnapping and beheading in June 2004 of two Americans: Paul Johnson, a U.S. defense contractor, and his fellow countryman, Robert Jordan who both of them did not opt for segregation and had rather chosen to live in rented villas in Riyadh had proven that al-Qaeda tracked their targets very well.

²²⁸ al-Rasheed, *maazaq ul islah fi as-sou'diya*, p. 115.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

F. INCREASING WESTERN CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Another dilemma facing the regime is the increasing western cultural influences that are widening the gap between generations. The cultural incursion of the TV satellites augmented by the travel and the studies in Western countries could lead to future social dislocation. The youngsters who are less attached to tradition than the previous generations will occupy key-positions in the Saudi bureaucracy, economy and society. Young people of the Royal family are part of them too. Alain Gresh notices with perspicacity the spectacle in the streets of Riyadh on Wednesday evenings:

“There are thousands of listless youths with nowhere to go, in the absence of theatres, cinemas or anywhere to meet females. They are obviously bored, all the more since the internet and satellite television have opened their eyes to international culture. It is hardly surprising that problems of delinquency and drug addiction are rising. At the weekend some seek an outlet in Bahrein, the island kingdom connected to Saudi Arabia by a gigantic bridge; 11 million travellers crossed it in 2004 and the number increases steadily. They go in search of entertainment they cannot find at home.”²³⁰

But exposure to western culture can also have negative reactions. As what happened during the Gulf War when some educated and underemployed youth opposed the regime on traditional conservative basis. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Āl-Saud to moderate the country’s exposure to cultural globalization. These people are referred to as the “lost generation”²³¹ (1980-2000) who “was denied its past, presented with a futile and sterile present, which had all the accrument of meaningless wealth, but no meaningful education. It seems to have existed in a vacuum... It is likely that it will be the generation that will fight the present establishment.”²³²

In the long run, gradual greater westernization should reduce the risks of such conservative opposition, but paradoxically, it should increase pressure for more liberal

²³⁰ Gresh. "Saudi Arabia: reality check". *op.cit.*, p. 2.

²³¹ Champion. *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p.303.

²³² *Ibid.*

political reforms. Balancing these forces will prove to be a difficult challenge King Abdallah seemed to be quite aware of, when he described the strategy of the regime in his speech upon his official ascent to the throne:

“...globalization is at our doorstep with its scientific and technical power. We must work very hard to modernize our economic and social system... but we must not abandon the true character of our conservative society.”²³³

The Kingdom is witnessing a wide gamut of social ills that vary from issues pertaining to women segregation, ban on driving, marital abuse..., to homosexuality, drugs, a high wave of criminality, a multinational and heterogeneous population of 6.3 million expatriates, and finally a double-edged increasing western cultural influence. Will King Abdallah be to meet the challenge of containing the social malaise and balancing the antagonistic pro-westernization and anti-westernization forces in the Kingdom?

²³³ Alain Gresh, “The World Invades Saudi Arabia”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*. (Guardian Weekly Supplement), pp.4-5, 2000, in Champion, *loc.cit.*

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ECONOMIC SITUATION

The recent history of the Saudi economy may be divided in four major cycles. The first is :

A. THE CONSTITUTION OF A UNIFIED NATIONAL MARKET THROUGH STATE INTERVENTION (1925-1973)

When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was declared in 1932, financial matters were secretly discussed between the King and his most loyal finance minister, Abdullah ibn Sulayman, who held this post until the death of ibn Sa'ud. One of the first tasks attributed to ibn Sulayman was to administer the grant of £5,000 paid to the Saudi monarch by the British government, until 1924. Ibn Sulayman was also the King's emissary to the merchants in order to 'milk'²³⁴ them to fill a virtually empty royal treasury. Such as was the case in 1927 when ibn Saud was preparing his anti-*ikhwan* pacification campaign. Ibn Sulayman had the skills and the necessary contacts to persuade the merchants to invest some of their profits in financing the King's military efforts which were described as beneficial to commerce and trade, and in Vassiliev's words: "While Ibn Sa'ud emptied the ex-chequer, it was Abdullah al-Sulayman's duty to replenish it".²³⁵ Merchants were also expected to "donate" money and provisions for particular purposes and provide regular supplies for the royal court.²³⁶

Ibn Sulayman's discussions with the King remained secret and private, as stated by the King's interpreter Alman:

²³⁴ al-Rasheed., *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.88.

²³⁵ Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 299 in al-Rasheed, *loc.cit.*

²³⁶ T. Niblock, ed., *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, p. 93, in al-Rasheed, *loc.cit.*

“But the real business of the state was done in the cool of the early morning, when Suleiman used to come with his books alone and unobserved to his majesty’s private chamber immediately after the morning prayer.”²³⁷

So the financial discussions were kept away not only from ibn Saud’s advisors in the Political Committee, and from the people, but also from his sons who were constantly asking money from their father’s treasurer to finance their increasing whims. According to al-Rasheed, “Ibn Sa’ud was disturbed by a series of scandals involving several of his sons. Their royal palaces and their regular travel abroad drained his resources to the extent that his treasurer refused to pay. This made him (ibn Sulayman) unpopular with some princes such as Sa’ud for instance”.²³⁸

In the 1920s and 1930s, most state income came from the Islamic tax, *zakat*. In 1925, a royal decree was issued in order to regulate the collection of *zakat*: *zakat* paid in kind should be taken from livestock of average quality, *zakat* paid in cash should be based on the average price of livestock, other taxes were imposed on agricultural products were calculated at 5% of crops growing on irrigated lands and 10% of crops growing on non-irrigated lands. Both silver and gold were taxed at 2.5% of its price.²³⁹

Among the Bedouins, it was the duty of the local sheikhs and amirs to make sure that those taxes were paid, in the *hujjar* settlements, the *mutawwa*’ were entrusted with the collection of the taxes. They were rewarded either by a fixed salary, or received commissions calculated on percentage basis of the collected amounts.

In addition to these taxes, an 8% customs tax was imposed by the monarch in Hasa and Hijaz. He also required the payment of the *jizya*, the Islamic tax imposed on non-Muslims. The Shia’a of Hasa, Christian and Hindu merchants were asked to pay it.

²³⁷ M. Almana, *Arabia Unified: A Portrait of Ibn Saud*, p. 197, in al-Rasheed, *loc.cit.*

²³⁸ Note no. 11 of al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 229.

²³⁹ Vassiliev, *op.cit.*, pp. 304-305 in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 88.

Before the discovery of oil, the greater part of state revenues used to come from pilgrimage; that is the reason for ibn Sulayman choosing Hijaz for his residence, in order to supervise the tax collectors and levy custom duties on both pilgrims and imported goods. According to al-Zirkili, ibn Sulayman employed some 400 officials, slaves and guards for what became the ministry of Finance.²⁴⁰

Ibn Sa'ud's revenues were estimated at £100,000 in 1913, they reached £210,000 in 1923²⁴¹ and £ 1.5 million in 1927.²⁴² Although these revenues were insignificant as far as a state infrastructure is concerned, they were impressive when they were given away as subsidies, gifts and feasts.

In 1933, Abdullah ibn Sulayman signed an agreement with the American company Standard Oil of California (SOCAL) to start exploration for oil. The pacification of the *ikhwan* and the immoderate propensity for luxury left the King with a debt exceeding £300,000, so he agreed with the American proposal to search for oil in his kingdom, invoking *surat al-kafirun* as a justification for this close co-operation with the non-Muslims:

“O disbelievers in Allah, I worship not that which you worship, Nor will you worship that which I worship, And I shall not worship that which you are worshipping, Nor will you worship that which I worship, To you be your religion, and to me my religion.”²⁴³

The American SOCAL, with Lloyd Hamilton as chief negotiator, offered ibn Saud an immediate loan of £ 20,000 as well as an annual rental of £ 5,000, a deal that was previously refused by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. In 1933, SOCAL placed the oil

²⁴⁰ K. al-Zirkli, *shibh al-jazeera fi ahd al malak Abdel Aziz*, p.910 in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 89.

²⁴¹ al-Zirkli, *op.cit.*, p. 709 in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 89.

²⁴² Vassiliev, *op. cit.*, p. 305 in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 89.

²⁴³ Holy Koran, (109:30)

concession under the California Arab Standard Oil Company, CASOC. This company was to constitute the nucleus of the 1944 Arabian American Oil Company, ARAMCO.

From the Saudi side, the key personality behind the conclusion of the deal was Philby, who shrewdly played the American and the British oil companies off against each other, guaranteeing both himself and ibn Saud the best terms of the contract, hence introducing Saudi Arabia to American commercial interests, to be followed by greater political involvement from the American side.

The oil concession brought immediate alleviation to an ibn Saud weighed down with financial pressures: officials' salaries in arrear, bulky debts to most of the Jeddah commercial companies, as well as to Abdullah al-Gusaybi, the King's private banker (£ 80,000), to the government of India (£ 30,000), to the Eastern Telegraph Company (£ 4,000), to the Banking and Marine Company (£ 6,000), and a substantial decrease in the *Hajj* revenues due to the world economic depression.²⁴⁴

In 1938, after several deceiving trials, oil well Dammam no.7 started to produce oil in commercial quantities, and on May, 1st 1939, the first tanker with liquid fuel sailed from the port of Ra's Tannura. Oil well Dammam no. 7 produced more than 1,500 barrels/day, more than what most oil wells were producing at the time.

According to Facey²⁴⁵, ibn Saud was able to be the first monarch to enjoy the benefits of the oil wealth, some of which was used to build new royal palaces for himself and for his sons, such as *The Muraba'* palace that was built in 1936 and completed in 1937 out of the first cheque paid by the oil company. The palace accommodated the royal court that numbered 1,000 persons at the end of the Second

²⁴⁴ P. Sluglett and M. Sluglett, *The Precarious Monarchy: Britain, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud and the Establishment of the Kingdom of Hijaz, Najd and its Dependencies, 1925-1932*, in Niblock ed., pp. 47-48, in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 93.

²⁴⁵ W. Facey, *Riyadh: The Old City*, pp. 112-113 in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p.93.

World War, senior brothers and sons were accommodated in new annexes and buildings, part of the royal complex, whereas foreign guests from the Jeddah-based consulates and important sheikhs were hosted in the Monarch's holiday retreat *The Badi'a*. Riyadh's population increased from an estimated 47,000 in 1940 to 83,000 in 1950, attracting more and more Bedouins who were looking for work and generous donations. However, the Riyadh construction boom was crippled by the breaking out of World War II, the Kingdom experienced food shortages, and the number of pilgrims upon whom state finances still partially relied on, was also reduced, even the personnel and material needed for further oil exploration were in shortage. The country needed ARAMCO's managers exerting continual pressure on Washington in 1943 to make President Roosevelt to admit the Kingdom's vital need for the defense of the USA, and therefore making it qualified for the American Lend-Lease fund.

By the end of World War II, oil contribution to the total government revenue of £ 13.2 million reached US \$ 10 million. In 1953, oil extraction reached 308.3 million barrels, and according to the Sau'di writer Abdullah Ahmad²⁴⁶, the years 1945-1953 allowed the monarch to enjoy *istirahat al-muharib*, [warrior's rest], a state of peace and tranquility that was only disrupted by the behaviour of some members of his own family who "overindulged themselves in the new personal wealth and the luxuries it brought, both had never been experienced before".²⁴⁷ According to al-Rasheed, ibn Saud was tormented by the behaviour of some of his sons; drinking parties in the royal palaces became embarrassing and he had to respond to criticism by the clerics. During these years, King Abdel Aziz also witnessed the development of Riyadh, the mushrooming of water pumps, electricity, cars, aeroplanes as well as royal palaces. It was ARAMCO

²⁴⁶ Ahmad Abdullah, *Al Bitrol wal akhlak*, in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p.94.

²⁴⁷ D.Holden and P. Johns. *The House of Saud*, Sidgwick, London, 1981, in al-Rasheed, *op.cit.*, pp.94-95.

that was involved in most of the infrastructure works undertaken during ibn Saud's last decade. ARAMCO behaved as the state subcontractor, with no significant state apparatus: it provided vital services such as water and health supplies for the royal palaces in addition to other public projects, such as the Riyadh- al-Kharj- al-Hofouf railway, hence helping the strengthening of the royal authority.

In the early 1950s ARAMCO employed 20,400 workers, 4,000 of them were Americans, 3,000 were of other nationalities, African, Arab and Mediterranean, and 13,400 were Saudis. According to Brown, it was the Hasawi Shi'a peasantry that proved to be the most stable bloc in the newly created heterogeneous entity called the "ARAMCO workforce", while Bedouins from different Saudi regions would come and go. Brown says that they came to work for one reason: "Word spread to the desert and townspeople that in exchange for some physical effort the blue-eyed foreigners would give a man a handful of silver".²⁴⁸ Al-Rasheed describes the working conditions of the Saudi and Arab force in ARAMCO's camp as follows:

"It was those tin-roofed shacks that housed Saudi and Arab workers employed in the four oil-fields that had been discovered at the time: Abu Hadriyya, Abqaiq, Qatif and Dammam. Their barrack-like dwellings consisted of concrete cement-block structures, offering modest recreational facilities, a market for buying food and other items, and one or more mosques. Sheep and camels intermingled with workers".²⁴⁹

And here is the testimony of an ex-ARAMCO Saudi worker:

"During the second war we almost starved in Qasim. Members of my family were poor peasants who looked after the palm groves of a wealthy local. We had already heard from people that some *nasranis* [Christians] were offering jobs in Hasa for cash. My father decided that I should go and try my luck. I travelled with a Bedouin caravan to 'American Camp' and was offered a job to carry goods and material. I did all sorts of jobs. For the first time in my life I found myself with other tribesmen from Utayba, Shammar and Qahtan, each had their stories and dialect. We worked together. I met people from Asir and

²⁴⁸ A. Brown, *Oil, God, and Gold: The Story of Aramco and the Saudi Kings*, p. 147, in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 97.

²⁴⁹ Vassiliev, *op.cit.*, p. 329 and Brown, p. 141 in al-Rasheed, *A History Of Saudi Arabia*, p. 97

other parts of Najd. It was amazing. We had a communal kitchen, it was our 'restaurant'. We called it *matam abu rub*, because they charged a quarter of a riyal for the meal. The food was awful. But the Najdis would not say anything. They were shy; they would not complain. They would not ask for more money or food. They just left the Indians to eat there. Later in the 1950s they began to demand things from ARAMCO. When *al-lajna al-ummatyya* [the Workers' Committee] told us to ask for more cash and better food, we did not respond. People were not beggars. But when they told us to ask for political rights, we all responded and joined the strikes in 1953. I sent money to my family. All I wanted to buy for myself was a radio. I wanted to hear about what was going on in Palestine and Egypt. Palestinian workers told us about their problems. We listened to the news together.²⁵⁰

In the 1960s and the 1970s oil revenues increased tremendously making up the largest share of the state revenue to the GDP and finally benefiting the whole population, so that within a few years Saudis experienced an age of plenty, after having gone through the age of penury.

However, in shaping the Saudi economy, two contradictory structures coexist. The first one dates from the age of Ottoman and British rule, making the economy dependent on an external source of revenue. The second one which started in the 1920s corresponded to an attempt by the young administration to replace external revenues with internal ones.

This structural imbalance (an economy essentially turned outward and public policies trying to turn resources inward) has remained at the origin of the Saudi economic policies' crisis. In the 1950s, it was reflected in a series of budget deficits, in the 1960s, it framed King Faisal's austerity and liberalization policies, in the 1970's it was temporarily offset by the huge inflow of oil wealth, before reemerging in times of decreasing oil revenues.

²⁵⁰ al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, pp. 97-98.

B. IMPORTED GROWTH AFTER THE 1973 OIL BOOM, TOGETHER WITH ECONOMIC DEREGULATION (1973-1983)

The year 1973 was characterized by a tremendous increase in oil revenues. But growth remained essentially imported, because it was based on external contributions to the national economy, and thus engendered a dual dependence on the foreign countries: dependence on imported goods in huge quantities and at high cost, and dependence on imported labour. In a vicious circle characteristic of rentier states, the more oil Saudi Arabia exported, the more industrial and agricultural goods as well as labour it imported.

Simultaneously with the oil wealth flooding into the state treasury, the fiscal measures were lifted after 1973. The taxes that were no more of quintessential necessity were eliminated one after the other, whereas customs duties were drastically decreased. A consequence of the 1973 boom was the removal of economic control, in addition to wealth becoming a source of regional and sectorial imbalances, rather than that of equal development. So, along with deregulation, imported growth became synonymous to imported disorder.

The 1973 oil boom led to a highly ambiguous situation. The state blind and omnipotent attitude is very obvious in the post 1974 years when the economy was subject to the "Dutch disease".²⁵¹ a massive inflow of wealth combined with a lack of reliable information. The state started to distribute the oil rent in the form of commercial licenses, free loans on real estate, land grants, agricultural and industrial subsidies, none of these were equilibrated by tax revenue or profitable production.

²⁵¹ Pascal Ménoret, *The Saudi Enigma a History*, London, 2005, p. 139.

The figures of the ten years 1974-1983 are quite representative: the total values of free loans and subsidies accorded by the Saudi Industrial Development Fund, the Real Estate Development Fund, the Saudi Agricultural Bank, the Saudi Credit Bank, and the Saudi Contractors Fund increased twenty times from 1.4 billion Riyals to 28 billion Riyals²⁵². The odd thing is that the state developed the private sector without expecting an equivalent in return because its revenue depended on imported wealth.

An example of the absurdity of developing a private sector that stemmed from a disorderly politics based on abundant expenditure would be that of the agricultural subsidies. In the 1960s, 80% of the Saudi arable land was located in Asir and 10% in Najd. By the end of the 1970s, Najd accounted for 65% of the cultivated lands with only 15% left to Asir. The absurdity of the situation gets worse if one takes into consideration the geography, the climate, and the water resources that were unexploited in Asir and wasted in Najd. This situation is due to the concentration of power in Najdi hands which was tempted to allocate lands and subsidies according to tribal and family diktats.

The situation worsened after the 1981 decrease in oil prices, and the imbalances accentuated: real estate prices fell by 30-40% ruining thousands of investors, the state began to be indebted both internally (through bonds to finance 20% of the budget), and externally to finance arms spending. In the 1983, the Saudi budget showed a debit balance for the first time, and it is just in the 2000 that it came out of the red thanks to the increase in oil prices.

The stagnation and budgetary instability (King Fahd announced on television that from then on the state budget would be drawn up on a month-by-month basis instead of

²⁵² *Ibid.*

a year-by-year basis) has been even worsened by substantial arms buying contracts that amounted to 26% of the state budget in 1979, to reach 34-35% in the years 1988-1991.

During this period, the state was able to create ex-nihilo a new capitalist class, “the Najd entrepreneurs”.²⁵³ Thus the state asserted its power to create or destroy social classes at the same time, shaping the economy. Vice-versa, the economy and the society demonstrated their power by subordinating the state to their own whims, subjecting it to the play of tribal and family strategies, urging it to give sometimes unjustified subsidies. So, this newly created class of Saudi entrepreneurs through the distribution of oil rent became an influential economic power in industrial, commercial, and agricultural lobbies hindering any attempt at structural economic reform. A number of measures such as the intended taxation of the private and public sectors, the reduction in subsidies to water and electricity companies, as well as to the industrial and agricultural sectors, in addition to the intention to Saudize employment in 1986 as part of a job-cutting program in the public sector, in order to involve employers in the funding of social security, all these measures were faced by a fierce campaign opposing the new legislations which forced the government to back down.

C. FROM ABUNDANCE TO AUSTERITY: SLOWDOWN FOLLOWING THE FALL IN OIL PRICES (1983-1990)

Economically, things were working fine as long as oil revenues were flowing, and the economy booming. But since the oil price crash of 1986 that more than halved the oil revenues bringing them from US\$ 42.6 billion in 1985 to approximately 20 billion in 1987, the Saudi economy is not as healthy as it once was, with a real GDP growth averaging 1.4 % per annum far below the 4% previously expected, especially when

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

knowing that the Kingdom's economy relies heavily on oil exports, (oil accounts for approximately 90% of export earnings and 75% of budget revenues), despite some attempts at diversification.

So a slower modernization of the country's infrastructure became necessary following the successive budget deficits that were met by drawing on reserves and borrowing from the local economy. The fourth development plan (1985-1990) reduced expenditures on infrastructures and focused more on developing human and economic resources. Overambitious projects and prestige construction plans such as the Qassim oil refinery and the Eastern Province new international airport were abandoned as a result of the growing economic uncertainty.

However, the government was reluctant as to cutting spending on public services and benefits to a population who took for granted free schools and hospitals as well as to other social benefits. Agricultural subsidies were kept but electricity and gas rates were increased by 70% in 1985, for the first time since 1972. With the decrease in cash flows, few Saudis could afford the consumption goods they were accustomed to, as well as extravagant trips abroad.

In this period of declining oil revenues, the government could not think of taxing the population, it was just able to raise extra cash from the introducing of higher fees for residence and exit visas, but had to abandon the idea of imposing income tax on foreign workers when highly skilled workers threatened to resign.

As for unemployment, youngsters are particularly affected, as jobs are becoming scarcer, with parental authority and tribal allegiances declining, so they are more tempted by mischief rather than hard work, especially that the system is less motivated by merits and achievements rather than personal connections and recommendations. It is in this decade that Saudi Arabia started to feel the weight of high population growth

with an estimated birth rate of 3.68% and a fertility rate of 6.48 children per woman, making the country one of the fastest-growing population in the world, and the youngest too, with almost 50% under the age of sixteen. Pressure on the infrastructure and the general services were increasing in addition to the increase in demand for employment in an economy that was not ready yet to absorb the growing number of young educated Saudis aiming at secure jobs with adequate salaries.

In the past, to be a Saudi was synonymous to being assured of a job, but not just any job, it should be a white collar category that designates a high social cachet, because the basic law of government decrees that the state shall provide job opportunities to all able-bodied people²⁵⁴. But the new generation of Saudi Arabia is now facing a situation in which state-guaranteed economic certainty becomes a luxury it can no longer rely on. The progressive decline in oil revenues in real terms has compelled the paternalistic and ever-present state to reduce its spending on welfare, and as increasing numbers of young Saudis prepare to enter the job market, they face the possibility of under-employment or even unemployment. The situation is very well depicted by 29 years old, Hamad from Asir:

“The unemployment situation upsets us. I am now unemployed. We are struggling. My brother's salaries are two thousand riyals each per month in a very expensive country. If it wasn't for my father, who has one of my brothers with his wife and children living with him in a flat, my brother would have been unable to cope with the rent. Likewise my maternal and paternal cousins help those who are unemployed in the family. We all help each other materially because the economic situation is tiring. If the extended family does not support us, we cannot survive because the state does not help you.”²⁵⁵

Regarding unemployment, figures range from 10 to 25%²⁵⁶. In this respect unemployment could be partly due to the deficient educational system, that engenders a

²⁵⁴ Mai Yamani, *op.cit.*, p.77.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.77-78.

²⁵⁶ Champion, “Saudi Arabia: Elements of Instability within Stability”, *op.cit.*, p.133.

growing number of graduates from Islamic universities who find themselves unemployed; whereas in the past they used to be recruited in low-level jobs in the bureaucracy or as *imams* in the religious institutions or even sent abroad on religious missions. These unemployed people are considered to be a contributing factor to the rise of the Islamic opposition in the Kingdom.

No wonder then that some young Saudis belonging to this category were very tempted by the Islamic preachers calling for a denunciation of the West, materialism, consumerism and corruption.

The government remained the first employer with over 40% of the labour force, construction, industry and oil attracted 25% of the labour force, services 30% and agriculture 5%. These figures however hide the fact that the kingdom accommodated a substantial expatriate community of Western, Asian and Arab workers estimated to be 4 million accounting for 75% of the total workforce in 1985. The largest working Arab group was the Yemenis whose expulsion en masse in the 1990s led to serious economic problems back home.

The decrease in the Saudi revenues in the 1980s led the government to launch a "Saudization" programme in order to gradually replace foreigners with Saudis as the latter acquired education, training and skills; that was the stated objective of the fourth quinquennial plan (1985-1990). Reliance on foreign labour has always been considered as a necessary evil for a transitional period.

The "Saudization" of the workforce is seen as an equivalent to "de-expatriatization"²⁵⁷, with a fall in the number of work permits issued to non-nationals as well as a stricter immigration controls and the deportation of clandestine immigrants

²⁵⁷ Champion, *op.cit.*, p.134.

whose number reached 360,000 in 1985 compared to 88,000 in 1979, most of them were South-East Asian workers. According to this view, employment for approximately 2.5 million young Saudis already exists excluding menial jobs. The plan needed the restructuring of the educational system and training programs to ensure that Saudis are technically qualified and willing to take jobs currently filled by foreign workers. This plan started in the 1980s remained of limited scope and has encountered many problems, particularly a shortage of local candidates for highly skilled jobs, and a hierarchical view of the jobs.

Manual labor tends to be disdained and is generally regarded as shameful. In other words, this is what is known as “the *mudir* syndrome”²⁵⁸, which could be considered as a residual of the Bedouin background, because the man’s role is that of a warrior or chief of the tribe, and an uneven application of the policy among Saudi and non-Saudi companies. In addition, alarming figures indicate that 27.9% of the new labor market entrants will be dropouts from elementary and adult vocational training programs²⁵⁹.

The 1980s saw an increase in the participation of Saudi women in the economy, although it remained limited. Members of the wealthy elite invested their capital in small all-female businesses, female-owned and managed boutiques. Beauty salons and fitness centers proliferated in prestigious shopping malls in Jeddah and Riyadh, and in 1980, the number of women on the government payroll working in the fields of education, health and administration was estimated to be 11,847.²⁶⁰ But even highly successful businesswomen remained dependent on male relatives for all their dealings with government bureaucracies, in addition to their reliance on foreign drivers for

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ L. Bahry, “The New Saudi Woman: modernizing in an Islamic Framework”, *Middle East Journal*, 36/4, 1982, p. in al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 152.

transport, a luxury that many Saudi families would have preferred to skip in times of rising costs.

The 1980s saw the rise of deep economic and social divisions too. The wealthy elite was made up of a restrained circle of royalty, tribal nobility, and a class of commercially successful educated Saudis. The increasing number of people achieving higher levels of education, the recently urbanized Bedouins and the traditional peasantry of the oases were inhibited by their limited access to influential circles as a result of regional background, lack of family connections or social marginality, and it was among this group that the economic crisis was most strongly felt.

D. FROM THE 1990s ONWARDS

In the 1990's, the Kingdom was being described as "economically enfeebled"²⁶¹. Many factors have contributed to the fragility of the economy, namely the direct and indirect expenses of the Gulf war, and the military and security expenditures, so that it has been said that if the bombings of 2003 were considered as a turning point with respect to Saudi internal affairs, it is the Gulf War that represented the catalyzing factor that has shaken the economy and the political foundations of the government. The total cost of the war was estimated at \$70 billion. The oil prices fell from approximately \$40/barrel in the beginning of the eighties to slightly over \$15/barrel in 1995. This led to drastic cuts in spending which undermined the loyalty to the rentier state that used to buy discontent with economic compensations.

But the deficiency in the Saudi economic performance is also due to other several factors: poor planning practices, mismanagement, waste, inefficient bureaucracy, opaque government-business links, widespread doubtful business practices,

²⁶¹ Champion. "Saudi Arabia: Elements of Instability within Stability", pp.130-131.

commissions for Saudi agents and brokers for construction projects and armament purchase, all this adding significant costs for the Saudi state. So what is called corruption in foreign countries is endemic in the Kingdom. This is eroding the regime political and religious legitimacy as well, both domestically and through the Moslem and global community.

A very good example illustrating the not very transparent business relationship between, in this specific case, Saudi and American elite, concerns the Vinnell Corporation contracts.

In 1975, Vinnell was awarded the first contract to modernize the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and has continued to receive contracts for modernizing the SANG. Later on, the Army Material Command Senior Board of Awards chose another company, based on "technical standing and final cost proposal", and submitted the offer to Abdallah who refused it, indicating that the company first chosen was not acceptable to the SANG, and that the Vinnell Corporation was the sole source for the Training Contract for the National Guard. Although it is not known for sure why Abdallah insisted on Vinnell, but it seems that the company's connections to the political and economic elite of the US had something to do with it. Some of the most powerful US businessmen and politicians are connected to Vinnell and the Āl Saud as well, and the connections go through several companies. The Carlyle Group is a Washington-based investment bank, that was until recently headed by Frank Carlucci, a former Secretary of Defence under the first President George Bush, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs under Reagan, and Deputy Director of CIA. Associated with the Carlyle Group is also Bush Senior's former Secretary of State James Baker. Bush Senior himself is a senior adviser to Carlyle and has met with top Saudi officials on Carlyle's behalf. The current President George W. Bush is also associated with Carlyle:

in 1990 he was appointed to the board of an airline food business, Caterair, (sister company of Vinnell), a position from which he resigned to become governor of Texas.²⁶² This type of unorthodox relationship is also related in Michael Moore's movie *Fahrenheit 9/11*, revealing the Bush's, the Saudi Royals, and the Binladens' exceptional strong business ties

“By the own words of Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the well-liked Saudi ambassador in Washington, who admitted the existence of widespread corruption afflicting the Kingdom, saying: "We did not invent corruption", when he was talking about his country's US \$400 billion development program stretched over several decades, and that if a US \$350 billion would have been enough, his answer was yes.”²⁶³ As for Syrian journalist Nihad al-Ghadiri, he says: “Nobody talks about corruption in Saudi Arabia anymore, they take it for granted.”²⁶⁴

Another example of links between government and private business interests in the banking and finance industry is provided by the BCCI 1999 scandal, where a Saudi government official, Abd el-Rauf Khalil was ordered to pay US \$ 1.100 million to BCCI liquidators after a US judge found that he had allowed his name to be used by BCCI to conceal enormous losses, and helped divert more than US \$ 250 million from BCCI into a brokerage he partly owned²⁶⁵. Another Saudi, Ghaith Pharaon, (son of the former adviser to ibn Saud, Rachad Pharaon)²⁶⁶, had already been found guilty of fraud in the case. BCCI collapsed in 1991, leaving 100.000 creditors owing more than US \$ 10.000 million.

²⁶² Joshua Teitelbaum, “A Family Affair: Civil-Military Relations in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, Florence, March 2003, pp.23-25.

²⁶³ Prince Bandar interviewed on PBS *Frontline*, Lowell Bergman and Tim Weiner, “A Nation Challenged”, *New York Times*, October 9 2001, p. A4 in Posner . *op.cit.*, p.67.

²⁶⁴ Aburish, *op.cit.*, p.54.

²⁶⁵ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, pp.103-104.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.104.

However, this gloomy assessment needs to be somewhat relativised, for two reasons. First, the oil prices rose in the second half of the 1990 decade, and the government took advantage of this, in addition to internal and external borrowings to improve its finances which led to a reduction in the budget deficit from 12.3% in 1998 to 3.6% in 2002. Another consequence of the rise in oil prices permitted the restoring of the level of assets of both private investors and the Saudi Monetary Agency (which had fallen from US \$ 160 billion in 1982 to US \$ 40 billion in 1990 and now are around US \$ 90 billion. Also, the oil recovery benefited the whole population since the per capita GDP rose to US \$ 11.300 by the year 2000 after having fallen to \$ 7.500 in the mid 1990s.

The second reason for this economic recovery is the ability of the Kingdom to diversify its economy, although according to the rentier state theory, an oil economy is doomed to remain a welfare economy relying on a single source of revenue as well as on massive imports of goods and services, and any trial to diversify the economy is doomed to fail. Especially that Saudi Arabia produces 15% of world oil production and exports 9.5 million barrels/day,²⁶⁷ So it is due to oil-funded subsidies, particularly the activity of the banking sector that the state managed to create the basis for a more balanced economy, and this is reflected in the following segmentation of the 2001 GDP: 43.6% from services, 34.5% from the extraction of oil and gas, 16.7% from industry, and 5.2% and agriculture. This diversification has been due to the relative success of the industrialization policy, whose share in GDP rose from 10% in 1990 to 16.7% in 2001.

Since 1975, Saudi industry began to diversify and to aim at the conquest of export markets. The state took advantage of the national resources to start an impressive

²⁶⁷ Kenneth Pollack, "Can We Really Deter a Nuclear-Armed Saddam?", in Micah Sifry and Christopher Cerf eds., *The Iraq War Reader History, Documents, Opinions*, Touchstone Books, New York, 2003, p. 404. and *L'Orient- LE JOUR*, June 15th 2006, p.8.

petrochemicals programme. The most important one was the Saudi Arabian Basic Industries Consortium (SABIC) founded in 1976, and the state was able to transform subsidies into investments, unproductive rent into productive capital, imports into exports, external revenues into internal profits, hence proving that a rentier state is capable of diversifying its economy thanks to its oil resources. The petrochemicals industry diversified into the production of fertilizers, detergents, glass and plastics, aluminium and steel showed some improvement too. Whereas refining capacity is tributary of the curve in oil exports: it declined with its decrease, then it increased with the recovery of the oil market in the 1990s.

The Saudi industry can boost a variety of products either produced under licence or wholly Saudi-owned. These products range from building materials (al-Zamil and Babtain), poultry (al-Faqih farms), to dairy products (SAUDIA milk, al-safi Danone, al-maraii...), to biscuits (Badra), to chips (Frito-Lays), to non-alcoholic beverages (Saudi Coca Cola), to industrial cakes (Americana), to corn oil (Afia), to tissue products (Olayyan Kimberly-Clark Arabia Company- Kleenex) as well as baby nappies (Pampers), soap (Zest), and washing detergent (Procter and Gamble's Ariel)...

So Saudi Arabia is clearing its path to the industrial realm, due to the important comparative advantage in oil and gas. The state has successfully surmounted the handicaps to industrialization: the lack of an indigenous trained labour force was compensated by the importing of labour, the narrowness of the local market was counter-balanced by an export-orientation, the Western and especially European protectionism was offset by a trade strategy turned towards Asia, and speculative tendencies in business circles were offset by a strategy combining private and public-sector initiative.

Recently, the Saudi government started promoting tourism, targeting "first class authentic tourists in quest of cultural and traditional heritage tourism, Moslems but particularly non-Moslems because usually Moslems do visit the Kingdom in order to accomplish the pilgrimage rituals of *Hajj* or *Umra*", according to Prince Sultan bin Salman, head of the Saudi High Commission for tourism. The Prince even suggests a "night life" *à la séoudienne*, which means family activities such as evening pic-nics with hubble-bubble, tea and Arabic coffee drinking parties²⁶⁸.

The Saudis have also initiated a privatization policy. At stake, are the very profitable concerns such as the SABIC²⁶⁹(petrochemical holding) that was partially (33%) privatised in 1986. But privatization could be difficult to accomplish. Such a project requires the creation of a new legal framework, transparency of ownership, and public accountability. Such conditions may prove hard to satisfy for a family which not only rules Saudi Arabia but owns it as well. So loosening financial control without loosening its absolute political authority is a difficult issue facing the Āl Saud.

Still in 2003 and at the end of twenty years of economic recession, the government faced two problems one economic, i.e. a need of more diversification in the sources of revenue and another social, i.e., how to reduce unemployment. Starting with the first problem, despite the huge steps taken by the government through its industrial policy, and the fall in oil prices, the dependence on oil rent is still excessive (oil share of GDP decreased from 79% in 1973 to 65.5% in 1980 to approximately 33% since 1986). In fact, Saudi Arabia represents many advantages rendering it one of the most suitable countries for economic diversification in the Gulf area: a high quality infrastructure, an educational system under reform, and a third of the population that is jobless. This

²⁶⁸ "Ryad lance une offensive de charme envers les touristes non musulmans", *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Saturday, May, 13th 2006.

²⁶⁹ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p. 104.

important potential should incite the government to look for the following two objectives; the development of a service economy and the relocation of manufacturing and industrial production within the framework of a regional growth strategy. In this respect, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), created in 1981 could represent an ideal tool for regionalization, however the constitution of a truly internal market covering the entire Peninsula needs the existence of efficient states with a properly functioning tax service and an authority to regulate competition. The regionalization of the labour market, as well as the industrial and manufacturing production could be a solution to the economic stagnation in the Middle East. It is the solution advocated by the United States and the IMF as well as many Saudi businessmen.

The economic strategy of the then Crown Prince Abdallah comprised a number of free-trade agreements with Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt, an agreement with Iraq was under study before the outbreak of the third Gulf War. The team around Prince Abdallah has raised the regional question in at least two occasions: when Prince Abdallah proposed his peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in February 2002, then at the signing of the free-trade agreements in early 2003. Above all, they have the merit of outlining a strategy for peace through free-trade at the image of what Western Europe achieved by creating the CEE.

The second problem facing the Saudi economy is of social order which is how to reduce unemployment. Participation rate of Saudi nationals in the domestic labor market in the mid 1990s is only 30.2%²⁷⁰.

The government has four instruments at its disposition to reform the economy: regulation of the employment market, fiscal tools, privatization and promotion of

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

foreign investments. In September 2002, official estimates on employment showed a jobless rate of 8.1% of the active population whereas the Saudi-American Bank SAMBA reported a higher unemployment rate ranging between 15-25%. This latter rate is a much more realistic one because it comprises the category of 15-19 years old school dropouts who are in the most difficult situation as to finding a job. In fact the rate of participation in labour is the lowest in the world (32% for men, with an average of 19%).²⁷¹ Therefore, and regarding the fiasco that resulted from the idea of a quota designed to allow immigrant workers to be replaced by Saudis launched in 1986, then the two waves of "Saudization" that were to be opposed to because they were considered demagogic and unpopular and that had ultimately to be discarded, the government has opted for the two following axes of policy in order to "capture the employment market from the top"²⁷² that is through a natural, market-oriented Saudization of skilled jobs by promoting occupational training and improving female education, rather than "from below"²⁷³, through authoritarian replacement of immigrants.

The second tool is a fiscal one: the reform the tax system. The only taxes collected in 2003, is *zakat* which is set at 2.5% of the profits and applies to foreign companies, and the custom duties affecting all enterprises established in Kingdom. But the reform of the tax system and the tax authority advocated by the IMF and the establishment of a single tax that does not distinguish between Saudis and foreigners seems to have reached a dead end in 2003. The IMF was pleading for a simple tax that did not differentiate between Saudis and non-Saudis. This systematic taxation would help reduce the Kingdom's dependence on oil as well as reduce the clashes with business

²⁷¹ Menoret, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

circles hostile to the imposition of an income tax on immigrants alone. This would entitle the instauration of a new relationship between the state and the members of the society, who would become tax payers rather than state-supported.

The third and fourth tools available to the government are privatization and encouragement of foreign investments. The IMF strongly advises the Saudis to launch the privatisation of large segments of the public sector which mostly employs Saudi nationals in order to alleviate the high level of debt. In November 2002 the Supreme Economic Council selected twenty sectors for privatization: railways, motorways, refineries, windmills, school maintenance, sports clubs, grain silos, hotel business, telecommunications, mail, seawater desalination, airport and port services. In December 2002, 30% of the capital of Saudi Telecom was privatized, for a total amount of \$ 4 billion, which resulted in the largest privatization in the Kingdom since the partial one of SABIC in 1985. The railways too were opened to privatization, as well as part of the educational system especially the professional training and adult continuing education.

As for promoting foreign investments, it falls within the competence of the Saudi Arabia General Investment Authority (SAGIA) created in March 2000. In the two and a half years after its creation, SAGIA granted 1,617 licences for a total amount of US \$ 13.5 billion. For this same period, Saudi Arabia attracted a little more than US \$ 20 billion while Saudi investment abroad reached US \$ 700 billion; therefore a lot still has to be done in order to convince both foreign and Saudi investors, and particularly women who hold some \$ 27 billion, to put their money into the local economy²⁷⁴.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

The recession period of the previous decade seems to be reversed with the actual recovery. The 5.3%²⁷⁵ record figure of economic growth in 2004 proved this to be happening. The financial group SAMBA expected a growth rate of 4.25% in 2005.²⁷⁶ This is mostly due to the record increase in price of crude oil, as well as to the very good performance of the non-petroleum sectors. The revenues from oil exports in 2004 have reached US \$106 billion, the highest level ever reached in Saudi Arabia, quite higher than the US \$69 billion average of the last five years. According to the SAMBA report, the performance of the Saudi economy in 2004 has been the most balanced in its history, especially regarding the fact that non-oil sectors have witnessed a parallel growth to that of the powerful petroleum sector. In its new budget for 2005, Saudi Arabia allocates 25%²⁷⁷ of its public revenues for development projects, especially in the sector of higher education, and personnel training.

Even the FMI has shown some optimism regarding the economic perspectives in Saudi Arabia, while advising more diversification of the sources of revenues different from those coming from the oil sector. In its annual report, the FMI noted that the perspectives remain good for the medium term, even though the high rate of unemployment and the great increase in the number of the active population remain a serious impediment. To remedy those problems, there should be an increase in the economic growth that does not come from the oil sector, more structural reforms to be made in order to remain competitive, more economic diversification too, and a reduction of the vulnerability to the oil price fluctuation. The FMI has felicitated the efforts of liberalization of commerce and wished the private sector would play a larger

²⁷⁵ "Le chiffre du jour 5,3% la croissance saoudienne en 2004", *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, December 29th, 2004, p.8.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

part in the economy especially by encouraging private investment and the privatization of the energy sector. Part of the FMI board of administrators has encouraged the Saudi authorities to make a plan for a medium-term budget: “that would allow to contain the expenses if it is based on realistic and wise provisions regarding oil-derived revenues”²⁷⁸. Some have come with the idea of an “oil-stabilization fund”²⁷⁹ that would permit to stock part of the oil revenues for the future generations so that Saudis would not end up with Mai Yamani’s quoting the late King Faysal: “In one generation we went from riding camels to riding Cadillacs. The way we are wasting money, I fear the next generation will be riding camels again”²⁸⁰.

Nowadays, thanks to the increase in the price of oil, the Kingdom is witnessing the greatest economic and financial prosperity since the seventies. Being the first oil exporting country with a US \$ 9.5 million barrils/ day and earnings having attained almost \$ 0.5 bn/day, the Kingdom boosted an estimated US \$57 bn excedentary budget in 2005.

The latest figures concerning this spectacular economic boom are a growth rate of 6.5% and a US \$ 58 bn record excedentary budget in 2005²⁸¹. This boom has generated billions of petrodollars in quest of investments, such as the megaprojects contracted by the Saudi government like the US \$ 26.6 bn King Abdallah's economic city inaugurated in December 2005 in North Jeddah, and more recently the US \$ 8 bn announced by King Abdallah in a ceremony in Hael on June 14th 2006 intended to be an industrial, agricultural, and mineralogic zone, in addition to a schooling compound and a residential zone comprising 30,000 houses. The total cost of the series of projects is to

²⁷⁸ “Bonnes Perspectives Economiques en Arabie Saoudite”, *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, January 14th, 2005, p.8.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Yamani, Mai, *Changed Identities*, p.3

²⁸¹ “Arabie saoudite: excédent budgétaire record et croissance de 6.5% en 2005”, *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Tuesday 14th of November 2006, p.8.

reach some US \$1000 bn stretching on the next twenty years.²⁸² This economic boom has reflected itself in a real frenzy for the stock market from a large section of the population ranging from businessmen to taxi drivers, in addition to many women. The value of the stock market represents nowadays a source of income to many Saudi families, an example of the booming sector would be the 5.7 million Saudis who spent almost US \$ 2 bn in the Yanpet, the national oil company located in Yanbu'.

Recently, the Kingdom has made a series of unilateral moves to bring the economy into closer alignment with WTO standards, including on the crucial issue of insurance reform, because for decades the Āl Saud had convinced their people that insurance was religiously forbidden, because everything is willed by Allah.

The Kingdom has joined the World Trade Organization in December 2005. Saudis, rulers and common people, seem to have understood the extent to which this entry is likely dramatically to increase poverty and unemployment, and thus undermine the traditional system of welfare and patronage that the ruling dynasty relied on since its inception, the demise of which would be the biggest recruitment aid al Qaeda could hope for. Cuts in government spending might lead the vital infrastructure projects to be delayed, and reduce the subsidies or the generous cradle-to-grave welfare system that Saudis are used to take for granted, thus inevitably leading to even higher levels of crime. Because, as it is pointed out by antiglobalization proponents, the credo of economic globalization such as free trade, deregulation, privatization, and structural adjustment have destroyed the livelihoods of millions of people in the Third World, often leaving them homeless, landless, and hungry, while hindering their access to even the most basic public services such as health and medical care, education, sanitation,

²⁸² "Un mégaprojet de 8 milliards de dollars lancé dans le nord de l'Arabie saoudite", *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, June 15th 2006, p.8.

fresh water, public transport, job training...all what the Āl-Saud had traditionally taken upon itself to provide for free as a way of buying the loyalty of its subjects.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has gone through four major economic cycles as discussed in this chapter alternating between hard times and spectacular recovery, still the Kingdom does face structural economic problems particularly an infrastructure that lags behind a high population growth rate, and a serious unemployment problem. However, the Kingdom has the means, if used wisely, to resolve these problems.

The economic boom that Saudi Arabia is witnessing proves that the Saudis are on the right track. But if the public expenditure on issues regarding frenzy armaments, generous donations to friendly regimes, royalty stipends, and huge subsidies on food, petrol, the telephone and electricity services... continue the way the trend has always been going on, bitter problems such as youth unemployment, falling standards of living and increasing poverty will be exacerbated, threatening the role of the government as patron. But in a climate of restless political turmoil, can the Saudi rulers afford any reduction in the government largess without putting their continuity and stability into jeopardy?

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Kingdom and its ruling family are facing a number of dilemmas. An immediate issue that concerns the ruling family in particular is the succession to the throne. The recent reform implemented by King Abdallah discussed in chapter II has not stood the test of time. However analysts²⁸³ do not seem so worried about this succession issue, saying that threats against Saudi internal stability appear to be manageable, and that there is more likelihood of a change in leadership rather than a change in regime, at worst perhaps, a palace coup. The whole history of the House of Saud suggests that if a leader or a group of leaders proves unable to cope with a challenge to the family enterprise, the family will find someone else. There is no shortage of trained and capable leaders within the family itself. As a matter of fact, Prince Talal ibn Abdl Aziz is quite optimistic about this issue. In a recent interview broadcasted January 24th 2005 on *al-Hurra TV*²⁸⁴, when the succession to then ailing King Fahd was raised, he said that he sees no obstacles at all to the procedure because the royal family has a history in overcoming family problems and he gave the example of the late King Saud's controversial episode, when his partisans and those of then Crown Prince Faysal opposed. The matter was finally settled in March 1964 after a *fatwa* was issued in favour of King Faysal²⁸⁵.

Another major issue facing Saudi Arabia is the Saudi Islamic challenge. Throughout its recent history, the state has marginalized religion and limited its role to education in matters concerning *fiqh*. Although there is no official separation between religion and politics, there has been a de facto acceptance of the situation since the Riyadh 1928

²⁸³ Michael Dunn, "Is the Sky Falling? Saudi Arabia's Economic Problems and Political Stability" *Middle East Policy*, 3 – 4, 1995, p.38.

²⁸⁴ Interview with Prince Talal ibn Abdel Aziz Al Saud, *al-Hurra TV*, January 24th 2005.

²⁸⁵ Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia, The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, London, 1988, p.101.

meeting where the ruling group controls the political affairs while the *ulama* control the spiritual affairs of the *umma*. The opposition wants to bring back religion to the arena of politics.

However, the Saudi Islamists have their limitations. In their attempt to attract a wider audience they still might face a problem of representation. Although the movement is strong among bureaucrats, some *ulama*, activists and middle class citizens, two groups are so far still excluded: the traditional tribal groups that have been rewarded for their allegiance to the state by the subsidies they get, and the educated wealthy elites who are in an advantageous situation vis-à-vis the state. So unless things change for these two groups i.e. the subsidies diminished or cut with respect to the tribes, and their interests ignored by the state for the professional elites, it is unlikely they join the Islamist cause.

Another limitation to the Islamists is that of regionalism. The Islamists come mostly from Najd, particularly the Qassim province, and it is not sure that the movement will be able to break regional barriers, unless it shows some tolerance towards other regions. Particularly concerned are the Hijazis and the Shiites to whom the present Islamists are reminders of the previous *ikhwan*, who under the banner of ibn Saud, inflicted on them atrocities in the name of spreading wahhabism and the purification of the call from innovations. A resurgence of regional identities and tribal loyalties under pressure from regional opponents to the Āl Saud may lead to the revival of the disintegration process in its trying to emulate any Islamist success. However, things are different now from the nineteenth century, in that the means available nowadays are much more violent, so that this will be by no means a velvet revolution, but a resurrection of the social and political forces that the ruling regime has kept dormant during seventy years. In this respect, Dr.

Dunn assumes that the Āl Saud are shrewd enough not to let a civilized Islamist dissent turn into a genuine dissident movement.²⁸⁶

A third dilemma facing the regime is the increasing western cultural influences that are causing a series of endless social ills: marital violence, drug addiction, criminality, expatriate complaints..., in addition to the incursion of the TV satellites that are widening the gap between generations leading to future social dislocation. In fact, the youngsters, including young people of the Royal family, who have studied abroad and who are less attached to tradition, will come to occupy key-positions in the Saudi bureaucracy, economy and society, therefore leading it to modernization.

But exposure to western culture can also have negative reactions, as what happened during the Gulf War when some educated and underemployed youth, also referred to as "the lost generation"²⁸⁷ opposed the regime on traditional conservative basis. A strong Islamic rhetoric advocating a return to Islamic authenticity attracted people who had been frustrated with a truncated modernization, inequality, corruption of the government and close relations with the West, which began to be depicted as the source of social and economic evils.

In addition to the West, sections of the Saudi society itself, particularly the Western-educated elite, also referred to as the liberals/secularists were accused of introducing inside the kingdom social ills that were never acknowledged publicly before, such as drug abuse and alcoholism. Prominent Saudi intellectuals debated on the issue of Islam/modernity on the pages of the Saudi press. Such debates were popular among many Saudis who saw in Islam a solution to their increasing social and economic problems. Al-Rasheed notices the following: ... "Within families, tolerance and tension

²⁸⁶ Dunn, *op.cit.*, p.39.

²⁸⁷ Champion, *The Paradoxical Kingdom*, p. 303.

progressed hand in hand. Some members of the older generation who had benefited from the oil boom of the 1970s were puzzled by the radicalization of their own children in the 1980s".²⁸⁸ Therefore, it is in the interest of the Āl Saud to moderate the country's exposure to cultural globalization.

In fact, most Saudis would welcome the modernization of their state, if it could be carried out without violating the fundamental principles of Islam. Especially supportive of these reforms are Saudi women as is the case of Nadine Bdeir, a young Saudi writer who appeared on *al-Hurra T.V.* in a talk-show diffused on December 28th 2004²⁸⁹, where she violently attacked the conservative clergy of her country, accusing them of backwardness, but at the same time acknowledging the fact that some improvement has been done toward more freedom for women and that her taking part in this interview was just unthinkable some years ago. Young people too would strongly approve of the modernization process as shown in Mai Yamani's book *Changed Identities*, where she has many case studies of young Saudis looking at their future from European or Western eyes. For instance Ayman²⁹⁰ believes that there is no future for those who study *shari'a* at university and that the development of a more secular national identity is important. Nayef believes that "all we should maintain from tradition is the Islamic theological nucleus, and that's all"²⁹¹. Whereas Abdallah²⁹², from Najran does not believe that there are problems with introducing the Internet into Saudi Arabia, because there is tolerance in Islam. The only problem he notices is that the access to technology is restricted to some people because of money barriers, rich people can afford it, poor people cannot.

²⁸⁸ al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, p. 155.

²⁸⁹ Interview with Saudi writer Nadine Bdeir, *al-Hurra TV*, December 28th 2004.

²⁹⁰ Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia*, p.23.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid*, pp.23-24.

Even members of the royalty think that change is inevitable. As illustrated by Prince Talal ibn Abdel Aziz's interview published in *Al-Quds al-Arabi* on April, 17, 1998 debating the issue of letting women drive, a hotly debated issue with the then falling of oil prices, and the average families bleeding themselves dry to pay the five hundred thousand foreigners who come to the country to work as drivers. Asked about his opinion as to allowing women to drive, Talal said absolutely, adding "Saudi women used to drive camels and journey at night among men. What's the difference between a camel and a car? ...Women driving has become an economic necessity. We transfer millions of dollars in hard currency to the home countries of expatriate chauffeurs. We can save ourselves that." And he continued: "Political reforms are coming as part of globalization, and we must prepare ourselves for this new development from all aspects... Globalization is currently based on democracy, human rights and market economics. Someone once jokingly called globalization the 'fashion' of the age, which we must share in. If communist China is going along with the "fashion", what about the small states in the Arab world? They must appreciate that change is inevitable."²⁹³

As a matter of fact, after September 11 2001 attacks with fifteen out of the nineteen authors being Saudis, and thus not only under American pressure but also out of concern about its own survival fearing the jihadi threat, the Saudi regime understood that it should do something. King Abdallah tries to move on slowly giving the impression that he would like to go further, but he has to take into consideration the battle of wills inside the ruling family.²⁹⁴ An example of a reform strongly advised by Washington and recently approved by the Kingdom would be that of revising the religious curricula in a way that the studied material would promote more tolerance and

²⁹³ Cited in: Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus And The Olive Tree*, London, 1999, p.266.

²⁹⁴ "L' Arabie saoudite mène sans bruit une transformation en profondeur". *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Monday, March 6th 2006, p. 10.

less hatred vis-à-vis other religions and sects. The King has designated a committee of fifty religious scholars to tackle the issue, and announced that the new revised programs will be ready as of September 2007.²⁹⁵

According to a Saudi intellectual, even if the reforms undertaken do not follow the pace the Americans would have liked it to be, they nevertheless follow the rhythm adapted to the Saudi society.²⁹⁶

The Saudi intelligentsia, the technocrats, the business leaders, King Abdallah, and the liberal wing of the ruling family are strong adepts of modernization, too. Those people account for more than half of the population.

A final but no less important issue facing the Kingdom is the structural economic problems, especially an infrastructure that lags behind its high population growth rate (3.8-3.9%, one of the highest in the world)²⁹⁷, and increasingly serious unemployment problem among the youth, still it has the resources, if used wisely, to solve these problems and to redress the situation. Issues of transparency, corruption, good governance, even social and political reforms are the demands of international organizations such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the OECD. Privatization, WTO membership, opening the Saudi economy to free-trade and unhindered foreign investment and capital flows, are all aspects of economic globalization the Saudis want.

The Saudis are trying to choose what aspects of globalization they accept and reject in order to enjoy the benefits without having to implement major reforms. The changes required include efforts to attract local and foreign capital, legal reforms to protect those

²⁹⁵ *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Monday, October 9th 2006, p. 13.

²⁹⁶ "L' Arabie saoudite mène sans bruit une transformation en profondeur". *L'Orient-LE JOUR*, Monday, March 6th 2006, p. 10.

²⁹⁷ al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition", *op.cit.*, p.18.

investments from political interference, educational reforms to better prepare Saudis for the job market, and public-private cooperation to reduce dependence on foreign labor.

The economic boom the Kingdom is witnessing now proves that the Saudis are on the right track. But if the public expenditure spent on royalty stipends, generous subsidies of basic goods, frenzy of armament, considerable donations to friendly regimes..., continues on the above described pattern, bitter points such as youth unemployment, falling standards of living, and increasing poverty will be exacerbated, threatening the government's role as patron. In times of restless political climate, reduction in government largesse may have undesirable political consequences putting the ability of the Āl-Saud to maintain stability in jeopardy.

With other factors remaining constant, it is a wise political overture that promotes dialogue between all the factions existing in the Kingdom, as suggested by Prince Talal bin Abdl Aziz in his TV interview of the 24th of January 2005²⁹⁸, a royal family that is supportive of gradual reforms, a fair economic distribution that goes hand in hand with a decrease in political stinginess, and a prudent cultural openness that will pave the way for a safe entry into the 21st century for the "Paradoxical Kingdom"²⁹⁹.

²⁹⁸ Interview with Prince Talal bin Abdl Aziz, *al-Hurra T.V.*, 24TH of January 2005.

²⁹⁹ Champion, title of his book.

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