

# Structure and distribution of power in Saudi Arabia. Main actors, institutions, and decision-making process

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**Abstract.** Saudi Arabia is one of the most important countries in the Middle East and its actions have a decisive influence on regional dynamics. According to the structure of an authoritarian monarchy, the House of Saud has developed a State and social organization that responds exclusively to its political objectives. This paper carries out a case study, analysing the strength correlations within the kingdom, the most relevant actors and institutions in the distribution of power, and spaces of conflict between the different groups from the kingdom's constitution in 1932 to the present day. The research seeks to answer what are the internal factors that stimulate the royal dynasty's dominance and what are the most notorious regimen's weaknesses. The purpose is to facilitate a better understanding of the functioning of the Government and State Administration.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, power, government, Wahhabism, House of Saud.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Methodological and theoretical aspects. 3. Categorization of the Saudi Arabian Society. 4. Construction of the Modern State. 5. Institutional distribution of power. 6. Conclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia carries a transcendental political and religious weight in the Middle East, the Maghreb, and the Muslim sphere. The decisions made in Riyadh regarding foreign affairs and regional strategy have a notorious impact on major matters of neighbouring territories. Saudi Arabian princes have been able to establish a hegemonic position, both within and outside their territory, despite the existence of numerous tendencies that question such power. Since the unification in 1932, the House of Saud has ruled over the country, controlling its main institutions and resources, and establishing a social order in conformity with its interests.

The Saudi Arabian Government tries to portray a homogenous and monolithic image of the Arab country on a presumption of prevailing stability and low conflict level. But the kingdom's reality turns out to be more intricate than the crown's portrayal. The royal family's essential task of consolidating their internal authority, through the establishment of a State Administration in conformity with their objectives, has been at all times called into question by different sectors. The leadership of the king and his clan is an evolutionary process in which they had to overcome multiple resistances, resulting in a unique political archetype and social life organization.

What stands out the most about the Saudi Arabian State is its own nature and political power. Each of the kingdom's constituent elements complies with the propositions and demands of the House of Saud. This is not a historical process led by a nation or specific community that results in the attainment of some type of government and social cohesion under certain common standards, but an elite's measured effort to guarantee their own survival. Every transformation taking place in Saudi Arabia in recent history has been promoted by its different monarchs, who have ruled in an authoritarian manner.

The king and the Saud dynasty are at the core of Saudi Arabia's political and social life alongside Wahhabism, which is the official religious denomination of the country and the first and foremost legitimizing source of their prevalence. The model established at the beginning of the 20th century is supposed to override any form of dissent or opposition. Still, the truth is that within the Saudi Arabian borders, political and social consensus is quite intricate, difficult, and constantly subject to errors and rising tensions.

The distribution of power happens according to the demands made by the Clan of Saud but also pays mind to different views conditioning the rulers' ability to carry out their duties and the enactment of royal decisions. Strong tribal and ethnic identity still present in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula induces Saudi Arabian leaders to consider these elements and adapt their political agendas to factors such as tradition and custom diversity. Saudi Arabian society does not appear steady and cohesive, as tendencies postulating divergent political agendas keep growing and calling into question, directly or not, the current internal status quo.

The establishment of a monarchy with an absolutist undertone, as well as the Crown's iron grip on most internal aspects, prevent us from having a clear look into the State's inner workings, dynamics surrounding power, and classification of ideological discrepancies. This paper seeks to approach this complex topic and condense the most relevant characteristics of Saudi Arabian politics, up from the State's establishment in 1932 to the present day, paying attention to its most defining agents and institutions where authority is exerted. Its final purpose is to offer a more comprehensive and precise view of the kingdom's inconsistencies, focusing primarily on the topics and agents that set the tone for central conversations.

The first part of the paper analyses the main agents in Saudi Arabian society. The House of Saud and Wahhabism would rest at the top of the pyramid—they have been controlling the country for over eighty years. In a separate category, we would have the whole of the citizens, whose situation differs vastly from the rulers' one. We can identify several forces within the Saudi Arabian community: a class more supportive of the regime that thrived adjacent to the royal sphere; Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia, who represent the most organized group of opposition; the more liberal and progressive tendencies, which defend the democratization of the country, and, opposite to them, the more conservative and rigorous ones.

The second part breaks down how power is structured throughout major institutions. It focuses on the monarch's role and the way his decisions are implemented over the whole nation. It also tackles the tensions rising around the different kinds of balance resulting from the control of main resources and leadership positions. These controversies limit the king's true powers and the dimension of his post, which gets redefined by pressure coming from different social sectors and family feuds within the royals. This affects the way the kingdom behaves internationally.

## 2. Methodological and theoretical aspects

Research is performed through social analysis and from an institutional perspective. Social analysis helps us tackle the heterogeneous nature of the Saudi Arabian population and politics. This analysis is categorized according to the convergence and divergence of interests from the different groups, factions, and classes. An institutional perspective allows us to discuss how power is really structured in the kingdom and reflect on the existing tensions in the States's upper echelons. To transform this explanation into a working narrative, frequently used concepts in the text must be explained.

Saudi Arabia is characterized as an absolute monarchy, framed within a patrimonial State. It functions under a rentier economic system and uses political patronage. These terms define the existing political and social systems, the dynamics happening inside the State Administration, and the relationships between citizens and government. These elements allow us to place the Saudi Arabian kingdom in a specific conceptual framework, helping us highlight its singularities and allowing us to draw analogies with other countries and regimes.

The Saudi Arabian nation has been politically organized as an absolute monarchy since its establishment as a modern state in 1932. It is considered an absolute monarchy since the king has unlimited power and exerts an absolutist-like authority. There is a centralization of power: the monarch rules and has ultimate responsibility over

legislation and justice (Yom and Gause, 2012: 76-77). Saudi Arabian princes are not just political figures; they carry religious symbolism and have the divine duty of protecting the Two Holy Mosques as well as spreading an appropriate interpretation of Islam. Wahhabism provides them with more room for legitimacy and moral values.

The royal family has taken care of establishing a so-called patrimonial State. National resources are the dynasty's property and an essential part of the capital. The most prominent members occupy major positions of responsibility in the country and are present at most levels of politics and society. The whole of it works with the purpose of satisfying the needs and demands of the monarch and those close to him (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007: 926-927). National interests are directly related to those of the House of Saud. Public and government institutions' actions aim to guarantee the crown's durability and the privileged status of the heirs to the throne.

An absolute monarchy and a patrimonial State are two common features among many Middle Eastern power structures. Families have control over the main and most powerful political positions and promote a national structure designed exclusively to serve their purposes. Internal stability is based on the ruling class's stability. The exploitation of oil and gas has been essential for maintaining it (Okruhlik, 1999: 296-298), as income coming from these has been used by the House of Saud to develop the country and promote a variety of state elements vital to the survival of the monarchy, although this has resulted in a strong dependency on these energy resources.

The House of Saud's full control of the kingdom has a direct impact on how wealth is distributed and how the administration functions. Clientelism creates a relationship between rulers and those being ruled (Hertog, 2007: 545-548) on the principle that the latter are fragile and depend on the former, who assure themselves the citizens' loyalty through coercive mechanisms, whether explicitly or not, and a network of prebends and discretionary support. Saudi Arabian population agrees to give up some of their rights and freedoms on the condition that the crown grants them some degree of well-being and safety in exchange for them.

### **3. Categorization of the Saudi Arabian Society**

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy where politics are inherently related to the king's decisions. Despite the authoritarian way of ruling the State, social and power dynamics are conditional on the correlation of forces between different actors and groups. The population can be divided into two different kinds of spheres: Firstly, according to their status inside the community and proximity to the crown, and then according to ideology and relationship with national institutions.

Society is characterized not only by economic factors but also by political and religious elements. We can identify seven social classes. First are Saudi Arabian princes and Wahhabi officials representing the national elite. Second are sectors closest to the crown holding intermediate positions in the administration or big companies. Third are the highly qualified foreign professionals coming from the Western world or different areas of the region. Fourth is the average Saudi Arabian citizen, whose well-being and satisfaction are determined by their level of loyalty to the crown. Fifth are the citizens most critical of the House of Saud, excluded by the community and persecuted by the authorities. Sixth are marginal people subject to systemic poverty. Coming last are low-skilled workers mostly from the Asia-Pacific region and the African continent — an invisible group.

The Saud dynasty and Wahhabism are the two big cofounding elements of the State. The royal family attained its privileged status after the kingdom's unification in 1932 when King Ibn Saud —after years of tribal disputes— managed to politically unite every territory in the interior of the Arabic Peninsula. It is an extremely vast dynasty that has an estimated amount of ten thousand members (Taheri, 2012: 141-142) who control the institutions and economy of the country. Within such a large clan, numerous frictions are triggered by two big topics: succession and big State policies, which lead to the creation of different groups according to shared ideology and interest in the throne.

Saudi Arabia is a patrimonial State, shaped by the House of Saud in accordance with their political priorities. State measures and actions comply exclusively with the interests of the crown. Despite the substantial divergences amongst clan members, there is a basic consensus on safeguarding internal stability and preserving the power of the dynasty. The king and his family are political and religious figures in the country (Al-Rasheed, 2004: 193-198) and the centre of society. The entire kingdom is subordinated to the royal family and their requirements. Prominent members determine the future of the country, holding important political, economic, and social positions.

Wahhabism represents another foundation on which the nation is built. Since the 18th century, these precepts have been strongly connected to the political objectives of the House of Saud (Habib, 2009: 57-59). The family clan is committed to protecting the religious denomination from critics and spreading their interpretation of Islam, while Wahhabi strata make sure to offer Muslim communities a doctrine congruent with the Saudi Arabian authority. Therefore, they are the main indoctrinating and legitimizing tool used by the Saudi Arabian government as a prerogative to establish themselves as the moral leaders of the people.

Wahhabism has a strong institutional presence in the kingdom but also carries considerable ideological weight in the development of policies. Religious officials are responsible for controlling education, justice, and culture. Wahhabism is very present in Saudi Arabian society and has a direct influence over the citizens' opinion and their relationship with power. Moreover, it defines the crown's view on which function to have within the kingdom but also internationally, playing a pivotal role in establishing the most elemental principles.

Coming second in the social hierarchy is a privileged social group close to the royal family and Wahhabism. It is made up of the clans and tribes that, ever since unification, have remained the most loyal to the Saudi Arabian monarchy. Saudi Arabia maintains a strong tribal component (Yamani, 2008: 143-145), which conditions the development of state institutions. This group is also made up of Saudi Arabian citizens who were able to work their way up in the Public Administration and major national companies. They are an emerging sector close to the

Government but share no dynastic links with the king. They are civil servants, private sector agents, and technocrats who are progressively taking on more responsibilities and gaining more influence.

The third stratum of society is made up of professionals from Western and neighbouring Arab countries, who represent corporations and political delegations that have different interests in the country. It is a common trend among most Arab monarchies on the Gulf to have mostly foreigners as their highly qualified workforce, taking over major positions in the private sector. The Government has taken several political initiatives to promote these positions and stop depending so much on imported labour (De Bel-Air 2018). Although they make up a privileged group and do not directly suffer the restrictions of an authoritarian regime, they have a limited relationship with nationals.

Coming fourth are the people considered to be the prototype of an average Saudi Arabian citizen. They do not enjoy any special status, nor are they notoriously close to the national elite. They are, however, granted a certain level of comfort and some bare-minimum services like education, healthcare, and job opportunities by the State. Due to the rentier economic system and political patronage present in the Saudi Arabian model, the Government distributes wealth according to their political interests. This contributes to the financial dependency of most citizens and reduces the possibility of protest movements arising.

The fifth sector of society is made up of those Saudi Arabian citizens who are the most critical of the Government, and whose mobilizations and demands are not tolerated by the State. Dissent is restricted in Saudi Arabia and has a strong social component as authorities promote social exclusion. Non-conformists can either suffer suppression and endure criminal sentences or leave the country and be identified as threats to the inner stability of the state. The most noticeable consequence is that they are not considered citizens with the same rights and opportunities as the others anymore.

The sixth level is comprised of people living in a state of extreme poverty and misery - the lowest social class in the country. Poverty is a deep-rooted structural problem in Saudi Arabia. Considerable differences exist between prominent personas of the kingdom and the popular sectors. Official figures offer a different, less alarming view of the economic and social reality. However, international analyses warn about a high number of people -around four million- living in extreme poverty (Baker, 2013), who depend on charity from religious congregations and public aid. They are an invisible part of the country that receives little to no attention from authorities.

Coming last in the categorization of society are the imported workers responsible for low-skilled labour. In the seventies, the emerging economies of the Gulf started several modernizing campaigns using returns on oil and gas. In order to satisfy the labour demand of their economies (Silvey, 2006: 26- 29), they looked for workers in countries in the Asia Pacific region and Africa to work in big infrastructure construction, the hospitality industry, and housekeeping. Many of them have poor working conditions and barely get any legal recognition.

The room for participating in Saudi Arabian political and social life is so limited that there is a very defined line that separates the community into supporters of the regime and non-conformists and those critical of the crown. The main trend among Saudis is to accept the political norms established by the monarchy. There are citizens who do it based on their ideological convictions, partly due to Wahhabism's influence on legitimizing the power of the Saud family. Others choose not to adopt a dissident posture for fear of reprisals and losing the rights or even privileges granted by the Saudi state. Finally, many Saudis opt to be politically indifferent, as there is a general deep-rooted passivity and presumption that only the dynastic clan can bring cohesion and stability to the kingdom.

Opposition in Saudi Arabia is very diverse and corresponds to a big amalgamation of political and religious proposals. A common factor among all these agents is their unrest and indifference towards the current regime, but divergences between them arise as a consequence of the purposes of their movements and the means they present to achieve them. Opposing factions can be classified into reformists and radicals, as some of them introduce modernizing measures and others defend drastic changes in the system. Opposition can also be divided into those with liberal and progressive inclinations and those with conservative and rigorist ones, which creates a strong political polarization.

Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia have traditionally been the most organized and visible opposing group in the kingdom. They are mainly based in the East of the country, where major oil and gas fields are located (Soage, 2017: 4-5). They complain about feeling marginalized and persecuted by authorities due to their religious beliefs. Official Wahhabism does not tolerate any other version of Islam and is particularly critical of Shia Islam. Saudi princes view them as a constant threat to stability and as a risk of a possible Iranian interference since they share the same religious precepts: protests demanding less suppression and more attention and participation for minorities like Shia Muslims.

The Arab Spring in 2011 was not particularly significant in Saudi Arabia, but it did highlight some of the social discontent with the inner workings of the government. A certain political activism, led by the younger generations, is emerging very prolifically on the Internet and social media (Perlov and Guzansky, 2014). It condemns corruption in the system and demands more individual rights and freedoms. Feminism has become significantly more relevant in Saudi Arabia over the last few years, establishing the position of women within the kingdom as the main topic of debate and putting pressure on the State to issue more liberal and flexible guidelines.

On the other side of the opposition are the more conservative and rigorist stances, which are usually better tolerated by the Saud monarchy than the liberal and democratizing ones. This form of dissent manifested itself in the siege of the Grand Mosque in 1979 or in the criticism of the presence of US troops in the country in 1991 (Lacroix, 2015: 175- 176). Most of them are part of the official Wahhabi sphere and provide a tool for putting pressure on the Government to limit the scope of reforms. Some of these views have added fuel to the fire for more radicalized and extremist parties linked to the rise of Jihadism over the last decades.

#### 4. Construction of the Modern State

Saudi Arabia's political construction is fairly recent if we consider that the country gained its internationally recognized identity and independence in 1932. Saudi Arabia's current territory has been historically fragmented between different clans and tribes for centuries. Since the 18th century, the Saud family -which had control over the centre of the Arabian Peninsula- had been unsuccessfully trying to promote unification under a single kingdom in accordance with Wahhabi axioms. It was not until Ibn Saud (reign 1932-1953) arrived, that the new State was constituted after years of ongoing battles with other predominant dynasties in the area during the beginning of the 20th century.

The evolution of the Saudi State happens according to the interests and needs of the Saud family. Its nature is fully patrimonial as Saudi princes have control over every political and social aspect and decide when and where transformations take place. We can observe a series of phases in state development, which have defined the way power is structured and how margins of influence are limited (Hernández, 2019: 69-86). The first stage of consolidation, which corresponds to the reigns of Ibn Saud and Saud bin Abdulaziz between the years of 1932 and 1964; a second period of rise, linked to Faisal bin Abdulaziz's government from 1964 to 1975; a third cycle of development, during the reigns of Khalid bin Abdulaziz and Fahd bin Abdulaziz in the eighties and nineties; a fourth level of modernization led by king Abdullah bin Abdulaziz at the beginning of the 21st century and, lastly, a phase of redefinition with Salman bin Abdulaziz since 2015.

The first stage was characterized by two facets: the strengthening of internal power and a poor international presence. The Saud family was mostly worried about establishing the foundations for the new State that would allow them to take control over the entire territory and secure the crown's authority. The strict interpretation of Islam made by Wahhabism provided them with sufficient narrative to justify the implementation of a hierarchical and authoritarian system (Alrebh, 2017: 281-284). The king and his family became political and religious figures and were turned into national symbols. The basic premise was that institutions would be established to facilitate the royal family's task of safeguarding their political objectives. National interests were created based on the presumptions and ambitions of Saudi princes. The newly established Government's biggest concern at the time was avoiding confrontation within the kingdom.

The division of responsibilities was done paying mind to the king's absolute power but also to the needed stability within the dynasty, Wahhabism, and between clans. The country was administratively divided into regions ruled by princes, who were responsible for implementing the monarch's decisions across the entire territory. The Government was strictly made up of blood relatives and the Saud last name dominated ministerial positions and extended throughout the limited state apparatus. The first national security forces were created —National Guard, Military Forces, and Royal Guard— and the religious police were also implemented (Espinosa, 2016). The economy would shortly become a vital factor in the development of the State.

The Saud family decided to put all their efforts into bringing stability to the kingdom and getting as many returns on oil and gas as possible. Foreign affairs were not significant during this first stage. Saudi Arabia avoided playing a major regional role, subordinating actions on an international scale to their allyship with the US (Domínguez de Olazábal, 2017: 8-9). The crown began to promote the creation of big national companies, for which Aramco — responsible for the production and exports of oil and gas in the country— was vital. Resources were managed by the royal family and became another political tool for them to use as well as the basic source of income for the regime.

The second phase corresponds to the rise of the Saudi State and Saud family on a political and regional scale under Faisal bin Abdulaziz's rule. He was able to depose his brother Saud bin Abdulaziz in 1964 so that the branch of the dynasty defending a deep reform of the country prevailed. In a little over thirty years, the crown had been able to strengthen the State and Government within their borders, but changes in the political environment triggered by Pan-Arabism and Nasser's leadership became a serious threat to the crown (Riedel, 2018: 32-34). Throughout this period, the royal dynasty sought to improve state capacities and increase international presence.

King Faisal imposed a more efficient working structure for the State Administration, giving significant priority to reinforcing security and defence operations to avoid any form of revolutionary trend. Oil was not just the motor for development in the country anymore, it also acted as a deterrent in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy. During his reign, the foundations for the State's national and international agenda were laid for the coming decades under the premise of authoritarianism, regional rise, and economic growth.

The third stage of evolution happened during the reigns of Khalid bin Abdulaziz and Fahd bin Abdulaziz in the eighties and nineties, which were defined by the expansion of state structures at both the national and international levels. Saudi Arabia acquired a prominent role in the Middle East and the Muslim sphere during a time of big regional and international changes. The Saud Government consolidated its leadership in the area (Wilson and Graham, 1994: 131-133) as well as their position as the closest interlocutor of the US Administration. Internal security, stability, and development were linked to anything happening on the outside so the priority of protecting national interests prevailed.

During this time, two significant phenomena took place within state structures. On the one hand, during the eighties, the nationalization process of big Saudi companies was concluded. Economic activity became fully controlled by the State, and what was more, directly supervised by the Saud family. On the other hand, there was an internationalization of Wahhabism (Enazy, 2009) through the financing of and state support to communities of believers and religious and political groups across the globe. Political changes within the kingdom were limited as the monarchy proved to be fairly competent to deal with internal tensions.

The fourth stage in the state development of Saudi Arabia happened under the rule of Abdullah bin Abdulaziz between 2005 and 2015, although he had been technically ruling the country as a regent since 1995 due to his brother Fahd's health problems. The time between the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries is



described as a stage of modernization due to the boosts given to various sectors by the government: political reforms to improve civil participation, transparency in the administration, and more rights for certain social groups like women; improving and expanding military capabilities to reduce defence dependency on the US; diversifying trade relations with third countries and integration into international markets.

Abdullah's purpose was to try to slowly introduce state reforms without altering the whole of the regime: adjusting the system to the new circumstances (McDowall, 2015). The scope of his policies was limited due to internal resistance and problems resulting from the Arab Spring. Initiatives to liberalize the economy and improve state efficiency were hindered by deep-rooted dynamics of Saudi society and the elite, which limited the effect of measures. The uprisings in 2011 motivated the crown's decision to go back on some of their promises of political change.

The fifth stage takes place during Salman bin Abdulaziz's rule, who took over from his brother Abdullah in 2015 after his death. These are years of intense state reforms at every level, from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's perspective about new national priorities in light of regional and international circumstances (House, 2019: 13-15). It is a phase of redefining capabilities and state efficiency. There is a centralization of responsibilities and decisions in the young leader while several plans for improving national economic and military competencies are being carried out.

Mohammed bin Salman is the kingpin of proclaimed transformations in the kingdom. The Saudi Vision 2030 plan includes some reform aspirations that hope to go more deeply into what Abdullah was doing before the Arab Spring: decentralizing the economy, reducing the importance of the administration, and finding different sources of wealth other than oil (Grand, 2018). There is also an interest in promoting some degree of social liberalization and limiting institutional religious rigorism. These expectations create conflicts between the most prominent members of the royal family and question the viability of reforms within the State without altering the authoritarian regime.

## 5. Institutional distribution of power

The Saudi monarchy is an absolutist, patrimonial, and rentier patronage system. These features defined the way the State developed, and the type of institutions created to exert the king's authority, which have undergone little to no change in eighty years. Spheres of influence and the division of responsibilities in the country are determined by the correlation of forces between the Saud family, Wahhabism's ideological relevance, pressure coming from external agents, and the Government's own needs in light of the national and regional circumstances.

The king has a superior political and religious presence in society. There is a lack of separation of powers and final decisions always depend on the king's wishes, whom no one can ever hold accountable. However, Saudi Arabia does not have a personalist government; the vesting of powers is fully controlled by a specific dynasty. The most relevant political agent on a national scale is the Saud family, who is present at most institutional levels and social spheres. Reaching consensus among all the princes and clan members is a very particular trademark of their decision-making process.

Mohammed bin Salman's appointment as Crown Prince, as well as the cumulus of responsibilities rapidly taken on by him, is causing a growing unrest within the royal family and the sectors closest to the crown (Al-Rasheed, 2017: 6-7). Saudi kings usually harmonize the different stances within the clan by saying that power is not an individual element and that it belongs to the whole of the dynasty. The country's founding father, Ibn Saud, bore this in mind while he distributed powers among his sons, but Salman is now disrupting the consensus and balance between different views within the dynasty. A more direct and personalist *modus operandi* is being imposed, setting aside the usual dynamics of consensus and discussion.

In Saudi Arabia, the king usually takes advice from his closest family and the most relevant religious figures in the country. The purpose of this task is to make sure political disagreements among the Saud dynasty members do not weaken the internal stability of the kingdom. The Head of State has unlimited political power, but that does not take away from the officials' willingness to seek approval and consensus among clan members. The division of responsibilities and the partaking of princes in power have guaranteed all this time dynastic cohesion and the survival of the model. Eliminating this factor can have unpredictable results for the kingdom's stability.

The premise of reaching consensual decisions also guarantees that succession to the throne will not be a traumatic process, being able to keep extensive lines of action over time. Monarchs usually take over and go more deeply into strategies previously planned out by their predecessors. Nevertheless, King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman set once again an unprecedented standard (Vick, 2018), as they are making significant alterations in delicate fields such as economic, foreign, and security policies, while leaving behind postulates that supported Abdullah's administration, taking on an approach that does not contemplate other perspectives.

The difference of opinion about big measures and the succession line polarizes the divergences within the clan. In 2006, King Abdullah decided to create the Allegiance Council to shed light upon the succession process and to incorporate into it the most prominent figures of the royal dynasty. In this space, there are 34 blood relatives represented, who allegedly approve, in a collegial manner, the appointments of the Crown Prince and his substitute (Kern y Reed, 2012). However, King Salman's preference for his son Mohammed bin Salman makes evident the weaknesses of the body and the rift within the clan.

The king has the authority to form a government with those public figures who are dearest and closest to him. The executive does not function as a centre for debate and common consent. Each minister answers exclusively to the king (Johnson, Lehman, and Matthijs, 2002). The distribution of ministerial positions is traditionally done according to the weight each of the family branches carries and according to the demands made by Wahhabi officials. The

clergy asks for departments related to education, justice, and faith-related issues, while the Saud family tries to have direct control over relevant and delicate areas such as security and defence.

The lack of transparency in the Saudi system makes it hard to see into the decision-making process and potential discussions surrounding big topics. Changes to the executive and different high-level positions in the Administration are always made in the king's name, who lays the structure for the government and is responsible for the appointments in religious and military strata, diplomacy, and national companies. King Salman and Prince Mohammed bin Salman have fostered King Abdullah's trend towards including more non-members of the Saud family in relevant state positions, adding a more bureaucratic and less patrimonial nuance to the regime.

The government's authority is distributed throughout the different ministries and agencies, as well as the governorates. Saudi Arabia is administratively divided into 13 regions ruled by members of the royal family appointed by the king. Each region has its local consultative council, which has very limited functions and is mostly used by governors for advice about specific subjects. Each municipality has a council, whose members have been voted for through an electoral process since 2005, and in which women have been able to take part since 2015 (Chinchilla, 2016). However, these bodies do not have any practical function other than advising competent authorities.

King Abdullah became known as a reformist partly due to his endorsement of the first Saudi Arabian elections and the participation of women in politics. Nevertheless, the kingdom is an absolutist regime and democratic channels are very restricted. Civil participation is restricted to the local level and has a low symbolic and consultative value (Aarts, 201: 33-34). Territorial issues are still linked to the relationship between great tribe leaders and the monarch, princes, and Wahhabism. The monarchy has taken an active part in making it impossible to structure a political debate in organizations or parties, dodged by the religious and ethnic components. Citizens are still politically passive agents who lack real decision-making abilities.

King Salman made changes to the structure and organization of the government during the first months of his rule. He created two new Councils that would complement the ministerial bodies: the Political and Security Affairs Council and the Economic and Development Affairs Council, which have the purpose of designing the monarchy's reform and action plans for the coming years (Karasik, 2015). Prince Mohammed bin Salman is the president of both bodies, in which ministries and the area secretariats participate. Their objective is to find solutions to the main challenges the country is facing, both internally and externally.

Both Councils reassert the young prince's leadership in major State positions since every decision regarding foreign affairs, defence or economy must go through him before reaching the monarch. The purpose of this is to apparently provide the executive with more efficiency and flexibility, even if that means limiting participation and consensus within the royal family. This has resulted in the presentation of Saudi Vision 2030, a plan of reforms aimed at speeding the modernization process of the country, and the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, which seeks to reassert the hegemonic position of the kingdom.

The Political and Security Affairs Council is made up of the Ministers of Interior, Foreign Affairs, National Guard, Information, Islamic Affairs, intelligence leaders, and Secretaries of State. The Economic and Development Affairs Council is made up of the Ministers of Justice, Mineral Resources, Finance, Labor, Housing, National Economy, Commerce, Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Health, Civil Service, Agriculture, Education, Environment, Foreign affairs, Culture, and Hajj and Umrah, as well as other competent bodies. The actions of these bodies should be complementary to the Council of Ministers, but the reality is that there are some structural conflicts.

The Saudi Government's organization shows a bicephalic tendency in three aspects. Firstly, while King Salman remains the Head of State and Government, it is Prince Mohammed bin Salman the one who is carrying out his duties (Bsheer, 2018), acting as a proto-prime minister. Secondly, the state administration's duty is divided into two big areas: Security-Foreign Affairs and Economy-Social policies, which barely interact with each other. Lastly, as stated in the big measures planned out for the coming decades, both the political affairs and development bodies have a bigger role than the actual Council of Ministers, which is acquiring a testimonial and symbolic value.

Ever since the establishment of the modern Saudi State, the House of Saud has resorted to Sharia and the Quran as the only valid constitution for the territory, always under Wahhabism's strict interpretation, which separates itself from other Sunni tendencies and the Hanbali school (Hosseini, 2009: 12-15). The very limited network of laws springs from three concentric circles: Islam, traditions, and royal decrees, which coexist in a complex and intricate goal balance. Policy formulation is reserved for the Head of State and Government's powers, who takes advice from ministers and secretaries as there is no other institution authorized to do so.

Provincial and Municipal Governors can establish regulations to solve specific problems in their area as long as they do not impair the basic principles. At no political level is there a chamber in which a certain amount of legitimate parliamentary activity is structured. As stated in the sacred texts, there is a Shura Council or Consultative Assembly (Dekmejian, 1998: 205-206), made up of 150 national public figures appointed by the Head of State, of which at least one fifth must be women. This chamber does not have any power to make proposals and its sole purpose is to answer the questions the king may ask.

The Shura Council, as well as the other local and municipal councils, carries out a triple political duty to serve the crown. Firstly, they legitimize the decisions made by the king and his deputies as the opinions of influential members of society are taken into consideration. Secondly, it helps to portray an image of civil participation and some degree of institutional liberalism in the monarchy. Lastly, it is a simple way for the Saudi princes to pay attention to the different forces in the country and respond to the sensibilities of each social sector, canalizing the potential demands and worries of the groups close to the power of the Saud family.

The complexity of national affairs and the extension of state functions made King Fahd introduce in 1992 a compendium of laws called the "Basic Law of Governance" aimed at settling the inner workings of public

administration, territorial organization, and the efficiency of the Consultative Council (Wehrey, 2015). Royal decrees continue to be the main vectorial element of Saudi policy, whose foundations have always been Islamic law, customs, and traditions. Laws do not go through the sieve of open and institutionalized discussion, limiting potential debate and discrepancies to the influence of and warnings that members of the royal family, Wahhabism, and prominent figures in the kingdom may communicate to the monarch.

Saudi Arabia's legal system is a lot simpler and less developed than in other neighbouring regimes. Saudi courts are framed within Islamic law, royal decrees, the "Basic Law of Governance", and tribal norms, which maintain a strong presence in the 13 regions (Maisel, 2009). Wahhabism continues to maintain a dominant position within the legal sphere as it has a high inference ability in decision-making, but also in the very execution of precepts. Courts completely lack a secular nature as they are another place where religious axioms prevail. Only the king can amend judgements made by courts as he is also the highest legal authority in the kingdom.

The purely Wahhabi nature of justice only balances out thanks to reforms introduced by previous monarchs and, especially, the customs and traditions present in different areas of the country that still prevail in some tribes (Maisel, 2014: 112-113). The State was built around the crown while maintaining a complex territorial balance, which translates into some degree of adaptability of the functioning of the judiciary. Judgments are made according to each case's singularities, the religious perspective of the judge, jurisprudence, and sectarian connotations present in each province.

Political unity supported by the Saud monarchy tends to reduce the room for dissent within the legislative and legal frameworks. Within the Saudi state system, there are currently two aspects that can, to some extent, be contradictory. On the one hand, the government is making some moves to make civil participation easier and take the diversity present in society into consideration. On the other, the authoritarian nature of the regime promotes an entire homogenizing sequence, which directly affects the promulgation of laws and the actions taken by the courts and serves as a tool for maintaining internal stability and authoritarian order.

The political model introduced by Ibn Saud has undergone very little change over the last seven decades. Immutability is one of the basic premises of the Saudi State, in which there is a rigid hierarchy, and the king and the Saud family are political and spiritual figures as well as the most emblematic symbols of national identity (House, 2012: 26-28). Bigger debates are limited to discrepancies within the clan and are rarely known publicly. King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman are trying to take some weight off dynastic pressure and various groups close to the power in terms of decision-making abilities, making it a more discretionary process.

## 6. Conclusion

The structure and distribution of power in Saudi Arabia are highly hierarchized: the king and the Saud family hold the main responsibility positions within the most significant spheres of the country. As a consequence of their special status, a social and political system develops, giving priority to three elements: A) safeguarding the moral authority of the clan and Wahhabi precepts; B) maintaining the regime's internal stability; and C) avoiding external interference and movements for change. This organizational structure has been forming for over eighty years and shows very little change despite some social demands.

The establishment of an absolute monarchy, alongside a rentier and political patronage development model under Wahhabism's ideological influence, has allowed the Saud family to exert their authority throughout the territory, overcoming ethnic, cultural, and political differences. The crown is both at the beginning and end of the system, responsible for making it work and for the cohesion of society. The king and the political elite act as the ultimate national models, whose duty is to avoid the kingdom's disaggregation. These are the principles that fundamentally prevent the Saudi model from naturally tilting towards processes of deep transformation.

The Saudi Arabian system has a positive impact on the interests of leaders as it grants them full control. They have the ability to monopolize political and social life as they take control over resources and capabilities. However, the biggest weakness of this type of structure is its lack of flexibility and adaptability. Every single change made to the system has been promoted by the upper strata, meant as a mechanism of contention and prevention, which accounts for the lack of real civil participation. These changes happen according to the Government's plans, and they always guarantee the immutability of the foundations of the regime.

The power structure relegates citizens to a passive and marginal role. Political patronage encourages the rewarding of those segments of society who always appear loyal to the crown. Criticism and opposition are not just punished and suppressed, they also lead to the exclusion of individuals from society, who are not allowed to enjoy any of the very limited rights and opportunities given by the government. There is no room for debate as the official narrative talks about any form of systemic change as a concession made by the king to his fellow citizens rather than an answer to potential demands.

Despite the difficult circumstances in the kingdom, resistance within society has emerged strongly and it presents alternative programs to the ones established by the government. Some transformative trends range from minimal-reform agendas, in which the House of Saud's special status is still contemplated, to more radical tendencies, which propose objectives to completely amend the current status quo. The State's response is the same for all these movements, even though they can differ vastly from one another. Demands are perceived by the power spheres as cracks in the system rather than opportunities to regenerate it.

The Saudi regime has withstood both international uprisings and some internal conflict over the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries. Each monarch has stood out for introducing small social, economic, or legal reforms during his rule, but doing so carefully and paying close mind to the particular needs of the monarchy and never as a result of pressure from the outside or civil demands. This trend foresees a lack of significant change to the national



balance in the short to medium term as the Saud family continues to show considerable resistance. Moreover, both endogenous and exogenous factors are still too weak to induce structural change.

The foundations of power in Saudi Arabia are the princes' absolute control and the supervision and indoctrination carried out by Wahhabism. To contemplate a different distribution and organization would mean to question the current regime, something the Government completely dismisses. None of the main figures within the Saud clan propose extensive reforms that could potentially lead the country to a different political and social model. Most members of the dynasty and the national elite know that the current monarchy would not be able to withstand breaches so deep; there is a clear dichotomy between the certainty and security of the established status quo and the concern about an unpredictable and unknown future.

The question is whether it is possible or not for a Saudi state to exist outside of the current Saud regime. The monarchy was responsible for creating a whole state structure around itself and defining the social order. If the crown loses capabilities or even ends up disappearing, it could mean the collapse of not only the system but the very nation. Saudi Arabia was built around the authority of a king capable of unifying the different sensibilities within a territory. A structure like this one leaves little room for change since any move in this direction could have unpredictable consequences for the future of the entire kingdom.

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