

# **CAN SAUDI ARABIA REFORM ITSELF?**

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## CAN SAUDI ARABIA REFORM ITSELF?

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Saudi regime faces one of the more difficult phases in its history. Fearful of change, accustomed to a system in which it holds enormous power and privileges, the ruling family may consider any serious reform a risk not worth taking. The irony is that a program of change offers the most likely path to stability, and the greatest risk would come from doing nothing at all.

The Saudi regime's U.S. ally is angry at its perceived complacency with Islamic extremism while its domestic constituency increasingly resents its perceived subservience to Washington. It needs to address internal and external pressures for reform without alienating the conservative religious leadership on which its legitimacy depends. Severe socio-economic problems include rising unemployment and poverty in a context of galloping population growth. And all this before the country awoke to the emergence of an armed, militant group within its borders that has unleashed a wave of violence intended to shatter confidence in the regime, its economic prosperity, and its stability.

Under such trying circumstances, the regime might conclude that the safest approach is to crack down on the more violent militants while essentially clinging to the political status quo. Security forces have had some success, arresting hundreds of suspected extremists, killing many others including the presumed leader of al-Qaeda in the Kingdom, and confiscating weapons and bomb-making material. Most citizens -- even those opposed to the regime -- appear repulsed by the militants' methods. The regime is not on the brink of collapse or the country on the verge of civil war. In this context, the argument that a political opening unnecessarily risks giving voice and influence to extremist forces is appealing. However, adoption of such a conservative approach would ultimately be a self-defeating strategy.

The rise of radical Islamism in Saudi Arabia has many and complex causes -- most recently including the U.S. posture in the region, epitomised by the invasion of Iraq and neglect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- but the closed nature of the political system and skewed resource distribution certainly count among them. The militants, in other words, did not appear in a vacuum. Their roots are deep in Saudi history and an environment that has stifled pluralism, prevented the organisation of social and political interests and nurtured intolerance. That the groups engaged in terrorist violence have little interest in free elections or greater political participation for Saudi citizens is self-evident. But just as surely they capitalise on the erosion of regime legitimacy to recruit new volunteers.

There have been some initial encouraging signs that at least part of the royal family understands this. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., in which Saudi militants were heavily involved, an intense internal debate has been underway. An informal reform lobby of liberals, progressive Islamists, nationalists, and Shiites has begun to press for change, offering a vision that is a non-violent alternative, consistent with Islam, home grown and respectful of the al-Saud's unifying role. In response, the government has acknowledged the need for political, social and educational reform and begun grappling with what that would entail. By sponsoring National Dialogue sessions, promising partial local elections, easing (though far from lifting) press censorship, and establishing a committee to review school curricula, the regime apparently signalled openness to at least some reform. So far, however, this has principally been in words. In addition, while asserting determination to reform, the regime has arrested and harassed reformers, limited public debate and blocked initiatives it does not control.

Notably, the political reform agenda -- initially triggered in some degree by the growing threat of extremism -- appears to have been at least temporarily set aside since that threat took on a violent form. This is short-sighted. Security measures to curb extremist militancy are the first line of defence, but dealing with longer-term challenges and keeping violent opposition marginal requires repair to a legitimacy that has been severely battered by the closed and arbitrary nature of the political system, the concentrated power and wealth of the royal family, and the record of financial corruption and profligacy of many of its members. This necessitates broadening public space, giving more citizens a voice and a stake in the system, allowing them to organise freely, strengthening political institutions such as the *Majlis al-Shura*, creating a sense of accountability and cracking down on corruption. The recent violent attacks ought not be used as a pretext to deviate from reform but as an imperative reason to accelerate it.

Reform will not come easily or without risk. Saudi Arabia is a highly conservative society where religion plays a central role in framing political discourse for rulers and opponents alike and is a potent tool of legitimisation. As they fight an Islamist insurgency led by al-Qaeda, which seeks to discredit them on the same religious grounds from which they draw their legitimacy, the al-Saud cannot afford to alienate traditional allies in the religious establishment. Nor can they carelessly tread on the sensibilities of the popular independent preachers who criticise them for their alliance with the U.S. and corruption, but oppose the *jihadi* groups attacking the Kingdom. The challenge is to marginalise the violent forces without alienating the broader conservative constituency. Some reforms -- curbs on the power of Wahhabi clerics, major changes in the status of women -- most urgently desired by the West are least likely to be carried out soon. This is largely a problem of the regime's own making, the product of decades of accommodation to ultra-conservative views in the educational and social spheres. But to insist that it rapidly unmake it would underestimate how extensively a puritanical brand of Islam has permeated society.

The broader question is whether the Saudi regime and an ageing leadership facing the issue of succession are capable of the necessary vision, let alone implementing it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

1. Commit to a program of gradual, deliberate and transparent political reform by:
  - (a) publishing a comprehensive and detailed reform agenda, including benchmarks and a timetable for implementation;
  - (b) enacting legislation providing for legalisation and regulation of civic, social, and cultural organisations and associations, and in particular allowing the establishment of an independent human rights organisation and freely elected professional unions;
  - (c) holding local elections according to the announced timetable;
  - (d) pursuing efforts to promote national unity, dialogue and tolerance between Shiites, Sunnis and other Muslim groups in the Kingdom;
  - (e) expanding the National Dialogue by making it more inclusive, outlining and promoting their agenda, and permitting citizens to meet and discuss key issues outside government-sponsored gatherings; and
  - (f) lifting restrictions on petition writers, releasing those under detention and permitting public discussion in the media and elsewhere by those calling for non-violent change.
2. Strengthen institutions and work to distribute and check power by:
  - (a) expanding the law-making authority of the *Majlis al-Shura* and its oversight over financial and budgetary matters, and granting it authority to review and approve cabinet appointments and the unrestricted ability to invite and question ministers;
  - (b) establishing a transparent mechanism for all government financial and business affairs, specifically by publishing and abiding by a clearly defined national budget with a precise breakdown of sources of state revenue and expenditure, subjecting public expenditures to independent oversight, and listing those in the royal household entitled

- to public funds and publishing such royal allocations;
  - (c) cracking down on corruption and abuse of state power, in particular by members of the royal family; and
  - (d) increasing accountability by gradually separating the royal family from day-to-day running of the government, appointing qualified professionals rather than royal family members to executive positions and splitting the functions of King and Prime Minister.
3. Accelerate economic and social reform by:
- (a) Intensifying steps to join the World Trade Organisation and attract investments in the non-oil sector;
  - (b) strengthening technical and vocational training;
  - (c) continuing efforts to better balance the education curriculum between religious study and professional or technical training; and
  - (d) actively implementing the decision to expand employment opportunities for women and abolishing the requirement that women obtain permission from a male guardian to access jobs, health and educational services.
7. Avoid overemphasising socially and culturally sensitive issues, such as education and the role of religion; and
8. Support and encourage efforts toward economic reform.

**Cairo/Brussels, 14 July 2004**

**To Saudi Reformers:**

4. Continue to promote reform by:
- (a) emphasising shared national interests and avoiding inflammatory language;
  - (b) emphasising inclusion and promoting affiliations that cut across geographic, tribal and sectarian lines; and
  - (c) seeking to broaden participation in reform efforts beyond professionals or members of the elite.

**To the U.S. Government and Other Western Governments:**

5. Urge the Saudi government to adopt reforms that permit broader political participation;
6. Place the issue of human rights violations and restrictions of civil rights on bilateral agendas;

## CAN SAUDI ARABIA REFORM ITSELF?

### I. INTRODUCTION: OF VIOLENCE AND REFORM

Since 2003, growing militant activity has generated a heightened sense of anxiety and vulnerability in Saudi Arabia. The 12 May 2003 attacks on Western housing compounds in Riyadh, which killed 35 people, represented the first salvo in a series of bloody strikes against foreign and regime interests. Seventeen people, most expatriate workers from Arab countries, were killed on 8 November 2003. The violence continued in 2004 with a car bombing targeting an interior ministry building in Riyadh on 21 April, the killing of six foreign workers in the port city of Yanbu on 1 May, and the siege on the Oasis compound in al Khobar on 29 May during which 22 people, most non-Saudis, were killed. The kidnapping and gruesome beheading of American citizen Paul Johnson as well as targeted killings of other foreigners in Riyadh in 2003-2004 is yet another chapter in the escalating trend of anti-Western and anti-regime violence. The country has periodically experienced violent attacks against foreign and state interests since the mid-1990s but on all accounts the current wave is of another dimension. The surge in violence has generated intense scrutiny of Saudi Arabia and its political and religious systems.

The militants' identity and affiliation are subjects of some speculation. Although the most active appear to be tied to the al-Qaeda network, the organisational structure and membership of the group that calls itself the al-Qaeda Organisation in the Arabian Peninsula (*tanzim al-qa'ida fi jazirat al-arab*) is unknown. Indeed, it is not even known if it is a coherent organisation as opposed to a network of autonomous cells. There is no reliable estimate of the number of militants operating on the ground, though from the repeated shootouts, discovery of explosive-rigged cars and caches of sophisticated weapons, it is clearly not negligible. (Some speculate that there are no more than 1,000 to 2,000, while others suggest a

much higher figure.) Saudi Arabia's large pool of poor and poorly-educated youth imbued with extremist religious beliefs is a natural constituency for the militant groups. The breadth of the militants' support within the Kingdom is another enigma. Although polls suggest respect for Osama bin Laden, they also signal that the vast majority of Saudis would embrace neither him nor his organisation as political leaders,<sup>1</sup> and what anecdotal evidence exists suggests general revulsion at acts of violence, especially when perpetrated against Saudis.

According to some analysts, Saudis support the militants' rhetoric -- particularly their criticism of the U.S. and corrupt Arab regimes -- but the decision to bring their battle to the Kingdom has aroused more fear than admiration.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as the militants are veterans of al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, their general outlook and approach toward violence

<sup>1</sup> In the summer and fall of 2003, Nawaf al-Obaid -- a Saudi security consultant working in Riyadh -- conducted a public opinion survey of over 15,000 Saudis. In a June 2004 article he wrote "While only 4.7 percent of respondents supported bin Laden as leader, 48.7 per cent had a positive opinion of his rhetoric. How do we reconcile these contradictory responses? As one interviewee from a conservative southern province told our team: 'When we hear bin Laden railing against the West, pointing out the corruption and incompetence of the Arab governments and the suffering of the Palestinians, it is like being transported to a dream'. But, he went on, 'when we see the images of innocent people murdered for this ideology, it's as if we've entered a nightmare'". *The Daily Star*, 24 June 2004.

<sup>2</sup> "There are many people who are against the Americans, and they are pleased when there are attacks against American targets. But they are not happy when these attacks happen in Saudi Arabia". ICG telephone interview with Mshari Al Zaedi, an expert on armed groups, Jeddah, 24 June 2004. A Saudi reformer said: "People may feel some glee that the regime is being punished, but they are fearful". ICG interview, Riyadh, 24 June 2004. Public outrage over the November 2003 bombings, which killed mostly Arabs from around the Middle East, arguably has forced the militants to take more caution in picking targets. Attacks since then have targeted either Westerners or regime interests exclusively.

would seem to be alien to ordinary Saudi youth. The frequency with which militants successfully elude Saudi capture has led to a disturbing -- albeit unsubstantiated -- suggestion that they might enjoy support within the security services,<sup>3</sup> though incompetence is at least as likely an explanation. Their objectives -- ridding Saudi Arabia of foreign influence, disrupting relations with the U.S., undermining the ruling family's legitimacy and upsetting the Kingdom's ability to ensure the stability of the global oil market -- would seem to flow naturally from their targeting. But this is by no means a classical insurgency equipped with a clear strategy aimed at seizing power.

The seriousness of the threat presented by the escalation of violent activity also is unclear. While the attacks have shaken confidence in the country's stability and safety, the militants for the most part have been able to strike only at soft targets, such as unprotected individuals and inefficiently guarded housing compounds. The notion that the regime is on the brink of collapse or the country on the verge of civil conflict appears wide of the mark. Fiery Salafi *jihadi* clerics, such as Nasser al-Fahd, Ali al-Khudayr and Abd al-Aziz al-Jarbu, who provided legitimacy and guidance to the most radical Saudi Islamists until 2003, have been imprisoned. As a result, the militants arguably no longer enjoy the same legitimising apparatus of religious scholars that is critical for their long-term recruiting efforts.

The regime has resorted to a variety of means to defeat the militants: tough security measures -- which led to the killing of Abulaziz Al Muqrin, the alleged local al-Qaeda leader -- displaying repenting militants on television; encouraging clerics to produce religious refutations of the militants' arguments; bringing in Islamist mediators; and, most recently, offering an amnesty.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the authorities have mobilised tens of thousands of *ulama*, or religious scholars, to preach against the militants and explain both in mosques and on

television that their acts are breaches of Islam.<sup>5</sup> These are important steps confronting both the militants and the groups that support and enable their activity.

In the longer term, however, such measures can only be part of the answer. The militants did not appear in a vacuum. Rather, their roots lie deep in Saudi history and in an environment that has stifled pluralism, prevented the organisation of social and political interests, and nurtured intolerance. Ultimately, genuine stability must be anchored in a strategy that marries security measures with social, political and institutional reform. In cautious, measured but in many ways unprecedented steps, Saudi Arabia had begun in recent years to go down that path. The recent violent attacks ought not to be used as a pretext to deviate from it but as an imperative reason to accelerate the journey.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 2004.

<sup>4</sup> In a speech delivered on behalf of the King, Crown Prince Abdullah announced: "We offer a chance for whoever belongs to the misguided group and is still at large following involvement in terrorism operations to repent, plead guilty and voluntarily surrender within one month from the date of this address. Whoever does will be immune from prosecution and will be treated according to the Sharia law in relation to violated rights of third parties". Saudi Press Agency, 23 June 2004.

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<sup>5</sup> On 18 June 2004, the day Paul Johnson was murdered, the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca told worshippers that those who had killed Muslim and foreign guests had "not read God's book or the Prophet's tradition" and had committed "enormous acts of corruption and many evils". *Al Watan*, 19 June 2004.

## II. BACKGROUND

The recent upsurge of violence can be traced back to events that occurred in the decade following the first U.S.-led Gulf War, when anger with the regime's decision to host American military forces combined with frustration over a political system that is seen by many Saudis as arbitrary, tainted by corruption, and unresponsive to social and economic needs. But current events must be understood against a broader historical backdrop, particularly the formation of the state and the construction of its contemporary political system.

### A. HISTORY OF SAUDI RULE

Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded only in 1932, the ruling family has a long history of political and military activity in the Arabian Peninsula. From their base in the central province of Najd, the al-Saud periodically sought to establish their hegemony over the peninsula during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1902, the family, led by Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman al-Saud, wrested control of Riyadh from its principal rivals, the al-Rashid. Between 1902 and 1932, King Abd al-Aziz (helped after 1916 by the British), defeated all putative challengers, eventually conquering and incorporating the provinces of al-Hasa in the east (1913), `Asir in the south (1922), and the Hijaz in the west (1925).

Unification did not mean unity. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia became home to disparate communities holding various religious and political beliefs and of different tribal backgrounds. King Abd al-Aziz relied on military power to defeat local leaders who challenged his authority. But his wars, as well as subsequent efforts to forge a state, were also made under the banner of *tawhid* (monotheism) -- the name given in the Kingdom to the call of the religious revivalist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth century puritan cleric who preached a return to practices of early Islam. The conquests of Abd al-Aziz depended heavily on the religiously-motivated desert warriors who had embraced the Wahhabi call and were known as the *Ikhwan* or brethren.

In the mid-eighteenth century, Abd al-Wahhab and the founder of the al-Saud dynasty, Muhammad Ibn Saud, forged an alliance pursuant to which the

clerics legitimised the rule of the al-Saud, who, in turn, guaranteed the Islamic character of the state. This was manifested in the clerical establishment's ultimate control over education and the judiciary and, ultimately, through contemporary institutions such as the Agency for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, policing of public morality.<sup>6</sup> That bargain, and the concomitant relationship between religious and temporal power, persists to this day.<sup>7</sup>

While force was periodically deployed against internal threats throughout the twentieth century, it gradually gave way to a combination of pressure, religious intimidation and coercion, as well as efforts to co-opt powerful tribal and social groups through intermarriage, the allocation of oil wealth and appointments to positions of power. The end result was a political system founded on a narrowly-defined social base that institutionalised the Wahhabi creed of its rulers and their supporters and displayed intolerance for religious difference, whether Shiite or even other schools of law within Sunni Islam.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The descendants of Ibn Abdul Wahhab -- the Al al-Shaikh family -- continue to occupy key positions. Abdullah bin Mohamed Al al-Shaikh is justice minister while Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaikh is the *mufiti* (the country's highest religious authority).

<sup>7</sup> While the *Ikhwan* provided both military and ideological support in the era of Saudi expansion, a protracted struggle between the ruling family and the religious warriors between 1927 and 1930 ended with the defeat of the *Ikhwan* and their subordination to family rule. However, while the religious establishment was relegated to secondary status and more often than not has rubber stamped official decisions, it continues to enjoy tremendous power and standing. See J. Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930*, (Leiden, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Historically, the Wahhabis have called themselves *muwahhidun* (unitarians), a reference to the central religious principles outlined by Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century. The term Wahhabi, which the Western media popularised in the 1990s as a means of describing the "puritanical" or "strict" version of Islam embraced by the Saudi religious establishment, has also become part of the Kingdom's internal discourse. However, the term is overused and devoid of analytic significance, serving to describe disparate groups and individuals across time and space, so long as they adhere to an austere or conservative view of Islam. Indeed, many of those commonly labeled Wahhabi disagree with one another on points of religious dogma, practice and political aim.



The post-1973 increase in the flow of oil wealth enabled the rulers to oversee the modernisation of many aspects of life in the Kingdom. The government invested in the country's infrastructure, building roads, schools, hospitals, power stations and water desalination plants. It gave generous handouts to citizens, subsidised housing, and provided jobs in the growing bureaucracy. All this, however, was not accompanied by any significant changes to the basic formula of rule -- overwhelming royal power legitimised by the Wahhabi religious establishment.

Direct challenges to the regime, while rare, occurred at intervals in the 1950s and 1960s, and in 1975 the Kingdom's ruler, Faisal, was shot dead by a relative. But the most serious challenge to the al-Saud took place in 1979, when two quasi-simultaneous events rocked the Kingdom's political establishment. On 20 November, Juhayman bin Muhammad al-`Utaybi staged the take-over of the mosque in Mecca, holding it for two weeks. The Saudis stormed the mosque and rooted out the last of the rebels in early December. In the second incident, several thousand Shiites, motivated by social and political frustration and energised by events unfolding in revolutionary Iran, celebrated Ashura on 28 November in violation of the official ban. The Kingdom's heavy-handed response provoked local outrage. Crowds swelled, and for the next week the Eastern Province -- where many of Saudi Arabia's oil resources are located -- was wracked with violent confrontation between demonstrators and state security forces.

The events of 1979 formed a turning point in Saudi domestic policy. The Shiite uprising prompted concern amongst the royal family that Khomeini's revolutionary message had found fertile ground in the East, posing a direct threat to Saudi control over oil resources. Although the regime took some steps to address Shiite grievances, it did not accede to their political demands. In the 1980s many Shiite activists fled the peninsula; those who remained faced a crackdown against public dissent.

Juhayman's seizure of the Mecca Mosque, inspired in part by the rebels' frustration with what they considered the ruling family's moral depravity and deviation from strict religious tenets, prompted the regime to commit additional resources to the religious establishment, build new religious institutions and, more generally, promote religious practices. This also had a significant impact on foreign policy as the regime -- eager to placate its internal critics and seeking an outlet for its

emboldened Islamic militants -- encouraged participation by thousands of Saudis in the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union and supported various types of proselytising and religious activism abroad.

The stability and prosperity enjoyed in the 1980s started to unravel in the following decade. In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, which was largely financed by Saudi Arabia and transformed it into a net debtor and which saw the establishment of U.S. military bases on Saudi soil, several groups of Saudis exerted pressure on the regime for political reform.<sup>9</sup> But these calls came from different and, at times, competing quarters. The so-called secular or liberal lobby petitioned the King, urging the creation of new institutions to open the political system and allow for greater public participation and a degree of political and institutional liberalisation. Religious reformers, the most vocal of the regime's critics, denounced what in their eyes constituted the country's Westernisation and submission to the U.S. and pushed for strengthening the clergy's power and the role of Islam in government policy.

As in 1979, the royal family reacted to mounting pressure with a two-track policy. On the one hand, it sought to suppress the most powerful elements of dissent, targeting in particular the Islamist opposition in the mid to late 1990s. On the other hand, it attempted to appease and co-opt different groups, offering essentially token political gestures. These included the Basic Law in 1992 and the advisory *Majlis al-Shura* a year later -- symbolic steps that ultimately changed little. The twin strategies were aimed at deflating internal and external pressure, limiting the scope of compromise, and ensuring the royal family retained its monopoly over political power.

## **B. THE STRUCTURE OF THE REGIME**

### **1. The royal family**

Standing atop the political system is the royal family, whose ranks have swelled considerably since 1932. King Fahd, who assumed the crown in

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<sup>9</sup> Saudi Arabia has known limited political freedoms in the past. Elections were held for local office in the 1950s in both the Eastern Province and the Hijaz. The press also enjoyed a greater degree of freedom in the mid-1950s. However, the regime has steadily reduced the scope of such liberties and political rights.

1982, suffered a stroke in 1995. Since then, Crown Prince Abdullah has served as de facto ruler. Other high-ranking members of the family, most of whom are the children and grandchildren of King Abd al-Aziz, hold prominent positions as the most important government ministers and as governors of the main cities and provinces. The system, designed to ensure stability, is often accused of contributing to administrative inefficiency and providing opportunities for corruption and abuse of power. Beneath the major princes, thousands of second generation and minor royal family members also have claims on the system and in many cases use state mechanisms to achieve or enhance personal interests.<sup>10</sup>

Some state institutions are not dominated by members of the royal family, notably the *Majlis al-Shura*, but they enjoy limited influence. The King appoints all *Majlis* members, who serve mostly as an advisory body. Ultimately, their authority is constrained both by the nature of their appointments and by the fact that the *Majlis* lacks genuine law-making powers.

Recent months have seen intense speculation both within and outside Saudi Arabia concerning divisions within the royal family.<sup>11</sup> Privately, some Saudis shared their belief with ICG that Crown Prince Abdullah -- who enjoys a reputation of integrity but uncertain support within the royal family -- favours an accelerated reform process while others, most notably Prince Nayef bin Abd al-Aziz, the interior minister, takes a far more cautious view, which a commentator summed up as evoking the "fear that reform would be like the dissolution of the Soviet Union: once change starts, nothing can stop it".<sup>12</sup> Some see evidence of the split in the arrest of the very same reformers who, one year previously, were welcomed by the Crown Prince.

There is little firm knowledge about the inner workings of the royal family, so analysis of potential splits can only be conjecture. While there almost certainly are differences of view, the tradition of decision by consensus and the shared realisation that, at a minimum, measures must be taken to crack down on violent groups and curb the spread of extremism appear to have guided policy up to this point. This has made possible changes in the educational curricula and the granting of greater leeway to the media to criticise not only violent militancy but also, to a lesser extent, the milieu that legitimises it.

Differences of view appear to affect the next level of inquiry: how far and how fast to go in reforming the socio-cultural system and confronting religious conservatives, and whether and to what extent to touch political and governance issues. Even if the Crown Prince is prepared to go further and faster than others, his status as the King's half-brother and need for support from powerful members of the "Sudayri Seven" (the King's full brothers, Sultan, Salman, Abd al-Rahman, Nayef, Turki, and Ahmad) could constrain his ability to act. Ultimately, any increase in popular participation and government accountability will curtail the regime's powers and privileges, and it is unclear whether anyone -- Abdullah included -- would be willing to travel down that path.

The rulers' advanced age and the prospect of succession present another important constraint on reform. The senior princes in line for the succession are in their late seventies and early eighties, and the expectation is that the coming period will be marked by a series of short reigns.<sup>13</sup> In the twilight of their careers, the Saudi princes are faced with an overwhelming array of unprecedented challenges, which require an ability to imagine and implement untraditional solutions.

## 2. The *Shura* Council

The *Shura* Council was appointed in 1993 in response to reform pressures in the aftermath of the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis. Composed of 120 members hand-picked

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<sup>10</sup> "There have been royal abuses of government funds, property rights and contracts. Royal influence has also abused civil and criminal justice procedure, both against Saudis and foreign businessmen. Various princes have used their influence to obtain shares of private businesses and the profits from oil sales and state-financed corporations. They have interfered or profiteered in contract awards, the allocation of money from oil sales, offset programs, and contracts for the delivery of arms imports and military services". Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century*, (Westport, 2003), p.142.

<sup>11</sup> See Toby Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, 228, Fall 2003 and Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004.

<sup>12</sup> ICG interview, Cairo, January 2004.

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<sup>13</sup> There is no clear mechanism governing succession, which is decided within the family. Article 5 of the Saudi Basic Law stipulates that "the dynasty right shall be confined to the sons of the Founder, King Abd al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman al-Saud (Ibn Saud), and the sons of sons. The most eligible among them shall be invited, through the process of *'bai'ah'*, to rule in accordance with the Book of God and the Prophet's traditions".

by the King, it has played a largely advisory role, being subservient to a government in which powerful elements of the royal family sit.<sup>14</sup> Council members are chosen from among the country's regions and a range of important constituent groups -- the business community, religious establishment, bureaucracy and, more broadly, traditionalists, conservatives and liberals. Members, who tend to be highly-educated and experts in their respective fields, are viewed as performing the Islamic function of *shura* ("consultation", in this case meaning the provision of counsel). While the rulers generally take account of the Council's views, its influence, rather than being grounded in law, has been a function of its members' prominence and diversity. Its ability to act as an informal check also reflects the fact that the system prizes consensus, strives to maintain harmony through consultation and is deeply averse to conflict. Pointing to the Council's ability to shape government policy, a member told ICG:

We have an understanding with the government. As long as there is no financial transparency, and we don't have all the facts [about the financial affairs of the state], if they come to us asking for taxes or levies, we say no.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. The religious establishments

While analysts and commentators have come to distinguish between "official" and "unofficial" or "informal" religious establishments, the distinction is largely artificial. Most clerics draw their pay from the government departments where they are employed or the religious universities where they teach; even those who are not on the state payroll per se most likely belong to organisations that receive state revenues or direct support from individual members of the royal family. Moreover, the Saudi system presents the peculiarity of being both closed (in that it strictly limits participation) and fluid (in that the line separating those on the inside and the outside is often hard to draw). The informal preachers who theoretically function outside the system are a case in point: like the vast majority of Saudi citizens, they lack formal means of shaping public policy and holding the government accountable; yet at the same

time, they operate in the broad grey and informal channels that give them the opportunity to interact with and influence officials and members of the royal family. Nor would it be correct to suggest that the official and informal clerical establishments form two homogenous religious camps. Instead, there are complex divisions within both and convergence across their lines.

That said, some rough distinctions can be drawn. Official clerics are those appointed by the government to positions in the religious hierarchy, including the *mufti* and members of the Committee of Senior Religious Scholars or of the Higher Judicial Council, and are therefore expected to ratify and provide legitimacy to the regime's policies. Informal or unofficial clerics, in contrast, derive their influence from their popular following and, in recent years, have been known to openly criticise the government and the ruling family. Whereas the former constitute a key source of legitimacy for the ruling family, the latter enjoy widespread popularity and play a major role in shaping public opinion.

In today's political context, no Saudi ruler can contemplate a significant policy shift without taking into account the likely reaction of the country's religious establishments. Official and unofficial men of religion dominate discourse in schools, universities, mosques and state-controlled radio and television. Neither liberal reformers nor so-called moderate Islamists nor the Western-educated technocratic class can come close to matching their mass appeal, means of communication or influence.

Traditionally, the official clerical establishment has been uninterested in the direct exercise of political power, preferring instead to trade its support of the rulers for guarantees concerning the application of Islamic law and its own morality-enforcing prerogatives. The clerics' legitimising function has been most notable when used to justify state actions that run counter to popular feelings and religious sensitivities. For instance, King Fahd's decision to invite U.S. forces after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was sanctioned in a *fatwa* issued by the former *mufti*, Shaikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz. Yet, while the religious establishment's influence is manifest, it also can be exaggerated. The Kingdom has on occasion successfully implemented changes despite clerical disapproval. King Faisal's decisions in the 1960s to open schools for girls and launch a national television station are the two most frequently-mentioned examples.

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<sup>14</sup> The King is also prime minister, while his half brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, is the first deputy prime minister. Prince Sultan, a full brother of the King, is defence minister and second deputy prime minister. Another brother, Prince Nayef, is interior minister.

<sup>15</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 3 December 2003.

Perhaps even more influential than the official establishment, the Kingdom's unofficial clerics enjoy tremendous appeal and play a role in the Saudi system that is all the more important, in that they wear the same cloak of legitimacy as the regime and, therefore, are in a position to denounce deviations from its self-proclaimed path. The most popular among them came to prominence during the 1990s in the context of a ferment of religious enthusiasm and activism, known as the *sahwa* (awakening).<sup>16</sup> The *sahwa* began in the 1980s as a result of the influx of oil money, which led to an exponential growth in religious universities and fostered a generation of sheikhs, professors and Islamic students. Incensed by the subservience of official clerics to the rulers and their willingness to legitimise the presence of U.S. troops, *sahwa* clerics such as Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali delivered fiery sermons denouncing the state's failure to live up to Islamic values and giving religious expression to the anger that many ordinary Saudis felt toward leaders viewed as arbitrary, corrupt and submissive to the U.S. Preachers associated with the *sahwa* have come to occupy a critical position in the current struggle between the regime and violent groups.

*Sahwa* preachers became the activist face of the clergy in the 1990s, sharing the social conservatism of their official counterparts and, for the most part, their intolerance toward non-Wahhabis, but, unlike them, were willing to challenge the regime openly.<sup>17</sup> As a result, they enjoy greater popular credibility, and their pronouncements are given more weight. The *sahwa* is far from monolithic. It encompasses a multiplicity of views and is comprised of both moderates and hardliners, including some who are now close to the reformist lobby and others who provide moral succour to violent dissenters, like bin

Laden. Notably, a number of its influential preachers toned down their criticism after restrictions imposed against them were relaxed in the late 1990s. Clerics who once were imprisoned (such as al-Hawali or al-Awda) or barred from preaching (such as Ayed al-Qarni) are now not only tolerated by the regime, but even invited to take part in government-sponsored meetings.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For an in depth study of the *sahwa*, see Gwenn Okruhlik, "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Current History*, January 2002.

<sup>17</sup> As ICG wrote in an earlier briefing, the Wahhabi movement (predominant in Saudi Arabia) traditionally had been regarded as "very conservative on points of doctrine and strict on matters of morals, but not presuming to intrude on the political sphere let alone seriously questioning the state's fundamental arrangements. This rule began to break down following the emergence of divisions within Saudi Arabian religious circles in the wake of the 1990-1991 Gulf War and especially the establishment of U.S. military bases in the country. The latter development exposed the Saudi rulers to criticism from the Wahhabi *'ulamas*". ICG Middle East and North Africa Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004, p.13.

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<sup>18</sup> Safar al-Hawali turned down an invitation to join the first National Dialogue, reportedly in order not to have to sit with Shiites and Sufis.

### III. PRESSURES FOR REFORM

#### A. EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Saudi Arabia found itself under a harsh and unflattering spotlight in the wake of the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda attacks in the U.S. The fact that fifteen of the nineteen suicide airplane hijackers were Saudi citizens provoked an avalanche of criticism in the U.S. The country's rulers, its religious beliefs, social customs and educational curricula became targets of endless hostile commentary. The Kingdom came to be portrayed as a breeding ground for terrorism, an anachronistic, backward country that professes official friendship to the U.S., while simultaneously teaching its children to hate the West and funding the religious extremists who attack Americans.

While U.S. administration officials generally refrained from open criticism, in private they raised serious concerns about matters such as intelligence-sharing and funding by Saudi Islamic charities of jihadi groups. Members of Congress, the media and U.S. think tanks displayed far less restraint. In a number of instances, the very nature of the U.S.-Saudi relationship was called into question. In October 2001, Senator Joseph Lieberman explained that the Saudis were trying to "ride the back of this tiger [al-Qaeda]". His colleague, Senator Joseph Biden, accused the Saudis of "having to essentially buy off their extreme groups in order to maintain themselves" and "funding a significant portion of what we are dealing with now -- Islam gone awry".<sup>19</sup> As the 2004 U.S. electoral season heated up, some Democrats denounced the administration's allegedly excessively close relationship with the royal family and urged a tougher posture vis-à-vis Riyadh. Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, made this plain:

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<sup>19</sup> See "Senators Jump on Anti-Saudi Bandwagon", *Middle East Economic Survey*, 29 October 2001. A RAND Corporation analyst, Laurent Murawiec, went even further. In a briefing in July 2002 to the Pentagon Advisory Board, then chaired by Richard Perle, a long-standing critic of Saudi Arabia, Murawiec described the Kingdom as the "kernel of evil", and an enemy of the U.S. He said "the Saudis are active at every level of the terror chain, from planners to financiers, from cadre to foot soldier, from ideologist to cheerleader". Murawiec recommended that Washington give the Kingdom an ultimatum to stop backing terrorism or face seizure of its oil fields and financial assets. *The Washington Post*, 6 August 2002.

If we are serious about energy independence, then we can finally be serious about confronting the role of Saudi Arabia in financing and providing ideological support for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. We cannot continue this administration's kid-glove approach to the supply and laundering of terrorist money...The same goes for Saudi sponsorship of clerics who promote the ideology of Islamic terror. To put it simply, we will not do business as usual with Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup>

Public criticism zeroed in on the Kingdom's belated acknowledgment that it faced a problem with Islamic militancy and that money donated to Saudi charities was making its way to al-Qaeda. The Saudis' initial reluctance to share their intelligence on Islamic militants did not help, any more than did repeated remarks by senior officials that Israel's intelligence service was behind the attacks.<sup>21</sup>

Even dramatic improvement in Saudi Arabia's security and intelligence cooperation with the U.S. following al-Qaeda's first large-scale operation in the Kingdom -- the simultaneous bombings of three compounds housing foreigners in Riyadh in May 2003 -- did not cure Riyadh's problems. In November 2003, members of Congress introduced the draft Saudi Arabia Accountability Act, which would impose sanctions unless the U.S. president certified that Saudi Arabia was making maximum effort to fight terrorism. As late as June 2004, a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, while acknowledging that "Saudi Arabia has taken important actions to disrupt domestic al-Qaeda cells and has improved and increased tactical law enforcement and intelligence

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<sup>20</sup> Speech by Senator Kerry, 27 May 2004, Seattle, WA. Former Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards stated: "We need a new relationship with Saudi Arabia, one that no longer ignores that regime's pattern of intolerance and denial when it comes to terrorists", Brookings Institution, 18 December 2002. The film by Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, is another vivid illustration of the depths of hostility in the U.S. toward the Saudi royal family.

<sup>21</sup> In a 29 November 2003 interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Siyasa*, the interior minister blamed "Zionists" for the attacks. More recently, the crown prince alleged that Zionists were behind the 1 May 2004 attack that killed six foreigners in the oil port of Yanbu. See *Newsweek*, 6 May 2004.

cooperation with the United States", underscored that "important questions of political will remain".<sup>22</sup>

Pressure on the U.S.-Saudi relationship increased further with Washington's insistence on Arab reform. Describing the outlines of a new U.S. approach toward the region, President Bush argued that 60 years of supporting dictatorships in the region had not made Americans safe and that the U.S. henceforth would adopt a "forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East". While being careful to praise Saudi Arabia for announcing that local elections would be held, the speech was taken by most as directed, at least in part, at the Saudi regime. In the president's carefully chosen words, "By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership in the region".<sup>23</sup> Speaking in Istanbul during the June 2004 NATO summit, the president reiterated this call, explaining that "suppressing dissent only increases radicalism" and pointedly saying this applied to "some friends of the United States".<sup>24</sup>

## B. DOMESTIC POLITICAL PRESSURES

While the 11 September attacks left the Saudi authorities shaken and anxious to limit any damage to relations with the U.S., many reform-minded groups within the Kingdom viewed them as an opportunity to intensify the push for political, social and educational change. This effort included liberals, Islamists<sup>25</sup> and Shiites -- many of them individuals with a history of peaceful activism against authoritarian rule. Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, a lawyer and religious scholar involved in the reform movement, told ICG:

The events of September gave rise to a new ferment in Saudi society. This ferment had two aspects. One was the spread of a noisy rebellious spirit which welcomed bin Laden. But the other aspect manifested itself in demands for reform in order to prevent further deterioration [extremism]. When al-Qaeda started to carry out actions inside Saudi Arabia, it gave a further urgency to reform.<sup>26</sup>

The wave of attacks by al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda-inspired local groups, which began in 2003, had a further jolting effect, fuelling a vigorous debate on the root causes of religious extremism. The bombings, repeated discoveries of weapons caches, and frequent shootouts between police and armed militants prompted even louder calls for change, with reformers arguing that extremism grew out of the closed nature of the political system. At the same time, Saudis chafing at the many strictures imposed by the religious establishment resorted to more open criticism and demanded educational reform and a more tolerant religious discourse.

In 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah received no fewer than five petitions calling for a substantial restructuring of the country's social and political life.<sup>27</sup> They urged that steps be taken toward the establishment of a constitutional monarchy based on elected institutions, separation of powers and freedom of expression. A separate Shiite petition in April 2003 appealed for an end to discrimination against the Shiite minority.<sup>28</sup>

But even before the first of these documents had landed on his desk, Abdullah had launched what he presented as proposals for reforming the Arab world. Among them was a call for more popular

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<sup>22</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "Independent Task Force on Terrorist Financing", 15 June 2004.

<sup>23</sup> President George Bush's speech to the National Endowment of Democracy, 6 November 2003. See also ICG Middle East Briefing, *The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth*, 7 June 2004.

<sup>24</sup> *The Washington Post*, 30 June 2004.

<sup>25</sup> Progressive Islamists, who have been at the forefront of the reform movement, are an increasingly vocal minority in the religious field. They see themselves as enlightened nationalist reformers who want to build a modern Islamic state with accountable institutions, tolerant of Shiites and other Islamic schools of thought. They also make a distinction between Islamic religious requirements (e.g., modest dress for women) and requirements born of the extreme social conservatism of the Najd region (e.g., the ban on women drivers).

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<sup>26</sup> ICG interview with Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, Cairo, 18 February 2004.

<sup>27</sup> See below for discussion of the reform petitions.

<sup>28</sup> There are no reliable figures for Saudi Arabia's Shiite population, though community leaders claim they constitute roughly 1.2 million out of a native population of approximately 17 million. They live mainly in the oil-rich Eastern Province and in Najran in the south; there is also a long-established Shiite community in Medina. The Saudi Shiites denounce officially sanctioned religious, political and economic discrimination, in particular severe restrictions placed on practising their religious rites and building their mosques. The Wahhabis regard as heretical Shiite beliefs and practices such as self-flagellation and visiting the shrines of saints. Shiites complain of being excluded from key positions in the administration, including the security and diplomatic services.

participation across the region.<sup>29</sup> While this may simply have been an attempt to seize the initiative back from the U.S. -- which had just unveiled its own early plans for Arab reform -- the fact that the Crown Prince appeared to acknowledge the need for political reform further emboldened those of his subjects pressing for the modernisation of the Kingdom's system of absolute rule.

In January 2003, Abdullah received a first petition entitled "A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation".<sup>30</sup> It was accompanied by a letter that expressed the "happiness of intellectuals all over this great land, and their appreciation for your call for popular participation" and followed by a surprise invitation to a group of the signatories to meet with the Crown Prince.

### C. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES

Although the fear of mounting religious extremism contributed to a climate in which demands for change could be articulated and heard, the social and economic challenges facing the Kingdom were of equal importance. Ihsan Bu Hulaiga, an economist and member of the *Shura* Council, told ICG:

It wouldn't be wise to exclude [as pressures for reform] the internal factors such as poverty, unemployment, unsatisfactory economic growth and the limited capacity of the educational system to supply the job market with skilled Saudis.<sup>31</sup>

The 1970s oil boom and the consequent steep rise in the Kingdom's revenues transformed a predominantly rural and tribal society into a heavily urbanised one. High oil earnings funded a sophisticated infrastructure, together with a massive expansion in the provision of government grants, subsidies and services. Above all, oil rent funded a new life-style; the Saudi people who had previously lived an often difficult life sustained by hard work came to rely on welfare and on millions of foreign workers to fill both manual and skilled jobs.<sup>32</sup>

The rapid transformation from self-reliance to a consumer society and welfare state coincided with massive population growth. In the three decades since the oil boom, the Saudi population has tripled and has now reached approximately 23.5 million, including roughly 6 million foreigners. According to one estimate, 45.6 per cent of the Kingdom's population was fourteen years or younger in 2002.<sup>33</sup> Government services have been unable to keep up with this demographic expansion and the accompanying youth explosion. Saudis complain of inadequate schools, declining hospital services and a steep drop in living standards. After peaking at \$18,000<sup>34</sup> in 1981, per capita income fell to \$8,424 in 2002.<sup>35</sup> The unemployment rate also is rising, reaching 11.93 per cent among the Saudi male population in 2002 and roughly 30 per cent among young men.<sup>36</sup> There also is compelling evidence of mounting poverty, which is now openly described in the Saudi press.<sup>37</sup> A Saudi university professor told ICG:

We have a state that owns the largest oil reserves in the world and the second largest gas reserves, but per capita income barely exceeds \$8,000, and the percentage of Saudis living in absolute poverty is fast increasing. Seventy per cent of our schools are located in rented premises -- ordinary houses that are unsuitable. The universities cannot absorb more than 40 per cent of school graduates. Women have no place....University professors are poor. All this indicates that something is wrong.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See *Arab News*, 15 January 2003.

<sup>30</sup> The full text in Arabic can be found at [www.arabrenewal.com](http://www.arabrenewal.com).

<sup>31</sup> ICG interview with *Shura* Council member Ihsan Bu Hulaiga, 3 December 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Cordesman, *op. cit.*, p.7.

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<sup>33</sup> See report by the Saudi American Bank, "The Saudi Economy in 2002", p.21.

<sup>34</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all figures denoted in dollars (\$) refer to U.S. dollars.

<sup>35</sup> See report by the Saudi American Bank, "The Saudi Economy: 2003 Performance, 2004 Forecast", p.2.

<sup>36</sup> Saudi American Bank, "Saudi Arabia Employment Profile", October 2002, p.1. A survey conducted by Nawaf al-Obaid in 2003 indicated that 79.6 per cent of Saudis "considered unemployment their most pressing concern. In contrast, no other issue (corruption, political reform, education or religious extremism) broke 10 per cent. Terrorism was cited as a primary concern by only 0.7 per cent of respondents. Clearly, Saudis, like most people around the world, first and foremost want a decent job, a steady if not rising standard of living, and sound employment prospects for their children". *The Daily Star*, 24 June 2004.

<sup>37</sup> The daily *Ar-Riyadh* newspaper, for example, runs regular articles on problems of poverty and those facing the public health system.

<sup>38</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 9 December 2003.

Demographic projections portend more serious strains on the state and economy. According to a 2002 study by the Saudi American Bank, the population of native Saudis will almost double by 2020; the Saudi labour force is projected to mushroom from 3.3 million in 2000 to 8.3 million in 2020.<sup>39</sup> Over time, insufficient job creation, an ill-adapted educational system and anachronistic economic structures, particularly when coupled with the sight of thousands of Princes enjoying lavish lifestyles, risk further undermining the regime's support base. Calls for social justice, an end to corruption and wider access to the country's huge natural wealth have long been staples in the discourse of regime critics. Saudis increasingly point out that the frustration of their youth and resentment of social injustice are fuelling support for violent Islamic militancy:

Administrative, financial and judicial reforms are very important to address the phenomenon of violence and extremism. Many people sympathize with the extremists when they carry out terrorist activities in the belief that these acts are a way of pressuring the state to carry out the necessary reforms.<sup>40</sup>

Judging from the discourse of senior Saudi officials, the need for change is now widely acknowledged. A senior official, noting that "there is no one who does not know that the world has changed and we need change", pointed to the combustible combination of rising unemployment and potential future declines in oil prices.<sup>41</sup> Another predicted that the regime's future would stand or fall on its ability to tackle the problem of unemployment.<sup>42</sup> Yet, as is true in many countries under pressure to reform, the focus so far has been essentially on economic steps designed to invigorate the non-oil sectors (adopting measures to join the World Trade Organisation and legislation to regulate the capital market),<sup>43</sup> as opposed to the more difficult -- but equally critical -- social and political transformations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Saudi American Bank, "The Saudi Economy in 2002", op. cit., p.21

<sup>40</sup> ICG interview with religious scholar and former judge Sheikh Abdulmohsen al-Ubaikan, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>41</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 9 December 2003.

<sup>42</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 17 December 2003.

<sup>43</sup> For an overview of recent economic reforms, see report by the Saudi American Bank, "The Saudi Economy: 2003 Performance, 2004 Forecast", op. cit., p.18.

<sup>44</sup> In a March 2004 reshuffle, seen as a sign of his determination to tackle the twin problems of unemployment

## IV. DEMANDS FOR REFORM

### A. THE MEANING OF REFORM

As has become the norm throughout the Middle East, the notion of "reform" has acquired quasi-talismanic status without being clearly defined.<sup>45</sup> The agenda of Saudi reformers have varied over time and according to particular constituencies, and local calls for reform generally have not echoed those emanating from the West. In the period following the arrival of U.S. forces in the Kingdom in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the loudest voices for change were from Islamists urging a further Islamisation of public life to remedy perceived deviations from the true path of religion. They criticised virtually all aspects of the Kingdom's domestic and foreign policy: arbitrary rule, corruption, mismanagement, maldistribution of wealth and the absence of social justice. Angered by the Kingdom's complete dependence on the U.S for its security despite the vast sums of money poured into defence spending, and outraged by the presence of U.S. troops, they called for a complete overhaul of public life and urged that religious scholars be given a central role in determining policy.<sup>46</sup>

The current phase of the reform effort largely is a function of the domestic and external factors described above. Perhaps most importantly, increased pressure in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks helped thrust discussion about reform into the public arena. What previously had been the preserve of disgruntled intellectuals speaking behind closed doors has become a legitimate topic for debate. Khalid El Dakhil, a sociologist and reformer, observed:

In 2003 reform became the issue of the day, inside and outside the government, for those who are for it, and for those who are against it. In other words, the concept and extent of reform became recognized as a legitimate question of contention. For the first time the

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and poverty, Crown Prince Abdullah separated the ministerial portfolios of labour and social affairs. He appointed his close advisor, Ghazi al-Gosaibi, as minister of labour. A high-profile moderniser, al-Gosaibi was expected to focus on a program aimed at training Saudis to replace foreign workers.

<sup>45</sup> See ICG Middle East Briefing, *The Meanings of Palestinian Reform*, 12 November 2002.

<sup>46</sup> See The Memorandum of Advice or *Muzakirat Al Nasiha* signed by 107 religious scholars in 1992, available at [www.yaislah.org](http://www.yaislah.org).



government recognized the necessity of reform and the legitimacy of public demands for it. It eased media censorship and was more receptive to reform petitions, in contrast to its hostile attitude of a decade ago.<sup>47</sup>

Reform became a common mantra, echoed by royalty, government officials, *Shura* Council members, businessmen, academics, liberals and Islamists alike. There are clear elements of convergence: virtually all want to preserve the country's Islamic orientation while ridding it of some of its more intolerant and restrictive mores, and most claim to favour continued rule by the al-Saud as a guarantee of unity and stability<sup>48</sup> while urging gradual movement towards more representative government institutions.

But the surface consensus conceals a wide array of different, often competing, agendas and viewpoints. Broadly speaking, the notion of reform is used to encompass economic modernisation, breaking the strategic alliance between the state and the powerful clergy or, alternatively, political movement toward constitutional rule.

To many Saudis both within and outside the reform movement, arguably the least controversial item -- and one that cuts across the ranks of liberals, Islamists, modernisers and traditionalists -- involves the need for enhanced transparency in the state's financial affairs, i.e., budgetary accountability and the provision of accurate, detailed information about sources of revenue and public spending. Precisely because it resonates so widely among reform-minded constituents -- because it touches on both political and economic change without frontally addressing either -- the issue was described to ICG

by Saudi interlocutors as the most immediately available confidence-building item on the reform agenda.<sup>49</sup> Businessmen, *Shura* Council members and others argue that the country's oil revenues in their entirety ought to be transferred to the budget and that the government should publish budgets detailing all its spending, including military outlays and the size of subsidies and allocations to the royal family. A *Shura* Council member told ICG:

People want accountability and the *Majlis* wants financial transparency including the publication of state revenue and its sources. In the past the budget was detailed; now it has become just ballpark figures.<sup>50</sup>

The withholding of information set against declining per capita income and the knowledge that many members of the vast royal family, which includes thousands of princes, enjoy profligate lifestyles is an important factor in undermining the state's political legitimacy. Describing the mood after the May 2003 bombings, a Saudi reformer told ICG:

The state does not listen to people....There is no channel of confidence between people and state. The state has been reduced to the interests of the family.<sup>51</sup>

Another well-known writer said:

Corruption is the biggest hurdle in the path of reform. Some princes consider it a natural privilege. Reform has to start with a war against corruption. During the days of King Faisal, there was a similar situation and the first thing he did was address the issue of corruption. He published the family's financial allocations as part of the budget. The first step should be determining an allocation to the royals, which they should not exceed. But now each prince takes whatever he wants, and there is no distinction between the private and the public. Secondly, we need legislation to determine what is public and what is private

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<sup>47</sup> Khalid al-Dakhil, "2003: Saudi Arabia's Year of Reform", *The Arab Reform Bulletin*, Vol. 2, Issue 3, March 2004.

<sup>48</sup> The al-Saud are the "the glue which holds the country together", and "a safety valve" without which the state's future would be at risk. ICG interviews with Saudi reformers, Riyadh and Jeddah, December 2003. The reformist lawyer and Islamic scholar Abd al-Azizal-Qasim told ICG: "I believe the royal family still possesses enormous legitimacy. The Kingdom's diversity only comes together under the al-Saud family. The Hijaz has its own character, culture and history, similarly Najd and the south. The family has not been replaced by any modern institution which could be said to embody the state. I think the majority of the reformers would not dare conceive of excluding the al-Saud, because it would involve a risk [to the country]". ICG interview, Riyadh, 9 December 2003.

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<sup>49</sup> ICG interviews with *Shura* Council members, religious scholars, lawyers and journalists in Saudi Arabia, December 2003. For a discussion on the North African case of how regimes have accommodated calls for curbs on corruption, see ICG Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I*, op. cit., p.13.

<sup>50</sup> ICG interview with *Shura* Council member, Riyadh, 7 December 2003. (There is a serious question as to whether the budget was ever either detailed or accurate.)

<sup>51</sup> ICG interview, Cairo, November 2004.

and to form the basis on which court action could be brought against the corrupt.<sup>52</sup>

Even those who have no links with opposition activism underscore the importance of "financial transparency" -- a euphemism used to refer to an end to corruption and waste of state resources. Sheikh Abd al-Mohsen al-Ubaikan, a former judge and a member of the traditional official religious establishment, explained:

Financial transparency is the most important matter. First finance, then the administration. If there were financial order and transparency in discussing financial matters, this would be a main source of assurance for citizens, because people fear for the future of their children and for the maintenance of prosperity.<sup>53</sup>

## B. THE PETITION LOBBY

Saudi reformers who emerged in recent years constitute neither an embryonic political party nor even a tightly knit group. Rather, they are best described as a loose network or informal lobby, in which a core group of members periodically initiate petitions and seek to attract the signatures of like-minded people. The petition-writers for the most part are, within the Saudi context, centrists who preach a message of gradual political transformation within the framework of the monarchy and the state's Islamic character. The January 2003 petition to Crown Prince Abdullah remains the reformers' basic credo.<sup>54</sup> Among the signatories were 104 academics, businessmen, religious scholars and professionals -- all men -- drawn from various regions and religious and political orientations: progressive Sunni Islamists critical of the dominant narrow interpretation of religion, liberals, and nationalists as well as prominent Shiite figures. Indeed, as significant as the content of

the document is the fact that its authors surmounted sectarian and political divisions to formulate a consensus program of reform.

The prime mover behind the petitions, Dr. Abdullah al-Hamed, is an Islamist from Riyadh who was active in the reform movement following the 1990-1991 Gulf crisis. As a result of his activism in the now defunct Committee for the Defence of Legitimate Rights,<sup>55</sup> al-Hamed spent time in detention and was dismissed from his position at the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University in Riyadh. Today, he argues that the best way to counter the spread of extremist thought, enhance the al-Saud's legitimacy and minimise their dependence on the religious establishment is to transform the Kingdom into a constitutional monarchy governed by elected institutions.

The main reason for the emergence of violence is the absence of popular participation in political decision-making....We say that political reform in an atmosphere of responsible freedom and dialogue is the best cure for extremism and violence....The state contributed [to the rise of extremism] by forbidding enlightened Islamists from being active and handing the reins of religious education to hard-line conservative elements....The state wanted to make the religious establishment its source of support, but if it had relied on the people, and instituted social justice and gave citizens their rights and freedoms, it would not have needed to rely on the religious establishment for everything.<sup>56</sup>

Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, a lawyer, former judge and religious scholar, and Abdullah Ibn Bejad al-Utaybi also figure among Islamist signatories.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> ICG interview, Cairo, January 2004. A Shura Council member made a similar point about precedents in Saudi history: "In the 1930s government finances were transparent and the king was careful, even stingy with what he spent on the family. We need to return to the situation 70 years ago with total transparency in public finances. A line needs to be drawn between what is private and what is public". ICG interview, Riyadh, December 2003.

<sup>53</sup> ICG interview with Sheikh Abd al-Mohsen al-Ubaikan, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>54</sup> For a full discussion of the petition, see Richard Dekmejian, "The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 3, summer 2003.

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<sup>55</sup> The CDLR was established in May 1993 by a group of Islamist academics and clerics to push for "legitimate rights", i.e., the panoply of human rights they assert are recognised by Islam, including political participation. Government authorities disbanded it within two weeks, fired its six founders and arrested their spokesman. In 1994, two founders, Saad al-Faqih and Mohammed al-Massa'ari, relocated to Britain, from where they started a campaign calling for the ouster of the Saudi royal family. The two men had a falling out and split in 1996. Currently al-Faqih's Movement for Islamic Reform in Saudi Arabia (MIRA) is the more active of the two.

<sup>56</sup> ICG interview with Abdullah al-Hamed, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>57</sup> See Elizabeth Rubin, "The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why", *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 March 2004.

Formerly a member of a militant group that torched video shops to protest what it saw as the West's creeping invasion of Saudi society, al-`Utaybi later emerged as a critic of traditional Wahhabism. Both individuals espouse a progressive reading of religion which critiques the narrow, literalist interpretations of a large swathe of the clerical establishment and the *sahwa* movement.<sup>58</sup>

Among liberal activists, Mohamed Said Tayyeb took the lead in preparing the petition. A Jeddah-based lawyer once known for his Nasserist leanings, he spent the past four decades pressing for democracy and civic rights, a stance that earned him several stints in prison. Tayyeb has fallen in and out of government favour over the years.<sup>59</sup> Together with al-Hamed, with whom he regularly consults, Tayyeb is considered a leader of the movement. The two men were arrested on 16 March 2004 and asked to sign pledges that they would cease their activism. Tayyeb was released after two weeks, though there are conflicting reports as to whether he signed the pledge;<sup>60</sup> al-Hamed and two others refused and are still in detention.

The Shiite minority also is well represented in the reform lobby. Among the most prominent member are Jaafar al-Shayeb, a campaigner for Shiite rights who has spent time in exile; Najib al-Khunaizi, a journalist; and Dr. Abd al-Khaleq Abd al-Hai, a university professor, who is now a member of the board of the government-appointed National Human Rights Commission.

Unlike their 1990-1991 predecessors, today's reformers frame their demands not in terms of Islamising the state but of modernising it in a manner consistent with

Islamic principles. Some who were involved in the earlier activism also have signed the petitions, but for the most part they have relinquished their past ideological stands. An example of the current approach is found in the initial petition, "A Vision for the Present and Future of the Nation", which argued that legitimate rule as defined by Islam is based both on application of the *Sharia* and on consent of the ruled.

Justice is the basis of rule, God has ordained social justice, and because justice can only be achieved through *shura* (consultation), God has ordered *shura* as a basic tenet of rule. *Shura* cannot be achieved in a practical sense until the following conditions are met: a nation of institutions and of constitutionality.<sup>61</sup>

Along with subsequent petitions, it outlined a package of reforms designed to transform Saudi Arabia into a state based on "constitutional institutions" respecting principles of political participation, government accountability, social justice, national unity and economic development -- all within the framework of *Sharia* law. The signatories called for the convening of an "open national conference" to discuss national problems and for the election of a *Shura* Council enjoying legislative and oversight powers.<sup>62</sup> They also advocated elected regional councils, an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and assembly and the establishment of "civil society institutions" such as clubs, committees, professional associations and syndicates. Finally, they affirmed the need to address the country's economic problems in a manner demonstrating a commitment to the fair distribution of wealth among different regions and that aims at tackling "financial corruption, widespread bribery and the abuse of official powers".<sup>63</sup>

Despite its non-confrontational tone and deeply respectful language towards the monarchy, the petition essentially suggested the establishment of institutions to curb the power of the ruling family, guarantee popular participation in decision-making, and carry out oversight and regulatory functions in relation to the government. A system in which the ruler's absolute power is currently restrained by tradition, religion and the need to maintain tribal consensus would instead become a constitutional

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<sup>58</sup> Saudi journalist and expert on Islamic movements Jamal Khashoggi categorises al Qasim and others as "neo-Islamists". "They use the Koran, the Sunna and even Salafi jurisprudence to support their modernising platform, which includes supporting civil society, introducing a more tolerant religious curriculum, codifying the *Sharia* and holding elections for a parliamentary form of government". See "Saudi Arabia's Neo-Islamist Reformers", *The Daily Star*, 29 March 2004.

<sup>59</sup> In December 2003, less than three months prior to his arrest, he participated in the government-convened National Dialogue session that discussed Islamic extremism and its causes. Signatories of the "Vision" petition include other well-known liberals, such as author and commentator Turki al-Hamad, an American-educated political science professor who has long been the target of hate campaigns from the ultra-conservatives; Abd al-Aziz al-Dakhil, a businessman and former deputy finance minister; sociologist Khaled al Dakhil; journalist Dawoud al-Shiryan; and columnist Qinan al-Ghamdi.

<sup>60</sup> Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 30 March 2004.

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<sup>61</sup> See [www.arabrenewal.com](http://www.arabrenewal.com).

<sup>62</sup> Al-Hamed told ICG the *Shura* Council should be elected by both men and women. ICG interview, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>63</sup> [www.arabrenewal.com](http://www.arabrenewal.com).

monarchy in which power is shared with elected representatives.

The authorities' reaction to the petition was mixed. In what was seen as a remarkable gesture, the Crown Prince met with a group of signatories, signalling that he shared their interest in reform while not committing himself to their agenda. At the same time, and notwithstanding the cordial reception and subsequent inclusion of some of the signatories in government-sponsored National Dialogue sessions, the authorities refrained from directly addressing the issues the document had raised, which were never published in the media.

The absence of a direct response and the slow pace of government-initiated reform prompted fresh appeals. In September 2003, four months after the first Riyadh bombings, more than 400 Saudis, including 50 women, signed a petition entitled "In Defence of the Nation", which both reiterated the demands formulated in the "Vision" and openly blamed the emergence of violent groups in the Kingdom on political restrictions:

We are all called upon to shoulder our responsibilities and take stock of our actions. We should acknowledge that the long delay in adopting radical reforms and the lack of popular participation in decision making have been among the chief factors which brought our country to this dangerous pass.<sup>64</sup>

The signatories, mostly liberal activists from the Hijaz<sup>65</sup> and Riyadh as well as Shiites, implicitly criticised the intolerant religious views that predominate in the Kingdom:

We consider that depriving society's political, intellectual and cultural components from their natural right to express their views has, in effect, led to the hegemony of a particular

trend which by its very nature is incapable of dialogue with the other. This trend, which represents neither the tolerant values of Islam nor its moderation...has contributed to the emergence of the terrorist and *takfiri* thought<sup>66</sup> which is currently setting our society on fire.

While the Islamist reformers who had signed the "Vision" refused to join the second petition because its tone was viewed as too liberal or anti-Islamic, by December 2003 a consensus was recreated, with Islamists, liberals and Shiites jointly calling for the implementation of the reforms outlined in the "Vision" and for the onset of a constitutional process. This would include the establishment of an independent commission tasked with drafting a constitution, which, in turn, would be submitted to popular referendum within a year and come into force after a three-year transition period.

By the end of 2003, and largely as a result of heightened violence within the Kingdom, the reform lobby increasingly was couching its argument for political change not as an end in itself but rather as the best antidote to militant extremism and an indispensable element in any campaign to eradicate its sources. The December petition argued that reform on the basis of a constitution would "not only be the correct way for constructing a modern Arab Islamic state, but it is also the lifeline that will save the country and its people from the problems that have recently emerged. The explosion of violence is nothing but the tip of an iceberg which extends deep under the water".<sup>67</sup>

The reformers' argument clearly has a tactical dimension: by justifying their position in this fashion, they made the case that political reform and broadened public participation ultimately were in the regime's own self-interest, guarantors of its stability and perpetuation. But the argument also reflected a basic belief that individuals with an opportunity to partake in public debate and a foothold in the public realm are more likely to oppose acts of violence seeking to destroy the political system.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> The people of the Hijaz, the province which borders the Red Sea, do not follow the Hanbali school of law on which Wahhabism is based, and some express resentment at what they regard as the hegemony of the Wahhabis who emerged in the central region of Najd. The Hijaz, which contains the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, is the birthplace of Islam; people from the region consider themselves more cosmopolitan and open to the outside world than the Najdis, given their interaction with pilgrims who have come to their region for centuries. The Hijaz's main port city of Jeddah is considered the Kingdom's most liberal-minded.

<sup>66</sup> *Takfir* is the act of denouncing a person as an infidel. *Takfiri* thought is that which is quick to condemn any perceived infraction of religious teaching as proof of unbelief. Critics of Wahhabism argue that its adherents' rigid, purist and often literalist interpretation of Islam makes them prone to resort to such accusations.

<sup>67</sup> "An Appeal to the Leadership and the People: Constitutional Reform First", can be accessed on [www.arabrenewal.org](http://www.arabrenewal.org).

## V. THE REGIME'S RESPONSE

### A. THE NATIONAL DIALOGUES

The regime signalled a relatively open-minded posture toward reform in several ways. Of these, perhaps the most significant was Crown Prince Abdullah's decision to meet with reformers and sponsor three National Dialogue rounds, in June and December 2003 and again in June 2004, in which aspects of reform were debated and recommendations issued regarding future steps. The gatherings represented a potential break from a decades-old tradition of monolithic discourse. They brought together Saudis from diverse religious backgrounds and political orientations -- in itself a first -- to discuss with unusual frankness sensitive issues linked to religious differences, education and the causes of Islamic extremism.

The first session, held in Riyadh on 15-18 June 2003, gathered religious figures from all the Kingdom's Islamic currents and sects: *ulama* from the official religious establishment and popular *salafi* preachers such as Salman al-Awda (who was imprisoned in the 1990s for criticising the regime), leaders of different Shiite sects, Sufis and others who do not belong to the dominant Hanbali school on which Wahhabism is based. The presence of Shiites and Sufis -- considered heretical by many in the dominant religious leadership -- was of particular note. Several members of the informal religious establishment, such as Safar al-Hawali, refused to attend and sit alongside Shiites and other non-Wahhabi Muslims.

Coming three months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the dialogue was aimed in part at guarding against any spill-over effects from the new assertion of Shiite power in Iraq. Saudi Shiites felt emboldened to call openly for an end to discrimination and a clear official statement affirming respect for all Islamic sects;<sup>68</sup> some Sunnis feared that Shiites might seek an alliance with their Iraqi counterparts and threaten the Kingdom's unity.<sup>69</sup> Aside from

convening the National Dialogue, the Crown Prince is reported to have proposed setting up a government-sponsored religious forum to foster Sunni-Shiite understanding.<sup>70</sup> Results have been mixed. The June meeting implicitly conveyed a message of religious tolerance but, on the ground, Shiite community leaders see little evidence of change, and even within the reform community, mistrust is never far from the surface.<sup>71</sup>

The regime held its second National Dialogue session in Mecca on 27-30 December 2003. Entitled "Extremism and Moderation, a Comprehensive View", it brought together 60 participants, including liberal intellectuals, businessmen, Shiite clerics, state *ulama*, signatories of the reform petitions and popular *salafi* preachers. Also taking part were ten women who, in deference to the country's strict rules concerning segregation of sexes, were seated in a different room and participated via closed circuit television. The meeting, devoted to the rise of Islamic militancy, dealt with a range of political, social and educational issues.<sup>72</sup> Al-Qasim, who used the opportunity to critique the education system, told ICG:

It was more serious and more genuine than I imagined it would be. The different social currents were able to speak, and you could say the opposition was very present at the meeting. The official focus of the dialogue was religious extremism, but the talk turned to both political and economic corruption, as the final communiqué reveals. There was no attempt from those chairing the meeting to intervene [to limit the discussions].<sup>73</sup>

The eighteen recommendations that emerged and were formally presented to Crown Prince Abdullah attested to the unprecedented nature of the talks. They included:

- holding elections for the *Shura* and regional councils and encouraging establishment of trade unions, voluntary associations and other civil society institutions;

<sup>68</sup> In a petition entitled "Partners in the Nation", members of the Shiite community reaffirmed their loyalty to the unity of the homeland and called upon the Crown Prince to end discrimination in employment and allow them to practise their religious rites.

<sup>69</sup> Toby Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, 228, Fall 2003. ICG interviews, Qatif and Dammam, October 2003.

<sup>70</sup> Reuters, 11 May 2003.

<sup>71</sup> ICG telephone interview with Shiite activist, Qatif, 28 April 2004.

<sup>72</sup> See *Al Watan*, 29 December 2003; *Okaz*, 28 December 2003, 1 January 2004.

<sup>73</sup> ICG interview, Cairo, 18 February 2004.

- ❑ developing means of communication between rulers and ruled, and separating the legislative, executive and judiciary branches;
- ❑ regulating the economy in ways that protect public resources;
- ❑ developing educational curricula to guarantee a spirit of tolerance, dialogue and moderation;
- ❑ renewing religious discourse to keep up with contemporary developments in the wider world; and
- ❑ opening the doors to responsible freedom of expression, mindful of the public good.<sup>74</sup>

The third session, which took place in Medina on 12-14 June 2004 and focussed on the "Rights and Duties of Women", illustrated the difficulties of addressing the more sensitive social issues. Although women constitute 58 per cent of Saudi university graduates, they make up only 5 per cent of the labour force;<sup>75</sup> as numerous studies have shown, higher participation of women in the workforce is essential to spur economic growth and increase family income.<sup>76</sup> An array of religiously-inspired restrictions impede women's ability to work or play a larger role in society. These include laws governing gender segregation in the workplace, the ban on female driving, and the need for male authorisation to travel, obtain health care, education or employment.

The decision to devote a session of the National Dialogue to women initially raised the hope that genuine progress, backed by a social and religious consensus, could be achieved. However, results were limited. While half the 70 participants were women, conservatives dominated the proceedings, ensuring that the recommendations were vague. Although recommendations included increasing employment opportunities for women, addressing the problem of violence against women, and expanding women's participation in public issues, controversial topics were avoided including lifting the ban on women drivers and allowing them to travel around the Kingdom, stay in hotels and rent flats without a male

guardian.<sup>77</sup> Expressing her disappointment, Suhaila Hammad, an outspoken and forceful defender of women's rights from an Islamist perspective, forcefully lamented that the recommendations had:

Re-enforced the domination of men over women....Those who organised the dialogue appear to have come under pressure from the conservative current. As a result they invited only a few moderates.<sup>78</sup>

In an illustration of the Saudi leadership's delicate balancing act, the Crown Prince met separately with a delegation of women who had participated in the talks and who handed him an alternative and more specific set of recommendations, which he promised to consider.<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately, the mere holding of these gatherings could help forge a broad consensus on the shape and scope of change, while empowering reform-minded officials to overcome resistance from the more conservative elements of the religious establishment and certain members of the royal family. For example, widespread public debate occurred in the lead-up to the National Dialogue on women, including unprecedented discussion in the mainstream media. That said, their impact ought not to be overestimated. They remain government-sponsored and controlled exercises:

The National Dialogue is a good step, but these are still closed talks among select elite who are then invited to present recommendations. There has to be more transparency. We need a political and social dialogue on the general level. The most important thing is for the concept of dialogue to become established in a

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<sup>74</sup> For the full list of recommendations, see *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 4 January 2004.

<sup>75</sup> Cordesman, op. cit., pp.175-176.

<sup>76</sup> See for example, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women in the Public Sphere* (The World Bank, 2004).

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<sup>77</sup> See *Al Hayat*, 15 June 2004. In the run-up to the National Dialogue, the government issued a decree pertaining to women's economic advancement, discussed below.

<sup>78</sup> ICG telephone interview, Riyadh, 17 June 2004. Hammad was not invited to this dialogue session, although she participated in the session devoted to religious extremism.

<sup>79</sup> For a report on the meeting, see *Al Hayat*, 18 June 2004. The recommendations included allowing women to take up jobs and access health and educational services without permission from a male guardian; making school education mandatory for girls; issuing women with family identity cards listing their children and marital status in order to protect rights within the family; and providing safe public transportation for women.

dominant culture that currently does not recognise it.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, there is no guarantee that their recommendations will be implemented.<sup>81</sup> Lack of follow-up would be a serious setback, fuelling belief that the sessions were essentially gimmicks meant to co-opt critics and project a more acceptable face of the regime to both domestic and international audiences.

That belief can only be bolstered by continued and in some instances intensified harassment of reformers. Despite the initial meeting between the Crown Prince and petition signatories, there were clear and early signs of official impatience with independent activism. Reformers were pressured to refrain from publicising their demands and urged instead to convey them privately to officials and members of the ruling family. Occasionally, authorities forced activists to cancel private gatherings. A leading reformist told ICG:

Reformers who are calling for popular participation are afraid, and they receive implicit threats from some officials. Sometimes their meetings are cancelled. In Ramadan we were supposed to meet in Jeddah, but there were pressures on our host to call off the meeting.<sup>82</sup>

As the petition calling for a constitutional monarchy was being prepared, a group of reformers associated with it was summoned to a stormy meeting with the interior minister, Prince Nayef, during which they were reprimanded and, in some cases, threatened with prison sentences.<sup>83</sup> A few weeks later, Crown Prince Abdullah delivered a speech that mixed support for gradual change with a thinly-veiled warning to more activist reformers:

...the state will not allow anybody to destroy national unity or disturb the peace of its people

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<sup>80</sup> ICG interview with Turki al-Hamad, Saudi author and political analyst, Cairo, 26 January 2004.

<sup>81</sup> In a letter signed by 880 people and sent to Abdullah in February 2004, the petition-writers praised him for "his frank and open adoption of reform" while urging him to announce a timetable for the implementation of the recommendations agreed by the second session of the National Dialogue. The letter can be found at [www.arabrenewal.com](http://www.arabrenewal.com).

<sup>82</sup> ICG interview with Saudi reformer, Riyadh, December 2003.

<sup>83</sup> See *The Financial Times*, 17 January 2004.

under the pretext of reforms....We will not leave the security of the nation and the future of its people to the mercy of opportunists, who start with provocation and end with arbitrary demands.<sup>84</sup>

Most commentators interpreted the term "arbitrary demands" to refer to calls for a constitution.

In March 2004 the regime went a step further, arresting a dozen pro-reform activists. According to an Interior Ministry statement, they were being sanctioned for statements "which do not serve national unity or the cohesion of society".<sup>85</sup> A lawyer who publicly criticised the arrests also was detained. The government crackdown appears to have been triggered by the reformers' stated intention to establish an independent human rights association, which it appears was seen as yet another defiant step after their call for a constitution. According to one of the reformers, Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim:

The straw that broke the camel's back, as far as the authorities are concerned, was a meeting held at a Riyadh hotel a month and a half ago [in January 2004] during which some 50 activists discussed constitutional reform and appeared to be forming a front.... Many of those detained were active at that meeting.<sup>86</sup>

Whatever the cause, the crackdown appears to have had its desired chilling effect. At the time of this writing, all but three of those arrested have been released but only after pledging not to present or sign any more petitions or talk to the media.<sup>87</sup> Since the March arrests there have been no new petitions or organised calls for reform.

## B. ELECTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

In October 2003, the Kingdom announced that within twelve months elections would be held for half the local council seats. Some saw this as an important decision. As Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, an Islamist reformer, put it:

It is hard to overestimate the importance of this step in a society where non-interference in

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<sup>84</sup> See *Arab News*, 15 January 2004.

<sup>85</sup> See *Al Watan*, 17 March 2004.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid; *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 March 2004.

<sup>87</sup> See Agence France-Presse, 27 March 2004.

politics is considered the condition of good citizenship. [The local] elections in themselves may not have much substance, but the decision to hold them breaks a barrier and establishes the principle that society could participate in making policy.<sup>88</sup>

Others, however, stressed the move's inherent limitations. The councils have a narrow mandate, which deals principally with the provision of services. Crucial areas of public policy, such as the allocation of public land (a matter critically important to curb corruption and abuse of office) thus remain beyond their reach. Critics noted that in the early days of the Saudi state, the Hijaz had its own elected council with powers far superior to those enjoyed by their current versions: "Local councils do not play a real oversight role in preserving public property and they will not contribute to reining in political violence. If we want to say 'no' to violence, we should say 'yes' to popular participation".<sup>89</sup>

In July 2004, after a prolonged period of silence, the Saudi minister for municipal and rural affairs announced that preparations were underway for an election to be held in September and that deadlines and regulations would soon be issued.<sup>90</sup> Still, the fact that nine months had gone by since the initial announcement without anything being said about preparations, the electoral rules, or the criteria for voter and candidate eligibility, fed doubts about the regime's intentions and strengthened the impression that it was seeking to deflect international criticism rather than engage in bold political reform.

As elsewhere in the region, the question of elections has become a focal point of dispute about how best to address the challenge of violent extremism. When confronted with calls to allow elections to the *Shura* Council, Saudi officials typically retort that this would pose too great a risk to stability and strengthen the hand of radical Islamists.<sup>91</sup> Because

conformity to strict religious dogma remains the principal criterion for judging matters public and private, they argue, the possibility of a pluralist, tolerant politics is at this point precluded; political debates could potentially turn into religious clashes over who is loyal to and who is deviating from Islam, between belief and *kufir* (the state of being an infidel). As a result, a rapid opening is seen at best as empowering the most conservative social elements and, at worst, triggering escalating violence and instability. An official warned:

Democracy right now will produce something very similar to the Taliban. We want to do it in dosages, and as we go along introduce new elements. The dialogue represented the first time the *Hanbalis* [Wahhabi `ulamas] said they would accept other Islamic sects. We want to proceed carefully.<sup>92</sup>

The preferred approach, he continued, was for the government to take a step and evaluate its impact before proceeding to the next one.<sup>93</sup> Beginning with local councils was justified because:

In the municipalities we are talking about services, so presumably the people vote for the candidate who will produce better services. This is why we start there rather than jump in the dark [with *Shura* Council elections]. In theory once this works, the next election will be for whole councils, then for regional councils and then the *Shura* Council.<sup>94</sup>

A prominent member of the *Shura* Council expressed similar views:

Eventually we need to elect the *Shura* Council and the local councils. But how to run elections without a culture of democracy and institutions of democracy? The local elections are one way the public can learn. These elections will help society elect representatives as citizens and not as members of corporate groups, with experience and practice; it need

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<sup>88</sup> ICG interview, Cairo, 18 February 2004.

<sup>89</sup> ICG interview with Abdullah al-Hamed, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>90</sup> Associated Press, 10 July 2004.

<sup>91</sup> In October 2003, Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz, the minister of defence and a key figure in the ruling family, reportedly told three reformers that partial elections for the *Shura* Council would be held within three years. ICG interview with Mohammed Said Tayyeb, Jeddah, 12 December 2003. Five months later, Prince Sultan announced that the country was not ready for those elections and that, if they were held, "people would emerge who cannot read or

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write but who have leaders and people backing them without debate". Reuters, 22 March 2004.

<sup>92</sup> ICG interview with Saudi official, Riyadh, 17 December 2003.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.



not be a tribal choice. Elections are the end result, not the beginning.<sup>95</sup>

Indeed, fear of a hurried political opening is voiced not only by officials, but also by members of the business community and reformers. Mshari al Zayedi, a journalist who once was an Islamic militant active in an underground group, explained:

I don't see political participation as the first step. That's why I am not enthusiastic about elections. It would be like putting the carriage in front of the horse. There has to be some kind of political opening up, but our society still thinks along tribal and religious lines. Its political consciousness has not developed to the point where it would elect the most efficient....The culture of democracy accepts the pluralism of opinions and relativity in all things. How can you reconcile relativity with a society that is governed by religion?<sup>96</sup>

The risk that holding elections in a country devoid of democratic institutions or pluralistic civil society will be either destabilising or futile ought not be readily dismissed. One Saudi official told ICG that the likeliest winners of elections now would be "Islamists, tribal leaders and rich princes [who could buy votes]".<sup>97</sup>

But these concerns about immediate elections at a national level should not detract from the need for urgent and serious steps to address the deficit of popular representation. Restricting political participation, public debate and official accountability, particularly during times of domestic duress, is likely to widen the gap between rulers and ruled further and fuel support for radical, even violent, Islamist forces. A more appropriate path toward political reform would include the following steps.

**Relaxing restrictions on civic organisations, political activity and freedoms.** Currently, the Kingdom does not have legislation allowing for the establishment of non-governmental civic associations or regulating their existence. Instead, associations are

legalised -- if at all -- on a case-by-case basis by executive fiat; the waiting period can extend for several years and permission is far from guaranteed. Thus, activists were denied the right to form an independent human rights association,<sup>98</sup> the regime choosing instead to set up its so-called non-governmental watchdog, the National Human Rights Association, in February 2004. Although many of its members enjoy considerable respect, all 41 were appointed by the King; moreover, the organisation's charter prohibits publication of reports or of any complaints it receives.

A prominent reformer told ICG:

Many princes say the people are not mature enough. We say open up the field gradually to civil society so that people will become mature. Reduce the barriers facing activities by intellectuals, allow the establishment of associations for judges and lawyers and human rights groups. Allowing civil society organizations would be a good start because such groups spread the concept of pluralism.<sup>99</sup>

**Strengthening political institutions.** As a means of broadening public participation and paving the way for meaningful elections, the legislative powers of the *Shura* Council should be both formalised and enhanced, so that it can be turned into a genuine and credible channel between state and society. Council members told ICG they have been pushing in private meetings with the King and Crown Prince for more powers.<sup>100</sup> A 29 November 2003 royal decree bolstered the Council's ability to act as a legislative as opposed to a purely advisory body. Individual members were granted authority to propose new legislation, a significant change from the prior rule under which such legislation had to be backed by nine colleagues and its introduction sanctioned by the King. According to a Council member,

This will strike an important balance between the *Shura* and the ministers because so far all laws, amendments, etc, have been initiated by the executive. Any power we get will improve

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<sup>95</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, December 2003.

<sup>96</sup> ICG interview, Jeddah, 13 December 2003.

<sup>97</sup> ICG interview with Saudi official, Riyadh, 8 December 2003. A Saudi critic of the regime argued there was a risk that the government might stage-manage state-controlled elections to bodies that enjoy no real power, thereby displaying the façade without the content of political participation. ICG interview, London, July 2004.

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<sup>98</sup> ICG telephone interview with reformer, Riyadh, 24 June 2004.

<sup>99</sup> ICG interview with Abdullah al-Hamed, Riyadh, 8 December 2003.

<sup>100</sup> ICG interview with four members of the *Shura* Council, Riyadh, December 2003.

checks and balances in the system....This will help the *Shura* build up its leverage.<sup>101</sup>

The decree also amended the Council's charter to ensure that in the event of disagreement it would have the opportunity to respond to the government's arguments, leaving the King as final arbiter and decision-maker. (Formerly, a Council proposal to which the government objected was simply dropped.)

Although Council members interviewed by ICG welcomed this step,<sup>102</sup> they clearly aspire to a more prominent role:

We want the Council to have the power to pass the budget. Now we can hold ministries to account over their spending, but we have no role in shaping the budget. Also we want the *Majlis* to be able to give or withdraw confidence from a particular minister. I say we should also ask for a change in the system of rule to separate the office of prime minister from that of the King.<sup>103</sup>

An official with close ties to the royal family partly echoed this view, agreeing that the Council "needs to go beyond being a house of experts. It gathers the best minds in the country. Should it continue to be this way [powerless]?"<sup>104</sup> The authority and credibility of the council ought to be augmented, in particular by giving it oversight over the budget and the unrestricted right to invite and question ministers. Indeed, given the appointed, highly-educated membership of the Council, now would be a good time to establish a tradition of constructive and cooperative debate, which would set a useful precedent for any future, elected body.

**Proceeding with plans to conduct partial local elections in a timely manner and, over time, with regional and national elections.** Ensuring that local elections are held on time will represent the first concrete signal from the regime regarding political reform. While local elections are only a limited step, holding the poll, covering the campaign on state television and providing the councils with a genuine role in local government will set the principle that

Saudis have the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Elections for the far more important *Shura* Council will need to be held at some point in the future, with local and regional elections together with the emergence of a more vibrant and independent civil society serving to prepare the ground.<sup>105</sup>

### C. THE MEDIA

The media has been instrumental in conveying a semi-official message of tolerance for reform efforts. Privately-owned yet government-controlled, Saudi newspapers for the most part have steered a fine line. While refraining from either publishing or discussing any of the reform petitions, they opened their columns to unprecedented criticism of the status quo. Significantly, most of the focus has been on the need to address socio-cultural (as opposed to political) issues. The press has given voice to public expressions of discontent over such matters as education (accused of inadequacy as well as of inculcating extremism), poverty, unemployment, drug use, the mistreatment of foreign workers and more generally problems confronting the younger generations.<sup>106</sup> Some opinion writers have called into question elements of Wahhabi discourse, suggesting a link between certain attitudes promoted by the religious establishment and the rise of violent extremism.

On the first anniversary of the 11 September attacks, columnist Rasheed Abu-Alsamh wrote in the English-language *Arab News*:

First, we must stop denying that any of the hijackers were Saudis or even Arab. We must also stop saying that the September 11 attacks were a CIA-Zionist plot to make the Arabs and Islam look bad. This is utter nonsense! We must be mature and responsible enough to admit that these sick minds that hatched and perpetrated these dastardly attacks were, sadly, a product of a twisted viewpoint of our society and our

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<sup>101</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, December 2003.

<sup>102</sup> ICG interviews with four members of the Shura Council, Riyadh, December 2003

<sup>103</sup> ICG interview with Shura Council member, Riyadh, December 2003.

<sup>104</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 9 December 2003.

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<sup>105</sup> A complaint often voiced by Saudis is that neighbouring Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain have moved much further towards more participatory political systems

<sup>106</sup> John R. Bradley, "Saudi Journalists test limits, seek greater freedom", Reuters, 14 October 2002

religion....Second, we must stop the hatred being taught to our children in schools...<sup>107</sup>

In March 2002, Saudi newspapers took another step in the context of the scandal surrounding the death of fifteen schoolgirls in a fire in Mecca. Members of the religious police, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, allegedly prevented rescuers from entering a burning school building because the girls inside were not wearing the *abaya*, a black all-enveloping garment. Breaking with tradition, articles urged accountability for those responsible for the tragedy. As a result of the ensuing uproar, the head of religious institutions in charge of girls' education was forced to resign, and responsibility for their education was transferred from the religious establishment to the ministry of education. This marked the first time the Saudi press had forced an official's resignation. As a prominent columnist put it, "it was an unplanned coup and it made [the press] feel important".<sup>108</sup>

In the aftermath of the May 2003 bombings, the press was replete with angry commentary aimed at both perpetrators of the attacks and clerics who preached intolerance and justified violence against non-Muslims.<sup>109</sup> Because fighting extremism had by then become a principal item on the government's agenda, liberal writers and commentators enjoyed far greater leeway to criticise aspects of the Kingdom's religious culture, which, in their view, helped nurture violent militancy. Here, too, the chief focus has been on educational and religious matters, as opposed to corruption, governance, or political representation.<sup>110</sup>

The primary subject for the press is the religious question and confronting the monopolisation of religion [by hardliners]. The press also criticises the bureaucracy. It touches lightly on issues of corruption. What is so far non-existent is talk of political freedoms,

though now there are voices calling for civil society. There has been some discussion of the reform petitions, albeit shyly and indirectly.<sup>111</sup>

Although boundaries remain, and journalists deemed to have violated the unwritten code have been sanctioned for undue criticism of the religious establishment,<sup>112</sup> press freedom undoubtedly has expanded over the past two years. To be sure, even this enhanced freedom is a reflection of the authorities' ultimate ability to tighten or relax restrictions at will. Thus, press attacks against extremism mirrored the authorities' newfound willingness to attack Salafi *jihadism*. Liberal columnists capitalised on this official mindset to challenge the religious establishment's hegemony over all aspects of social life in the Kingdom.<sup>113</sup> Going further than official pronouncements, however, some media outlets have also called for greater tolerance, dialogue and debate within both schools and Saudi society in general.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> ICG telephone interview with prominent Saudi journalist, 24 February 2004.

<sup>112</sup> Jamal Khashoggi was sacked as editor of *Al Watan* on 27 May 2003 after the paper aroused the religious establishment's ire by publishing a series of articles and cartoons critical of the clerics. They were particularly outraged by a piece about Ibn Taymiya, a fourteenth century religious scholar whose works are important in Wahhabi Islam. Hussein Shobokshi, a businessman and columnist, was barred from writing for several months in 2003. He had authored a piece outlining a vision of the country's future in which elections are held, women drive cars and practice law and a Shiite citizen serves as the mayor of Buraydah, the home of Wahhabi conservatism in the Najd heartland.

<sup>113</sup> Insofar as newspapers are privately-owned, they arguably have been under increasing pressure to reflect, albeit with a degree of self-censorship, the social and economic concerns of readers in order to maintain their share in a saturated market.

<sup>114</sup> See *Al Watan*, 4 December 2003; *Okaz*, 16 December 2003, 17 December 2003. On occasion, the attempt to explore the appeal of extremist ideas among Saudi youth has veered into the overtly political. When asked about the causes of extremism, researcher Abdullah ibn Bejad al-Otaibi told *Al Sharq Al Awsat*: "There are many causes...some concern internal politics such as the absence of political participation. Some are external political reasons such as the American policy towards the region...some factors are economic and local such as unemployment. There is also a social factor. We are facing a society that has for three centuries been on the receiving end of an exclusivist and categorical religious discourse, unchallenged by any other discourse, religious or otherwise. This has produced an exclusivist social culture, unable to surmount its problems through dialogue and difference of opinion". Quoted in *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 6 December 2003.

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<sup>107</sup> *Arab News*, 13 September 2002.

<sup>108</sup> ICG telephone interview, London, 24 February 2004.

<sup>109</sup> An editorial in *Al Watan* on 13 May 2004, the day after the bombings, argued that Saudi society had to tackle "an obscurantist brand of thought among us which rejects modernism, equality, tolerance and opening up to the world". On 14 May, *al Madina* wrote that "September 11<sup>th</sup> was a turning point in the history of the United States that enabled Washington to prepare to challenge terrorism. May 12 should become a turning point in our life to discover the real causes of this terror, deal with it and uproot it".

<sup>110</sup> See *Al Watan*, 15 December 2003, 17 December 2003; *Okaz*, 22 December 2003.

## VI. WALKING A FINE LINE: REFORM, RELIGION AND THE PRICE OF STABILITY

The regime's mixed signals -- allowing greater debate, taking cautious steps toward change, cracking down on reformers -- have led to a host of interpretations concerning longer-term intentions. A widespread belief among reformers is that, faced with U.S. demands, the ripple effects of the Iraq war, and growing domestic discontent, the regime felt compelled to engage in cosmetic change but has not made a strategic decision to transform the domestic system:

There is no conviction on the part of the decision makers. They are playing for time, hoping the Americans will get too busy in Iraq. They are hoping to survive using political shenanigans and those self-appointed guardians of Islam, the government's clerics.<sup>115</sup>

Others explain the see-saw quality of the regime's actions and, in particular, the arrests of Saudi reformers in terms of deep-seated divisions within ruling circles over the desirability and speed of change.

More fundamentally, Saudi officials argue that while reform is necessary, it must proceed cautiously so as not to provoke a backlash or, worse, instability. In other words, now is not the time to launch far-reaching changes on all fronts at once and risk antagonising the country's large conservative constituency, which enjoys deep roots within society. Said one official, "my feeling is that reform is taking place at the optimum or even maximum speed....The silent majority...does not find it easy to accept" criticism of conservative religious views.<sup>116</sup> Regardless of the extent to which it is exploited as a pretext to avoid change, this concern needs to be taken seriously as it is held even by many who support reform.

While reformist voices may be those sought out and heard in the West, the vast majority of the population remains attached to religious conservative values. The challenge, therefore, would appear to be to marginalise the more radical, violent forces without

simultaneously alienating the broader conservative constituency. Government officials assert that the limited reforms that have been implemented so far have aroused the suspicion and resistance of many in the religious establishment:

You would be amazed at the opposition of the religious conservatives to the dialogue and to elections. Some sheikhs wrote to say there are no elections in Islam. If the [premise] of religious discourse is that it possesses the truth, then why tinker with perfection. They have asked the Crown Prince to cancel what appears to be a mild form of reform, the dialogue.<sup>117</sup>

To which a *Shura* Council member added, "I don't want achievements to come at the cost of social tensions. When people's feelings are provoked, it could lead to violence. Then the government would turn away from reform [and focus on] security issues".<sup>118</sup>

For a regime whose legitimacy relies to a very large extent on its religious credentials, maintaining the broad assent of the various religious constituencies is of vital importance and helps explain its overall approach. Indeed, national mobilisation and harsh security measures against the violent insurgents have become the highest priority. This almost certainly does not strike the rulers as the ideal moment to implement changes that might detract from those objectives and sow dissension, in particular if they involve openly challenging positions of power or strongly held religious views. As it is engaged in a fight against a violent Islamic movement that accuses it of deviation from the path of Islam, the regime is loathe to threaten its relations with religious forces that both oppose violence and enjoy popular legitimacy, however conservative their views.

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<sup>117</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh 17 December 2004. Even a cursory look at one of the many Islamist websites on which individuals post anonymous contributions reveals the depths of suspicion with which many Saudis view the reform process. Secular writers are vehemently attacked, and the National Dialogue is denounced as dangerous as it could empower Shiites and allow those of a secular bent to corrupt Saudi society. A contributor to the *Al Sawa* (www.alsaha.com) internet forum asked on 19 January 2004, "How can we accept dialogue with those who are secular, Shiites or Sufis? Dialogue should be open to all!?!? Merciful God have mercy on us". Other such comments can be found at www.muslim.org.

<sup>118</sup> ICG interview with Muhammad al Hulwa, Riyadh, 12 December 2003.

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<sup>115</sup> ICG interview with newspaper editor, Jeddah, December 2003.

<sup>116</sup> ICG interview, Riyadh, 9 December 2003.

The role of the *sahwa* is particularly important. Preachers such as al-Hawali and al-Awda garnered a huge following in the 1990s because of their anti-regime critique. Released from detention by the Crown Prince late in that decade, these men -- at one time mentioned admiringly by bin Laden<sup>119</sup> -- have in recent years moved toward the centre. In turn, the regime has reached out to them to help in the struggle against more extremist forces. As an expert in Saudi affairs has noted, the signs of a narrowing of the gap between the regime and these Islamists are highly significant:

This coming together of the Saudi leadership and its former Islamist critics is the most interesting development in Saudi politics since September 11. To some extent it could signal a decline in the credibility of the official *'ulama*, as the regime has seen the necessity of reinforcing the official condemnation of bin Laden with support from religious figures who have credibility in Islamist circles.<sup>120</sup>

That these Islamists -- who typically oppose much of what they would view as "liberal" or Western style reform in social and educational issues -- can play an important role in this respect was evidenced when they publicly opposed the *jihadi* groups mounting attacks within the Kingdom. Al-Hawali and al-Awda were among six religious scholars known for their conservative *salafi* views who on 13 June 2004 issued a strongly-worded, tightly-argued statement, bolstered by numerous references to the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, clearly condemning al-Qaeda's actions, its attacks on both Muslims and non-Muslims, and its rejection of the rulers' authority.<sup>121</sup> It is also significant that Ayed al-Qarni, rather than one of the official clerics, appeared on state television in

late 2003 to interview three well-known extremist preachers whose views have provided religious cover for the *jihadis* and who had been arrested in May for issuing a *fatwa* urging Saudis not to help the authorities seize wanted militants. The three men recanted on camera and explained under al Qarni's questioning how they had erred in declaring the government apostate and supporting the militants.<sup>122</sup> Given the enduring popularity of the *sahwa* preachers, their opposition to the armed militants is an important asset the regime cannot afford to squander.

Keeping such non-violent Islamists on board while pursuing reform can involve delicate and difficult juggling. The interplay between the regime, the informal preachers and reform was well illustrated in the aftermath of the bombing of the Muhaya compound in Riyadh. In November 2003, al-Hawali and three other Islamists offered to mediate between the government and the armed militants, seeking a deal under which they would hand themselves over in exchange for a promise that they would be well treated after arrest. While the offer was rejected, the conditions he put forward for the mediation are indicative: the silencing of liberal writers deemed provocative by the militants, cancellation of all laws not in conformity with *Sharia* and repeal of the decision to take girls' education out of the hands of the religious establishment.

One of the three Islamists who made the offer, Sulaiman al-Doueish, explained:

If those of a secular bent were silenced and stopped from inflaming feelings, it would leave a larger room for manoeuvre between Islamists themselves. Because now any youth could object to a religious scholar [trying to dissuade him from violence] by saying, "How can you ask me to be silent while you let this infidel speak?... We have to silence all opportunistic voices which try to advance their interests at the expense of our religion. We do not need to pour oil on the fire."<sup>123</sup>

Balancing also is required when it comes to two of the most sensitive questions for religious conservatives, namely the status of women and

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<sup>119</sup> Bin Laden had praised al-Hawali several years earlier for "enlightening" Muslim youth. Associated Press, 14 June 2004.

<sup>120</sup> Gregory Gause, "Be Careful What You Wish For", *The World Policy Journal*, Spring 2002.

<sup>121</sup> See Saudi Press Agency, 13 June 2004. They also were among 36 religious scholars who signed a statement in March 2003, on the eve of the U.S. attack against Iraq, calling on the country's youth to avoid *fitna* (internal strife) and any action that risked perturbing the peace of Saudi society. The statement included a specific reminder that Islam prohibited the shedding of both Muslim and non-Muslim blood. See "The Internal Front and the Current Challenge: A Legal Viewpoint", at [www.islamtoday.net](http://www.islamtoday.net). That said, al-Hawali has been erratic in his position, wavering between apparent comprehension for the motives of the *jihadis* and opposition to them.

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<sup>122</sup> See *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 18 November 2003; 23 November 2003.

<sup>123</sup> ICG interview with Sulaiman al-Doueish, Riyadh, 6 December 2003.

education. Concern about how they would react<sup>124</sup> and the perceived need to secure their backing for any reforms on women's issues help explain why conservatives dominated the third National Dialogue session and why its results were so meager. Even in this case, however, the government was willing to implement some change notwithstanding possible conservative disapproval. Less than two weeks prior to the start of the Dialogue, the Council of Ministers issued a decree allowing women to obtain commercial licenses in their own names -- effectively doing away with the need for a male guardian's permission. The decree also instructed government ministries and departments to create jobs for women and asked the Chambers of Commerce and Industry to form a committee made up of women to help train women and find jobs for them in the private sector.<sup>125</sup>

In the education field, the government has sought to purge textbooks of lessons that inculcate hostility toward Christians and Jews, and other revisions purportedly are on the way.<sup>126</sup> But, faced with warning by clerics from both the official and unofficial religious establishments against any dilution of the curriculum's Islamic content and with the accusation that it was bowing to U.S. desiderata, the authorities were at pains to explain that their efforts were self-generated, justified by the need "to respond to the requirements of the age and not as a reaction [to pressures from abroad]".<sup>127</sup> At least seven religious scholars were included in the fourteen-member committee charged with supervising curriculum revisions. Even this apparently did not suffice to reassure 156 outraged religious scholars, principally university professors and judges, who in a joint

statement strongly condemned the changes as "a first step on a long route which has been labelled 'reform' but which would lead to the peak of corruption, if God forbid, its end were to be reached".<sup>128</sup>

The steps on educational and gender issues, while extremely cautious, are not insignificant. They mark a noticeable change from the attitude adopted in the 1980s after militants took over the grand mosque in Mecca and, in the 1990s, following the wave of criticism from the *sahwa* preachers prompted by the stationing of U.S. troops in the Kingdom. In both instances, the government coupled a crackdown against opponents with embrace of their socially conservative agendas and an infusion of funds into religious institutions.<sup>129</sup>

Where the regime has, apparently, drawn the line is in the area of political change. The decision to silence the reformers is symptomatic of a desire to maintain hegemony over the political arena. It appears that the government has no concrete plans for any changes in the political system beyond the local elections. The King's annual speech to the *Shura* Council on 20 June 2004 outlined the steps undertaken the previous year and asserted that the Kingdom would continue on the path of "development and modernisation", but failed to promise any specific changes.<sup>130</sup> The political reform agenda, initially triggered in some degree by the growing threat of extremism, seems to have been at

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<sup>124</sup> A few days before the start of the National Dialogue session on women, some 130 religious scholars issued a joint statement asserting that total equality between men and women would contravene Islam. It went on to note that women should stay in their homes and work outside only if strictly necessary, and then only in "legitimate" jobs. The statement also criticised the three main Saudi dailies, *Okaz*, *Al Watan* and *Al Riyadh* for being "proponents of Westernization" in relation to women. See *Al Quds Arabi*, 9 June 2004.

<sup>125</sup> The decree's full text is in *Al Watan*, 1 June 2004. Notably, these changes all related to women's economic advancement, suggesting that the government is more open to reforms linked to its economic agenda.

<sup>126</sup> Religious education accounts for more than a third of class-time in Saudi schools. Pupils are taught six separate religious subjects as part of the curriculum.

<sup>127</sup> Prince Sultan bin Abd al-Aziz, the defence minister and head of the committee charged with revising and amending curricula quoted in *Okaz*, 5 December 2003.

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<sup>128</sup> Characterising the changes as a "catastrophe", the signatories assailed them as a "submission to the demands of the enemy" and an "attack on the sovereignty of the nation". In their view, the "Zionist rulers of America" had sensed that the Saudis would compromise on their beliefs because the country had accepted concepts such as "the historic friendship" and the "strategic alliance" between the Kingdom and the U.S. After warning that the Jewish and Christian enemies of Islam would not rest until Muslims had given up their religion, the signatories issued what amounted to an implicit threat to the rulers, reminding them that religion is the foundation of the state and the foundation of the people's loyalty to it. If, they argued, loyalty based on religion were to be weakened "it could not be replaced by alternatives such as the spirit of patriotism or the Saudi nationalism currently being pushed by the media and educational establishments". The petition can be found at [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net).

<sup>129</sup> Women disappeared from television, the religious police were given free license to become more aggressive, religious education was expanded and more money was channeled into religious activities aimed at spreading Wahhabism abroad.

<sup>130</sup> The full text of the King's speech can be found in *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 21 June 2004.

least temporarily set aside now that the threat has taken on a violent, terrorist form.

This reaction is short-sighted and, it is hoped, short-lived. That the groups engaged in terrorist violence have little interest in free elections or greater political participation is self-evident. But just as surely, they are able to capitalise on the erosion of the regime's legitimacy in their efforts to recruit new volunteers and evade detection by the security services. Isolating the militants and fully mobilising society against them will require restoring confidence in the Saudi leadership through a combination of short and longer-term measures. These include curbing corruption and the abuse of power, taking steps to enhance financial transparency and involving society in political decision-making through a strengthened *Shura* Council, legalising civic institutions and regularising their status, and displaying greater tolerance for more open debate as a prelude to elections. Greater accountability is also required. This could be achieved by gradually separating the ruling family from the tasks of day-to-day government, appointing more qualified technocrats (and fewer royal family members) to senior executive positions and splitting the functions of King and Prime Minister (as is now the case, after prolonged struggle, in several Gulf countries). Disassociating the cabinet from the ruling family will make it easier for *Shura* Council members and the media to assess the performance of the Prime Minister and government and hold them accountable without fear of offending the royal family

Ultimately, a process of reform that empowers institutions and broadens genuine participation could help channel opposition in a peaceful rather than violent direction. It would also encourage those with more moderate interpretations of religion to air and promote their views. For the most part, Islamist intellectuals and clerics who espouse a more tolerant, progressive Islam are eclipsed and at times intimidated by the more vocal ultra-conservatives.<sup>131</sup> But signs of internal debate and change exist: reformers such as Abdullah al-Hamed and Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim argue against the more puritanical versions of Islam from an Islamist perspective;<sup>132</sup> 35

intellectuals, most of them lecturers in religious universities, signed a statement in early March 2004 calling on "religious leaders and opinion makers" to condemn the bombings in Iraq that killed more than 180 Shiites performing religious rites;<sup>133</sup> al-Awda attended the dialogue despite the presence of Shiites; and *sahwa* clerics have called for greater political accountability and popular participation in decision-making. There also are interesting signs of evolution within the *sahwa* and of its role within Saudi society.<sup>134</sup> Relaxing restrictions on public debate and association might well demonstrate greater public backing for educational and judicial reforms and for women's work-related rights than is generally assumed and, in so doing, intensify it.

Together with economic and educational reforms aimed at training Saudis to meet the demands of the job market, providing greater employment opportunities for women, and moving the country away from the more intolerant aspects of its dominant religious perspective, political reform should form part of a panoply of measures whose benefits will be recognized over time. The alternative -- impeding the political opening in the name of the Islamist threat, continuing to harass critics or failing to include people in the political process -- is likely to feed scepticism about the regime's intentions, undermine its legitimacy, and strengthen the hand of its violent foes.

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<sup>131</sup> Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim told ICG that "there is a sizeable bloc of Islamists in the the Hijaz and in the south who are open-minded". ICG interview, 18 February 2004.

<sup>132</sup> See for example the critique of Saudi school education presented by al-Qasim at the second session of National Dialogue, available at [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net).

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<sup>133</sup> The signatories made clear they were directing their appeal at official religious bodies such as the Council of Senior Religious Scholars and at influential preachers such as Safar al-Hawali and Nasser al-Omar. The statement appeared on 4 March 2004 on the internet magazine [www.elaph.com](http://www.elaph.com).

<sup>134</sup>"In the last ten years, the *sahwa* clerics have faced competition from preachers on satellite television channels. Now there is a multiplicity of views. The *sahwa* current is no longer what it used to be. It no longer has a single reference point. It has split into a number of strands, of which the main one can be described as mobile: it supports neither everything that al-Hawali says nor everything that al-Awda says". ICG interview with Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, Cairo, 18 February 2004.

## VII. THE U.S. ROLE

Pivotal to both countries, the U.S.-Saudi relationship is also becoming increasingly dysfunctional. Of all Arab countries, Saudi Arabia has consistently been America's closest ally. Yet the relationship, based on oil and security interests, has largely been an "elite bargain"<sup>135</sup> between two states whose respective societies share few cultural or political values. The partnership, lacking strong public constituencies in either country, was inherently fragile; shaken by recent events, it is rapidly becoming an embarrassment to both governments.

Dependent on reliable access to energy supplies and on a strategic presence in the Gulf, Washington traditionally steered clear of any criticism of human rights violations or political and religious practices within the Kingdom.<sup>136</sup> Saudi rulers have relied on strong U.S. political and military support, while remaining deeply uneasy about American policies in the region, in particular regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the informal bargain struck between the two, Riyadh has acted as a check on hostile regional powers, stabilised the oil market, and, in the aftermath of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, housed substantial American forces. Washington provided significant military and security assistance, while policy disagreements were papered over for the perceived common good.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> For a discussion of U.S.- Saudi relations see Gregory Gause, "The Approaching Turning Point: The Future of U.S. Relations with the Gulf States," The Brookings Institution, Saban Centre for Middle East Policy, May 2003.

<sup>136</sup> Since 1943, when President Franklin Roosevelt first outlined the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia to American interests, U.S. policy has been guided by the twin objectives of preserving the regime's stability and American access to the country's vast oil reserves (major U.S. oil companies had signed agreements for the exclusive right to extract and export Saudi crude in 1933). Saudi Arabia also began playing a pivotal security role for the U.S. in the Persian Gulf in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979 and the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan that same year.

<sup>137</sup> Driven by strategic interests in Washington and its own security concerns in the 1980s and 1990s, Saudi Arabia spent \$52.4 billion between 1985 and 1992 on military hardware. Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*. (Boulder, 1997), p. 107. Saudi arms purchases, such as of four AWACS aircraft in 1982, often proved controversial, but were "considered vital for protecting Saudi oil fields against Iran and countries in which the

The underlying tensions periodically surfaced -- as during the 1973-1974 oil embargo -- though rarely with the intensity they have acquired in recent years. The escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, coupled with the Bush administration's disengagement and perceived bias toward Israel, led Crown Prince Abdullah to deliver an extraordinary warning to Washington, threatening a reconsideration of bilateral relations.<sup>138</sup> Almost immediately thereafter, the 11 September 2001 attacks raised U.S. concerns about Saudi policies that were seen to promote religious extremism and violence. While the administration refrained from strong public criticism, its private comments as well as those of members of Congress, influential think tanks and the media, led many to speculate about an impending crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations. The tensions inherent in the relationship were again made plain in 2003 when the Saudi government, which had opposed the U.S.-led war in Iraq, provided Washington with military facilities, including use of an airbase from which the air campaign was coordinated. The extent to which the Saudis helped the American war effort has been an open secret despite official denials, and one that undermined the rulers' standing.

As previously discussed, the myriad problems besetting the relationship are having an impact on the American political debate, with Democrats repeatedly seizing on the White House's continued close relationship with the Saudi regime to accuse it of being overly soft in its war against terrorism.<sup>139</sup> But that impact pales in comparison to the devastating domestic effect it is having in Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, arguably no single factor has contributed more to undermining the status of Saudi rulers and strengthening the appeal of their radical opponents than the nature of the bilateral relationship. Saudi militants regularly invoke the wrongs visited on the Palestinian and Iraqi people to justify their actions. The Saudi cell that beheaded an American engineer

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Soviet Union had military presence". Madawi al Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (London, 2002), p. 161.

<sup>138</sup> According to an account in *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2002, Abdullah's letter said that in light of the U.S. alignment with Prime Minister Sharon, "from now on we will protect our national interests, regardless of where American's interests in the region lie".

<sup>139</sup> "America cannot afford to hold its nose and play nice with a country whose actions often speak louder than its words when it comes to fighting terrorism. It's time to put the American-Saudi relationship on a frank and balanced basis". Senator John Kerry, *The Forward*, 12 December 2003.



on 18 June 2004 pointedly called itself the *Al Falluja* Brigade. Likewise, the targeting of Americans in June 2004 was justified on the grounds that they were developing systems for the Apache helicopters that are used against Muslims by their enemies. "This act is to heal the hearts of believers in Palestine, Afghanistan, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula," said a statement by al-Qaeda that accompanied pictures of the severed head of American engineer Paul Johnson.<sup>140</sup>

In fact, resentment of the close partnership with the U.S. extends far beyond the most radical fringe. In common with most Arabs, mainstream Saudi public opinion regards the U.S. as an essentially hostile force, determined to subjugate Arabs and Muslims and to promote Israeli interests at all costs.

The U.S. faces a conundrum. It is hesitant to offend an important ally, yet deeply concerned about a number of its policies, desirous to see it engage in genuine reform, while worried that reform itself could spell instability and bring about a hostile, and far more threatening, regime. So far, the administration has opted for a dose of public and private pressure which, coupled with Riyadh's growing realisation of the threat posed by radical militants, have helped produce some changes. Intelligence cooperation has markedly improved, and Saudi Arabia has moved to clamp down on the funding and overseas activities of its charitable institutions. But the fundamental question of whether and to what extent the U.S. ought to press for political and social reform in the Kingdom remains. Many U.S. analysts believe Washington should press far more strongly for fundamental changes in Saudi policy, in particular toward the conservative religious establishment.

There is reason to doubt, however, how successful such a U.S. approach on issues touching upon culture, education and more broadly the role of Islam could be. Given the intensity of anti-American feeling among Saudis at this time, the pressure would carry a high risk of backfiring, undermining rather than bolstering the momentum for reform. In education specifically, some Saudi efforts are already under way, which would not be helped by the perception that they were a response to U.S. pressure. Nor would visible alignment between Washington and the more liberal minded reformers help. On the eve of the Iraq war, Mohammed al-Mohaisen, a Saudi activist,

commented that Washington's "attempts to appropriate the goals and language of our grassroots efforts has set us back considerably by risking the perception that ours is a movement being imposed from the outside".<sup>141</sup> And an Islamist preacher and businessman close to al-Hawali made clear that "reform should spring from its legitimate base -- the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet, not from the theories and conspiracies of the West".<sup>142</sup>

This does not mean the U.S. must remain silent or passive, but that it should take particular care to avoid overt interference on sensitive matters such as education or religion. Instead, the emphasis should be on matters that have broad echo among Saudis, including Islamists: the need to broaden the political field through institutional reform, to relax restrictions on civil society organisations and political activists, and to respect the human rights of all, including those who have voiced strong anti-American views.

Of course, as with its overall reform efforts in the region, the principal U.S. handicap is the hostility engendered by its policies. Unless and until Washington can address concerns arising out of its occupation of Iraq policy, such as its treatment of Iraqi prisoners and, most importantly, adopt a more engaged and even-handed posture toward the Israeli-Arab conflict that would be widely seen as promoting a fair, peaceful settlement, its other efforts, however commendable, are unlikely to be taken seriously, let alone embraced.

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<sup>140</sup> Reuters, 18 June 2004.

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<sup>141</sup> Mohammed al-Mohaisen, "A Saudi Dissident's Agenda for Democratic Reform", *International Herald Tribune*, 3 March 2003.

<sup>142</sup> ICG interview with Suleiman al Dousih, Riyadh, 6 December 2003.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Political reform clearly is not the only and not even the principal answer to the immediate crisis facing Saudi Arabia. Extremist militants are not motivated by anger at the system's closed nature and are not about to end their attacks should it suddenly open up. Security measures are the first line of defence. But to deal with longer-term challenges and ensure that violent opposition remains marginal, Saudi citizens will need to be given a stake in public affairs through broader and freer political participation. Elements of the reform lobby can serve a pivotal role in defining new terms of governance. They offer a vision that is a non-violent alternative, consistent with Islam and home-grown. For the time being, they also conceive of a future polity at the centre of which the al-Saud stand as a unifying force in a diverse and divided society.

There are strong arguments, given the power and influence of the religious sector and its highly conservative bent, to move the reform process ahead gradually. But movement also needs to be steady, which it currently is not. Talk about and around reform should be replaced by an effort to outline a timetable for implementation of a comprehensive agenda that addresses several core issues: broadening civic and political participation; empowering state institutions; and curbing regime abuses. More concretely, this would entail measures to strengthen the *Majlis al-Shura* and local councils and provide them with appropriate lawmaking powers; loosening restrictions on civil society and political organisations and regularising their status; reforming the judiciary in ways that ensure that all, including the state and royal family, are bound by the same laws; respecting freedoms of expression, association and assembly; providing protection for Muslim minority communities; and taking steps to address the problem of administrative abuse and corruption.

There are serious doubts about whether the Saudi regime and an ageing leadership facing an impending succession are, in fact, capable of formulating the necessary vision, let alone implementing it. The regime, which faces an unprecedented array of social, economic, political, foreign policy and security problems, has typically been guided by conservative instincts. Resistance to steps that will erode its control or power is inevitable, which is why many observers, and not a few Saudi dissidents, are sceptical that the royal

family will be, at least in the short term, the engine of its own modernisation. Instead, they fear that Saudi Arabia's rulers, bolstered by the current high oil prices, may decide to take refuge in a tough security approach, invoke the threat of violence to curb demands for change, and use the reform movement tactically to placate pressures from within and without. Fearful of change and attached to a status quo in which it enjoys unchecked power and enormous privileges, the ruling family may prefer not to embark on a genuine program of change. And yet, implementing political reform and seeking to regain its legitimacy would constitute a far safer course both for it and the country as a whole.

**Cairo/Brussels, 14 July 2004**

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF SAUDI ARABIA



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