

# The Saudi King: Power and Limitation in the Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy Making

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**Abstract**—When reviewing the literature, there is a widely held assumption that in Saudi Arabia, the monarch rules unchecked and is the ultimate foreign policy decision-maker. However, as it argues in this paper, the king is not the sole actor, because, senior members of the royal family are participating in directing the Saudi internal and external policies.

**Index Terms**—Decision making, foreign policy, monarchy, royal family, Saudi Arabia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Security and stability in the Gulf<sup>1</sup> region are essential for the whole world. Purely, because two thirds of world's crude oil reserves are located in the region. Currently, Saudi Arabia, the World largest oil producer, supplies the world with approximately 15% of its oil needs and its share in world supply is increasing. Hence, stability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a world quest. Accordingly, it is essential to identify who participate in formulating the Saudi foreign policy.

When reviewing the literature, there is a widely held assumption that in Saudi Arabia, the monarch rules unchecked and is the ultimate foreign policy decision-maker. However, as it argues in this paper, the king is not the sole actor, because, senior members of the royal family are participating in directing the Saudi internal and external policies.

This paper will firstly, shade some light on the monarchical systems; constitutional, absolute and dynastic monarchies. Secondly, the powers of the Saudi king, which are spelled out in the Saudi Basic Law, well be reviewed. On paper, the Saudi Basic Law seems to portray the regime as an absolute monarchy. Thirdly, the power of the royal family's senior members will be discussed. Despite the monarch's unquestionable position at the helm of the state, it will be, demonstrated that many royal norms actually limit the king's authority. Fourthly, this paper will argue that currently, modern institutions are actively involved in directing the Saudi internal and external policy and it will highlight that senior member of the royal family usually hold main position in these institutions.

The paper will conclude that the main unit of decision

making in the Saudi foreign policy is not a single actor, that is the king, but a number of politically independent actors who take an active and continuous part in the country foreign policy decision making. Hence, Saudi Arabia is better described as a dynastic monarchy.

## II. ABSOLUTE, CONSTITUTIONAL AND DYNASTIC MONARCHIES

The monarchical governments has controlled approximately 85 percent of world population In 1900. This percentage has been even higher. Monarchies were the main type of government. According to Lansford, "A monarchy is a type of tyrannical regime in which all or most political power is concentrated in generally the hands of a single ruler [the King or the Queen]" [1]. The monarch based his or her legitimacy on religion and claimed that he or she was acting in the name of God [2]. Thus the sovereign usually is the head of the state, the commander in chief of the army, the chief executive and all the country's wealth is under his or her control.

Monarchies can be absolute, constitutional and more recently dynastic.

*Absolute monarchy* is the oldest and the most system that govern people in their long history. An absolute monarchy gave the ruler unlimited authority and power [2]. Lansford describes the absolute monarchy as the system that "grant the sovereign almost total control over the state and the populace". He states that "within absolute monarchies, there is no distinction between the ruler and the state; therefore, the resources of the nation are viewed as the personal property of the sovereign" [3].

*Constitutional monarchy* is the current most popular monarchical system. Generally, this type of monarchy has developed from the twelfth century [3]. Thus, the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries have witnessed the emergence of a comprehensive constitutional monarchical system in Europe. At present, there are thirty-nine constitutional monarchies. Constitutional monarchy is "a type of government in which a sovereign can rule under the limits of a constitution. The text of the constitution or its principles limit the sovereign power, and subsequently, government ministers formulate parliamentary acts and assume responsibility for the government" [4].

*Dynastic monarchy* is a term introduced by Herb in his famous book; All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies (1999). Herb claims that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are neither constitutional nor absolute monarchies, but dynastic monarchies. In dynastic

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<sup>1</sup> The U.S. usually adopts the term 'Arabian Peninsula/ Persian Gulf'. In Arabic, it is referred to as the 'Arabian Gulf', whereas internationally it is called 'the Persian Gulf'. To avoid taking sides, the researcher shall call it just the Gulf

monarchies:

*Members of the ruling families monopolize the highest state offices, including the premiership and the portfolios of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense, the ministries known in the Gulf as the wizarat al-siyada, or ministries of sovereignty. The ruling families also distribute members throughout lower positions in the state apparatus, especially in the key ministries [5].*

Several features distinguish the dynastic monarchal system. The dynastic system is not like other monarchal systems in which the succession of the new sovereign is based on "a lottery of birth". Instead, the royal family chooses any qualified candidate as the king. Another characteristic of dynastic monarchies is that the royal family has the power to remove the king, if his policy endangers the dignity or the future of the dynasty or if he crosses a line that might jeopardize the state [6]. An additional pillar of the dynastic monarchal system is consensus. Important decisions in dynastic monarchies are always built on consensus among the senior members of the royal family. Before making such decisions, the king has to discuss them with senior members of the dynasty and he has to listen to all voice [7].

After giving a brief history and explanation of the main monarchal systems, the paper shall try to find out which type of monarchy types best describes the Kingdom of Saudi system.

### III. POWER AND LIMITATION OF THE SAUDI KING

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been ruled by the Al Saud family since the second half of the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup>. There is a near consensus among commentators on Saudi politics that, with the exception of a few successfully contained moments of crisis<sup>3</sup> in the twentieth century, the regime remained resilient and capable of weathering any turbulence caused by domestic opponents or foreign countries. The most crucial issue in the Al Saud family is the question of succession to throne and even this has never led to strife within the royal family. The only exception was in 1964 when King Saud was deposed by the royal family for incompetence and Faisal was chosen as a king [8]. The survival of the Al Saud family over more than two centuries has traditionally been assumed to derive from a combination of traditional dynastic monarchy, economic affluence and an Islamic tradition encouraging compliance to rulers [9]. As bin Sultan and Seale indicate, a key norm in the House of Saud is respect for the king under all circumstances [10]. Among these key factors, the traditional authority in the shape of dynastic monarchy is of crucial importance in the

<sup>2</sup> The first Saudi state was established by Imam Mohammad ibn Saud in 1744. This state had controlled the majority of the Arabian Peninsula until it was removed by the Ottoman Empire in 1818. The Al Saud family rose again and Imam Turki ibn Abdullah established the second Saudi state in 1824. The second Saudi state collapsed in 1891 when it was taken over by Al-Rasheed state. Al Saud rose again in 1902 when King Abd Al-Aziz ibn Abdurrahman captured Riyadh and in 1932, the king announced the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (the current Saudi state).

<sup>3</sup> For instance In the 1960s the regime faced the threat of Nasserite and Ba' thist persuasions, all borrowed from neighbouring Arab countries.

survival of the Al Saud dynasty. To understand dynastic monarchy in Saudi Arabia, the pages to follow offers greater insights.

A common misperception is that Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy. When reviewing the Saudi Basic Law this perception will be even stronger as the Basic Law lists extensive authorities for the king [11]. However, after reviewing the king's main authorities, this paper will proceed to the limitation on these authorities, arguing that Saudi Arabia can be more accurately seen as a dynastic monarchy. Article 5 of the Saudi Basic Law stipulates that "the system of government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is that of a monarchy [and] rule passes to the sons of the founding king, Abd Al-Aziz Bin Abd Al-Rahman Al-Faisal Al Saud, and to their children's children". A formal division of powers into executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government is acknowledged. The king is the ultimate arbiter of all the branches of government; the judiciary is nonetheless an independent authority, whose members are appointed and relieved of their duties by royal decree—based on a proposal by the supreme judiciary council, whose composition and activities are "specified by the law" [12].

Further, the king is the president of the Council of Ministers and appoints his deputies, as well as all ministers and high-ranking civil servants, by royal order, and all ministers and heads of independent authorities are responsible to the prime minister (i.e. the king, in normal circumstances) for their activities [13]. He is the commander-in-chief of all armed forces, appoints and dismisses officers and declares emergencies, mobilisation, and war [14]. He may delegate some of his authority to the Crown Prince and appoint a viceroy when he leaves the Kingdom [15]. Summarising the role of the Saudi king, Al-Awaji notes that:

*All powers rest with the king who is the Chief of State, the Prime Minister, the Commander in Chief of the armed forces... Therefore, all authorities-legislative and executive-are delegated from him, and exercised in his name [16].*

Such an extensive list of powers for the king may give the impression that the Saudi regime is an absolute monarchy. Yet, it can best be described as what Herb calls a dynastic monarchy, a regime in which "the family forms a ruling institution" [17]. In dynastic monarchies, Herb contends, members of the royal family share an interest in maintaining the continued health of the dynasty, and cooperate to keep the monarch in check. The king does not control appointments; instead, family members rise to high office through seniority, and the "King or Emir cannot dismiss his relatives from their posts at will" [18]. He asserts that "the family has the authority to remove the monarch and replace him with another member of the dynasty" [19]. For instance, during the reign of King Saud (1953-1964), the Saudi debt had increased significantly in 1958 because of the king's negligence. His policy also failed to confront Nasserism<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Nasserism was amongst the most powerful political ideologies in the Arab World In the 1950s and 1960s. It is taken from the opinion of Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president (1956-1970) and it combine aspect of Arab socialism, anti-imperialism, republicanism and nationalism.

which caused a split among the Saudi society and endangered the regime survival. This led to his removal by the royal family and he was replaced by King Faisal.

Over the last six decades, the norms that have governed the relations among the Saudi royal family members make the royal family difficult to analyse. Yet, in 2006, in a royal decree, King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz (the current king of Saudi Arabia) announced the establishment of the Allegiance Institution. It comprises fifty three members of the royal family, each representing a branch of the sons of King Abdulaziz ibn Abdurrahman (the founder of the current Saudi State) [20]. The Allegiance Institution Law specifies that members of the Institution have full authority to nominate any one of them and to elect the Crown Prince, the next King of Saudi Arabia [21]. Furthermore, the Allegiance Institution has the power to replace the King and/or the Crown Prince if it finds that they are permanently “not capable of exercising their powers for health reasons” [22]. Another important limitation on the influence of the King is the council, “chaired by the eldest son of King Abdulaziz with the second oldest brother as his deputy” [23]. The net result of the Allegiance Institution is that each member of the fifty three royal branches is eligible to be the future King. These mentioned elements of the Allegiance Institution which control the relation among the member of the Al Saud dynasty, makes the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia an ideal example of a dynastic monarchy.

The Saudi foreign policy decision making rests primarily in a number of politically independent decision makers within the inner circle of the royal family. There are several informal norms that encourage these key actors to resolve disagreements over key foreign policy decisions and reach a solution. In this context the king plays the crucial role as broker<sup>5</sup> among different royal factions and whose views are widely respected by the all members of the royal family [24]. In an interview, the author asked who participate in formulating Saudi internal and external policy? Dr Madani<sup>6</sup>, the current Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, replied:

*The King always consults with the Crown Prince, the deputy Crown Prince and other senior members of the royal family when performing internal and external policies. The King also consults various bodies before making decision. The Ministry of the foreign affairs, Defence Ministry, Ministry of internal affairs, the National Security Council the Saudi Intelligence and Majlis Ash Shura (the Saudi Parliament) all play an important role in providing the King and his deputies with the necessary studies, advice and suggestions. In addition, the King has a privet consultants, wither they are religious scholars, economists, politicians, militaries and other experts. Saudi Arabia has a unique*

<sup>5</sup> In politics, a broker is a respected figure who mediate between different factions to reach consensus without taking side with any group. In the Saudi case, the king usually act as broker to mediate between the royal family member. Nasserism was amongst the most powerful political ideologies in the Arab World In the 1950s and 1960s. It is taken from the opinion of Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president (1956-1970) and it combine aspect of Arab socialism, anti-imperialism, republicanism and nationalism.

<sup>6</sup> Nizar Bin Obaid Madani, the current Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, interview by author, Riyadh, March 4, 2009.

*system which allow the government to study and analyzes all suggestions, views and advise, and when the government make its decision, the whole country work together as one unite to achieve its goals.*

Similarly, Alasker<sup>7</sup>, the chairman of the foreign affairs committee at *Majlis Ash Shura* argues that the Saudi king always consults with senior members of the royal family before making any crucial decision.

In the Saudi system, a distinction is evident between the inner circle of the royal family, the senior princes and outsiders, including the junior princes, religious scholars, tribal notables, merchants and technocrats. This has given rise to monitoring and to a system of checks and balances operated by the power centres within the royal family which limits the King's power [25]. Further, with the recent professionalisation of the policy making processes in Saudi Arabia, key members of the royal family rely on outside advisors to formulate key public policies. Alasker also, emphasis that the government always considers the opinion of the elite, whether it appears on television or in the newspaper. This helps the government to draw a full picture of its policy. In addition to this labyrinth of checks and balances from these interest groups, the king is accountable to the people as a result of unwritten rules and traditions grounded in Islamic teaching and tribal traditions, and the public has the right to petition such officials directly. For this reason the Saudi government has gained considerable popular “legitimacy” [26]. In this sense Saudi Arabia is neither an absolute monarchy, nor a constitutional one, but can be best seen as a dynastic monarchy. Weeks argues that, as with democracy, dynastic monarchies are more susceptible to domestic consequences if their foreign policies fail or become shrouded in bluffing [27]. The implication of this political system is that Saudi foreign policy decision makers are not allowed to make decisions or cross lines that endanger the prestige or authority of the dynasty; otherwise they are faced with opposition from multiple sources of power.

Some outsiders assume that Saudi Arabia is modelled on the original state apparatus of the seventh century, in which state institutions are poorly developed and the most important institution is the royal court. Yet, an important fact about the current Saudi State is that the number of modern institutions involved in the administration of the country has multiplied over the last four decades. Selvik and Stenslie illustrate that “the most striking consequence of the oil revenues is that [Saudi Arabia has] developed modern state system” [28]. They continue to argue that “wealth has made it possible to jump from the early Middle Ages to a hyper-modern era in the lifetime of a couple of generations” [29]. Al-Showra<sup>8</sup> stressed in an interview with the author that “Saudi Arabia is ruled by many actors and institutions and cannot be regard as a country of the sole leader; this in turn has given balance and stability to the Saudi internal and external policy”. Al-Showra also emphasise that:

<sup>7</sup> Abdullah Alasker, currently a member of the Saudi *Majlis Ash Shura* and he is the Chairman of *Majlis Ash Shura's* Foreign Affairs Committee, interview by author, Riyadh, May 3, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Ismail Al-Showra (A retired official which he was during the 1980s and the early 1990s the Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry of Saudi Arabia), interview by author, Riyadh, March 3, 2009.

*Saudi Arabia is now an institutionalized state ... [as] many formal bodies that direct internal and external affairs, like the cabinet, the Majlis Ash Shora (The Saudi Parliament), the National Security Council, the Saudi Intelligence and the Council of Senior Scholars [the religious scholars] are now intact.*

The institutionalisation of the Saudi state, however, did not result in the marginalisation or even removal of the royal family from power. In practice, the king retains vast powers, and key governmental posts remain the preserve of senior members of the royal family. The positions they hold in state institutions are in many ways associated with their standing within the family. As Halliday contends, "Saudi Arabia is an obvious case – where the boundary lies between the policy of Saudi ministries and the initiative of individual princes and businessmen is difficult to assess" [30].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On paper, the Saudi Basic Law seems to portray the regime as an absolute monarchy. However, despite the monarch's unquestionable position at the helm of an autocratic state, this paper demonstrates that many royal norms actually limit the king's authority, so hence Saudi Arabia is better described as a dynastic monarchy. It follows from this conceptualisation of the Saudi regime that – as widely misperceived – the main unit of decision making in foreign policy is not a single actor, that is the king, but a number of politically independent actors who take an active and continuous part in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decision making.

Given the above explanations, it is clear that the Kingdom is a stable country because it has survived several crises in the last couple of centuries. It is plausible to conclude that Saudi Arabia, as a mature and established dynastic monarchy, is less likely to act irrationally and pursue conflict-ridden foreign policies as this would endanger the regime survival.

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