
THE SAUDI ARABIAN PROSPECTIVE CASE

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a final illustration of the use of the “process” model for anticipating prospectively the incidence of ethnic conflict by applying it to the potential case of the emergence of ethnically based violence in Saudi Arabia. Similar in structure to the Ethiopian case presented in the previous chapter, this case affords an opportunity to use the model to examine the potential grievances the Shi’a might have against the Saudi state structures dominated by the Saudi monarchy and the likely path that a mobilization of the Shi’a might take. The chapter examines the case of Saudi Arabia from the perspective of what an intelligence analyst might conclude about the propensity of Saudi Arabia toward ethnic violence were she to use the “process” model. Data available as of 1997–1998 were used to conduct this analysis.

Just as in the case of Ethiopia, the choice of Saudi Arabia as a case study to apply the model is meant in no way to suggest that Saudi Arabia is somehow predetermined to slide into ethnic tensions or strife. The choice was made on the basis of geographical diversity (as other case studies examine different regions of the world) and the country’s regional importance.

Analysts familiar with Saudi Arabia may find this an unusual choice for modeling potential ethnic conflict, in view of the dominant perception of ethnic homogeneity among Saudi Arabians. Nevertheless, the Saudi Shi’a do fit our definition of an ethnic group. The Shi’a are a distinct group within the larger milieu of the Arab and monolingual population of Saudi Arabia. As defined in Chapter Two,

ethnicity refers to the idea of shared group affinity and a sense of belonging that is based on a myth of collective ancestry and a notion of distinctiveness. The group in question must be larger than a kinship group, but the myth-engendered sense of belonging to the group stems from constructed bonds that have similarities to kinship The constructed bonds of ethnicity may stem from any number of distinguishing cultural or physical characteristics, such as common language, religion, or regional differentiation.

The common “marker” in the case of the Shi’a is religion, and on that basis the Shi’a have been stigmatized socially (by the monarchy and much of the Sunni population of Saudi Arabia) and systematically excluded from Saudi Arabia’s political system. The Shi’a inhabit a geographically compact region of Saudi Arabia, and, based on the ascriptive understanding of religious affiliation and ethnicity that is dominant in the region, they have a myth of separate ancestry. In addition, evidence points to ongoing attempts to mobilize the Saudi Shi’a on a group basis.

As in any society, there are numerous other substate groups inhabiting Saudi Arabia, differentiated primarily on regional, tribal, and clan bases. Those groups may be important for intelligence analysts focusing on the potential for political conflict in Saudi Arabia. But it would be a stretch to consider them “ethnic” groups by our definition. The tribal and regional groups tend to be based on kinship groups (and have a distinct sense of common ancestry) and they may have elements of regional differentiation. But their sense of distinctiveness is not yet pronounced enough to warrant their treatment as ethnic groups to the same extent as the Shi’a.

As with the Ethiopian case, the authors emphasize that the model, at this point of its development, is intended to be more suggestive than predictive. Neither the choice of the Shi’a nor the potential outcomes examined should be taken to imply that the group will mobilize against the monarchy or that Saudi Arabia is somehow predetermined to slide into strife.

Organized in a fashion similar to that of the previous three chapters, four sections follow this introduction. The first section examines the structure of closure and provides an analysis of which ethnic groups appear to be privileged and which seem underrepresented in structures of power (the demographic characteristics of Saudi Arabia in

1997–1998, on which the analysis is based, are appended at the end of the chapter). Then it examines the strengths and weaknesses of the challenging group—the Shi'a—looking at its potential mobilization process. A brief discussion of secondary scenarios follows. The second section looks at the capabilities the state—Saudi Arabia—might bring to bear in dealing with the challenging groups. The third section examines the strategic choices, arrived at on the basis of the assessments in earlier sections, that the state and the group are likely to pursue vis-à-vis each other, given their resource base. Finally, a few observations conclude the chapter.

ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL FOR STRIFE

Closure in the Political and Security Realms

In terms of closure in the political realm, the current political system in Saudi Arabia dates to the conquest of much of the Arabian peninsula in the 1920s and the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 by Ibn Sa'ud (of the House of Sa'ud), whose main power base was in the Najd (central portion of the kingdom). All subsequent rulers have been the sons of Ibn Sa'ud, and the kingdom remains an absolute monarchy. The royal family dominates all political life in the country to an extent that has few parallels in the contemporary world. Rule by the royal family remains personalized and idiosyncratic rather than formalized in any substantive sense. Informal customs and judgments that assess the level of "trust" and loyalty toward the regime on tribal and regional bases form the dominant criteria for closure in the political realm. The royal family has a tight hold on all top positions of power. Individuals associated with the tribes from central Najd are seen as most loyal.

The highest-ranking political authorities in Saudi Arabia belong to the royal family of Al-Sa'ud, which has virtually absolute power within the kingdom.¹ The royal family (now numbering over 5,000 males) permeates all areas of government of any sensitivity and ensures that other posts are manned by loyalists. King Fahd is the head

¹Indeed, the name of the kingdom stems from the name of the royal family. For this reason, dissidents and opponents of the Saudi family often refuse to use the designation "Saudi" for the country, referring to it only as "Arabia."

of state (he acceded to the throne in 1982). His designated successor is the Crown Prince (the king's half-brother). The king is also the prime minister. The top individuals in the Council of Ministers are all part of the royal family, all of the same paternal line, and many are of the same specific maternal lineage. Skilled technocrats not of royal family background occupy the key "technical" ministries: finance and national economy, petroleum and mineral resources, planning, industry and electricity. They are appointed by the king and serve entirely at the pleasure of the royal family. The "technical" ministers change frequently (sweeping changes took place in 1995). This is in contrast to the royal family ministers, who rarely change. Recent cabinet changes have further strengthened the hand of the Sudayri clan which dominates the royal family. See Table 6.1.

Stemming from royal decrees issued in 1992, a Consultative Council (Majlis al-Shura) was set up in December 1993. The king appoints its 90 (initially 60) members.² The council has an advisory function and can be dismissed at will. Its members are generally distinguished and well-educated members of Saudi society.³ Further evolution of the Majlis is worth monitoring, though the body is unlikely to be allowed to challenge government policy except in the most technical of realms. A few interesting exceptions aside, the king has

Table 6.1
Top Saudi Arabian Political Officials

Position	Name	Royalty
Prime Minister	King Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud
First Deputy Prime Minister, National Guard Commander	(Crown) Prince Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud
Second Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defense	Prince Sultan ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud

²See also "Saudi Arabia Expanding Membership in Its Consultative Council by One-Third," in *Mideast Mirror*, July 3, 1997.

³See profile of government officials and council members, available from Saudi government Internet sources, <http://www.saudinf.com>.

avoided the appointment to the council of independent-minded individuals who might criticize the regime.⁴

Saudi Arabia has no judicial branch of government. It has a body of religious scholars (the 18-member Council of Ulema) who offer judgment on the Islamic legitimacy of policy, based on Islamic law. Many decades ago the Ulema spoke out (privately) with some independence on issues directly related to religious policies, but over the years it has become more generally subservient to the king in all matters. It still may express private concerns to the king on certain issues. The members of the judiciary are traditionally from the Al al-Shaykh family, which has historically been intimately linked—including via intermarriage—to the ruling al-Sa'uds, thereby providing the ideological/religious foundation to the al-Sa'uds' secular rule. The current minister of justice is a member of the Ulema.

Saudi Arabia's provinces have no independent executive (only administrative) authority. Almost all governors of the provinces are members of the royal family. Particularly prominent is Prince Salman, a full brother to the king, who is governor of Riyadh and a major figure within the ruling family.

Little systematic information is available about director-level state employees. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, over time, these positions have been filled with technocrats, often with good foreign education credentials, but selection also seems to depend on loyalty to the regime.

In terms of closure in the security realm, the royal family controls all of the top security positions. The king is the ultimate authority in Saudi Arabia and is the commander in chief of the armed forces as well as the top boss for all state bodies. The main security organizations are the armed forces, the National Guard, the intelligence organizations, and the police. Ministerial-rank personnel head these organizations. The National Guard represents the country's premier "security" organization. It provides the bulwark of protection to the regime, in that it deliberately constitutes a balancing force against

⁴See "Islamists Sympathetic to Dissident Sheikhs Named to Saudi Shoura Council," *Mideast Mirror*, July 8, 1997.

the regular armed forces. Unlike the military, the National Guard is stationed in the major cities and is positioned to block any antiregime action by the regular military.

Close relatives of the king are the highest-ranking individuals in charge of the specific bodies that deal with internal and external security. See Table 6.2. At the director level, the officer corps of the Saudi armed forces appears to be drawn almost exclusively from the royal family and those close to it. The National Guard is even more tightly controlled by the royal family. Its members are drawn from loyal tribes from the Najdi heartland, all carefully balanced off against one another. All of the operations and intelligence directorates are headed by junior members of the royal family (who bypass the chain of command to go directly to the minister of defense on operational decisions).⁵ Less is known about the police. Apparently, many officers are drawn from tribes loyal to the royal family, primarily in the Najd. However, it is difficult to generalize, as some foreign nationals are employed as officers.

Assessment of closure in the political and security realms. Closure in Saudi Arabia is based, first of all, on ties to the royal family, and then on tribal and regional bases (because of assumptions about their loyalty). The royal family dominates in an absolute sense the

Table 6.2
Top Saudi Arabian Security Officials

Position	Name	Royalty
Commander-in-Chief National Guard	King Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud (Crown) Prince Abdullah ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud House of Sa'ud
Commander		
Minister of Defense	Prince Sultan ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Prince Sa'ud al-Faisal as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud
Minister of Interior	Prince Nayef ibn Abd al-Aziz as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud
Director of Foreign Intelligence	Prince Turki Bin Faisal as-Sa'ud	House of Sa'ud

⁵Said K. Aburish, *The House of Saud*, New York: St. Martins Griffin, 1996, p. 190.

upper levels of political leadership. Other Najdis and technocrats (of various tribal affiliations but all of known loyalty) also occupy ministerial and high-level posts. However, there is a qualitative difference in the level of power they have, as belonging to the royal family *de facto* carries far more weight than having a specific position (due to informal but dominant ways of going around formal channels of authority). The Hijaz region is represented in the government far less than the Najd. The Shi'a seem almost completely left out of the leadership levels.

Similarly, the royal family dominates completely at the highest levels of security. Reliable information on the tribal and regional composition of the middle and upper ranks of Saudi security organizations is not readily available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the most trustworthy from the royal family and Najdi loyalists predominate.

Are there provisions for dynamic change within the Saudi Arabian political system presented above? Although there are no formal restrictions to positions of political influence, that means little in a state where formal legal issues carry little weight and informal but widely understood customs predominate. Informal restrictions are high. Instinctive "trust" in general terms seems to reside more on a regional/tribal basis than it does at the ideological level; for example, even outspoken Najdis may be seen as inherently more trustworthy and committed to the regime than possibly "loyalist" Hijazis. It is impossible to verify the accuracy of such beliefs (that is, the extent to which Najdis really are loyal to the regime). With increasing modernization, the accuracy of the association of automatic loyalty along a regional/tribal basis may be decreasing.

A formal process of change of the elites at the highest levels is lacking, and a broad range of restrictions acts to maintain the status quo. The monarchy shows no intention of relinquishing power or even allowing for the possibility. There are no elections, hence no voting rights. There is no formal process or mechanism for legitimization of political elites except at the wish of the royal family. Political office may be held only by royal appointment. Suppression—often brutal—of overt dissent is a part of the governing process. Political institutions in the formal sense remain in their infancy. Power is not institutionalized and remains idiosyncratic. The king has stated

publicly and often that democracy is not an “appropriate” form of government for Saudi Arabia.

The recently established Consultative Council represents virtually the only possible instrument of peaceful change, but the body has a long way to evolve to achieve such a role, as its members are appointed by the king. Further, the body can be dissolved at will by the king. In legal terms, the idea of a legislative body contradicts the religious tenets of Wahhabi Islam (and other conservative interpretations), in which man-made legislation is seen in contravention of “God’s law,” or Shari’a law. Thus even a proposal to create a legislative body would be dangerous to the regime’s legitimacy. Alternatively, the regime could move to permit election of members to provincial consultative councils, but such a move would establish a dangerous precedent and is unlikely.

If anything, the trends over the past few decades have made peaceful change more difficult. In the pre-King Fahd days, the government was smaller and the massive oil revenues had just started. Although the royal family dominated at the top, it was in a close alliance with the religious establishment, and it engaged in tribal alliances as well as with the military and the merchant, professional, and business classes.⁶ That dynamic is no longer in place, as the religious class is uncomfortable with the corruption and self-indulgent lifestyles of the royals. Diminishing oil revenues and a growing royal family have damaged ties with the merchant and business classes because of the royal family’s efforts to skim off percentages of all business deals. In addition, there is a greater scramble for top jobs from better-educated royals, squeezing the traditional professional class.

The distinctions based on presumed trust and assumed loyalty toward the royal family affect the Shi’a the most, though other groups (tribal/regional distinctions) also face these barriers to a varying extent. According to Shi’ite activists, Shi’a are denied access to the following positions: government minister, deputy minister, judge, officer in the army, navy, or air force, secret police, public company director, newspaper editor, education superintendent, border customs, and any position in the following ministries: royal

⁶See “Forecasts,” *The Monthly Monitor of Trends and Developments in the Muslim World*, London, June 1995, pp. 2–3.

palace, the National Guard, Foreign Ministry, Justice Ministry, Hajj (Pilgrimage) Ministry, and Ministry of Islamic Affairs.⁷ There are rare exceptions: two Shi'a attained a senior government position (though none at the cabinet level). Two of 90 members of the enlarged Consultative Council are Shi'a.

Closure in the Economic Realm

There is little reliable data available on the economic sector in Saudi Arabia, and data at the subnational level are especially difficult to find. Petroleum and natural gas extraction (and associated industries) are the primary areas of economic activity, accounting for 40–45 percent of the gross domestic product and generating almost all (about 90 percent) of the kingdom's export income. Data on employment patterns are not available (and estimates are difficult because of the employment of many nonnationals in the industry and services), though the economically active population is approximately 6 million (with estimates of the share of agriculture at 1 million). The general pattern that seems readily evident is that income distribution is skewed substantially, with the royal family in a class by itself and then the rest of the population.

At the elite level, the royal family is clearly advantaged in its access to income-generating institutions. According to an opposition estimate, an ordinary prince with ten children and two wives (not unusual) received \$260,000 a month, while top princes with senior positions in the government had income as much as \$100 million per year.⁸ Because of their access to levers of government and means of regulation, informal or formal payments to royal family members throughout the government are the norm. For example, anecdotal data suggest that members of the royal family increasingly tend to play a role in the commercial life of the kingdom as "silent partners," demanding a cut of most business deals (especially foreign) as "facilitation fees."⁹ Moreover, access to wealth by nonroyals is pos-

⁷Based on author Fuller's interviews with Shi'a in exile, 1997.

⁸Aburish, p. 68.

⁹For more detailed information on the privileges of the royal family and its pervasive interference in business life, see Charles J. Hanley, "House of Saud," May 3, 1997, Associated Press.

sible only through royal largesse. The current situation is in contrast to the state of affairs in the 1950s, when wealthy Hijazi merchants helped bankroll the royal family as partial partners in the national undertaking.

Although explicit data on wealth distribution at the general population level are not available, the falling price of oil since the 1980s has led to a drastic decline in real per-capita income (from \$14,000 a year to \$4,000 since 1982, by one estimate).¹⁰ World Bank estimates that during 1985–1995, GNP per capita declined in real terms, at an average rate of 1.9 percent (while population increased by an annual average of 4.3 percent in the same period). The drop has affected all areas of the kingdom, though not necessarily to the same extent. Investment patterns favor the Najd and the petrochemical industry in the Eastern Province (the Shi'a region), since the latter is the key oil-producing region. While industry in the Eastern Province has some beneficial effects on the local economy, employment patterns do not favor the Shi'a. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Shi'a as a group have the lowest standard of living in the country.

Assessment of closure in the economic realm. The dearth of reliable data makes conclusions difficult. However, it is clear that a huge gap in income exists between the small elite, composed primarily of the royal family, and the rest of the population. The income gap appears to be growing, with the elite becoming even more rich while the general population is competing more intensely for a share of an increasingly smaller pie (due to population growth and stagnant oil revenues). Despite the trend, Saudi nationals continue to have a standard of living far higher than citizens of non-oil-rich countries in the region. The provision of substantial social services, cheap housing, and subsidized energy and water costs also acts to prevent the creation of a true dispossessed class.

Does a mechanism exist for changing the static system of wealth distribution described above? Restrictions on access to wealth are primarily informal (but dominant), as substantial income accumulation and economic activity are at the discretion of the royal family. An informal but clear ceiling exists on income accumulation for non-

¹⁰James Adams, "Americans Face Rerun of Iran as Saudi Wobbles," *London Times*, July 28, 1996.

royals. The root cause of the situation is the political structure of the country. As long as the Sa'ud remain in power, the state of affairs is likely to persist.

The patterns of assumed loyalty to the royal family among the tribes and regions are a major determinant of access to wealth. Individuals from the Najd tend to be favored. Conversely, access is most difficult for the Shi'a because their loyalty is presumed suspect. While completely informal, these restrictions are ever present.

Closure in the Social Realm

Status distinctions in Saudi Arabia are prominent and crucial to the standing and opportunities open to an individual in the kingdom. As befitting a monarchy, status is arranged in concentric circles, based on proximity and loyalty to the royal family. Not based on any clear ethnic criteria, status is a mixture of religious, tribal, regional, and economic factors. A status stratification map for Saudi Arabia might appear as in Table 6.3.

The royal family has absolute preeminence in the social hierarchy in the kingdom, followed immediately by the religious establishment. The royal family and the Muslim clerics co-exist in a symbiotic relationship, dating back to the close identification between the House of Sa'ud and the Wahhabi movement since the latter's beginnings in the 18th century. The core source of the royal family's high status is the simple fact that the House of Sa'ud conquered most of the

Table 6.3
Status Stratification

Group	Status
Royal family	++
Clerical class	++
Najdi tribes	+
Other regions/tribes	-
Shi'a	--

+ + = high status; - - = low status
(compiled on the basis of data presented earlier).

Arabian peninsula, established the kingdom, and now treats it *de facto* as if it were a personal possession. Because of the location of Islam's holiest shrines in the kingdom, religion is a central factor in its identity. The Sunni (Wahhabi sect) clerics are dependent on the royal family for their own high position in the kingdom and in the Muslim world. Other religious schools of Islam are not recognized in the kingdom in practice, and their clerics have no standing, if any legal existence at all. The clerical class is drawn strictly from key Najdi tribes, but especially from the Al al-Shaykh family, who have long represented the ideological/religious support to the royal family. In turn, the Wahhabi interpretation of the Islamic law is upheld by the kingdom's state apparatus (justice and court system).

Social status for every other group stems from its historically determined loyalty and identity with the House of Sa'ud. The various tribes in the Najd have been associated with the House of Sa'ud the longest and participated in the original alliance put together by Ibn Sa'ud that conquered most of Arabia. Traditionally, nearly all Najdis are followers of the Wahhabi sect of Islam.

Groups from other regions (such as Hijaz or Asir) rank below the Najdis, because they were associated with other sects of Sunni Islam and were conquered relatively recently; there are also longstanding rivalries between some of them and the House of Sa'ud. The Hijazis are not considered to be "pure Arabs" in the way the Najdis are. However, the Hijazis have considerable economic and commercial clout; Jeddah had been the commercial capital of the kingdom and has only recently been rivaled or surpassed by Najdi economic and commercial power and the rise of Riyadh.

The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia are unquestionably at the lowest end of the social order. Their religious sect is officially described by some Wahhabi clerics as apostasy (*rida* or *kufir*) and condemned as non-Islamic (*takfir*), which is (theoretically) even punishable by death. Shi'a exile groups claim they are not allowed to teach or study their faith, and have been prohibited from building Shi'ite mosques and community halls for nearly 70 years.

What are the implications of this status distribution? Status is an informal but powerful determinant of access to political and economic power. There is a whole range of subtle biases and assumptions

about the proper social place of individuals, based on their group affinity. In the case of the Shi'a, the biases and assumptions amount to exclusion from many career paths. In any event, Shi'a access to advancement is limited to the private sphere (since there is little prospect of selection and/or advancement in the public sector), and even then it is primarily within their own region (the Eastern Province). Shi'a are excluded from at least 50 percent of Saudi universities and research institutes, and Shi'ite testimony is not permitted in court. Shi'ite shrines have been destroyed by Sunni activists in the past. Shi'a activists claim that even certain Shi'ite given names are prohibited.¹¹

The other groups are also a target of the clerics, but not nearly to the same extent as the Shi'a. For example, the Hijazis are deprived of practicing officially their own brand of orthodox Islam (the Hanafi school) with their own clerics, but in practice the constraints are less harsh. Because of their low status and implicit concerns about their loyalty to the monarchy, the Shi'a tend to be seen as more loyal to Iran (the Shi'ite intellectual center) and treated as likely traitors by the rest of the Saudi society.¹² For example, after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and Saudi concerns that the Shi'a in the kingdom could be a fifth column, Shi'ites were systematically eased out of nearly all significant positions in the oil industry in the Eastern Province.

Is there a mechanism for change within the Saudi Arabian social stratification system? Status is ascriptive in that it is acquired primarily by birth and little movement is possible between status groups. The only exception is that connections to the royal family or certain privileged merchant groups can affect status. In this sense, some change of status is possible by way of succeeding at the professional level and/or showing loyalty to the regime. Nearly all restrictions are informal, in some ways making them more difficult to change (because they are hard to pinpoint). There is little interaction between groups, as one's social circle is narrow, discrete, and primarily limited to the extended family.

¹¹Based on statements made to author Fuller by several Shi'a leaders in exile.

¹²Based on statements made to author Fuller by several Shi'a leaders in exile.

Overall Assessment of Closure

Based on the information presented above, Table 6.4 summarizes the degree of closure (in an overall sense as well as in the political, economic, and social realms) experienced by Saudi Arabia's main ethnic groups. To reiterate, closure in Weberian terms refers to the "process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group." In the table, a group experiencing a "low" degree of closure has the most opportunities open to it. A group experiencing a "high" degree of closure has opportunities largely closed off.

The royal family is clearly privileged in all respects, to an extent seldom seen in the contemporary world. The clerics occupy a privileged position in the kingdom as the interpreters of God's law. The Najdi tribes (with some differences among them) are the main loyalists of the regime, and they show a pattern of privilege. The fact that all three groups face a low degree of closure does not mean that they are equal. The royal family is so far above the rest of the society that it does not really belong on a scale with them; it is included here only for reasons of completeness.

The non-Najdi tribes and regions differ in status among themselves, but in relation to the privileged Najdi groups, all of them experience a moderate degree of closure in the kingdom's social and political life. Among them, the Hijazis probably face the fewest obstacles at the economic level. The Shi'a face a consistent pattern of deprivation and experience a substantial degree of closure, especially in the

Table 6.4
Patterns of Closure by Group Affinity in Saudi Arabia

	Political	Economic	Social	Overall
Royal family	Low	Low	Low	Low
Religious elite	Low	Low	Low	Low
Najdis	Low	Low	Low	Low
Hijazis	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate
Asiri Yemenis	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Shi'ites	High	High	High	High

kingdom's political and social life. However, the kingdom's oil revenues have led to relatively generous social welfare policies, limiting the outward differences stemming from the various levels of privilege and deprivation.

The informal nature of the rules that uphold the social standing of groups in the kingdom, the absolute, personalized, and kinship-based system of governance, and norms of a traditionalist Islamic society all combine to make for a rigid stratification pattern. As long as the monarchy retains its current hold on power, there is little indication that the existing patterns of stratification will undergo any change.

A final ranking of groups along the lines of privileged to dominated—in relative terms—is in Table 6.5. The specific placement of ethnic groups on the privileged-dominated scale is not evenly spaced. The royal family is vastly above the other groups. The religious elite is also in a special position, *de facto* as a junior partner for the royal family in ruling the kingdom. The main regional/tribal divisions range from the privileged Najdis to the clearly dominated Shi'ites.

Table 6.5

Ranking of Groups in Saudi Arabia

Privileged	Royal family
	Religious elite
	Najdis
	Hijazis
↓	Asiri Yemenis
Dominated	Shi'ites

TRANSFORMING POTENTIAL STRIFE INTO LIKELY STRIFE

As a prospective case study, this section focuses on the process of potential mobilization of one of the main groups against the state. The primary focus is on the Shi'a, and that mobilization process is sketched out in full. That is followed by a brief discussion of some other non-Shi'a-centered scenarios.

PRIMARY SCENARIO: SHI'ITE MOBILIZATION

The Shi'ites face the greatest level of discrimination and deprivation in Saudi Arabia on a group basis. Out of all the Saudi substate groups, the Shi'a also come closest to being an "ethnic group" in the usual sense of the term: the Shi'ites are a distinct group, having their own customs and inhabiting a compact area of the kingdom, with religious affiliation being the main "marker" differentiating them from the rest of the Saudi society. The irony of the Shi'ite situation is that even though they inhabit the primary oil-producing region of Saudi Arabia (the largest petroleum producer in the world), the other regions of the kingdom see the effect of revenues from the oil industry. In other words, the Shi'ites sit on top of the greatest oil reserves in the world, but not only do they see relatively few benefits from it, they are condemned by the Saudi clerical elite as "apostates" or "non-Muslims" and shunned and treated as likely traitors by the rest of the Saudi society. The mixture contains the potential for a rebellion. Indeed, during the past two decades, numerous acts of open dissent and violence (riots and terrorist bombings) by Shi'ite activists have taken place. The scenario presented below sketches the potential path of Shi'ite mobilization leading to a full-blown challenge to the monarchy.

Incipient Changes

The combination of longer-term demographic and economics trends may prove troublesome for the kingdom. Oil prices fluctuate substantially from year to year, but trends in place point to low or moderate prices for oil. New oil discoveries, the opening up of new areas to oil production, and advances in technology mean that, in the absence of OPEC regaining its 1970s-era effectiveness as a cartel, the world supply of oil remains sufficient to meet gradually increasing demand. However, a low or moderate price of oil means a constraint on Saudi Arabia's economic growth (because of the country's reliance on oil for revenues). On the other hand, the natural increase of the population in Saudi Arabia remains high (estimated by the CIA at 3.42 percent in 1997) and, given the traditionalist Islamic outlooks, it is likely to continue at levels well above 3 percent. The two trends are problematic in the long term, in the sense that they are bound to accentuate the competition for economic resources within Saudi

Arabia. Given the kingdom's social structure and the ever-growing size and appetites of the royal family, the equation boils down to a sharpening of competition among Saudi nationals for a share of a pie that is shrinking or at least increasing at a slower pace. In such a situation, the disadvantaged groups, most of all the Shi'a, will be increasingly squeezed out and face declining standards of living in an absolute and probably in a relative sense to other groups. Complicating the problem further, continuing investments in the petroleum-extraction industry mean economic activity in the primary Shi'a area, with its attendant pollution problems but without the material benefits accruing to the Shi'a. The trends put in place a source of concern among the Shi'a concerning the further deterioration of their social and political position in the country.

Environmental problems constitute another potential problem. The monarchy's favoritism toward the Najdis means that heavily subsidized agriculture (wheat, at many times the international market price) has flourished in the Arabian desert, rapidly depleting the water table in the Najd. Consequently, there may be pressure to divert water resources from the Eastern Province (the best farming region in the kingdom) to the Najd or even to push the Shi'a from their farms. Either of the two developments would sharpen the competition between the Shi'a and the Najdis.

In terms of sudden (or at least less-expected) changes, the primary economic shock might consist of a sudden and substantial drop in the price of oil (caused either by a worldwide recession or a technological breakthrough that would make the advanced economies less dependent on oil). Such an event would lead to a rapid drop in state subsidies and social services and would have a damaging effect throughout the Saudi society, but it would fall the hardest on the least privileged, namely the Shi'a.

In terms of a sudden political change, a royal succession is never an easy transition. Eventually, like any mortal, King Fahd will pass away from the scene. Even if the designated successor takes power without major problems, the initial period of the new ruler's reign is bound to be full of uncertainty just because of the personalized nature of royal rule. If the monarch is deposed as a result of an assassination (King Faisal was assassinated by one of his nephews in 1975) or a coup, the period of transition to a new ruler may be even

more turbulent. In any event, a leadership change in a monarchic system is always a crisis of the system. Individuals with antipathy toward the system may see the crisis as an opportune time to pursue their own agendas.

A diminished level of support for the monarchy by the main loyalist forces (Najdis) would have the effect of suddenly changing the power balance in the kingdom. Such a switch is not that far-fetched, and it could have origins in the fundamentalist Sunni opposition to the monarchy (evidenced by terrorist acts) combined with reduced loyalties among the Najdis in general because of rising expectations and the problematic economic performance.

The rise of a new Shi'ite religious leader abroad would amount to a major change. The ascent of Ayatollah Khomeini after the Iranian revolution had an inspirational fallout on a small but significant number of Shi'a in Saudi Arabia. With Khomeini's passing, no revolutionary Shi'a leader of comparable stature has emerged. Should one arise in Iran, Iraq, or elsewhere, such a figure would provide a cohesion to the Shi'a that is currently lacking.

Tipping Events

Galvanizing or tipping events might involve the arrest (or release, as several prominent Shi'ite clerics are in jail) of key Shi'ite religious leaders or any number of specific steps to clamp down on the public expression of Shi'ite religious practices; examples might be the closing of Shi'ite mosques or meeting places (*hussainiyyas*) or renewed denunciation of Shi'ism as heretical by the Sunni clerics. The reinstatement of strict controls on Shi'ite travel abroad or in the kingdom carries with it a symbolic significance of singling out the Shi'a and may galvanize the group.

Leadership

Leadership among the Shi'a is most likely to come from the clerics because of the moral authority of such figures. Numerous Shi'ite clerics already in jail could serve as leaders, as could some of the clerics in exile. Shi'ite leadership might emerge abroad because of the restrictions on all Shi'a in the kingdom, compared to the ability of

the Shi'a abroad to write, publish, and disseminate information to their followers. Shi'ite centers in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and the United Kingdom (London) all have ties to and an impact upon the Saudi Shi'a. Religious leaders have the potential for a wider following, since they are seen as a source of political guidance. Moreover, these figures could draw on a built-in infrastructure of Shi'a meeting places. Shi'a religious practice has strong hierarchical elements, allowing for high-level leaders to have tremendous influence over their followers.

Secular Shi'a leadership would be more difficult because Shi'ite institutions are virtually nonexistent. Under less politically constrained conditions, a leading Shi'ite merchant family might be a source of secular leadership, but few such families are in evidence because of the pattern of discrimination.

Resources and Organization

The Shi'a have limited financial resources available to them, especially when compared in a relative sense to the other main regional groups. The pattern of discrimination faced by the Shi'a in the kingdom has meant that few Shi'a have accumulated substantial wealth. Moreover, the isolation of the Shi'a from others in the kingdom means a lack of readily identifiable groups that may sympathize with or support a Shi'a mobilization (other than perhaps the case of opposition to the royal family among some fundamentalist circles in the Najd). The resource problems of the Shi'a are magnified by the absence of any clearly identifiable mechanism through which a leadership could "assess taxes" in the name of the group. Organizational skills are less of a problem than the fact that Shi'ite organizations are not permitted. Potential networks are currently weak, and the monarchy tries to keep them that way.

Foreign Element

The foreign element is a strong factor in a potential Shi'a mobilization, and it may partially fill some of the shortcomings already identified above. The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia have religious ties with Shi'ite elements outside the country. Religious leaders have contact with senior clerics in Iran and Iraq. Some have ideological ties and con-

tact with the Shi'ite Hizballah organization in Lebanon. Family ties link many Shi'a in Saudi Arabia with the Shi'a in Bahrain (the latter have engaged in protest and insurrection against the Bahraini regime). If the Shi'a were to come to power in Bahrain, even a moderate government could not disavow all interest in the fate of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia. The same applies to the possibility of the accession to power of the Shi'ite majority in Iraq. Clearly, there is a multitude of ties between the Shi'ites of Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite organizations that have expertise in conspiratorial and terrorist activities. And there is a thin line between sympathy along the co-religionist/co-ethnic lines and the use of Shi'ite organizations for their own ends by the neighboring countries, with Iran being the best case of this.

Saudi Arabia's land and sea borders with Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait remain in dispute (though most of them are in the process of being negotiated or demarcated). The disputes are minor, but during the 1990s they did lead to armed skirmishes between Saudi forces and Yemeni and Qatari guards. Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, or Yemen all have the power and geopolitical interests to assist potential internal opposition groups within Saudi Arabia. Iraqi forces invaded Saudi territory during the Gulf War, and Iraq could generate a border dispute if it chose to do so. Iranian support for terrorist organizations in Saudi Arabia is widely acknowledged. In principle, Iran could decide to provide direct support to the Saudi Shi'a. So could elements of the Shi'ite community in Iraq, especially if it were to come to power. Hizballah in Lebanon also constitutes an important potential conduit of armed aid to the Saudi Shi'a. A specific spark that may lead to the accentuation of the role of the foreign element in a potential Shi'a mobilization in Saudi Arabia would be heightened U.S./Saudi tensions with Iran.

Overall Assessment of Mobilization

Given the shortcomings in the elements needed for Shi'a mobilization and the enormous resources (in both a relative and an absolute sense) that the monarchy can marshal against them, a crucial aspect of the effectiveness of any Shi'a mobilization is a weakening of the Saudi monarchy. This can take the form of a succession crisis or a

reduced level of support (or more pronounced dissatisfaction) with the monarchy among its main loyalists and supporters. A potential Shi'a mobilization is lacking in resources and organization, but these problems might be offset through a greater involvement of the foreign element. Effective leadership would play a crucial role in the mobilization process, as it would limit the resource problems and attract foreign support.

OTHER SCENARIOS

The Hijazis and perhaps even the Asari Yemenis may be worth examining in a manner similar to the Shi'a assessment. While potentially dangerous to the monarchy, neither of these two scenarios falls in the category of ethnically based mobilization as defined earlier. Instead, they amount to potential mobilizations on group bases but more along the lines of regional differentiation in a highly socially stratified country where one region is distinctly favored by an absolutist regime. Since the issue at hand is potential ethnic mobilization, the only group that comes close to fitting that description in Saudi Arabia is the Shi'a.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that rigid stratification in modernizing societies (and Saudi Arabia is an uneasy mix of the most modern and the most traditional) tends to be problematic. Eventually, if a system of privilege and discrimination along regional lines is kept in place by state policy, the initially slight regional variations may lead to the emergence of ideologies that expressly claim "ethnic" differences (and use historical examples found in every society to "prove" the point) and/or aspire to differentiated (for example, autonomous) status because of the internalization of the prejudices upheld by the state. Such a process is generational, but it tends to quicken in times of growing economic grievances toward the ruling group. The tribal and regional allegiances that remain strong in Saudi Arabia may or may not take such a path, but signs pointing in that direction are worth monitoring.

Finally, the case of Najdi-led opposition to the monarchy, either alone or combined with Sunni fundamentalism, is a distinct threat to the regime. Such a scenario does not merit an examination from the perspective of an ethnically based mobilization, but it could be ana-

lyzed in a systematic fashion, perhaps using some of the elements and categories from the framework used here.

ASSESSING THE STATE

Accommodative Capability

How inclusive and responsive are Saudi Arabian political structures to the popular will? The political institutions in Saudi Arabia are expressly exclusive by design, and the Saudi leadership makes no apologies about it. There are no means to hold political authorities accountable to popular will. The political system is monarchic and, as such, there are no voting rights or elections. There is no constitution, and the Islamic law serves as the basis of the official justice system in the kingdom. There are few constraints upon the king, and all participation in affairs of the kingdom is at the pleasure of the royal family. The level of exclusion and inclusion varies according to the group, with the Najdis most favored and the Shi'a most excluded. Almost all exclusion is informal and based on group-level assumptions about loyalty to the monarchy.

The few constraints upon the royal family, and any hint of accountability, come from two sources. One, the recently set up Consultative Council, appointed by the king, in principle has the right to ask ministers to come and justify their policies. In practice the council is timid and does not question policy in any depth or hold the policy executors accountable except at the most politically safe technical level. Two, the moral authority of the clerics limits the regime. However, the senior clerics have become largely subordinated to the political order and openly state that it is against Islamic law to oppose the state (some radical clerics challenge such an interpretation of the Islamic law). The king appoints the members of the highest Islamic authority and can make sure that the top clerics play a role in upholding the monarchy.

Is there potential for change to be found in the Saudi Arabian political structure of late 1997? The political structure is absolutist and has no formal mechanisms for conflict resolution and institutional change. The king's decision, usually justified on the basis of the Islamic law, is the final word.

In one semblance of a conflict-resolution mechanism, the royal family holds open audiences whereby, in principle, citizens may bring their grievances to the highest level for consideration. The practice allows the royal family to hear a narrow segment of the *vox populi*, but the decisions of the emirs at such meetings are arbitrary (even if well intentioned) and are usually not professionally informed or debated. Theoretically, the issues brought up at such meetings could touch upon aspects of the political system.

The only institution that has the seeds of potential change of the political structures is the Consultative Council, though it must evolve a long way before it will have any impact. Conceivably, over time the council could take on greater powers—perhaps a technical challenge to some nonroyal minister or a more active proposal of legislation to the cabinet—but such a change could only occur with the consent of the king. In short, the system is one of the most inflexible, unresponsive, and exclusive in the contemporary world.

In terms of prevailing norms of governance, the monarchy is not tolerant of opposition. The co-opted clerics and the justification of the Islamic law provide the mechanisms to squash all dissent. Nonetheless, the regime does not rule with an iron fist in the same fashion as the Syrian or Iraqi regimes. The monarchy would rather co-opt than punish, marginalize and gratify (through a policy of buying off enemies by making “offers that cannot be refused”) rather than dictate. With large carrots as well as sticks, only the uncommon ideologue prefers to face the stick. When the carrot fails, however, the stick (or the sword) can be harsh.

The monarchy’s assumptions about individuals’ loyalty on the basis of group origins shows in its favoritism of the Najdis and the marginalization of the Shi’a. The outlook indicates thinking in terms of group-defined collectivist norms.

What is the level of cohesion among the ruling elites? Only anecdotal evidence and inferences on the basis of past events shed some light on the inner workings of the royal family. Previous experience shows that informal consultation within the royal family is ongoing and ever present. Such consultation has led to the deposing of a king by other members of the family (King Sa’ud). As in any closely knit kinship-based system of rule, court intrigues are the order of the day.

The royal family shares a broad consensus about the policies of the government and the nature of the society, though anecdotal evidence indicates some fears about the family's ability to maintain itself in power in the long term. Known policy differences include the degree of desirable closeness to the United States and the preferred course of action on domestic issues such as corruption. There may be some disagreement at lower levels of the family relating to the share in the benefits for members of the ruling family and possible concerns over the bureaucratic rigidities of the system. But although the royal family may appear divided when examined from within, when dealing with outside threats the group is likely to be highly cohesive.

In conclusion, the institutional structure of the Saudi monarchy is exclusive, inflexible, and has little tolerance in governance. The kingdom is not responsive to internal pressures and has little potential for change. Cohesion among the ruling elite in support of the system is high.

Fiscal and Economic Capability

The Saudi monarchy presides over a massive income from oil revenues, making it a classic rentier state, i.e., living on "rents" in which the state's major function is the distribution of largesse over which it has almost total monopoly. Saudi oil reserves, the largest in the Middle East, will extend revenues through the next century, even at the current rate of production. Saudi Arabia's proven recoverable petroleum reserves were sufficient to maintain production at 1995 levels for over 80 years (equivalent to about one-quarter of the world's proven oil reserves). Because of high state spending levels established in the 1970s (at a time when oil prices were high), the state has had problems in cutting its expenses to match the drop in revenues derived from oil exports (oil income dropped by nearly one-half in the 1980s). As a result, the state has been forced to cut back on services, benefits, and subsidies, and it has even defaulted on payments to some foreign contractors.

The macroeconomic indicators are stable even though the economy has registered only small growth or slight declines annually for over a decade. In the five-year period 1992–1997, Saudi Arabia's overall balance of payments has been mostly positive, even though the cur-

rent account balance has been largely in the red. The kingdom has followed a pattern of light deficit spending in the 1990s (less than 1 percent of GDP). Detailed information on state debt is not available. Saudi Arabia's gold reserves have fluctuated but remain strong. The kingdom also has substantial loans it could call on from international lending institutions. See Table 6.6.

The state has no mechanism in place to extract resources from the society, but society is not a source of income given the nature of the rentier state. There is no taxation in Saudi Arabia and none is envisioned in the foreseeable future. Its resource base stems from revenues derived from oil exports. Because the kingdom's economic performance and availability of resources rely on and mirror the world demand for oil, a worldwide recession would present problems. However, demand for oil is only partially elastic and, as the world's largest oil producer, Saudi Arabia is guaranteed a steady stream of revenues.

There is potential for the reappropriation of funds within the state budget. Public administration and some social services have declined slightly, but defense and security expenditures have remained at approximately 33 percent of the state budget during the past five years. There seems to be enough leeway for substantial shifting of funds on a short-term basis. See Table 6.7.

The royal family and its supporting elite are extraordinarily wealthy (among the wealthiest in the world). Informal provision of state-salaried jobs and distribution mechanisms within the key tribes provide the chief loyalists with substantial income.

Table 6.6

**Saudi Arabian International Reserves
(in US\$ million in December each year)**

	1994	1995	1996
Gold	235	239	231
IMF special drawing rights	607	666	692
Reserve position in IMF	882	854	807
Foreign exchange	5,888	7,101	5,295
Total	7,613	8,861	7,025

SOURCE: IMF, International Financial Statistics.

Table 6.7**Saudi Arabian Government Expenditures (in 000,000 riyals)**

	1994	1995	1996
Total	160,000	150,000	150,000
Defense and security	53,549	49,501	50,025
Public administration and other government spending	40,530	39,706	37,952
Services and subsidies ^a	65,398	60,317	61,608

^a“Services and subsidies” include the following categories: human resource development, transport and communications, economic resource development, health and social development, infrastructure development, municipal services, local subsidies.

SOURCE: IMF, *International Financial Statistics*.

In sum, in an absolute sense, the fiscal capacity of the Saudi monarchy is strong. The monarchy has access to enormous resources, in both an absolute and especially a relative sense (to a group such as the Shi’a). Despite Saudi Arabia’s economic difficulties during the past decade, it would be absurd to describe the state as facing a financial crisis or lacking financial resources to meet its own political priorities. The royal family has total control over the budget and is capable of making substantial shifts in resource allocation at will, if the welfare of the family depends on it. A key political question is how much of its own income the royal family might be willing to sacrifice in order to make more funds available to other elements of society in the interests of buying social peace and tranquillity.

Coercive Capability

The royal family maintains total control over all apparati of violence within the state, and is subject to virtually no institutional restrictions on its use. The king is the head of state, the prime minister, and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The king’s designated successor and the first deputy prime minister, the Crown Prince, is the commander of the National Guard. The second deputy prime minister (another prince) is the defense minister. Another prince is the minister of the interior (police and domestic security forces). In principle, the senior clerics have a moral voice in policies relating to

the application of state violence, but most of the clergy has been co-opted to the royal family's needs.

Who serves in the apparatus of violence? The regular armed forces are composed of well-paid volunteers, usually of urban backgrounds. Information about the armed forces, its officer corps, and particularly its attitudes toward political developments is highly sensitive, and there is only fragmentary and anecdotal evidence on which to base assessments. The state security bodies, the intelligence services, and the National Guard are manned almost exclusively by Najdi loyalists (drawn from loyal tribes from the Najdi heartland, all carefully balanced off against one another). There would be very little sympathy on their part toward any non-Najdis, particularly the Shi'a, who might challenge the monarchy's authority in the kingdom.

What norms exist with respect to the use of violence domestically? The Saudi monarchy has never wavered in the application of force to quell public disorder. That said, the general wealth of the regime has allowed it to buy off most opponents, and the monarchy has not had the need to practice violence against the population on a broad basis.

Compared to the libertarian foundations of U.S. law, Islamic law in its strict interpretation (as applied in Saudi Arabia) is harsh and unforgiving. Saudi Arabia tends to lead the world in the application of the death penalty, and there is only limited experience with ideas of human rights, as enshrined by the UN.

Are the Saudi apparatus of violence suitable for domestic use? The forces most suitable for domestic use include the Public Security Force, Ministry of the Interior Forces (intelligence and police forces), and the National Guard. All of them have the training and equipment to maintain public order. The National Guard, the preeminent internal security force and counterweight to the regular military, is well funded and equipped.¹³ Its strength seems to match that of the military, and its training has been provided by, among others, the

¹³The phenomenon of having in effect two armed forces (the National Guard and the regular army) as a check on each other forms a main component of what one analyst has dubbed "coup-proofing" of the regime. James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Fall 1999, pp. 131-165.

U.S. Vinnel Corporation. The regular armed forces are not well suited for domestic use, since they contain substantial heavy conventional forces. But they could be used to back up the other domestic security formations in operations against widespread disturbances.

In conclusion, the Saudi monarchy has absolute control over an extensive coercive apparatus. There are no formal constraints on the use of force and only the vaguest of informal constraints. The apparatus of violence appear to be well trained and armed and are politically trustworthy.

STRATEGIC BARGAINING

Based on the framework presented in Chapter Two, this analysis of the potential mobilization of the Shi'a and the capabilities of the Saudi monarchy to deal with such a mobilization provides a way to think about the range of possible interactions between them. As in the previous three case studies, the group and state types are categorized on the basis of their capacities, and the matrices assist in conceptualizing their likely patterns of interaction.

Measuring the Group's Capacities

Concerning the leadership of the Shi'a, the profile of Shi'ite clerics fits all the conditions of a strong leadership. They are certain of the rightness of their cause and have a clear vision of what they wish to accomplish. Their interpretation of Islam is supported by a major player in the Islamic world (Iran). The leadership has not hesitated to take risks and has paid the price for it. A clear leader emerging from the clerics would have high standing in the group. Thus, the assessment of leadership that a potential mobilized Shi'a group is likely to have is "strong."

With respect to resources, internal support for the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia is weak, especially in comparison to the enormous wealth of the monarchy. The monarchy has been successful in marginalizing the Shi'a economically and limiting their ability to organize networks within Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Shi'a cannot count on support from other groups in Saudi Arabia. There is an extensive potential

support network from abroad, but its suitability is not all that clear and is still limited in relation to the resources available to the monarchy. Thus, the assessment of resource support that a potential mobilized Shi'a group is likely to have is "weak."

Regarding popular support for the Shi'ite mobilization, this capacity is not as clear-cut as the others for definitional reasons. A potential Shi'ite mobilization would build on an already strong group cohesion (the survival of the Shi'a as a community in a hostile environment is testimony to its existence). However, the Shi'a lack sympathy or potential for support from other groups in the kingdom. This fact strengthens the in-group feeling of the Shi'ites but is a weakness in any localized Shi'a mobilization against the Saudi monarchy. Even if the mobilization took place in a situation of a more general decrease of support for the monarchy in the kingdom (as stipulated in the incipient changes), the move could result easily in greater cohesion between the monarchy and the other groups against the Shi'a rather than support from the other groups for the Shi'a. Popular support from co-ethnics and co-religionists may provide greater resources and organizational skills, but it does not change the basic problem that the Shi'a are isolated in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the assessment of popular support that a potential mobilized Shi'a is likely to have is "weak."

Based on these assessments, the potential mobilized Shi'ites are judged to be a type G group. The capacities of such a group are as follows:

Accommodative: low;

Sustainment: low;

Cohesiveness: low.

Note that if popular support is assessed as broad, then the group changes to type C, whose sustainment capacity remains low but whose accommodative and cohesiveness capacities change to high.

Measuring the State's Capacities

Concerning the leadership of the state, the royal family has grown used to its position and has a clear goal to maintain power and per-

petuate the status quo. Its absolute hold on power makes any questions about losing popularity moot. Its strategy is also clear: as long as it keeps the clerics a part of the ruling structure and retains a core of loyalists, it will continue to profit from the oil revenues. Thus, the assessment of leadership is “strong.”

The fiscal position of the Saudi monarchy is strong. The reduced profits from oil exports during the last decade notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia remains in an enviable situation of having virtually guaranteed substantial revenues for the foreseeable future. Because of Saudi Arabia’s importance to the world economy, the monarchy can also expect generous loans if they became necessary. Thus, the assessment of fiscal position is “strong.”

As an absolute monarchy, Saudi Arabia is one of the most exclusive regimes in the world. Political rights, as commonly understood in the United States, do not exist in Saudi Arabia. There are no formal and only the vaguest of informal checks upon the regime. The regime is intolerant of dissent and its system of law is strict, harsh, and unforgiving. Thus, the regime is assessed as “exclusive.”

Based on these assessments, the Saudi monarchy is judged to be a type D state. The capacities of such a state are as follows:

Accommodative: low;

Sustainment: low;

Coercive: high.

Outcome of Bargaining and Preferences for Violence

Based on the matrix showing the preferences of the mobilized group, a type G group has the following preferences toward a type D state: (1) intimidate, (2) negotiate, and (3) exploit.

And based on the matrix showing the preferences of the state toward a mobilized group, a type D state has the following preferences toward a type G group: (1) repress, (2) exploit, and (3) negotiate.

Note that if the group type is C, due to an assessment of popular support as broad, the group’s preferences remain the same: intimi-

date, negotiate, exploit. The state's preferences also remain the same: repress, exploit, negotiate.

Comparing group and state preferences leads to the conclusion that the potential for violence in the dyadic encounter between the mobilized Shi'a and the Saudi Arabian state is high. The primary strategy for both sides is to turn to violence.

The state has a preference for a strategy of repressing the challenger, with a hedging strategy of exploiting the weaknesses within the mobilized group. In practical terms, the latter may mean a forceful crackdown and intimidation of the Shi'ite activists while using economic incentives to reduce in-group support for the activists. But the primary strategy is to deal with a Shi'a mobilization by force. The strategies do not change even if the Shi'ite mobilization were to obtain greater support within Saudi Arabia (leading to coding the group as type C).

The type of state that Saudi Arabia fits (type D) is the most violence-prone of all eight state types. In dealing with the variety of challenging groups, a type D state has a primary strategy of using violence six out of eight times. The results are not accidental but based on logical connections between resources and strategies. In practical terms, the regime is not constrained in any significant fashion from using force, it has the wealth to build up a powerful apparatus of violence, and it is determined to stay in power.

The preferred strategy of a mobilized Shi'a would be to intimidate the regime, with a hedging strategy of negotiation. In practical terms, the preference for violence may mean a sudden armed uprising, made even more likely as a strategy because of the expectation of foreign support to deal with an expected Saudi crackdown. But the juxtaposition of violent and peaceful paths as the preferred and hedging strategies is interesting and in contrast to the state strategy of force or threatened force in both the preferred and hedging strategies. The contrast illustrates the power difference between the group and the state. The nature of the regime and its preponderance of power leave little recourse for the group except to take up arms. But the group would be alert for any signs that the regime might be willing to negotiate (for it would like to see a negotiated outcome but does not believe it to be a realistic option under the circumstances).

Quite aside from the above, the type of group that a mobilized Shi'a fits (type G) is the most violence-prone of all eight group types. In dealing with a variety of state types, a type G group has a primary strategy of turning to violence five out of eight times. Put in terms of the expected Shi'a mobilized group characteristics, the group has little going for it other than a devoted, bordering on the fanatical, leadership. The group lacks the resources to take on the state, and the resonance of its potential mobilization is limited. The above does not change even if the group is assessed to have wider support (from other groups in Saudi Arabia) and categorized as group type C, since the state type is so inflexible and resistant to consider choices other than violence.

Revisiting the Evaluation

There is much to be said for the portrayal of a course of events between a potential mobilized Shi'a and the Saudi monarchy as expressed in the terms above. Based on the evaluations earlier in this chapter, there is little question that a mobilized Shi'a would be treated inherently as an enemy of the Saudi monarchy and would feel the full brunt of the Saudi internal security forces. Conversely, there is little question that the Shi'a have few alternatives to violence, even though they would prefer to pursue their group aims by peaceful means.

Since the Iranian revolution and the Shi'ite riots in the Eastern Province, activism on behalf of the Saudi Shi'a has been carried on largely abroad, especially by the Reform Movement. The monarchy has harassed some Shi'ite clerics and jailed others (and then it has negotiated with the Reform Movement about the release of the jailed clerics in return for the movement ceasing its "dissident" activities). Individual Saudi Shi'ites have turned up fighting in a variety of Muslim "holy wars," and a number of Shi'ite terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia have taken place. All of the above shows a substantial level of discontent among the Saudi Shi'a, but their mass mobilization has not taken place. Perhaps the Shi'a intuitively realize the costs of such an action, for according to the analysis conducted here, they would pay a hefty price for an open and mass-based challenge to the monarchy.

The state has shown no tolerance for any mass-based challenge, and it has worked assiduously and effectively to prevent its occurrence through co-opting, buying off, or isolating the malcontents. The regime's dealings with the Reform Movement illustrate a pattern of clever bargaining with a mixture of threats and incentives, all from a position of strength. Indeed, the regime has monitored the Shi'a closely and tried to encourage splits within the Shi'ite leadership. The regime has had the means and the skill to head off any mass-based opposition. In this sense, a challenge by a mobilized Shi'a against the monarchy has all the elements of being violent and being met with violence (as shown in the analysis) but the Saudi regime has been successful so far in preventing such a challenge from materializing. It may continue to do so for a considerable period.

For the purposes of tracking the evolution of intergroup relations in Saudi Arabia, and especially the relationship between the Shi'a and the Saudi monarchy, the following trends need special monitoring by intelligence analysts:

- The ability of the Saudi regime to continue to control dissent is dependent on its oil revenues. A change in Saudi Arabia's position as the major oil supplier in the world (due to discovery of large recoverable reserves elsewhere or technological advances that diminish the importance of oil), a cut in its share of the market (due to increased production by other suppliers or disasters in the Saudi oil fields), or a major drop in the price of oil (especially if caused by a worldwide recession) all would have potentially far-reaching impact on the regime's domestic stability. In terms of the model, serious and sudden economic difficulties for Saudi Arabia would imply a move toward state type G, another violence-prone type. That in itself would not imply any change in preferred strategies toward the mobilized Shi'a, but it might create other domestic difficulties for the monarchy that the Shi'a could use to its own advantage.
- The monarchy's ability to manage internal tensions as a result of rising expectations and the regime's decreasing ability to satisfy them are already a problem, and it is likely to grow in importance in the long term. Moreover, dissatisfaction is likely to be more difficult to control by the regime because of technological advances (the Internet), access to foreign travel and media, and

the presence of substantial numbers of Western-educated personnel. A weakening of support among the regime's loyalists may provide an opportunity for more assertive actions by the Shi'a.

- A succession to the throne would be a crisis for the monarchy. Although a designated successor exists, there is no guarantee that the removal of the king from power, whether through assassination or natural causes, will not spark in-fighting within the royal family over the right to be the king. In terms of the model, uncertainty at the top of the Saudi hierarchy means potentially a movement toward state type H, a more peacefully inclined type. Depending on the circumstances surrounding a succession, the Shi'a (and other groups in the society) may become more assertive.
- The evolution of the Consultative Council into a body that wields even a measure of real power or control over the Council of Ministers would be a watershed in Saudi political development. Such an evolution borders on the improbable at this stage, but specific events could propel it forward. It would mean a move toward a more representative and inclusive state and, as such, would imply a different role for the monarchy (and the clerics) in the kingdom. In terms of the model, this would represent a move toward state type A, a less violence-prone type than the one currently in place.
- The emergence of a clear leader among the Shi'a clerics with strong appeal to Shi'ites in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Persian Gulf may have a dramatic impact on the Saudi Shi'a, leading to their mobilization. The result of a confrontation with the Saudi regime is likely to be violent and may have wider repercussions in the Gulf.

Thinking about the dynamics of intergroup relations and potential for unrest in Saudi Arabia, the framework presented above makes apparent the following intelligence needs and information gaps:

- A better demographic profile on the Saudi Shi'a, including their organization and wealth;

- More information about the Saudi Shi'ite leadership, including a profile of key figures and their views on the future of the Shi'a community in Saudi Arabia;
- More detailed information about the activities of the Saudi Shi'ite dissident organizations in exile, including their contacts with the Shi'ite community in Saudi Arabia and their influence upon them;
- Tracking the rise of charismatic figures among the Shi'ite clerics and their standing among the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia;
- Monitoring the relations between the Shi'a and other groups in Saudi Arabia, including contacts between the Shi'ite and non-Shi'ite political opposition;
- Extent of foreign ties and support to the Saudi Shi'a, especially from Iraq and Lebanon and the receptiveness of Saudi Shi'ites to foreign assistance;
- Information about disagreements and attitudes within the ruling family on domestic stability and accommodation with the political opposition;
- The extent of Saudi intelligence in penetrating the Shi'a community, primarily as an indication of the ability of the Saudi regime not to be surprised by the Shi'a;
- More information on the Saudi National Guard and the armed forces, including the attitudes and composition of the officer corps, and their training and readiness for domestic security.

Close attention to these issues may enable early identification of any impending turn toward internal strife in Saudi Arabia.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

The framework presented here examines a potential conflict situation in Saudi Arabia through a dyadic comparison of the Saudi Shi'a and the Saudi monarchy. The framework provides a tool to think abstractly about the mobilization patterns and challenges to the monarchy. It is meant to provide insight into the strategic preferences available to the main actors under certain "what-if" conditions. As such, the model aims to be parsimonious, and its narrow-

ing of the crucial questions to the main dyad illuminates the logically derived preferences of both actors.

The results show that if the conflict were to take place within the bounds stipulated, it would almost certainly be violent, as both sides would see the use of violence as a preferred strategy. Indeed, the matchup is noteworthy in that it places the most violence-prone state type against the most violence-prone group type. The situation is hypothetical, and its elaboration in some detail in no way implies that such a conflict is likely to materialize. There is nothing inevitable about the conflict coming about, and many indicators point to the likelihood that the Saudi monarchy can prevent the mobilization of the Shi'a for the foreseeable future.

The model is explicitly parsimonious and does not capture the various intergroup relations that may be important in the emergence of intrastate conflict in Saudi Arabia. For example, greater assertiveness along tribal and/or regional lines may play a part in weakening the regime. However, given the largely isolated status of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, the issue may not be crucial.

Since the model was applied to a prospective case, its accuracy in anticipating the likely strategies that the challenging groups and the state are likely to follow is, as yet, unverifiable in an empirical manner. Just as in the Ethiopian case study, the purpose of applying the model to Saudi Arabia was to provide a series of hypothetical but likely situations and determine the evolutionary paths for both the state and the group that would result in the most violence-prone confrontations. Thus the model's usefulness lies in illustrating the "dangerous dyads."

As with all the case studies presented here, the model is a tool for structuring analysis. As such, it provides a shortcut to thinking—in conceptual terms—about the likely paths to violence. But the Saudi Arabian case shows clearly that difficult judgments and assessments remain for an analyst to make. For example, the difficulty of assessing the availability of resources and the level of popular support for the Shi'a may change the outcome of the analysis. The matrices that are a part of the model provide logically deduced options open to the group and the state, but the preferences cannot be applied in a mechanistic fashion.

AFTERWORD

In an overall sense, little has changed in 1998–1999 to alter the assessments contained in this chapter. Two recent trends, hinted at in the analysis, have become more pronounced.¹⁴ Politically, King Fahd has become less involved in decisionmaking due to ill health. Crown Prince Abdullah has assumed more power, though he relies heavily on consensus within the ruling family. Abdullah is more conservative in temperament and behavior than Fahd, which increases his popularity with many ultraconservative Saudis, particularly the Najdis. This shift, however, is not likely to change greatly the status of Saudi Shi'a or regional groups.

Economic problems also have diminished. As the price of oil bottomed out and regained its earlier levels, the kingdom's ability to dispense largesse has recovered. In more general terms, state capacity has increased. Long-term problems still loom, owing to the steadily increasing size of the royal family and its members' continued expectations for the "good life." But for the near term, the royal family is in a better situation than it was in the mid-1990s.

¹⁴For another recent discussion of the prospects of political violence in the Persian Gulf region (including Saudi Arabia), see Daniel L. Byman and Jerrold D. Green, *Political Violence and Stability in the States of the Northern Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, MR-1021-OSD, 1999.