ANNEX: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAUDI ARABIA IN 1997–1998

The following information about population characteristics is based upon the situation in Saudi Arabia at the beginning of 1998. The information presented here is the basic reference for the analysis in this chapter.

Name: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Capital: Riyadh.

Nature of government: Absolute monarchy, with no legislature or political parties. An advisory body, the Consultative Council, with members appointed by the king, was established by royal decree and inaugurated in December 1993. The king rules in accordance with the Shari’a (Islamic law). By custom, the king is also the prime minister and, in that capacity, appoints and leads the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers acts as an instrument of royal authority in legislative and executive matters. The council makes decisions on the basis of a majority vote, but to be implemented, a decision requires royal sanction.

Organization of the state: A system of provincial government was set up in 1993–1994. The country has 13 provinces (mintaqah): Al Bahah, Al Hudud Ash Shamaliyah, Al Jawf, Al Madinah, Al Qasim, Ar Riyadh, Ash Sharqiyah (Eastern Province), Asir, Hail, Jizan, Makkah, Najran, and Tabuk. The provinces are divided further into a total of 103 governorates. Local government organs consist of the General Municipal Councils (in several towns) and tribal and village councils (led by sheikhs).

Date of constitution: None. Rule is according to Islamic law (Shari’a). King rules by issuing decrees.
Population: 20.1 million (CIA estimate, July 1997). The figure includes 5.2 million foreign nationals residing in Saudi Arabia. Latest census figures (September 1992) gave a total of 16.9 million (of which 4.6 million were foreign nationals). Estimated population growth rate is 3.42 percent (CIA estimate, 1997).

Major ethnic groups: All Saudi nationals are “Arab.” Approximately one million people are Yemenis, with varying degrees of legal status (those in Asir province are subjects of the kingdom). Tribal loyalties remain strong, although they have lessened as a consequence of settlement and urbanization of the population. Kinship ties are also significant. The principal tribes are the Anayzah, Bani Khalid, Harb, Al Murrah, Mutayr, Qahtan, Shammar, and Utaiba—all in Central Arabia. There are at least fifteen minor tribes as well, including the more weakly defined tribal groupings outside the central Najd area. Within the central heartland of the Najd, tribal rivalries persist; tribes such as the Utaiba and Rashid still harbor latent grudges against the ruling family. Hierarchies among tribes exist and they are determined, in part, by their closeness to the royal family. Statistics on the tribal makeup of the country are exceedingly difficult to find and are discouraged by the regime since they are politically sensitive.

Languages: Major languages: Arabic. There are slight differences in dialect that distinguish the Najd heartland of the kingdom from the Eastern Province, the Hijaz, and the Asir.

Religions: Islam. About 85 percent of the population are Sunni Muslims, and most of them belong to the strictly orthodox Wahhabi sect. The Wahhabi movement dates back to the 18th century and originates from the Najd region of Arabia. The conquest of Arabia by the Najd-based House of Saud in the 1920s led to the imposition of Wahhabism as the official faith of the country. While the main schools of Sunni Islam are officially recognized in Islamic law, any non-Wahhabi practice in Saudi Arabia is viewed de facto improper. Non-Wahhabi clerics have no official standing and have almost ceased to exist in the kingdom. The Shi’a represent a distinct minority whose religion in Wahhabi eyes is not considered legitimate Islam. Their numbers are much disputed, though they number at
least 200,000 to 400,000.\textsuperscript{15} Shi’a activists claim that half a million Shi’a hide their status and pretend they are Sunni because of the persecution and disadvantages associated with Shi’ism. In their main region of residence (the Eastern Province), the Shi’a represent approximately 33 percent of the population. Altogether, Shi’a activists claim one million people, or even 25 percent of the population,\textsuperscript{16} though the more generally accepted figure seems to be about 15 percent. The latter figure would seem to support the claims by Shi’a activists of the existence of substantial numbers of “hidden Shi’a.” Foreign nationals residing in the kingdom include adherents to a variety of religions, including Christianity.


\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Mideast Mirror}, August 27, 1996, p. 15.