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The Politics of Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia occupies a unique position in both the Arab and Islamic worlds. As the birthplace of Islam and the custodian of its two holiest sites, the political, social, and legal systems of Saudi Arabia are deeply intertwined with religion. The governance of the kingdom is equally shaped by centuries-old traditions, the enduring authority of the House of Saud, and modern geopolitical realities.

This book, *The Politics of Saudi Arabia: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Saudi Arabia*, seeks to provide readers with a comprehensive and accessible introduction to the intricacies of Saudi political life. It examines the distinctive nature of the kingdom's absolute monarchy, the mechanisms of authority and decision-making, and the dynamic—at times tension-filled—relationship between religious mandates, tribal customs, and royal interests. Each chapter unpacks the institutions, reforms, and social dynamics that have defined Saudi Arabia from its founding to its present transformation.

Saudi Arabia's political system is characterized by a mixture of stability and rigidity, centralization and consultation. Despite the absence of political parties and national elections—hallmarks of political participation elsewhere—the mechanisms of governance in Saudi Arabia have their own forms of consultation, balance, and negotiation, both within the ruling family and in society at large. These are shaped by the kingdom's unique legal environment, where Sharia is the ultimate source of legislation and moral authority.

Recent decades have witnessed unprecedented social and economic change in the kingdom. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 reform agenda has introduced changes that would have been unthinkable a generation ago: the introduction of new rights for women, the opening up of Saudi society and entertainment, and major economic diversification efforts. Yet, these reforms have taken place within, and are bounded by, an unyielding political order that prizes stability and the continuity of royal authority above all else. Political liberalization, in the Western sense, remains distant.

At the heart of Saudi politics lies a web of relationships and sources of influence: the royal family, the religious scholars, tribal leaders, and the growing, young population. Throughout its history, the kingdom has adapted to internal and external pressures by evolving its institutions and, at times, redefining the boundaries of royal and religious authority. Understanding the politics of Saudi Arabia thus requires a nuanced appreciation of these actors, as well as the profound pressures for change generated by globalization, economic transition, and a rapidly changing society.

This book aims not only to explain the architecture of Saudi Arabia's political system, but also to provide insight into the challenges and debates that will shape its future. By exploring the historical, social, legal, and political forces at work, readers will gain a deeper understanding of one of the world's most consequential—and often misunderstood—nations.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Foundations of Saudi Arabia's Political System

To understand the political system of modern Saudi Arabia, one must first journey back in time, long before the striking skylines of Riyadh or the vast oil fields that fuel the global economy. The roots of the Saudi state are deeply embedded in the history and geography of the Arabian Peninsula, a land shaped by harsh deserts, scattered oases, and a complex tapestry of tribal allegiances. For centuries, this was a region without a unified central authority, where life was dictated by the rhythm of nomadic movement and the unwritten laws of tribal custom.

Before the advent of Islam in the 7th century CE, the Arabian Peninsula was a patchwork of tribal groupings, each with its own leadership structures and codes of conduct. While some settled communities existed, particularly in the south with kingdoms like Saba and Himyar, or in trading centers like Mecca and Yathrib (later Medina), much of the interior, the Najd, was dominated by nomadic Bedouin tribes. These tribes were fiercely independent, their lives revolving around the availability of water and pasture for their livestock. Political organization was largely based on kinship, with authority resting in the hands of tribal chiefs or sheikhs, whose influence often stemmed from their personal qualities and ability to mediate disputes and protect their kinsmen.

The arrival of Islam fundamentally altered the political landscape of the Arabian Peninsula. The Prophet Muhammad, beginning in Mecca, not only brought a new religious faith but also a new social and political order that transcended tribal loyalties. The nascent Islamic state, headquartered first in Medina and then expanding rapidly, provided a unifying force that had been absent for centuries. The early caliphates that followed the Prophet's death extended their influence across vast territories, and while the political center of the Islamic world would eventually shift away from the Arabian Peninsula to Damascus and later Baghdad, the peninsula remained the spiritual heartland.

Despite the rise of large Islamic empires, direct control over the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula remained a challenge for distant powers. The interior, particularly the Najd, often maintained a degree of autonomy, with local tribal structures persisting. Over centuries, various external forces would exert influence on parts of the peninsula, including the Mamluks and, significantly, the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans, from the 16th century onwards, controlled the Hejaz, home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, largely for the prestige and responsibility associated with the Hajj pilgrimage. Their influence in other coastal areas also waxed and waned, but their grip on the

central Najd remained tenuous.

It was in this environment of fragmented political control and enduring tribalism that the foundations of the modern Saudi state began to take shape in the 18th century. A key moment was the alliance formed in 1744 between Muhammad ibn Saud, the ruler of the town of Diriyah in the Najd, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a religious scholar advocating a return to a strict, pure form of Islam. This partnership, often referred to as the Diriyah agreement, was a powerful combination of political ambition and religious zeal. Muhammad ibn Saud provided the political and military strength, while Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab provided the ideological justification for expansion and unification.

This alliance marked the beginning of the First Saudi State, with Diriyah as its capital. The new entity, fueled by the fervor of the Wahhabi movement, began to expand its control over neighboring areas in the Najd and eventually extended its influence over much of the Arabian Peninsula. The rulers of the First Saudi State, taking the title of Imam, sought to implement their strict interpretation of Islamic law and unify the disparate tribes under a single authority. This expansion, however, brought them into conflict with regional powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire and its proxies.

The First Saudi State proved to be a formidable force, challenging the existing order in the peninsula. They captured Mecca in 1803, a bold move that directly confronted Ottoman authority over the holy cities. This expansionist drive and the challenge it posed to Ottoman prestige eventually led to a concerted effort by the Ottomans, using their Egyptianwali (governor) Muhammad Ali Pasha, to suppress the Saudi state. In 1818, Ibrahim Pasha, Muhammad Ali's son, successfully campaigned against Diriyah, leading to the destruction of the capital and the collapse of the First Saudi State. Many members of the Al Saud family were sent into exile.

Despite the destruction of the First Saudi State, the Al Saud dynasty and the Wahhabi movement were not entirely extinguished. The legacy of a unified entity based on the alliance between political and religious authority persisted. In 1824, a grandson of Muhammad ibn Saud, Turki bin Abdullah, managed to re-establish Saudi rule in the Najd, this time with Riyadh as the capital. This marked the beginning of the Second Saudi State.

The Second Saudi State, while not reaching the territorial extent of its predecessor, continued the principles of governance based on the alliance between the Al Saud rulers and the Wahhabi religious scholars. However, this period was marked by internal conflicts within the Al Saud family, a recurring theme in Saudi history, and external pressures, particularly from the Al Rashid family in Hail. These internal and external challenges ultimately led to the decline and fall of the Second Saudi State in 1891, with the Al Saud family again forced into exile, finding refuge in Kuwait.

The end of the Second Saudi State might have seemed like the final chapter for the Al Saud, but history, as it often does, had other plans. The stage was set for the rise of a figure who would not only reclaim his family's ancestral lands but also forge a new, more enduring political entity that would become modern Saudi Arabia. The lessons learned from the rise and fall of the first two Saudi states – the importance of the alliance with the religious establishment, the challenges of tribal loyalties, and the ever-present threat of external intervention – would profoundly influence his approach to state-building.

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