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Aarts, P.

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Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia*

*"If we want things to stay as they are,
things will have to change."*

(GIUSEPPE DI LAMPEDUSA, *The Leopard*)

I. Introduction

"Why do Arabs not revolt?", Rami Khoury recently wondered (Khoury 2009). Do Arabs indeed increasingly ignore their government? Karim Makdisi definitely concurs:

"The state represents something which is almost always negative (...). No one looks up to the state as something positive. You survive, and you live, and you get through in spite of the state. That's the relationship" (Whitaker 2009: 83).

This view starkly contrasts with the notion that there are clearly trends of political liberalization in the region (which, admittedly, fall short of what is usually referred to as 'democratization'). In recent years, numerous contributions have been devoted to 'demands for reform' and the notion of reform itself has acquired quasi-talismanic status.¹

When it comes to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, some would go as far as claiming that "ten, twenty years ago, we had the luxury of time. We could choose the kind of reform pace we wanted. Now, we either reform quickly or collapse" (Turki al-Hamad in Kapiszewski 2004: 92). This seems highly exaggerated. As I will try to show below, the pace of reform in Saudi Arabia is slow, very slow. Moments of progress alternate with moments of reverse and, as is shown in the most recent survey of *The Arab Democracy Index*, the kingdom still ranks lowest – as before (The Arab Reform Initiative 2010). The claim to be made here is that notwithstanding some modest but discernible measures of political 'liberalization', in particular since 2003, the Saudi regime forms an exemplary case of successfully modernizing authoritarianism in an autocratic context (Heydemann 2007 and 2009).²

Reforms are mainly happening above society, a result of the fact that Saudi Arabia has never undergone a period of modern political mobilization. As Steffen Hertog, one of the most astute Saudi Arabia observers, correctly diagnoses:

"The country has few political entrepreneurs who would want and know how to organize larger groups into formal channels. Politics is to a large extent conducted through linkages which are local, personalized, and often paternal in nature and not differentiated by modern criteria of stratification and functional position in society" (Hertog 2006: 70).³

The focus of reform in Saudi Arabia thus far has been essentially on economic steps designed to reinvigorate the non-oil sector, and much less on political transformations – more difficult and equally critical.

In this article, written against the conceptual background of the 'inclusion-exclusion' perspective, I will first shed light on the main political and social challenges which Saudi Arabia is facing. Second, a survey will be given of different 'waves' of reform that have taken place since the early 1990s, focusing on the post-2003 period. Third, after outlining the inclusion-exclusion framework two case studies will be dealt with, trying to analyse why and how the House of Saud implemented both inclusionary and exclusionary measures. Finally, a concluding section will recapitulate the main findings and provides some insights into a possible new trajectory of research.

II. Challenges

The Saudi regime has passed through several crisis periods before it entered into the current one (which actually started in the mid-1990s). As noticed by Niblock, in each and every case "the threats have arisen through the failure of state policies to resolve the problems faced by, or meet the

* A draft version of this paper was presented at the workshop 'Between Inclusion and Exclusion. The Many Faces of Reform in the Middle East and North Africa', organized by the Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES) in Lisbon, 24 September 2010.

¹ To name a few of those contributions: Club de Madrid 2009; Ehteshami & Wright 2007; Foley 2010; ICG 2004a; Jones 2003; Kapiszewski 2004; Nonneman 2006.

² As is aptly noted by Whitaker, the "typical Arab regime is both authoritarian and autocratic-authoritarian because it demands obedience and discourages questioning; autocratic because power is highly centralized and concentrated around the head of state" (Whitaker 2009: 93). Saudi Arabia clearly is such a typical Arab regime. The Saudi Arabian political system also still fits the typology that Iliya Harik developed in the mid-eighties. I.e. although relations between the House of Saud and the official clergy are not the same as before (see below), Saudi Arabia is an example of the 'alliance system of chief and imams' (Harik 1987: 28-30).

³ As Hertog shows (in his earlier work, Hertog 2006, as well as, and more extensively, in his most recent one, Hertog 2010), there is one salient exception to the atomization of social interests, that is Saudi business (organized through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry).

concerns of, significant parts of the population. In practice, the policies pursued by the state have themselves created the problems, as a side effect of the pursuit of other objectives" (Niblock 2006: 171). The two preceding crisis periods were 1958-1960 and 1979-1980. They will not be dealt with here as they have received extensive coverage elsewhere.

In general terms, the Saudi political system faces serious challenges in all possible sectors and a careful and precarious balancing act is required between the demands in these sectors (politics, religious/cultural, economic, and foreign relations) and between three levels (domestic, regional, international).⁴ What we have witnessed in the kingdom's recent history is, on the one hand, a proven record of pragmatism and adaptability, with skills in co-optation and an ability to mobilise legitimising resources while avoiding the coalescence of opposition strands. On the other hand, the regime faces several serious problems: (1) a population that has grown rapidly; (2) an apparently intractable youth unemployment problem; (3) the lack of manoeuvrability that has emerged as the price for the 'segmented clientelism' that has characterised the Saudi polity; (4) the paradox that the reforms that are both needed and clamoured for from outside are opposed by the very actors in society and the polity (the non-radical Islamists and clerical establishment) whose help is needed in combating the appeal of the anti-regime extremists;⁵ and (5) the continued and arguably worsening puzzle of reconciling close relations with the United States (essential both for regime and more widely the economy) with the domestically de-legitimizing effects this has against the background of events in the Arab-Israeli and Iraqi theatres.

To this must be added longer-term structural changes in society and the economy, not least in the context of economic, technological and political globalisation; and a changing regional environment. The latter includes Iraq's democratic experiment, and the pattern of political reform in the neighbouring GCC states setting a 'standard' to which the Saudi public is exposed daily, given the regional integration of personal, professional and media networks. Though the extent is difficult to measure, the latter also applies to the possible 'demonstration effect' of political turbulence in the streets of Tehran (where people do go out to claim

their rights as citizens). For the regime, then, a coherent policy response is essential in order to address these conflicting pressures, craft a sustainable omnibalancing act, and maintain or rebuild legitimacy. Policy coherence and regime cohesion are closely connected. From earlier analyses⁶, a picture has emerged which suggests that such cohesion is often lacking when sustained, coherent policymaking in the domestic arena is called for. In key areas such as economic policy and political reform, it appears that output has suffered, contradictory strands of policy have stymied each other, and little concerted, in-depth and trans-sectoral reform has been effected.

Equally not helpful are intra-family disagreements and competition. As long as King Fahd remained the notional head of state, this situation was perpetuated, as Crown Prince Abdullah and his 'circle' proved unable to fully stamp their authority on the policy process and the 'vision' for the kingdom. As expected, this improved with his accession and he managed to push several envelopes, including confronting the clerics. Abdullah, however, is in his eighties (86), so that in the medium term – and possibly sooner – a further succession looms. Hence the fundamental direction of policy will remain in doubt for some years – unless Abdullah can set in place a number of hard-to-reverse *faits accomplis*. For the sake of the regime's own long-term future, and for the sake of overall sustainable development in Saudi Arabia, that would seem to be important, but it is not at all clear whether the resistance built into the system as a whole (mainly the segmented-clientelistic version of rentierism), powerful factions in the royal family, and the likely limits to Abdullah's own reform-mindedness or acceptance of opposition voices, will allow this to happen.

As already alluded to above, one needs to note also the absence of a natural pro-reform alliance among key parts of Saudi society: opposition exists, along with demands for reform, but this is not united nor does it stretch in any significant and organised fashion into those key middle-class and elite sectors of society that have proved necessary elements of a liberalising and democratising coalition in other – mainly European – contexts (note: without uncritically following the popular 'no bourgeoisie, no democracy' notion).⁷ It is debatable whether such a thing as 'civil society' does exist in

⁴ This section partly draws on the (updated) chapter 'A Triple Nexus. Ideology, Economy, Foreign Policy and the Outlook for the Saudi Polity', in Aarts & Nonneman 2010 (Arabic edition, forthcoming) and on interviews conducted in Saudi Arabia in December 2006 and October 2009.

⁵ It should be noted that there is no consensus on this issue among Saudi activist themselves. For instance, one of the most prominent 'constitutionalists', Matruk al-Faleh, flatly denies that the Al Saud have to be so apprehensive about the Wahhabi establishment. He labels them as an "artificial opposition" (interview by author with Matruk al-Falih, Riyadh, December 2006).

⁶ Al-Rasheed 2005; Glosemeyer 2005; Hertog 2005, 2006 and 2010; Niblock 2006.

⁷ Avineri 2010; Kazziha 2010; Hertog 2006 and 2010; Luciani 2005 and 2007; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992.

Saudi Arabia – if it does, it is at best in a very rudimentary form while ‘suffering’ from a heavy interdependent relationship with the ruling Al Saud (Montagu 2010).⁸

One final factor to be mentioned here relates to oil revenues. While the debate on the ‘rentier state’ continues unremittingly, and the jury is still out on the issue whether ‘oil hinders democracy’ (waiting for results from more sophisticated studies than Thomas Frieman’s simplistic ‘Law of Petropolitics’)⁹, there is a consensus that rent income *does* have economic and political implications but that path dependency matters, that historical facts should be taken into account and that political culture may matter too.¹⁰ Having said so, it is clear that during periods of high oil revenues, the regime can continue for some time to employ its time-honoured strategy of co-optation and clientelism combined with repression of more significant perceived threats.

Indeed the Saudi state has been doing just what social movement theory predicts will be the most successful strategy in dealing with the various strands of ‘contention’: it has followed a combined strategy of repression plus accommodation plus facilitation. While there is no ‘iron law’, it is difficult to deny that during persistent periods of low oil prices regimes will have less means to practice patronage and buy legitimacy.¹¹ In the third section of this paper we will see how this worked out in Saudi Arabia’s reality, but first a few paragraphs on the different phases of ‘reform’ (the use of inverted commas can be discussed in each case).

III. Phases of Reform

With the arrival of non-Muslim troops on Saudi oil during the 1990-91 Gulf War, a new dynamic had

entered the relationship between the state and the population.¹² The *first* push to political reform came in the aftermath of the war, with the promulgation of the Basic Law in 1992 and the introduction of the (appointed) Majlis al-Shura one year later. At the same time new administrative laws were passed that led to the installation of provincial councils. These initial steps, ironically, were the result of pressure from not particular democratic quarters, i.e. a group of Salafi clerics outside the religious bureaucracy, who later came to be known as the *Sahwa* or ‘awakened’ clerics.¹³ They were enraged by the king’s decision to allow U.S. troops on Saudi territory and, more importantly, angry with the clerical establishment’s sanctioning of the move.

In 1991 and 1992, several petitions were submitted to King Fahd, both having an Islamist flavour though encompassing many demands with which liberal critics of the regime could identify.¹⁴ The texts called for an end to corruption and nepotism, the appointment of a consultative council, and more freedom of expression. At the same time, similar demands were being propagated by dissidents in exile or living abroad (Okruhlik 1999: 306-308; Fandy 1999; Lacroix 2005 and 2010). The introduction of the Basic Law and the promise to establish a Consultative Council did, however, not satisfy the opposition and calls for further reform continued, leading to the formation of the more radical Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) in May 1993.

The Shura council started working in the mid-1990s and gradually gained some relevance.¹⁵ In 1997, the number of its members was enlarged from 60 to 90 and three Shia Muslims were among the newly appointed members (in 2001 the council was expanded again to 120 members and in 2005 once more to 150). Though the council’s role is

⁸ This view was strongly confirmed by Muhammad Salahuddin, editor-in-chief of *Al-Madina* (interview by the author, Riyadh, December 2006).

⁹ Several of the earlier serious studies: Dunning 2008; Herb 2005; Ross 2001 – and more in particular Ross 2009; Smith 2004; Youngs 2008.

¹⁰ These conclusions were reached at the end of the workshop ‘Natural Resources, Accountability, and Democracy’, organized during the Gulf Research Meeting, July 7-10, 2010, by Gerd Nonneman and Richard Youngs. During the discussions, ‘multicausality’ was stressed and there was a clear call for more in-depth case studies. Also see Aarts et al. 1991; Harris 2010; Hertog 2010; Okruhlik 1999.

¹¹ Which is not to say that this automatically would lead to reform measures as sometimes is claimed. Opinions on this issue differ, however, as came out of interviews with e.g. Awadh-Abadi, Director of the Department of Research and Studies at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, and Abd al-Aziz al-Fahad, prominent attorney and intellectual (Riyadh, December 2006).

¹² Okruhlik rightly points out, however, that the effect of the 1990-91 Gulf War should not be exaggerated. It merely accelerated a political debate that was long underway (Okruhlik 1999: 302).

¹³ The full story on the movement can be found in Lacroix 2010.

¹⁴ The first petition, the ‘Letter of Demands’ (19 May 1991), indeed had among its 453 signatories quite a few liberals. The second petition, the ‘Memorandum of Advice’ (July 1992), was signed by religious scholars and was bolder and distinctly oppositionist. For the rest, Kapiszewski reminds us that already in December 1990, a group of 43 ‘liberals’ and ‘secularists’ circulated a reformist petition (Kapiszewski 2004: 78-79).

¹⁵ For a more critical, if not cynical, perspective, see Jones 2003: 43-44. Lacey broaches the following anecdote: “Soon after the end of the Gulf War, the government of Yemen sent a peace offering to King Fahd – a donkey carrying two heavy baskets, one on either side. One basket contained a beautiful and shapely woman, the other was stacked full of gold nuggets. ‘Wonderful!’ cried the king. ‘I shall give the beautiful woman to my poor brother Sultan [the much married defence minister]. He doesn’t have enough of them. And I shall send all that gold to my poor son Abdul Aziz. He’s down to his last fifty billion riyals.’ ‘What about the donkey?’ asked his courtiers. ‘It’s so loud and stupid.’ ‘Excellent!’ cried the king. ‘Send it to the new Shura Council. That’s just what we need there!’” (Lacey 2010: 163).

overall reactive, it takes its role of advice, scrutiny and criticism seriously. It is able to receive petitions, complaints, and suggestions from the general public and can serve as “an ideal sounding board for the testing of future reform plans, and may act as the ideal vessel for their introduction as well” (Ehteshami & Wright 2007: 928). It would be naive to extrapolate from the foregoing that the Majlis al-Shura (and the provincial councils) could easily be converted into representative bodies, though that possibility might arise in a situation where the kingdom would be confronted with a new threat to its stability (Niblock 2006: 109). That ‘opportunity’ came with 9/11.

A *second* ‘wave’ of reforms followed in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks, when Saudi Arabia came under an unflattering and harsh spotlight (having delivered fifteen of the nineteen hijackers). It led to the portrayal of the kingdom as breeding ground for terrorism, based on its anachronistic, closed, and illiberal political culture. Initially, political pressure to reform came from the outside, the Bush administration in particular. Broadly speaking, it led to the U.S. administration’s “forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East” and, more specifically, the Congress introduced the Saudi Arabia Accountability Act (November 2003).

This pressure from outside – which soon subsided (see section IV) – energized many reform-minded groups inside the country.¹⁶ They viewed this as an opportunity to intensify the push for political, social and educational change. Pressure came from different circles: Islamists, liberals and Shias. It was, however, not until the arrival of al-Qa’ida (or al-Qa’ida inspired) terrorism on its own soil in 2003 that a much greater urgency was felt, leading to heated deliberations on the need for improved governance, while terrorism became the subject of intense public debate.¹⁷ In 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah received no less than five petitions, not only from Salafi reformists but also from women’s-right campaigners, constitutionalists, and Shia activists. The regime reacted by a “flurry of quasi-democratic proposals” (Dassa Kaye et al.

2008: 107), such as a modest expansion of the powers of the Majlis al-Shura, the sponsoring of National Dialogue sessions and the establishment of a quasi-independent National Human Rights Association (in April 2004). Late 2003, the Crown Prince announced that municipal council elections would be held within 12 months. In 2003 and 2004, three National Dialogue rounds were held, a potential break from a long-established tradition of monolithic discourse. Saudis from different religious backgrounds (including Sufis and Shias) and political orientations were brought together to discuss in an unusual frank atmosphere all kinds of sensitive issues.¹⁸ Together with the ‘petition sphere’, there was a kind of optimism and in hindsight the 2003-2004 period can be viewed with a tinge of nostalgia, despite its imperfections (Dassa Kaye et al. 2008: 107). The redline that was breached was the reformers’ call for a constitution, leading to the arrest of a dozen pro-reform activists in March 2004.¹⁹

Ironically, after some time, the violent attacks of May 2003 (‘the kingdom’s 9/11’) were followed by the successful implementation of non-democratic counter-terrorism measures, thereby bringing the open, ‘reformist’ atmosphere that had been created by the very same violent incident to an abrupt end. Soon the regime realized again that it should proceed cautiously so as not to antagonize the country’s large conservative constituency that both oppose violence and enjoy popular legitimacy, “however conservative their views” (ICG 2004a: 23; Kapiszewski 2004: 90). So instead of losing credibility due to the May bombings, the conservative branch within the Al Saud – represented by Prince Nayif, Minister of Interior since 1975 – managed to gain ground, reshaping national discourse and making security the country’s number one priority (Jones 2003: 48).²⁰ In this rather bleak setting, it was the municipal elections for half of the nearly 1,200 seats of the country’s 179 municipal councils that drew the most attention internationally among media and policy-makers. Originally announced for 2004, they took place in three regional rounds in early 2005.²¹ The remaining half of the seats were

¹⁶ Not all reformists share the view that external pressure has this energizing effect (interviews by author in Riyadh, December 2006).

¹⁷ Details on the violence inside Saudi Arabia, see Al-Rasheed 2007 and 2009; Hegghammer 2010; ICG 2004b; Meijer 2005.

¹⁸ Though the impact of the National Dialogue’s gatherings should not be totally belittled, overestimating its importance is much more dangerous. As Turki al-Hamad, a Saudi author and analyst, commented: “The National Dialogue is a good step, but these are still closed talks among a selected elite who are then invited to present recommendations. (...) The most important thing is for the concept of dialogue to become established in a culture that currently does not recognize it” (ICG 2004a: 17-18). The first three sessions were followed by another five, the last one taking place in April 2010.

¹⁹ Interviews by the author with Matruk al-Falih, Abdullah al-Hamid and Muhammad Sa’id Tayyib (Riyadh, December 2006).

²⁰ According to some interviewees, this policy of ‘securitization’ goes back to even before the 1979 siege of the Mecca mosque after its seizure by Juhayman al-Otaybi (interview by the author with a. o. Asad al-Shamlan, political scientist at the Institute of Diplomatic Studies, Riyadh, December 2006).

²¹ Contrary to the ubiquitous assertion of almost all commentary on the elections, these were not in fact the kingdom’s first-ever ones. When first conquering the Hijaz, Abd al-Aziz Al Saud had taken account of local sensitivities by establishing an elected Majlis al-Shura for the region in addition to five municipal councils for the main towns; and in the 1950s under King Saud local elections were begun, only for the experiment to be shelved when King Faisal came to power.

to be appointed; the councils mainly deal with non-political issues such as local services and planning matters; women were barred from either standing or voting, albeit for 'logistical' and not legal reasons; and no group campaigns, platforms or manifestos were allowed – let alone political parties. From the perspective of the post-1960s era the 2005 elections looked like a significant development, both in themselves, and for the way in which they evolved, including the atmosphere that developed around them. So far, however, the councils have largely proven toothless, although a few (some ten out of the total 179) of these councils, especially in the Hijaz and the Eastern Province, did have some success and have been able to create a basic form of 'popular support'.²² After the modest, often cosmetic and seemingly calculated reform initiatives of 2003-2004, a period of standstill set in during which the initial reforms begun by King Abdullah had effectively ground to halt.²³

It would take another five years before Saudi Arabia entered a *third* wave of reforms. In February 2009, King Abdullah announced a range of new ministerial, legal, and bureaucratic appointments that were surprising in scope and timing. It was the king's first major reshuffling since he ascended the throne five years earlier. A significant appointment was that of Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad as the new education minister, who is regarded as progressive. Not less noteworthy, though probably of less significance, was the appointment of a woman as deputy education minister, in charge of girls' affairs. As if that was not a sufficient affront to the conservative, misogynist Saudi clerical establishment, King Abdullah also used his powers to make sweeping changes in its leadership. Not only was a hardliner removed as head of the Supreme Council of Justice (replaced by the king's close advisor, Salih bin Humayd, the President of the Majlis al-Shura), but also the heads of the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, of the Permanent Council of Religious Research and Fatwas, and of the Council of the Supreme Judicial Council Judges were removed, while part of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars was replaced (Meijer 2010; Fakhry Ansary 2009).²⁴ In the following

months, the debate between reformists and conservatives culminated in several rather dramatic events.²⁵ For now, the zenith was reached in August 2010 when King Abdullah took position in the 'fatwa chaos' – one decree even more embarrassing than the other – and declared that only a limited number of 'approved' senior clerics was allowed to issue fatwas.²⁶ This last series of reforms looks more profound than the earlier ones. The reform process' wavering character, however, persisted. In May 2009, it was announced that the municipal councils' mandate was extended for another two years, effectively postponing the elections. Also very little was heard about improving women's rights, including the right to vote. In general terms, one should realize the fact that the reform process is totally dependent on the grace of King Abdullah and has not acquired a momentum of its own among the Saudi citizenry (notwithstanding the 'explosion' of anti-clerical articles in the Saudi press). One could (and should) even argue that with the weakening of the power of the clerical establishment, the Al Saud has increased its power. True, the present king enjoys a level of popularity that is seldom acquired by a ruler with such extensive powers, but the 'devil is in the succession'.

he recent appointment of Prince Nayif as second deputy prime minister was greeted with alarm by the reformists. It is an euphemism to say that his commitment to follow the path set by Abdullah is far from guaranteed and "he might well prefer to revert back to the more conventional, less consultative rule of King Fahd" (Club de Madrid 2009: 155). Undeniably, progress is easily reversible and the path of reform remains far from certain.²⁷

It is well-known that the House of Saud has unremittently ruled the country since 1932 in an authoritarian fashion and the centre of power has remained firmly closed off from contestation. Nonetheless, as was shown above, there were times of 'openings' – however small they have been – followed by 'closings' (of different shapes and sizes). Let's have a look now how this can be analysed in terms of inclusion and exclusion, knowing these are two sides of the same coin in so far as both are invoked to maintain power.

²² See Dassa Kaye et al. 2008 for a brief survey of various opinions on the 2005 municipal elections (117-119). See Kraetschmar 2010 for a more technical analysis of electoral institutions' relevance for understanding Arab electoral politics.

²³ Though in the intermediate years some initiatives were taken in the field of the judiciary and the educational system (Club de Madrid 2009: 141) and an Allegiance Commission (*hay'at al-bay'a*) was established, which for the first time ever gives – on paper at least – 35 princes the responsibility to decide who the next Crown Prince will be (Al-Badi 2008; Mouline 2010; Stenslie 2009: 221-264).

²⁴ The king even went so far as 'nuancing' the monopoly the strict Hanbali code of jurisprudence by appointing religious scholars from the more moderate Hanafi, Shafi'i and Maliki schools to the Council of Senior Religious Scholars.

²⁵ As Meijer aptly notes, reformists can be located not only within society (mainly expressing their views via the liberal press), but also both within the official and the informal clergy, and – not to forget – within the Al Saud itself. One of the most contentious issues was gender segregation (*ikhlatat*), related to the recently established, and co-ed., King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). More details on this and related cases in Meijer 2010.

²⁶ This 'war of fatwas' had to do with the lack of sources of religious authority after the death (in 1999) of the kingdom's most prominent and powerful mufti, Abdullah Abd al-Aziz bin Baz. He was succeeded by the much less authoritative Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh (Jones 2009: 112; Steinberg 2005: 34).

²⁷ Club de Madrid 2009: 149-155; Meijer 2010: 26-27.

IV. Inclusion and Exclusion

Studies on elections in Arab countries have clearly shown that these are not primarily intended to furnish domestic legitimacy. In the best case, they can be seen as “the mechanism through which opposition forces are incorporated into the formal political game (...) but they are not allowed to question the rules of the game that govern their participation” (Schlumberger 2007: 15). The situation in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is even worse: no elections at all, apart from the not too meaningful municipal elections that took place in 2005. What the regime instead does is using various other mechanisms by which popular actors are being included, albeit marginally and temporarily. Thus a “superficial atmosphere of change is created that allows for a further manipulation of the political process through cunning cooptation, containment, and/or repression” (Brown and Shahin 2010:6). The Saudi regime distinctly fits the ‘consolidated rentier monarchy’ type – characterized by low contestation and low-middle inclusion – that recently was developed by Raymond Hinnebusch (Hinnebusch 2010).

When it comes to defining the concepts of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’, we refer to Tobias Schumacher’s framework (Schumacher 2010). Inclusion has to be understood as “a pro-active, regime-initiated and regime-controlled process by which societal groups and categories are effectively included into the polity – and not just the state – with a view to respond to identified needs and/or public demands for greater political participation”. Exclusion, in its turn, is defined as “a multi-faceted and fluid force which is defined and utilized by the regime in order to limit, possibly fragment or even erode the scope of previously or simultaneously initiated inclusionary measures aim[ing] at ensuring and, ideally, cementing existing power arrangements” (Schumacher 2010: 6-7). It is thus crucial to understand that these strategies, often used in parallel, are two sides of the same coin invoked to consolidate regime durability (Schlumberger 2007).

The next step would be trying to answer the questions: (a) under which domestic, regional and global conditions did reforms occur?; and (b) what were the primary and secondary causes for reforms (and backtracking on those reforms)? It seems that in the Saudi context several factors – on three (‘classical’) levels of analysis – come to

the fore. On the domestic level, a key issue is the combination of demographics and unemployment. Without any doubt, this factor is persistent and does not allow the government to lean back but to seriously consider reform measures (Niblock 2006: 115-118, 173; Hertog 2010: 185-222). Regionally speaking, it were the geopolitical effects of the Kuwait crisis in 1990 and the occupation of Iraq (starting in March 2003) that mattered. Both events galvanized the views and activities of those who favour reforms, but it should be noted that in the case of Iraq’s occupation (accompanied by the pan-Arab satellite news media’s graphic coverage of the near-daily carnage) anti-reformists, too, were lent a helping hand.²⁸ On a global level, in the wake of 9/11, an impulse for reform was given since the onset of the U.S. initiated ‘war on terror’, but pressure largely dissipated after the Iraq invasion, much to the chagrin of some reform activists (Dassa Kaye et al. 2008: 120). After having outlined these notions on the politics of inclusion and exclusion, it might be instructive to look more closely at some concrete cases. For reasons that will become clear, I selected two exemplary ones: state-Sahwa and state-Shia relations. Both are illustrative of the inclusion-exclusion paradigm at work under authoritarian conditions.

IV.1. The Sahwa: From Exclusion to Inclusion to Fragmentation²⁹

Although the Sahwa phenomenon dates back to the 1970s, it gained specific political relevance in the wake of the U.S.-led Gulf War of 1990-91. As Madawi Al-Rasheed notes:

“In the Saudi context Sahwa is a movement that strives to re-enchant a politically disenchanting world” (Al-Rasheed 2007: 67).

Leading scholars, most importantly Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda, won widespread acclaim by fiercely protesting against the presence of U.S. troops on holy Saudi soil.³⁰ Because they also aired their grievances on issues such as corruption and freedom of expression, a ripple effect occurred on subsequent, broader reform initiatives. As Gwenn Okruhlik remarks:

“Islamists opened the floodgates of criticism in the kingdom by invoking the Islamically grounded right to advise the ruler” (Okruhlik 2002: 26).

²⁸ One may add to this Hizbullah’s summer 2006 war with Israel and Iranian nuclear ambitions, both having a further chilling effect on liberalization. In this context, one might refer to the notorious and often-quoted phrase attributed to King Fahd: “Why start fires on the inside when there are fires on the outside?” (Dassa Kaye et al. 2008: 119).

²⁹ For the full story on the *al-sahwa al-islamiyya*, see Lacroix 2005 and 2010, less extensive in Al-Rasheed 2007: 59-101; ICG 2004b; Sager 2005.

³⁰ The Sahwa movement was much broader than the well-known shaykhs. It also included a number of intellectuals such as Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, Mohammad al-Hodhayf, Muhsin al-Awajy, Saad al-Faqih and Muhammad al-Mas’ari (see references above).

It took some time before the government, shocked by the Sahwa's boldness and alarmed by their rising popularity, reacted. It was only in 1993, after some of them had established the earlier mentioned Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, that mass arrests took place in the Sahwa circles and many preachers were put behind bars. Al-Awda and al-Hawali were among them, though they did not belong to the CDLR (they were in prison from 1994 onwards). Gradually, starting in 1997, some would be released but the two shaykhs languished in the Saudi prison system until 1999. Soon after their release, the shaykhs were approached by the government which was looking for their support after the death of the clerical heavyweight, Abdullah Abd al-Aziz bin Baz in 1999. His passing away had created a vacuum of religious authority that few others among the official *ulama* could fill.

"Because of their independent streak, their wilfulness in the face of political pressure and imprisonment, al-Awda and al-Hawali did" (Jones 2009: 112).

The al-Qa'ida attacks in the United States, followed by local terrorism in 2003-2004, prompted the two men to speak out against extremism and to openly support the rule of the royal family (though it would be oversimplified to conclude that they had become puppets of the state as was shown by expressions of outrage against U.S. policy in the region, in particular after the invasion of Iraq). This successful cooptation provided the regime with a powerful clerical base, "with greater credibility than the official establishment, to attack the *jihadis'* ideology, stave off recruits and possibly foster defections" (Dassa Kaye et al. 2008: 116). Al-Awda also attended the first series of National Dialogue meetings and both he and al-Hawali supported candidates for the 2005 municipal elections.

In the meantime, fissures within the movement became more manifest. Some, like Mohsen al-Awajy, burnt all his boats and at a certain moment could be seen as an "ex-Sahwi" that played the role of "unofficial spokesman of the Ministry of Interior" (Al-Rasheed 2007: 98-100), while others gradually drifted towards the *jihadi* trend, joined other Saudi Islamists abroad or moved out of Islamism altogether and joined Saudi liberals.³¹ In early 2004, twelve prominent Islamo-liberals were arrested, among them 'Islamists' and 'liberals', after they had created their own independent human rights organ-

ization and called for constitutional monarchy. Some of these 'constitutionalist', like Abdullah al-Hamid, stayed in prison until August 2005 when Crown Prince Abdullah ascended the throne.³² Unsurprisingly, the last word appears to have the regime's, worried by the momentum gained by the Islamo-liberals.

"[It] decided to try and crush the development of the movement. The rise and seeming fall of the Islamo-liberal trend, caught between the rock of the traditional distrust and rivalry between Islamists and liberals and the hard place of the regime, therefore illustrates the difficulty for post-Islamist movements to impose themselves on Middle Eastern political scenes" (Lacroix 2005: 56).

The tested recipe of the Al Saud – divide and rule on the basis of cooptation and repression – had once more done its job.

IV.2. The Twelver Shias: From Revolt to Rapprochement to Recrimination³³

There is no space here to deal with the history of the Shias in the kingdom in detail. Suffice to say that from 1913, when the Al Saud conquered what would become the Eastern province, until the late 1970s, most Shias had embraced a form of political quietism – notwithstanding the fact that they have been systematically subject to (different kinds of) discrimination and sectarian incitement. It was only in 1979, in the slipstream of the Islamic revolution in Iran, that their second-class citizenship made them fight back against oppression. What followed was a violent wave of unrest in the streets of al-Qatif and other cities in the Eastern Province, provoking the use of overwhelming force by the Saudi security forces. Mass arrests took place and hundreds were driven into exile. This uprising marked a pivotal turning point in the relation between the state and the Shias.

It was only in the wake of the first 'wave of reforms' in the early 1990s that relations between Saudi Arabia's Shias and the state improved again. In 1993, after a negotiated agreement with King Fahd, a policy of engagement with the regime started. Hundreds of exiles were allowed to return to the kingdom, political prisoners were released, and promises were made that social and religious issues would be addressed. It was indeed a re-

³¹ In an interview with the author, al-Awajy scornfully labelled Abdullah al-Hamid as "a joker, not a real Islamist" – at the same time calling for a "Wahhabi perestroika" (interview in Riyadh, December 2006).

³² In later years, al-Hamid and others were jailed again several times.

³³ The subject of discussion here will mainly be the position of the Twelver Shias (or Jafaris), making up 60-65% of the total Shia population in Saudi Arabia. Other Shia sects are Ismailis and Zaidis. In total, Shias make up 10-15% of the total population (which is estimated at 25 million, of which 7 million resident foreigners; some sources indicate quite different numbers, like Lacey who mentions 18 million natives and 10 million foreigners, Lacey 2010: 273).

markable development after decades of political animosity.³⁴ Not everyone though was charmed by the rapprochement of Shia leaders like Hassan al-Saffar and refused any conciliation and continued to support violent resistance to Saudi power. They did so by joining Hizbullah al-Hijaz, the main rival of the other Saudi Shia opposition group, the Organization for Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP).³⁵ After 1996, the violent trend virtually disappeared from the scene, due to massive arrests and general Saudi-Iranian rapprochement (leading to a security agreement in 2001).

Though grievances were not addressed as demanded, from the mid-1990s onwards the dominant point of Shia activism was essentially communalist, focusing on reform and pluralism, mainly trying to defend the community's interests *vis-à-vis* other sectarian groups. Trying to build bridges, several Shia political activists signed the January 2003 petition 'A Vision for the Present and Future of the Nation', calling for political, social and educational reforms. Two months later, surfing on the wave of the Riyadh 'Spring', 450 Shias from different political backgrounds handed a petition of their own, 'Partners of the Nation', to the Crown Prince. It was not only meant to emphasize ongoing community grievances (calling for greater freedom of worship and speech, more political opportunities for Shias, curbing sectarian hatred, and more generally ending of discrimination), but also to reaffirm the Shia loyalty to the Saudi state (often questioned by Sunni Islamists).

This showing of allegiance to the Al Saud had everything to do with the realization that their "community's security is intimately bound up with the survival of a regime that alone can mediate between the various and often competing groups while keeping the most extreme at bay. Hence the emphasis on national unity, coexistence, cooperation, the centrality of Islam, all of which are designed to refute suspicions of disloyalty to the regime or central state" (ICG 2005: 5). After the American invasion of Iraq, and the elimination of the Sunni power structures, this was amplified during rising fears of Shia empowerment.

Initially the reform movement's efforts and Shia activism appeared to pay some dividend. Shia members were nominated to the Majlis al-Shura and they played a prominent role in the National Dialogue. This sphere of moderation had come about with the help of senior royals but also by moderate

elements within the Sahwa movement (Club de Madrid 2009: 151). The 'honeymoon' would not last much longer however.

As set out above, the reform push soon succumbed to several internal and external forces. Starting in May 2003 and lasting until mid-2005, the state responded to the terrorist threat through heavy-handed tactics, including a crackdown on the reform movement itself. The most likely explanation for the state's decreasing tolerance for the reformers is given by Toby Jones:

"[The] Saudi leaders believed the activists had grown too bold too quickly and that the movement was poised to win over a significant base of popular support" (Jones 2009: 23).

Though it is highly unlikely that this equally applies to Shia activists, they suffered the same fate as the Sunni reformist camp. The municipal elections of 2005 brought a temporary relief for the Shias, so it seemed. Though mainly of a cosmetic kind, they were a "coming-out party of sorts" for them (ICG 2005: 7). The enthusiasm to participate among Shias was in stark contrast to the lethargy towards the elections in the rest of the country. As a result, they won most of the seats in both al-Qatif and al-Hasa. All winners were supporters of, or sympathetic to, shaykh Hassan al-Saffar.

On the external front, the Iraq war had its effects too. In the course of 2006, during periods of increased sectarian violence, Saudi clerical firebrands issued declarations that supported anti-occupation and anti-Shia *jihad* in Iraq, stopping just short of calling for regional war against Shiism and genocide against the Shias. Although Saudi Arabia's mufti called for unity in Iraq and renounced sectarianism, the kingdom's political leaders seemed attempting "to ride the sectarian tiger" by remaining conspicuously silent on the religious scholars' diatribe (Jones 2007: 31-32). A related 'Iraq effect' concerns the possible return of Saudi Sunni insurgents (who had gone to Iraq "to kill Shias"). It has led to growing fears among Shias, some of whom started to take their own security measures.

More recently, in late February 2009, state-Shia relations seriously deteriorated. While visiting the al-Baqi cemetery in Medina, one of Islam's holiest sites, Shia pilgrims were attacked by Saudi reli-

³⁴ More details in Jones 2006 and 2009; ICG 2005. In a "classic Al Saud balancing act", the king also ordered the release of a comparable batch of Salafi prisoners (Lacey 2010: 174).

³⁵ In 1991, as part of the overture to the state, the OIRAP changed its name into Reform Movement (*al-haraka al-islahiyah*). See Louër 2008: 229-235. More on Hizbullah al-Hijaz, see Matthiesen 2009 and 2010. Many hold this organization responsible for the June 1996 terrorist attack in al-Khobar that killed 19 American military service personnel and wounding almost four hundred others. Considerable mystery, however, continues to surround the bombing and little or no evidence except suspicion exists (ICG 2005; Matthiesen 2010).

gious and regular police. The incidents in Medina outraged Shias in the Eastern Province, encouraging an array of new activism in the region (Matthiesen 2009). It was much less the expected usual suspects, like Hizbullah al-Hijaz, whose presence was subsequently felt, but previously unknown groups like the 'Force of Youth', 'Free Men of al-Qatif' and 'Deliverance'. Most vocal, however, is a local clerical agitator, Nimr al-Nimr, from al-Awwamiyya, an almost purely Shia and poor village outside of al-Qatif. In his so-called 'dignity speech', al-Nimr blasted the sectarian policies of the Al Saud and, more importantly, raised the possibility of seeking independence from Saudi Arabia.

It goes without saying that 'Medina' and subsequent events in the Eastern Province put al-Saffar and his group of moderates in a difficult position. Obviously, being staunchly nationalist, they rejected al-Nimr's call for secession, but at the same time they could not remain silent on regime's violence and the increasingly shrill sectarian commentary from inside the kingdom. Though it is too early to judge its real depth, but clearly there is a growing divide between the 'negotiators' (like Hassan al-Saffar and Jafar al-Shayeb) and the 'rejectionists' (like Nimr al-Nimr and Hamza al-Hasan).³⁶ For now there is an uneasy calm in the Eastern Province, and al-Saffar c.s. still dominate the political landscape, but as long as they do not deliver real results from their dealings with the government the challenge from the extremists will not subside.³⁷ Taking the obvious differences between the case of the Sahwa and the Shias into account, at least one similarity stands out: the royal family sticks to the tried and trusted methods: promising reform but delaying its implementation, cunningly coopting and/or coercing opponents, and playing the divide-and-rule game to fracture and weaken the opposition.

V. Conclusion: Casting the Net Wider?

Regime stability – distinct from political stability – can be theorized in different ways. In a recent doctoral dissertation, a survey was given of the four main perspectives: 'oil rentier state'; 'Islamic state'; 'Western client state'; and 'dynastic monarchy' (Stenslie 2009: 19-68). Each of these has its ana-

lytical strengths and shortcomings, but none of them provides a sufficient explanation for the stability of the Al Saud. That is why Stenslie adds another perspective which may have more explanatory power. His thesis is that the main roots of the Saudi monarchy's resilience are to be found in mechanisms, formal and informal, behind *elite integration*. The Al Saud has built strategic, but flexible, alliances with four elite segments: religious leaders; tribal leaders; leaders of the bureaucracy; and business leaders. The way the system works gives the House of Saud a 'corporative' character, meaning that the regime maintains its authoritarian rule through corporative mechanisms (Stenslie 2009: 70-75). To some extent, by doing this, he stands on the shoulders of 'good old' Khaldoun al-Naqeeb and, more recently, Steffen Hertog who coined the term 'segmented clientelism' (Hertog 2005 and 2010).³⁸

To a large extent, the inclusion-exclusion perspective that was chosen for this article fits the elite integration approach. It is, however, slightly different in the sense that 'elite' is broader defined than in the standard elite integration literature. And, as I will argue below, the net might even have to be cast wider to fully come to grips with the Al Saud's successful way of reconfiguring authoritarianism. The voluntary sector's role (or 'civil society') – in an almost 'symbiotic' relationship with the state – looks increasingly important and deserves some attention. But before doing that some more general concluding remarks on the regime's 'liberalization' and 'deliberalization' strategies are in place. Taking the three-level functions of public space – expression, protest, and participation – there is no doubt that Saudi Arabia has clearly witnessed some progress on the first, very little progress on the second and hardly any progress on the third.³⁹ As Neil Partrick aptly argues:

"Reform in Saudi Arabia does not constitute a clearly articulated program to reach a definite outcome; rather, what is often referred to as reform is more about changing the environment. A more open environment has certainly emerged in the last few years. Various media outlets controlled by Saudi Arabia's competitive ruling elite publish

³⁶ In a typical restless mood, Shaykh al-Saffar commented to be willing to "talk to al-Nimr at any time" (interview by the author, al-Qatif, December 2006).

³⁷ For a less alarmist view, see Kwartan 2009.

³⁸ In the conclusion of his dissertation, Stenslie adds the important caveat that elite integration in itself can never be sufficient to explain regime stability: "The remarkable resilience of the monarchy cannot be fully explained without taking into account the other theoretical explanations"; and "elite integration is not a necessary precondition for regime stability, but rather one of several factors that in sum might explain the survival of an authoritarian regime" (Stenslie 2009: 266-267).

³⁹ An interesting, though rather embryonic, development that covers all three dimensions is the debate in the Saudi media on 'citizenship'. Unsurprisingly, it is the Shias who are most actively promoting equal citizenship. They rightly argue that citizenship is not simply about being a national but implies rights as well as responsibilities, referring to the distinction between *jinsiyya* and *muwatana*, the first one defined as 'passport citizenship' (or the 'right of abode') and the second one as 'democratic citizenship'. On the 'politics of citizenship', see *Arab Human Development Report 2009*: 54-77; Butenschon 2000; Castillejo 2009; Davis 2000; Longva 2000; Partrick 2009; Shechter 2009; van Hensbroek 2007.

different commentaries on the local and regional scene. But this is not a true debate; it is more a public posting of distinct opinions” (Partrick 2010).

As long as the regime has no plans for any changes in the political system (beyond the local elections), the ruling family will not turn soon into a simple royal family (Niblock 2006: 175). Although, making a benevolent evaluation, King Abdullah has “astutely stressed the need for increased responsibility for the fate of the nation, [taking] pains to be seen to consult widely among the population” (Club de Madrid 2009: 155), it is far from guaranteed that he will stay the course. As, for example, recent history has shown after the Riyadh ‘Spring’ of 2003, Abdullah cannot make bricks without straw. Even in the case that we assume that he sincerely wants reform, he just as easily has backtracked and there is no reason to expect this pattern to change in the near future. As in the past, key contextual factors – on a domestic, regional, and a global level – will determine the ebb-and-flow’s rhythm of the reform process. Summarily, these may have to do with demographics (mostly related to unemployment); pressure from Salafi hardliners; the dispersed nature of Saudi decisionmaking; different kinds of terrorist violence (some of which, like the local variant, may act as a double-edged sword); regional turbulence; international pressure (though mostly of a fleeting nature); and of course oil revenues. In a worst-case scenario, King Abdullah’s successor may abandon the ‘reform’ course altogether.

Now where does ‘civil society’ come in? Based on some preliminary findings, the hypothesis has been developed that the state – at least under the rule of the incumbent king – needs civil society organizations as a counterweight to the conservative pressure of Wahhabi elements from within that same state apparatus.⁴⁰ Although Wahhabis lost control over policy and politics to royalty and state bureaucrats, and *wahhabiya* itself produced the seeds of mutation leading to interpretations that challenged the discourse of control, the state is still officially based on it. No longer a hegemonic force, but “the conservatives can resist any attempt at reform and call the government’s bluff” (Meijer 2010: 93). It is in this context that civil society might act as a ‘partner’. Based on extensive fieldwork, Caroline Montagu demonstrates the close relationship between the state and the voluntary sector:

“As the old unity of umara’ (rulers) and ‘ulama’ (clerics) breaks down, the Al Sa’ud’s need to forge national identity increases and thus their reliance on the voluntary sector’s good offices” (Montagu 2010: 72).

That might sound too good to be true and it is debatable whether the relationship can indeed be labelled as ‘interdependent’, as Montagu does, “the Al Sa’ud (...) respect the voluntary sector’s authority in socio-political issues, *using it and being used by it*” (Montagu 2010: 82-83, italics PA). Further research has to provide evidence, but on the basis of what is available to date this is slightly dubious. Hence it might be more accurate to speak at least about ‘*asymmetric* interdependence’. Not only does the government strictly control the voluntary sector, but it has also successfully fragmented it. Non-governmental organizations mostly act under royal patronage and, much to the dismay of civil society activists, in the absence of a civil society law (although such a law has been approved by the Shura Council in December 2007, it is still under discussion in the cabinet).⁴¹

In the short to medium term, it is unlikely that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will move beyond the confines of ‘liberalized autocracy’. This has very little to do, as is often argued, with the ‘fact’ that Saudi Arabian society is more conservative than the ruling family, that the royals who seek to initiate progressive change are held in check by a deeply conservative society.⁴² Such an argument is disingenuous “in that historically it is the deep conservatism of the state, especially during the reign of King Fahd during the 1980s and 1990s, that has brought about deficiencies in the educational system and almost complete lack of a secular civil society (...). The state has also been the instigator and enforcer of policies that have segregated spheres for men and women and placed restrictions on freedom of expression and association, policies which have ultimately served to entrench conservatism within the country” (Club de Madrid 2009: 142). Surveys have shown that Saudi Arabians favour further moves towards liberalization in many spheres, not least women’s rights. It is simply wrong to infer political attitudes from social attitudes. As Okruhlik properly stresses:

“There are political liberals who are social conservatives, and social liberals who are

⁴⁰ Recently research on ‘civil society’, ‘position of women’ and ‘political trends and debates’ has started within the framework of the research program “Strengthening Knowledge of and Dialogue with the Islamic/Arab World”, financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A first round of field work has taken place; more will follow. Also see Montagu 2010.

⁴¹ The need for a sound legal and administrative environment is strongly emphasized by activists like Matruk al-Falih and Jafar al-Shayeb, and Muhammad Fahad al-Qahtani (interviews in Riyadh, December 2006 and October 2010; in Cairo, November 2010). In more general terms, a much less pessimistic assessment is given by Höhne-Sparborth (2008) who argues that changes in the social sphere will ultimately have a spin-off effect in the political sphere.

⁴² Khaled al-Dakhil, Saudi writer and academic, argued that “even if society is not ‘ready’, the government should *make it ready*” (interview by the author, Riyadh, December 2006).

political conservatives. Social conservatism and religious devotion do not translate into support for political authoritarianism" (Okhrulik 2009: 94).

All in all, however, the Al Saud remains robust, implementing changes without real reform, thereby breaking its already high record on the 'YIPPI score' (years in power per incumbent

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