National identity in the Arab world is a tenuous concept, often intertwined with and overshadowed by social and cultural allegiances. The Al-Saud family, rulers of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, have managed to unite the disparate religious and ethnic elements of their society — at least they have united them enough to forge a functioning nation-state. But not all Saudi subjects accept the Al-Saud's kingdom as synonymous with their own concept of a true national identity. Frederick W. Weston, III traces the history of the Al-Saud's efforts at state-building and concludes that national identity is still an unresolved question for the kingdom. Modernization has strengthened allegiance to the nation but weakened allegiance to the state (the Al-Saud) among the emerging middle class; this has potentially serious implications for the ruling family's political legitimacy.

“A Saudi? I carry a Saudi passport, yes; but I am an Arab.”
— Arab student to the author,
Jeddah, 1983

Lurking in the student's response is an entire complex of personal, societal, and political perceptions which are at best only occasionally compatible. Questions of Arab national identity and political legitimacy that arose in the 19th century are still valid; the failure to reconcile them accounts for much of the unrest we witness in the Middle East today (for example, in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine).

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Originally, national identity found expression in opposition to foreign domination and colonial rule. However, in the nearly 70 years since the First World War, the British and French have quit their imperial holdings. Throughout the Arab Middle East (with the exception of Palestine) sovereign, independent nations have emerged within borders not wholly of their own creation, but for whose integrity they are willing to take up arms.

State boundaries were imposed upon the Middle East in much the same way they were upon parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Because these new borders had little justification in history, their states demanded new allegiances which eroded the traditional political structures and symbols of identification. The questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” assume, therefore, in addition to personal, familial, and religious salience, a sharp political significance upon which the security and efficacy of current governments depend. How then are citizens’ perceptions of national identity and governments’ claims to political legitimacy reconciled?

In the case of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, one might conclude that the ruling Al-Saud’s ascendancy has been the consequence of their political ambition, embrace of an Islamic ideology, centralization of power, and accumulation of wealth. This is no doubt true, yet it overlooks the result of the Al-Saud’s efforts since the turn of the century: the creation of a unified nation-state with which, rather than with the Al-Saud itself, many of its citizens can now identify.

The essence of that identity finds its expression in terms of history, language, religion, modernization, and political geography. The question of identity is not “What is it to be a Saudi Arab?” but rather “What is it to be an Arab living in the country called Saudi Arabia?” Answers and their divergence from the Al-Saud’s claims to rule have crucial ramifications for the future of the kingdom.

**Bases for Political Legitimacy**

The Al-Saud family emerged within the traditional political structure of central Arabia. The historical legacy and religious doctrine with which they justified their rule remain at the core of their claims to legitimacy today.

*History.* The domination of the Arabian Peninsula by the Al-Saud has its origins in an alliance of convenience forged by two remarkable men in 1744.1

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Muhammad ibn Saud was the ruler of Dar‘iya, a small town a few miles northwest of Riyadh in the Najd, the central Arabian plateau. Into his domain came Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who for some years had been traveling throughout the peninsula preaching a conservative, reformist Islam (see the following section for details). Muhammad ibn Saud recognized the political significance of the Wahhabi movement, which had already taken root in parts of the Najd, and graciously offered the teacher “protection equal to that of the chief’s own women and children.”

Secure in the patronage of the Dar‘iya leader, ibn Abd al-Wahhab continued his preaching and wrote letters to scholars and leaders around the peninsula. Responses to his call to join the new movement varied, but by 1746 he and the Al-Saud felt confident that force could achieve that which proselytism had not. They declared a jihād (holy war) on their opponents and began a military campaign that by 1773 had captured Riyadh and much of the Najd. Muhammad ibn Saud had died in 1765 and had been succeeded by his son, under whose armies the Wahhabis conquered Hasa in the east, the Empty Quarter in the south, and the Asir in the southwest, and they reached the Red Sea. By the time Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab died in 1791, the movement had gained enough momentum to proceed without him. In 1803, the Wahhabi armies marched into Mecca. Medina and the rest of the Hejaz (western Arabia) were annexed in 1804, and by the end of the decade both Baghdad and Damascus had been threatened.

The magnitude of the Saudi–Wahhabi achievement cannot be overestimated. By extending their domain on the peninsula from the Arabian Sea to the Red, “they had done what no other Arabian leaders had accomplished since the days of the Prophet Muhammad”¹² 12 centuries earlier. This state of affairs, however, was not destined to remain. The Ottoman Sultan, the ascendant Islamic ruler and nominal suzerain of the Hejaz since 1517, could not tolerate the loss of the Holy Cities and with them the lucrative Ḥajj (pilgrimage). He authorized Muhammad Ali Pasha of Egypt to invade the peninsula, and in October 1811, the campaign began. Medina and Mecca fell quickly to the Egyptians, but it was not until 1818 that Dar‘iya succumbed. A year later, the Egyptians withdrew to the Hejaz and left the vacuum of central Arabia

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to the defeated but contentious tribes. The Egyptians had concluded the first successful invasion of central Arabia by a foreign army; and the first Saudi-Wahhabi empire had been destroyed.5

In 1824, Saudi rule reemerged in Riyadh. Careful not to antagonize the Egyptians in the Hejaz, the Saudis expanded eastward, so that by 1833 their rule extended along the entire coast of the Arabian Sea. Family infighting over issues of succession led to several changes of leadership. In 1836, the Egyptians once again marched on the Najd, this time with the intention of annexing the region. Riyadh fell in 1837 and ultimately most of the peninsula came under their control. European intervention in Muhammad Ali's war with the Ottomans in Syria led to a withdrawal of the Egyptians from the Najd in 1841. During the next two decades, the Al-Saud arose once more to dominate central Arabia. Again, its conquests proved short-lived. Disputes over succession and now competition with a northern tribe, the Al-Rashid, resulted in the diminution of the Saudi realm. In 1891, the Saudis were decisively defeated by the Al-Rashid and the family went into exile in Kuwait.6

On the night of January 15, 1902, a small force led by Abd al-Aziz (21-year-old son of the previous Saudi ruler and known in the West as ibn Saud) stormed Riyadh and secured the city in the name of the Al-Saud.7 Thus began the long campaign to reestablish Saudi rule in Arabia. Abd al-Aziz returned his father and family to Riyadh, then traveled south to drum up support among the townspeople and Bedouin tribes.8

In the fall of 1902, the Al-Rashid attempted to regain control of Riyadh, but were defeated. From that time onward, the Najd remained firmly in Abd al-Aziz's control and he expanded his domain northward and eastward. This brought him into direct confrontation with the Ottomans. Abd al-Aziz tried to enlist British assistance but failed, so that in 1913, he felt constrained to sign a treaty with the Ottomans which recognized his status as a Turkish vassal.9

Until 1912, Abd al-Aziz had set about his task of reunifying Arabia based on the Al-Saud claim to historic, dynastic rule. In that year, however, he resolved to revive the Wahhabi movement and the Al-Saud's traditional role

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9. Ibid., pp. 30-36.
as its sponsor. Hoping to appeal to Bedouin Islamic sensibilities, Abd al-Aziz sent religious leaders schooled in the Wahhabi doctrine to the tribes. The issue of these efforts was the establishment of *hijar* (meaning "migrations," based on the first Muslim community established in Medina by the Prophet in A.D. 622). Here the settlers formed agricultural "communities of brethren in the faith," or *Ikhwan* (see the following section for details). Abd al-Aziz's purpose was twofold. First, he wanted to create a standing army (eventually, more than 60 *hijar* provided over 60,000 fighters), and second, he intended to undermine the nomadic existence of the tribes, whose fractiousness Abd al-Aziz clearly recognized as a severe threat to his rule. He was successful to varying degrees, but it appears that early on in his struggle Abd al-Aziz perceived the territorial limits to his expansion and their incompatibility with the traditional Arabian way of life (see below, *Geography*).

In August 1914, the First World War broke out. The Al-Rashid, allies of the Turks, were still Abd al-Aziz's primary competitors for dominion in central Arabia. In the Hejaz, another antagonist emerged: the Hashemite family under Sherif Hussein of Mecca, who trace their lineage directly to the Prophet and his clan, the Hashim.

During the early years of the War, the Sherif negotiated with the British Foreign Office in Cairo to obtain support for an Arab revolt against the Ottomans. Meanwhile, the British India Office secured a vague promise from Abd al-Aziz to help the British take Basra in Iraq in return for Britain's recognition of his suzerainty over the Najd, Hasa, and remaining eastern districts of the peninsula. Abd al-Aziz finally signed a treaty with the British in December 1915. It "did not obligate him, as the government of India would have liked, to side actively with Britain in the war; nor did Britain obligate itself to assist Ibn Saud. . . ." Abd al-Aziz was not prepared to assist the British in Iraq, partly because by this time their campaign was foundering and partly because he was busy combatting several tribal rebellions.

In June 1916, Sherif Hussein raised the flag of revolt against the Turks in the Hejaz. British promises of support for the Arab Revolt and eventual Hashemite rule over Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire were seen by

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10. Ibid., p. 40.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., p. 38.
13. There is little doubt that personal political ambitions motivated Hussein; but, nevertheless, the Arab Revolt did appeal to pan-Arab, nationalistic sentiments throughout the Ottoman Empire.
Abd al-Aziz "as a case of double dealing, and British material support to his enemy as a mortal threat to his own position." The exigencies of the war and his own relationship with the British prevented Abd al-Aziz from confronting Sherif Hussein until nearly eight years later.

In 1919, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the end of the First World War, Abd al-Aziz's Ikhwan decisively defeated the Sherif's forces east of Taif. British insistence prevented Abd al-Aziz from advancing on Mecca. A British-sponsored armistice was negotiated, and Abd al-Aziz moved on the Asir, the mountainous region south of the Hejaz, and annexed it in 1920. On November 4, 1921, he defeated the Al-Rashid and established control over all their northern areas. Once again he faced the Hashemites, though this time along the frontiers of the new states of Transjordan and Iraq, ruled by Sherif Hussein's sons. Raids by tribes on all sides prompted the British to convene a conference to secure national borders. The results were the Treaty of Muhammara and the Uqair Protocols which, by the end of 1922, basically settled territorial claims along the lines which exist today.

The Saudi-Hashemite feud erupted again over the question of Hashemite interference with Najdi pilgrims traveling to Mecca for the Hajj. On March 3, 1924, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey abolished the Caliphate, maintained by the Ottomans for four centuries, and two days later Hussein audaciously assumed the title. Offended by Hussein's effrontery and under pressure from the Ikhwan, Abd al-Aziz sent a force against Taif in August. In September, the town was destroyed, some 120 years after the first Saudi invasion, and Hussein's forces retreated to Jeddah. The British, whose dealings with Hussein over the years had persuaded them that his position was untenable, denied him any support from his sons in Transjordan and Iraq. Hussein was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Ali and went into exile on October 3. Nine days later, the Saudis entered Mecca.

Abd al-Aziz then directed his energies toward consolidating and legitimating his rule. In November 1925, he concluded agreements with the British, settling territorial issues pertaining to Transjordan and Iraq outstanding since 1923. In December, after a year's siege, Ali finally surrendered Jeddah, and on January 8, 1926, Abd al-Aziz was proclaimed King of the Hejaz and Sultan of Najd and Its Dependencies. Six years later, after crushing the
Ikhwan in civil war (see following section), Abd al-Aziz renamed his realm the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (or, more properly, the Saudi Arab Kingdom). Abd al-Aziz emerged from the First World War as the preeminent leader in Arabia. He succeeded in unifying the peninsula as only his forefathers and the Prophet Muhammad had done before him. It was, however, only his recognition of external forces that prevented him from pursuing further territorial ambitions. As Nadav Safran points out:

Whether he pursued the dynastic principle or militant Wahhabism, Ibn Saud was acutely aware from the history of the first realm of the imperative to avoid an all-out confrontation with a superior imperial power all by himself.  

Islam. The Islamic reform movement on which the Al-Saud based their rise to power was a product of the ninth-century Hanbali school of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of the Wahhabi movement, was born in 1703 in the Najd. He was one in a line of esteemed theologians and qadis (judges). He studied the Quran, jurisprudence, and classical religious works, and while still in his twenties he began preaching. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s Arabia had been “characterized by political fragmentation and incessant tribal conflicts” ever since the removal of the Caliphate from Medina in A.D. 661. “Religious beliefs and practices had deviated from Orthodox Islam.” A variety of heretic rituals had sprung up, such as veneration of tombs and prayers to deities other than Allah.

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s ferocious denunciation of these practices and his call for a return to true Islam were based on the principles “that God is indivisible, that veneration of saints verges on polytheism, that prayer is obligatory, and that the penalties of the shari’a [Islamic law] must be upheld.” Opposition to him by the ulama (men of religion, but not a clergy in the Western sense, as Sunni Islam has no formal clerical hierarchy) was strong enough to force him to leave his home. He traveled to the Hejaz and later to Iraq, then returned to the Najd to continue his teaching. Eventually he settled in Dar‘iya under the protection of the Al-Saud.

17. Ibid., p. 55.
18. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Piscatori, p. 57.
Tawhid (monotheism) is the tent pole on which the other tenets of Wahhabi doctrine are hung. Forbidden are prayers to the dead, the seeking of protection or intercession (tawasul) from anyone or anything but Allah, and the institution of any innovations "not based on the Qur'an, the Traditions, or the authority of the Companions."24

By embracing the Wahhabi cause, the Al-Saud acquired an irresistible motivational and legitimating tool. "[I]t allowed them to gain control of territory while putting them on the side of a great cause — removing unworthy innovations from the peninsula. . . ."25

The Ikhwan represented a powerful 20th-century synthesis of political ambition and religious justification by the Al-Saud. By creating a standing army motivated by the prospect of a righteous crusade, Abd al-Aziz succeeded in achieving his territorial goals while simultaneously co-opting the Bedouin tribes. This was necessary because he "realized that no central authority and modern political structure could be established in an unstable tribal society."26 Saudi hegemony could not have been reestablished without the help of militant Wahhabi Islam; it could not have been maintained without the destruction of the essentially divisive tribal socio-political system.

The difficulty Abd al-Aziz eventually faced with the Ikhwan in 1929 lay in the irreconcilability of the modern territorial limits of the nation-state with the political nature of Islam, which really recognizes only two entities: the Dar al-Islam (House of Islam) and the Dar al-Harb (House of War or the lands of the unbelievers).27 After the annexation of the Hejaz, Abd al-Aziz's territorial acquisitions were complete; surrounded by ocean on two sides and the British or their proxies on the other sides, further expansion was impossible. Nevertheless, Ikhwan sorties into Iraq and Transjordan sorely tested the stability of Saudi rule and its foreign relations. Though he recognized the threat to his rule that these unauthorized raids represented, Abd al-Aziz could hardly object to them on ideological grounds.

British reprisals in the north were severe, but it was not until February 1929, when the Ikhwan massacred a group of Najdi merchants (who were subjects of the Al-Saud and ostensible Wahhabi adherents), that Abd al-Aziz had sufficient cause to confront the rebels. On March 30, 1929, supported by the Najdi townspeople who feared the Ikhwan and condemned their hy-

24. Ibid., pp. 27-29.
pocrisy, Abd al-Aziz’s forces met the rebels near Artawiya in the north, ironically the site of the first *Ikhwan* settlement in 1912. In a short and decisive battle, Abd al-Aziz prevailed. Afterward, Abd al-Aziz issued a declaration forbidding all meetings without prior approval of the ruler and assuring that all religious questions in the future would be decided only by the *ulama.*

The Al-Saud’s relationship with the traditional religious establishment, the *ulama*, also demands scrutiny. Even before the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in the thirteenth century, the division between secular and religious power had become institutionalized, and the primary political function of the *ulama* involved the legitimation of temporal leaders who claimed to rule in the name of Islam. Thus it was that the Al-Saud, to justify their actions and policies, necessarily carried the *ulama*’s support. Among the *ulama*, the family and descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (called the Al-Shaykh) “enjoyed a privileged position.”

Because the *ulama* received their salaries primarily from the state, a symbiotic relationship evolved between the rulers and theologians.

Nevertheless, though the “*ulama* were generally supportive of Saudi rule, their relations with Ibn Saud were far from harmonious.”

Objections to Saudi policy included the treatment of the minority Shi’ite Muslim population in the Eastern Province and the introduction of modern technology. The *ulama* only gave approval to the installation of a telephone system in Arabia after Abd al-Aziz demonstrated that an instrument capable of transmitting the word of God, i.e. verses of the *Quran*, could not contradict the principles of Islam.

There were other occasions, such as the military response to the revolutionary take-over of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, when government action could not proceed without expressed *ulama* support.

Ayman Al-Yassini points out the relationship between Saudi political legitimacy and Islam:

> In his attempt to expand Saudi rule and consolidate his authority, Ibn Saud reaffirmed Wahhabism as a state ideology and established

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28. Safran, pp. 52-54.
30. Ibid., p. 49.
31. Ibid., p. 50.
33. Ibid., p. 485.
religiously inspired institutions to promote and implement his policies. By maintaining the traditional alliance between his family and Al-Shaikh [Al-Shaykh], he projected his rule as a continuation of the first Saudi state in which the relationship between religion and state was a harmonious one.34

**Maintenance of the Regime.** Political viability is a continuing concern. The discovery in 1938 of marketable quantities of oil in the kingdom presaged a fundamental change in its role as protector of the Holy Cities. Saudi Arabia's leap into the modern world would demand extreme adjustment within both government and society, and

it was not surprising, therefore, that whereas Ibn Saud established and/or strengthened religious institutions in the earlier stages, he dismantled some of these institutions and restricted the activities of others in the later period. The challenge that confronted Ibn Saud and his successors was to continue the use of Wahhabism as a state ideology while developing a modern state as well.35

In the early 1950s Abd al-Aziz recognized the need for more sophisticated bureaus of government. Until that time, he had left traditional structures in place, operating autonomously in their discrete regions, over which he had superimposed only the most rudimentary of bureaucracies. Therefore the Hejaz, whose system of administration had been based on Egyptian and Turkish models, differed greatly from the Najd, where “functional differentiation between the religious and political domains was minimal.”36 Oil, the revenues from which only first exceeded those from the Hajj after the Second World War, precipitated the changes in government structure.37

The Domestic Council of Mecca was the first formal administrative body instituted by Abd al-Aziz, created in 1924 after the conquest of that city. A year later the Council was replaced by the Instructive Committee, and then in 1927 Abd al-Aziz formed the Committee of Investigation and Reform to study the organizational structure of the government. Based on this committee's recommendations for centralized administration, Abd al-Aziz established

34. Al-Yassini, p. 57.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 60.
37. Ibid., p. 61.
the Advisory Council, whose members were drawn from various regions in the country. Though the Advisory Council did have formal legislative powers, its policies required the king's approval. Finally, prior to his death in 1953, Abd al-Aziz formed the Council of Ministers "to act as a central agency for all existing and future departments and agencies." Its decisions were also subject to the king's approval.

Before 1951, only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1930), the Ministry of Finance (1932), and the Ministry of Defense (1946) had been established. There followed during the early fifties the Ministries of Interior, Education, Agriculture, Communication, Commerce and Industry, and Health. Between 1960 and 1962, the Ministries of Petroleum and Minerals, Labor and Social Affairs, Pilgrimage and Awqaf (Islamic endowments), Information, and Justice were added. By the end of the 1970s, six more ministries and a variety of departments and bureaus were created to round out the government's administrative apparatus.

Analysis of the expansion of government in the Kingdom reveals the Al-Saud's preoccupation with both state security and the derogation of rival power blocs, most notably the ulama. As James Piscatori points out, "it has been easy for the Sa'uds to use Islam for legitimation because they have institutionalized the religious authorities and because they have given them wide functions"; yet it should be kept in mind that the very process of institutionalization undermined whatever autonomy the ulama once enjoyed. They were now subjected to royal prerogatives; the ministries in which they function (primarily Justice, Pilgrimage and Awqaf, Education, and several smaller government departments) are administrative in nature rather than prescriptive. Policy ultimately is set by the Al-Saud.

Ancillary to the co-optation of the ulama has been the devolution of the Al-Shaykh both within the ulama and in their traditionally privileged relationship with the Al-Saud. For example, the Directorate of Religious Research, Ifta' (legal rulings), Da'wa (legal proceedings) and Guidance, accountable directly to the king and responsible for propagating Wahhabi doctrine, is made up of 15 members; only one is from Al-Shaykh. "The minimal representation of Al-Shaykh in this vital religious body is surprising, but it could

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38. Ibid., pp. 64-65.
39. Ibid., p. 66.
40. Piscatori, p. 60.
41. Al-Yassini, p. 79.
be viewed as a continuation of Ibn Saud's policy of not allowing any one group to wield more power than the royal family."\textsuperscript{42}

The evolution of the judicial system has followed a similar pattern. "Today Saudi Arabia is the only major country where there is extensive practical application of the Shari'a,"\textsuperscript{43} and its interpretation is traditionally the \textit{ulama}'s exclusive province. Nevertheless, reorganization of the system became necessary in order to differentiate between, on the one hand, misdemeanor and statutory cases which would fall under Summary Court jurisdiction and, on the other hand, those civil and penal cases which would come under the jurisdiction of the \textit{Shari'a} Courts. Overarching this structure was the Committee on Judicial Supervision, which supervised the lower courts and reviewed their decisions. This system remains essentially intact today, but since 1962 under the aegis of the Ministry of Justice.

Concomitant to these changes, there grew up a body of laws, royal decrees, and commercial codes designed to regulate behavior in modern society with which the \textit{Shari'a} could not wholly cope.\textsuperscript{44} Supplementary organs were established in response to the requisites of a growing modern economy; these include the Grievance Board and the Committee on the Settlement of Commercial Disputes.\textsuperscript{45}

Although the Al-Saud publicly proclaim their adherence to Islamic principles (references are never made to Wahhabi Islam, since it is not regarded as an aberration), their subordination of the religious establishment should not be surprising: the patrimonial nature of Saudi rule cannot tolerate a significant sharing of authority. As Piscatori explains, "It is a pattern seen many times before in Islamic history: the fusion of temporal and spiritual authorities ends with the subjection of the spiritual."\textsuperscript{46}

Lastly, the Saudi preoccupation with state security manifests itself in their ambivalent feelings about military development. They finally began to modernize their armed forces in the 1970s. As William Quandt points out:

\begin{quote}
Part of the Saudi success in avoiding military coups stems from an acute awareness of the danger. The royal family has gone to great lengths to keep control over the Saudi armed forces, often by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{43} Michael C. Hudson, \textit{Arab Politics} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 49.
\textsuperscript{45} Al-Yassini, pp. 75-77.
\textsuperscript{46} Piscatori, p. 58.
taking measures that do little to enhance the capabilities of the Saudi military. For example, until the mid-1960's Saudi Arabia spent little on its armed forces.\textsuperscript{47}

The organizational structure of the military reflects this Saudi concern. There are an army, navy, and air force, but also royal guards to protect the king, a national guard for internal security (made up of central Arabian tribal levies and descendents of the \textit{Ikhwan} — indeed the National Guard was created in 1955 from \textit{Ikhwan} remnants known as the White Army after the color of the robes its soldiers wore),\textsuperscript{48} and border guards. Each has its own command structure, often attached to different members of the royal family.\textsuperscript{49}

The United States has been the kingdom's primary supplier of military equipment and training. In 1970, the Saudis spent $45 million on U.S. weapons and services. In 1979, by contrast, over $6 billion was spent, although more than half of this went toward the construction of military infrastructure. Nevertheless, “the Saudis entered the 1980s without feeling confident of their own ability to defend themselves,”\textsuperscript{50} and arms purchases have continued at a high rate.\textsuperscript{51}

The Al-Saud’s endeavors to consolidate their rule through centralization and control of the military appear so far to have been successful. Nevertheless, there has been at least one serious attempt at a coup d’état.\textsuperscript{52} Still, the Al-Saud seem to be in a position to defeat any immediate internal threat to their rule; indeed Quandt argues that “it would be rash to predict the demise of the Saud family entirely anytime in the indefinite future.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textit{Oil and Modernization}. Regime maintenance in the twentieth century could not depend solely upon Islamic ideology and military coercion. As Richard Nolte writes:

\begin{quote}
Religion could be important and could supply a crusading intensity to the purposes of a strong leader, but the experience of Ibn Saud suggests equally that the sword of faith was two-edged, not
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{48} Lacey, p. 313.
\textsuperscript{49} Quandt, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 53.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., pp. 51-53.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p. 102.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 106.
to be neglected but not wholly to be relied upon, and that the hard core of zeal was subject to decay. Religion as the basis of an enduring state was not enough . . . .

A far more vital basis of enduring rule was the vast increase of income the new state was able to secure.\(^5^4\)

In 1946, the kingdom's revenues from oil amounted to $10 million. In 1981, at their height, annual revenues exceeded $102 billion.\(^5^5\) Not until 1970, however, did the government implement the First Development Plan, a five-year program whose value "could be seen, without cynicism, as the collection of data and the more precise identification of obstacles standing in the way of development projects on the scale and in the numbers demanded by the country's sudden wealth."\(^5^6\)

The windfalls from oil were rapidly changing the face of Saudi Arabian society. The dissolution of the traditional Bedouin "time-honored way of life,"\(^5^7\) begun with the creation of the Ikhwan, was accelerated by the sudden transfer of wealth. The government could now pursue more actively its settlement policies: elimination of exclusive territorial rights to wells, nationalization of new water supplies, and disintegration of tribal attachment to the diyaar (traditional grazing grounds).\(^5^8\) "Forbidden to raid and increasingly able to live off their animals, the tribes have become more and more dependent on government bounty."\(^5^9\)

The urban impact of the oil industry is no less extreme. Nolte explains that

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\text{[i]t has created and trained a whole new working class where none existed before, and has fostered the development of a middle class of entrepreneurs, contractors, traders, and professionals of all kinds. It has built schools . . . and . . . provided scholarships.}\]


\(^{55}\) Safran, pp. 61, 221.

\(^{56}\) Holden and Johns, p. 391.

\(^{57}\) Nolte, p. 86.

\(^{58}\) Piscatori, p. 60.

\(^{59}\) Nolte, p. 86.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 85.
It has also resulted in a large influx of foreign laborers and managers, estimated to be as high as two million in 1980. Although census data is suspect, this figure may represent well over 25 percent of the entire population.

Since the First Five-Year Plan, roads, ports, airports, housing, hospitals, universities, industrial complexes, telecommunications, and agricultural production have been specifically targeted by the government for development. The Al-Saud’s objective is clear: national integration through the creation of a modern, independent economy whose viability will outlast the oil resource that built it. It is a daunting challenge, to say the least, since, as William Thomson writes,

... they are attempting to telescope centuries of historical experience and development into years, and ... they must sublimate inbred local loyalties and prejudice into a national sentiment. Only a community of interests, especially in the economic and social fields, will create a national will. ... 

Furthermore, according to Mark Heller and Nadav Safran, the royal family is bent on maintaining the religious, cultural, and political foundations of its rule while promoting a thoroughgoing economic and infrastructural transformation of the Kingdom. The regime believes as a matter of faith that this transformation is consistent with traditional values and can even help entrench them.

Nationalism. Arab nationalism arose in the Levant during the mid-19th century, a reaction to four centuries of imperial Ottoman rule. It received great impetus from French and American Christian missionaries who had founded schools in Syria (which included what are now Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria itself). The movement’s objective was to free all of Arabic-speaking Asia from foreign domination and create a unified Arab nation; it did not conceive of regional differentiation into discrete sub-units. Thus, the Arab Revolt during the First World War, which had its intellectual

61. Quandt, p. 100.
origins in the urban Levant, could be fought in the Hejaz under the banner of pan-Arabism. (In Africa, the experience of Egypt can more rightly be considered a specific territorial movement, since the roots of Egyptian national consciousness extend far into ancient history.)

The Al-Saud eschew any overt references to nationalistic sentiments in attempts to legitimate their rule. There are several reasons for this. Nationalism is regarded as a secular concept calling for an allegiance which is antithetical to adherence to Islam. This position may appear satisfactory, but in the sphere of practical politics it is undermined because, in their attempts to identify themselves interchangeably with the state they created, the Al-Saud implicitly demand their citizens' allegiance. A second motive lies in the Al-Saud's fears that appeals to nationalistic ideals would ultimately backfire, resulting in irresistible pressures to permit domestic political expression, of which there is virtually none at present. And third, nationalism in the Middle East is most often articulated in terms of Arab nationalism, which "postulates the existence of a national identity transcending local patriotism and the sovereignty of local Arab states." 65

Nevertheless, "all politicians must favor greater solidarity, if not actual unity." 66 The Arab nationalism of Nasser during the 1960s posed a direct threat to the Al-Saud's rule, which was viewed by much of the Arab world as a reactionary and inequitable monarchy. However, the oil embargo of 1973 (instigated by King Faisal) and the subsequent price increases lent much prestige to Saudi Arabia as a leader in the Arab world. 67

Clearly, the challenge facing the Al-Saud is to subjugate domestic nationalism, which may be possible so long as standards of living continue to improve and relative freedoms are preserved, while maintaining at least some semblance of solidarity with the larger Arab world. In the end, their success will depend on how well they can balance the competing demands of the conservative right and the politically active left.

FOUNDATIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

A first difficulty in addressing the question of national identity in Saudi Arabia is the dearth of empirical data. 68 A second problem is distinguishing

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67. Ibid., p. 178.
68. This realm is more easily inhabited by sociologists than by political scientists or historians, but most of the available studies on the kingdom are the work of the latter two.
between the state and the royal family, particularly difficult in Saudi Arabia, the only modern nation named for its rulers.69

Language and History. In 1926, attempting "to say who the Arabs were," T. E. Lawrence wrote that "their name had been changing in sense slowly year by year. Once it meant an Arabian. There was a country called Arabia; but this was nothing to the point. There was a language called Arabic; and in it lay the test."70

In fact, as Lawrence well knew, there is no country called Arabia, nor was there ever (see below, Geography). The Arabic language, on the other hand, does have ascriptive value. It is the medium of the Quran, God's final revelation; and as a consequence of Arab-Muslim expansion "[f]rom the border of Persia and Iraq, right across the Fertile Crescent into North Africa, Arabic supplanted all previous languages and remains the common language to the present day, with some local exceptions here and there."71 Anyone who speaks Arabic as his mother tongue is considered an Arab, whether he lives in Casablanca or Baghdad or Muscat. The Moroccan may be incomprehensible to the Iraqi, but nevertheless they are both heirs to a glorious language. Likewise the Saudi Arab: he cannot call it solely his own.

Fredrik Barth points out that the operative definition of an ethnic group is one whose membership "identifies itself, and is identified by others as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order."72 But, as Michael Hudson writes, the Arab community defies Barth's classification:

Nowhere is the task of definition more difficult than in the Arab world where the multiplicity of primordial identifications includes kin group, sect, and universal religious community . . . [I]n the Arab world all three are frequently related to a national identity. For example, the national identity of Jordanians or Kurds is colored with tribalism; the national identity of Lebanon and Yemen has been associated with a particular sect; and the national identity of Sa'udi Arabia . . . is infused with Islamic symbols.73

69. One may be tempted to say the same thing about the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, since, in Arabic, both "Hashemite" and "Saudi" are adjectives modifying "Kingdom." However, this ignores the geographical ascription, i.e. the Jordan River, which has no equivalent in the Saudi Arab Kingdom.
73. Hudson, p. 34.
Arabic has a variety of terms for the different “primordial identifications.” *Asabiyya* refers both to kinship bonds and to broader associations based on political and tribal alliances. In either case, or both, a citizen might define his relationship to the Al-Saud, implying a “sense of corporate solidarity.” As such, national identity is inextricably linked to the Al-Saud. *Qawm* and *watan* connote slightly differing notions of nation and identity, and are often used by politicians. *Umma*, meaning community, is also used, either in the sense of *umma al-islamiyya*, the community of Islam, or *umma al-arabiyya*, the community of Arabs or Arab world. A Saudi identity, relative to these last two cases, would be subordinate to a greater fellowship.

The Arab historical experience offers another symbol for identification, but the ubiquity of Islam makes distinguishing between the wholly historical component and the wholly religious one difficult, if not impossible. That which preceded Islam tends to be overlooked. As Hudson explains,

Islams, embodying the final and most correct of God’s revelations, was disseminated to bring an end to the era of ignorance — the jahiliyya — as Islamic teachers described the pre-Islamic period. Inasmuch as all that had gone before was now revealed as unworthy, it is not surprising that Arabism should treat so summarily the preexisting cultures and heritages.

Arab ascendancy during the Middle Ages clearly had its religious underpinnings. It is therefore difficult to embrace, in the light of Islam’s perseverance, theories which chauvinistically elevate demographic and economic origins. Calls for Arab solidarity based on a secular historical experience, often promulgated by Christian Arabs, would seem to have little appeal to the Muslim Arab and particularly to the Saudi Arab, in whose land Islam was born and in which two of the three Holy Cities are located.

In none of these symbols of the corporate Arab world is there an explicit sense of territoriality, and they are therefore insufficient for a definition of a national, Saudi Arab identity. The problem is compounded by the fact that the kingdom came into existence to suit the Al-Saud’s political needs and not in reaction to an imperial threat. The state preceded the identity, and one is

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74. Ibid., p. 35.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., p. 41.
charged to define it not by apposition to colonial rule, but by some other means.

_Islam._ Another focus of identification is religion but, because of its extra-territorial nature, it is not wholly sufficient. Of interest is any aspect of Islam perceived by a Saudi Arab to be pertinent specifically to the kingdom. There are two: the Holy Cities and Wahhabism.

The kingdom’s role as protector of the Holy Cities is unique. As a consequence, it enjoys a privileged position in the Islamic world. For the devout Muslim in Saudi Arabia, this can only be a source of pride. If he also happens to be a Wahhabi adherent, then his ties to the lands of the Al-Saud are reinforced.

There is, however, a minority of Shi’ites in the Eastern Province, centered primarily in Qatif, on the coast north of Dhahran. At the end of 1979, shortly after the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, there were uprisings in Qatif in reaction to perceived oppressions by the Sunni-Wahhabi majority. They were brutally put down, but since then the government has made concerted efforts to effect a more equitable distribution of the oil wealth and benefits. Wahhabi doctrine is considered anathema to Shi‘ism, and it is doubtful that there might be a unified national identity based on Islamic solidarity.

Arguably, Islam as the core of national identification only derives its meaning in relation to the non-Muslim world. To be a Saudi Arab is without question to be a Muslim, and in the Arab world this is not a singular distinction. Even the experience of Pakistan, a nation whose founding principle was Islam, reveals that other sources of identity — ethnicity, language, history — will also emerge. Islam certainly informs Saudi identity; it is difficult to argue, however, that it is the essential determinant.

_Nationalism and Modernization._ The imposition of clearly delineated borders by the French and British during the interwar mandate period precipitated the separate national movements which eventually ended in today’s divided Middle East. While it may be argued that the inherent diversity characterizing Arabia, Syria, and Iraq was too strong to allow for the maintenance of a single Arab state, it cannot be ignored that the borders finally set do not even represent historical divisions. As Hudson notes, “National identity in the Arab _umma_ is at best multidimensional, at worst mired in irreconcilable contradictions.”

77. Piscatori, p. 67.
78. Hudson, pp. 5-6.
One may, nevertheless, discover some bases for a national identity specific to Saudi Arabia. As Hudson realizes,

To be an Arab does not exclude being many other things as well . . . . The valid conclusion is simply that Arabs feel strongly that they belong to a specific ethnolinguistic and religious community; such feelings do not preclude a variety of other identifications, practices, and ideologies, nor are they precluded by them.\textsuperscript{79}

Richard Nolte postulates three foundations for a Saudi national identity: homogeneous population, shared history and culture, and unity in response to modernization. In the first instance, he argues that “since ancient times there has been a certain homogeneity in the composite population of the peninsula”\textsuperscript{80} that differentiates it from the greater Arab world and is fixed in the common language and orthodox Sunni Islam. In the second case, he writes, “There is a shared memory of past greatness and conquest, and a system of values in which family loyalty, hospitality, generosity, and valor rank high.”\textsuperscript{81} Hudson appears to concur when he says, “Saudi Arabia’s Islamic and tribal-ethnic character and its historical position [make] it the most authentically Arab of all the Arab societies.”\textsuperscript{82} And in the third regard, Nolte suggests,

\[T\]he nationalists in Saudi Arabia are synonymous with the emerging urban middle class and working class groups who more and more have been exposed to and have absorbed modern political and social assumptions, conceptions, and values . . . . \[T\]hese new ideas have fallen on the thirsty ground of a society more and more alienated from its old social patterns and values . . . . The resulting impulse is to reform and rebuild their society into modern civilized respectability. This is the major motivation behind nationalist feeling . . . . \textsuperscript{83}

According to Heller and Safran, the new class in which national feeling is strongest is composed of bureaucrats, army officers, teachers of secular subjects,

\textsuperscript{79. Ibid., pp. 53-54.}
\textsuperscript{80. Nolte, p. 78.}
\textsuperscript{81. Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{82. Hudson, p. 177.}
\textsuperscript{83. Nolte, p. 91.}
and self-employed modern professionals. It emerged as a consequence of foreign intrusion and modernization.\(^8\) Enlarging on Nolte’s position, they argue,

Saudi Arabia has never undergone direct foreign rule, but it was exposed to a large foreign presence in connection with the development of the oil industry. The American oil companies, by building a modern sector in a primitive economy, created part of the new Saudi middle class and also provided the massive revenues that made regime-directed modernization both possible and necessary. By their very presence they also constituted a focus of nationalist resentment.\(^5\)

**Geography.** A geographical focus of national identification may be the least sustainable premise, yet it offers perhaps the most interesting conclusions. Mortimer discounts it out of hand, saying it “is a purely legal and administrative thing, with little or no emotive significance,”\(^6\) and it does not appear to have much appeal to other writers. It posits the existence of a corporate body which recognizes the established borders and for which they have significance. Recurring border disputes with Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates would suggest that, at the very least, the idea is debatable; but one might argue that today these disputes are rather more political in nature than sociological.

A first difficulty is one of semantics. In Arabic, there is no word for Arabia. It is an alien construction. There is a stretch of land called the Arab (or Arabian) Peninsula, but historically this counts for little in terms of self-perception. Its inhabitants more readily identify themselves with regions within the peninsula, as Najdis or Hejazis; but even these give way to tribal affiliations. Still, most tribes do recognize close associations with specific areas, such as the Banu Khalid in the Al-Hasa, the Al-Zahrani in the Baahah, and the Al-Jihainah in the central Hejaz. Some areas, such as Jebel Shammar, derive their names from the predominant tribes settled there.\(^7\) While these areal distinctions had significance in terms of traditional tribal competition, it would be wrong to assume that they represented discrete and inviolable socio-political units, unaware of their place in a larger collectivity. Inter-tribal

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84. Heller and Safran, pp. 3-5.
85. Ibid., p. 7.
86. Mortimer, p. 176.
marriages, historical alliances, a common heritage, and interregional economic activity all betray bonds to and within a greater geographical entity.

Nevertheless, the scope of that entity was inchoate at best, and, in the modern era, only with the reemergence of the Al-Saud and the imposition of European mandates did it receive positive definition. At the end of the First World War, British mandatory power was established across the northern frontiers of the Arabian Peninsula in the areas which eventually became Jordan and Iraq. Attempts at border delineation were made, but negotiations with Abd al-Aziz stalled because he “objected to frontiers based on territorial rather than on tribal lines.”

Borders were clearly incompatible with the seasonal movements of the nomads, but, as Christine Moss Helms writes, there were also other concerns:

It was not until the post-World War I mandate period that Central Arabia was exposed to the phenomenon of “nation-state”, partially defined by its territorial extent within which the state had absolute and autonomous authority. Abd al-Aziz, aware that the physical limits of his own authority would be restricted by the mandates, refused to accept arbitrarily fixed boundaries. The ostensible reason for his refusal was that fixed boundaries were unsuitable for nomadic life, but there were other more personal reasons. If the allegiance of a tribe could be secured, then rights to the tribe's territory were also gained and, in this way, a ruler could continue to extend his authority as long as tribes could be induced to pledge such allegiance.

Despite the Treaty of Muhammara and several later agreements, it was not until the subjugation of the Ikhwan in 1929 that tribal wars and serious dispute over the northern borders came to an end. Abd al-Aziz realized that the British (and their hated Hashemite proxies) had determined the limits of Saudi expansion. In the southeast along the Rub al-Khali (the Empty Quarter), vaguer but less politically troublesome borders were set with the Trucial States (under British protection and later called the United Arab Emirates) and Oman. In the southwest, a rugged barrier of mountains segregated the kingdom from much of the Yemen, itself heir to a distinct historical and economic

89. Ibid., p. 224.
experience. The borders set (and still occasionally disputed), while not reflecting topographical realities entirely, do have some basis and represent the practicable limits of these governments' authority.

Territorial quantification changed the traditional economic and social patterns of Arabia. Imaginary lines drawn across the desert meant little to the Bedouin. Force and taxation (employed by both the British and the Al-Saud), on the other hand, did have meaning. The change was not lost on the Bedouin, whose resignation to it was expressed to H. R. P. Dickson, British Political Agent in Kuwait, by an Ikhwan leader, in 1929: "'Where is the boundary, we don't know any boundary, we have never been told anything. If you mean Iraq or Kuwait tribes we [Ikhwan] understand, and I tell you they are safe.'" Helms's study ends with the suppression of the Ikhwan and the proclamation of the Saudi Arab Kingdom in 1932 and therefore does not address the issue of modern national identity. Still, she recognizes that there were dramatic ramifications for society:

The tremendous impact within the [Arab] states of the shifts from a 'frontier mentality' to a 'border mentality', from particularistic identification with a village or tribal groups to consciousness of their national identity as defined by a state operating within fixed territorial limits, cannot be estimated.

Most Saudi Arabs living today were born after 1932, and do not have direct experience with the pre-kingdom society. They have grown up within recognized borders, and their personal, professional, and political ambitions are colored in terms of the territorial integrity of their state. The maintenance of those borders is no longer in question; in fact, they may prove to be far more sturdy than the institutions they house.

**Conclusion**

There are a variety of bases for national identification in Saudi Arabia and, though no one has clear dominance, in concert they define a positive and distinct nationality. The problem then is no longer one of cognition, but of description, and it is not easily resolved. A person might be an Iraqi or

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90. Ibid., p. 172.
91. Quoted in ibid., p. 272.
92. Ibid., p. 191.
Jordanian or Yemeni, but to be called a Saudi is to connote a kinship or political posture that often does not exist. This dilemma was implicit in the student’s comments which opened this paper; it informs his self-perceptions and very likely his behavior. Unfortunately, there is no adequate alternative vocabulary: regional descriptions, such as Najdi or Hejazi, are too restrictive, and the ethnic one, Arab, is too ecumenical.

This semantic difficulty reveals, of course, the underlying political one. Citizens of the kingdom who are not members of the Al-Saud are ultimately cut off from the inner circles of power. Many of these people are well educated and ambitious — members of Heller and Safran’s “new middle class” — and are quite able to distinguish between allegiance to the state (the Al-Saud) and allegiance to the nation. Those components which are, in the abstract, common to political legitimacy and national identity — i.e., history, culture, religion, and now territory — do not, depending on the speaker, obtain similar expression. Whereas the Al-Saud emphasize their historical ascendancy and adherence to Islam, the nationalist looks to the collective Arab experience and to egalitarian Islam: he sees a nation built by the Al-Saud and jealously guarded, but nevertheless a nation in whose political process he does not participate. This prohibition on political activism explains why his ascriptive values differ from those used by the Al-Saud: he feels no compunction in breaking faith with the family that, though it created the political process, bars him anyhow. Consequently, he regards membership in a corporate body as far more compelling than allegiance to an oligarchy.

This by no means prophesies the imminent demise of the Al-Saud. Large segments of the population benefit from the patriarchal system — in particular, those families whose commercial successes have been the result of alliances with the Al-Saud, Bedouin tribes that provide levies to the National Guard, and the ulama who oppose secularization. Also, the population is extremely small relative to the land area and is widely dispersed; both are obstacles to an effective challenge to the regime. Finally, it might be argued that, in a country lacking a tradition of political pluralism, the present structure is most capable of balancing competing blocs and priorities. Pursuit of industrialization while maintaining the primacy of Islam poses difficulties, as the story of the telephone aptly illustrates, but it appears possible.

The expression of national identity is an inherently political process often challenging traditional allegiances. Within the relatively homogenous society of Saudi Arabia, pluralism is emerging to threaten the Al-Saud’s rule. Although the prognosis for the regime is uncertain, the nation it created will surely endure.