

Introduction

The dominant narrative in the history of Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century is that of state formation, a process that started in the interior of Arabia under the leadership of the Al Sa‘ud. While this leadership was not new (it was visible in the history of Arabia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), the modern state of 1932 distinguished itself by creating a stable and durable realm that successfully incorporated Hijaz, ‘Asir and Hasa, in addition to the central province of Najd. The state brought diverse people and vast territories under its authority as a result of a long campaign of conquest.

In its early days the course taken by the new state resembles a cycle familiar in the region. Since the eighteenth century, several ambitious local rulers (from the Al Sa‘ud and others) had tried to expand their authority over adjacent territories, but their attempts failed for a variety of reasons. The Al Sa‘ud and other local rulers founded polities which were, however, destroyed shortly after they reached a substantial level of expansion. Given this historical background, the state of 1932 is often seen as a success story. In this story the legendary figure of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥman Al Sa‘ud (thereafter Ibn Sa‘ud), the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is dominant. The fact that his state has not vanished as so many earlier emirates did adds to the credibility of the story. This book is an attempt to explore the continuities and discontinuities in Sa‘udi social and political history.

In the nineteenth century, there were several attempts to bring more of Arabia under direct Ottoman rule. The Ottoman–Egyptian invasion of Arabia in 1818 and the Ottoman occupation of Hasa and ‘Asir in 1871 were meant to establish direct Ottoman authority in the peninsula. However, vast territories remained without an Ottoman governor. Several local amirs in the interior were recognised as ‘ruling on behalf of the Sultan’ and occasionally they were sent subsidies and gifts to cement alliance and ensure obedience. The Ottomans expected local rulers to restrain

their followers from attacking pilgrimage caravans and Ottoman garrisons stationed in more vital regions, for example in Hijaz and Hasa.

This situation was maintained until the defeat of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. While Sharif Ḥusayn of Hijaz actively supported Britain against the Ottomans, other influential rulers distanced themselves from a war that did not closely influence their domains. Ibn Rashid in Ha'il declared his allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan without offering any serious military support, while Ibn Sa'ud in Riyadh sided with the British without being directly involved in the war against the Ottomans.

What was to become of Arabia following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War? When France and Britain partitioned Ottoman territories under the mandate system, Arabia fell within Britain's sphere of influence. Arabia, however, was not to become a colony similar to other colonies in the British Empire. During the war, Britain cultivated intimate relationships with two main local powers, Sharif Ḥusayn and Ibn Sa'ud, but failed to reconcile their claims to rule Arabia after the war. Britain's conflicting policies and promises together with its financial support strengthened both rulers. The idea that Arabia could be unified became more realistic, now that there were only two strong rivals, one in Hijaz and one in Najd. The throne of Sharif Ḥusayn was sacrificed in favour of Ibn Sa'ud, who took over Hijaz in 1925, ousting the Sharifian family in the process. In 1932, Ibn Sa'ud declared himself king and his realm the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Najd's nominal incorporation in the Ottoman Empire and the fact that it did not become a colony similar to other Arab countries in the twentieth century led many scholars to comment on its unique history. Its modern state is often considered as an indigenous formation assisted by the unique efforts of its founder, Ibn Sa'ud. While Saudi Arabia did not inherit a colonial administration or a nationalist elite similar to that developed elsewhere in the Arab world, one must not exaggerate its so-called unique history. Britain did not turn Saudi Arabia into a colony, but British influence during the first three decades of the twentieth century was paramount. It is difficult to imagine Ibn Sa'ud successfully conquering one region after another without British subsidies. The weakened Ottoman Empire accepted his conquest of Hasa in 1913. Unable to reverse the situation, the Ottomans recognised Ibn Sa'ud as the *de facto* ruler of Najd. Britain later sanctioned this in 1915 when she recognised that 'Najd, Hasa, Qatif, and Jubayl and their dependencies are the territories of Ibn Sa'ud'. Similarly, his conquest of the Rashidi emirate in 1921 was

only possible with British weapons and generous subsidies. His expansion into Hijaz in 1925 took place at a time when Britain was growing tired of Sharif Ḥusayn's demands, perceived as a threat to British interests. Britain was more than happy to see Sharif Ḥusayn removed from Hijaz, leaving his sons, Faysal and ʿAbdullah, on the thrones of two newly created monarchies in Trans-Jordan and Iraq. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Britain remained the main external player behind the formation of the Saʿudi state. While Saudi Arabia escaped some of the ruptures of direct colonial rule, state formation and the unification of Arabia under Saʿudi leadership must be understood in the context of British intervention in the Middle East. Britain's influence weakened only after the Second World War, when the USA began to assume a greater role.

To argue, however, that the Saʿudi state of 1932 was a British 'invention' misses an important aspect of the internal dynamics that shaped the state and led to its consolidation. While Britain may have been a key force behind state formation, the rise and consolidation of the Saʿudi state resulted from a complex process that cannot be traced to any single external factor.

The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a state imposed on people without a historical memory of unity or national heritage which would justify their inclusion in a single entity. With the exception of a substantial Shiʿa minority in Hasa, the majority of Saʿudis are Sunni Muslims. The population, however, had been divided by regional and tribal differences that militated against national unity or unification. Saudi Arabia shared this important characteristic with several Arab countries that came into being during the period between the two great wars. While the borders of many Arab states were drawn in accordance with French and British policies, the four regions that comprised Saudi Arabia (Najd, Hasa, Hijaz and ʿAsir) were 'unified' as a result of their conquest by an indigenous leadership, sanctioned by a colonial power.

The unification of Arabia under the leadership of Ibn Saʿud was a process that lasted some thirty years. Between 1902 and 1932, Ibn Saʿud defeated several rivals until his realm reached the limits acceptable to Britain. Where France had been the colonial power, republics emerged. But in Saudi Arabia a kingdom was founded, as in parts of the Arab world where Britain had been influential, namely Trans-Jordan and Iraq.

Saudi Arabia is, however, different from other Arab countries. The conquests of Ibn Saʿud did not proceed under nationalistic rhetoric or the discourse of independence and self-rule. With the exception of Hijaz, where such rhetoric emerged during the Arab revolt (1916) associated with Sharif Ḥusayn who aspired to become 'King of the Arabs', the rest of Saudi

Arabia had no experience of such aspirations. Moreover, Britain did not distinguish herself by great efforts to generate discourses on independence and autonomy.

The conquest of Arabia by an indigenous ruler took place with a very different symbolic vocabulary. Ibn Sa‘ud relied on ancestral claims to rule over a region that ‘once belonged to his ancestors’. When he returned to Riyadh from his exile in Kuwait in 1902, he was merely restoring or extending the Al Sa‘ud claim over the town. Similarly, further expansion in Qasim, Hasa, northern Najd, Hijaz and ‘Asir was undertaken with the intention of restoring his family’s authority over territories that had been once incorporated under Sa‘udi leadership. This was a reference to the short-lived experience of the eighteenth century when the first Sa‘udi–Wahhabi emirate (1744–1818) succeeded briefly in stretching the limits of Sa‘udi rule beyond their small provincial capital, Dir‘iyyah. This historical precedent proved to be a justification for expansion in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Alone, however, this justification fell short of convincing Ibn Sa‘ud’s local rivals to accept his rule. Force was mightier than vague ancestral claims. Most regions were incorporated in Ibn Sa‘ud’s realm only after he had overcome the resistance of local leadership. Coercion proceeded in tandem with the revival of Wahhabism, the reformist movement that once inspired the people of southern Najd to expand beyond the interior of Arabia. As early as 1902, Ibn Sa‘ud enlisted the *muṭawwā‘a* (religious ritual specialists) of Najd, in the process of expansion. The *muṭawwā‘a* were behind the formation of the *ikhwan*, a tribal military force that was dedicated to fight in the name of *jihad* (holy war) against the ‘infidels’, a loosely defined category that at times included people who were not easily persuaded to accept Sa‘udi leadership.

The project of unifying Arabia was a gradual process assisted by several factors that were beyond the control of Ibn Sa‘ud. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the encouragement of Britain allowed Ibn Sa‘ud to fill a power vacuum in Arabia. The unification of vast territories under his rule after he had secured Riyadh in 1902 could not easily have been anticipated. The popular historiography of this period tends to paint a picture of Ibn Sa‘ud as a ‘desert warrior’ who had the genius and foresight from the very beginning. It took thirty years of warfare and more than fifty-two battles between 1902 and 1932 before the project materialised. The idea of a Sa‘udi state was a late development, certainly not associated with Ibn Sa‘ud’s early conquests.

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While it is difficult to imagine a kingdom of Saudi Arabia without Ibn Sa‘ud, one must go beyond miracles and personal genius. Personalities and agents are important, but they operate within a historical context that shapes their success and failure. I intend to move away from the historiography that glorifies the role of single actors and concentrate on the interaction between historical events and society that led to the consolidation of the Sa‘udi state of 1932. Readers will find that this book does not have an obvious chronology listing battle after battle to document the successful stages of the unification of Arabia. Nor does it have a chronology of the reigns of the kings who have ruled since 1932. Instead, a thematic approach that highlights the importance of social, political and economic variables has been adopted to explore a possible interpretation of the rise of the Sa‘udi state and its later consolidation.

Crucial to any understanding of modern Sa‘udi history is the observation that this history shows a striking accommodation between the old and the new. Saudi Arabia’s position as the location of the holiest shrines of Islam is at the heart of this accommodation. This has meant that Sa‘udi internal politics and society are not only the concern of its own rather small population, but also the concern of millions of Muslims in the world. The symbolic significance of Saudi Arabia for Islam and Muslims cannot be overestimated. It has become a prerogative for its people and state to preserve its Islamic heritage. It is also a prerogative to cherish the responsibilities of geographical accident which have made it the destination not only of Muslim pilgrims but also the direction for their five daily prayers. The country’s transformation in the twentieth century is shaped by this important fact that required a careful and reluctant immersion in modernity. The preservation of the ‘old’, the ‘authentic’ tradition progressed with an eye on the ‘new’, the ‘modern’ and the ‘alien’. Saudi Arabia’s specific Islamic tradition, namely Wahhabi teachings, did not encourage an easy immersion in modernity in the twentieth century. From the very beginning, the ruling group stumbled across several obstacles when they introduced the most simple of technologies (for example cars, the telegraph and television, among other innovations). Objections from conservative religious circles were overcome as a result of a combination of force and negotiations. Social and political change proved more problematic and could not be easily implemented without generating debates that threatened the internal stability of the country and alienated important and influential sections of society.

In addition to its specific religious heritage, modern Saudi Arabia emerged against the social, economic and political diversity of its

population. The cosmopolitan Hijaz and Hasa with their long history of contact with the outside world were incorporated into the interior, a region that assumed hegemony with the consolidation of the modern state in spite of its relative isolation throughout the previous two hundred years. The social values and political tradition of Najd were generalised to the whole country after 1932. Resistance to rapid social and political change had always been generated in Najd, where the most conservative elements in society continue to be found even at the beginning of the twenty-first century. A combination of a strong tribal tradition in the interior, together with a strict interpretation of Islam in the major towns and oases, made this region most resistant to *bid'a*, 'innovations or heresy'. Given that the Al Sa'ud's leadership had always been based on the allegiance of the sedentary communities of Najd, the *haddar*, their rule was dependent on accommodating this region's interests, aspirations and political tradition.

The accommodation between the old and the new became more urgent with the discovery of huge quantities of oil under Saudi Arabia's desert territories. With oil, the Sa'udi state began to have unprecedented wealth at its disposal to build its economic and material infrastructure and transform its landscape beyond recognition. In the process, both state and society faced an urgent challenge. Can the 'old' Najdi tradition be preserved? Can it coexist with a juxtaposition of the 'new'? These questions proved to be especially difficult in a society that has undergone rapid modernisation. How to benefit from oil wealth while remaining faithful to Islam and tradition has generated unresolved tensions that have accompanied state and nation building since the early 1930s. Colonialism or its absence is irrelevant because Saudi Arabia has been drawn into the international context and world power politics since the early decades of the twentieth century. With the discovery of oil in the 1930s, Saudi Arabia's incorporation in the world economy became an important aspect of its historical development.

Chapter 1 sets out the historical background to the formation of the present Sa'udi state. It examines the Al Sa'ud's rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the intention of setting the scene for the revival of their leadership with the capture of Riyadh in 1902. It also identifies the main power centres in Najd, Hijaz and Hasa that previously challenged their authority. This chapter identifies the 'emirate' as a polity dominant in Arabian history. The emirate (*imara*) is a genre of political centralisation often referred to in the literature as a dynasty (Al-Rasheed 1991) or chiefdom (Kostiner 1993; 2000) to distinguish it from the 'state', believed to be a later development.

Earlier emirates in central Arabia often shared a number of characteristics:

- (a) the dominance of prominent ruling lineages based in oases or towns;
- (b) fierce power struggles within ruling lineages and fluctuating boundaries;
- (c) expansion by conquest and raids;
- (d) the imposition of Islamic tax or tribute on conquered territories;
- (e) the confirmation of local rulers or their occasional replacement by representatives/governors;
- (f) the maintenance of law and order;
- (g) a mixed economy of trade, agriculture and pastoral nomadism;
- (h) the flow of economic surplus from the periphery of the emirate to the centre where it was redistributed to gain loyalty and allegiance; and
- (i) the maintenance of contacts with external powers, mainly the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and later Britain, both a source of new resources outside the indigenous economy.

While previous emirates had failed to unify Arabia, some succeeded in establishing spheres of influence over territories away from the core of the emirate. In the nineteenth century, the Sharifs in Hijaz, and the Sa'udis and Rashidis in central Arabia, all strove to consolidate emirates that exhibited the above-mentioned features. These emirates remained fragile and continued to compete with each other in an attempt to control parts of Arabia. While the Sharifs had no ambition to control central Arabia, their attention was drawn into Yemen. The Rashidis and Sa'udis competed in central Arabia. Sometimes external forces (for example the Ottomans and Britain) fuelled their rivalry. This often led to the intensification of warfare between emirates that aspired to expand beyond their core territories.

The allegations of 'chaos' and 'fragmentation' of Arabia's politics prior to the formation of the modern state in 1932 are misrepresentations that fail to explain the modern history of the region. Arabia had the experience of political centralisation manifested in the emergence of local emirates based in the main oases of the interior and Hijaz. While these emirates cannot be defined as fully fledged states, they exhibited regular and generally acceptable attempts to bring people and territories under the authority of urban-based leadership. The fact that all such emirates failed to create durable polities should not diminish their importance for understanding previous political structures and the present configuration – the state of 1932.

In the case of the first and second Sa'udi–Wahhabi emirates (1744–1818 and 1824–91), a coalition of tribal confederations assisted in expansion.

However, the main impetus behind the consolidation of Sa‘udi rule came from the *ḥadar* communities of Najd, the inhabitants of the towns and oases. It was among the *ḥadar* that Wahhabism emerged, thus providing an ideological rationale for expansion and the establishment of an Islamic moral and political order. While bedouins played a prominent role in conquest, they remained peripheral at the level of leadership. This was also true of the Rashidi and Sharifian emirates where leadership was drawn mainly from a sedentarised tribal lineage in the case of the former and a holy lineage in the case of the latter.

The Sa‘udi–Wahhabi emirates were the precursors of the modern state. In its early days, the Sa‘udi state of 1932 was similar to those that had preceded it. With the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, the state was able to break away from the emirate pattern.

Chapter 2 follows the story of Ibn Sa‘ud’s conquest of Arabia between 1902 and 1932 without exploring the details of the various battles that resulted in the unification of the country under Sa‘udi leadership. Instead, it examines the important role of religion in politics and highlights the crucial contribution of a force not given enough attention in the literature on Saudi Arabia, namely the *muṭawwā‘a* of Najd. While most accounts of the consolidation of the Sa‘udi state privilege the *ikhwan* tribal force deployed by Ibn Sa‘ud against his rivals (Habib 1978; Kishk 1981; Kostiner 1993), this chapter will argue that a particular version of that ritualistic Islam developed by the sedentarised religious scholars of Najd equally contributed to the expansion of Ibn Sa‘ud’s domain. Wahhabism is often considered as legitimising Sa‘udi rule, but this legitimacy needed to be visualised and represented. The *muṭawwā‘a* were active agents in this process. They domesticated the population in the name of Islam, but also enforced Sa‘udi authority under the guise of a vigorous programme to ‘Islamise’ the people of Arabia. Both the Sa‘udi leadership and the *muṭawwā‘a* represented the interests of the Najdi *ḥadar* communities at the expense of those of the bedouin tribal population. Although the tribal population was an important military instrument in the expansion of Sa‘udi rule after 1912, it was marginalised as soon as the major conquests were completed in the late 1920s. The idea of a Sa‘udi state was definitely a product of the efforts of the *muṭawwā‘a*, a sedentary community that regarded both tribal and bedouin elements as the antithesis of an Islamic moral order.

This interpretation of the origin of the Sa‘udi state will correct popular descriptions of the state as ‘tribal’ or ‘bedouin’. While tribal social organisation was dominant among substantial sections of society, political

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tribalism played a minor role in shaping the emerging state. The durability of the Sa'udi state of 1932 is a function of the fact that it does not represent the interests of a single tribal/bedouin group, since its leadership was drawn from outside the major tribal groups of Arabia. Hence this leadership was able to play the role of mediator between the various tribes, the sedentary communities and the more cosmopolitan regions of Hijaz and Hasa.

After the state was declared in 1932, there remained the task of maintaining loyalty and control. The continuity of kingship was dependent on creating a royal lineage capable of providing future kings. Between 1932 and 1953, Ibn Sa'ud marginalised collateral branches of the Al Sa'ud and consolidated his line of descent (chapter 3). During this period, several marriages with Arabian nobility and religious families led to the birth of over forty sons, providing future kings, princes and governors. While the literature on Ibn Sa'ud's marital unions highlights their potential for building alliances with important sections of society, marriages created a long-lasting dependence on the Sa'udi ruling group. This was a time when state infrastructure, bureaucracy and resources were invisible to the majority of Sa'udis. In the absence of important economic resources to consolidate authority over the conquered territories, the Sa'udi state was consolidated by marriage.

Moreover, the meagre resources of the state in the pre-oil era manifested themselves in elaborate feasts and handouts in cash and kind. Power was visualised in the context of the royal court that was the Sa'udi state. Understanding royal pomp casts a new perspective on the consolidation of this state and shows its continuity with the emirate pattern. In a manner reminiscent of tribal shaykhs and amirs, Ibn Sa'ud consolidated his authority by turning the royal court into a centre for the redistribution and reallocation of resources. He appropriated surplus produce from certain sections of society and redistributed it among others in the pursuit of allegiance and loyalty. The consolidation of the Sa'udi state during this early period was not dependent on 'institutions', 'bureaucracies' and 'administration' (as there were none), but was a function of informal social and cultural mechanisms, specific to the Arabian Peninsula.

While Ibn Sa'ud did not live long enough to see the transformation of the Sa'udi state and society, the discovery of oil in the late 1930s allowed him to consolidate his position as the main source of wealth and affluence. The King became the source of all largesse, now having at his disposal resources unknown to previous rulers in Arabia. Substantial funds were dedicated to the construction of imposing palaces hosting the ruling group, foreign guests and the royal court. During Ibn Sa'ud's reign, however, state

bureaucracy and institutions remained underdeveloped. The King was an absolute monarch, while delegating some responsibilities to his senior sons. The modest development of the country's infrastructure during this period was undertaken by ARAMCO, the American oil company that won the oil concession in 1933.

Ibn Sa'ud died in 1953 and, as anticipated, his son Sa'ud succeeded him (chapter 4). The reign of King Sa'ud witnessed a fierce struggle among the royal family. Sa'ud was challenged by his brother Crown Prince Faysal, resulting in his abdication in 1964. The struggle resulted from Sa'ud's mismanagement of state finances but, more importantly, the conflict unveiled a political crisis following the death of Ibn Sa'ud. How to divide Ibn Sa'ud's patrimony among his senior descendants became an urgent issue that threatened the continuity of the state. This was aggravated by Sa'ud's desire to promote his own sons in government at the expense of his senior half-brothers. The conflict led to the emergence of separate competing blocs within the royal family, whose interests could only be reconciled by removing Sa'ud from the throne. Faysal emerged from this conflict with increasing powers that allowed him to rule as king and first prime minister, while placing recruited supporters from among his loyal brothers in key government ministries.

Ibn Sa'ud's successors faced major challenges associated with rapid modernisation, transformation of the landscape and the emergence of new discourses rooted in modernity. Modernisation within an Islamic framework, the motto of King Faysal, became increasingly problematic towards the end of his reign. In the 1960s Arab nationalism in its Nasserite and Ba'athist versions was seen as a threat to the stability of Sa'udi rule. Faysal found in Islam a counter-ideology to defend the integrity and legitimacy of the Sa'udi state amidst attacks from opponents and rivals in the Arab world. Promoting the Islamic credentials of the Sa'udi state was, however, problematic.

Faysal was able to bring Saudi Arabia to the attention of the world when he declared an oil embargo on the United States and the West in 1973 (chapter 5). Saudi Arabia moved from the margin to the centre of Arab and world politics. In the 1970s its new wealth increased its vulnerability and prompted its leadership to search for an external power for protection. The Sa'udi–American liaison became problematic as it exposed the tension between Faysal's Islamic world-view and his close ties with the United States.

Faysal's successors, Khalid and Fahd, saw the unfolding of new forces and challenges. The siege of the Mecca mosque in 1979 was the first major