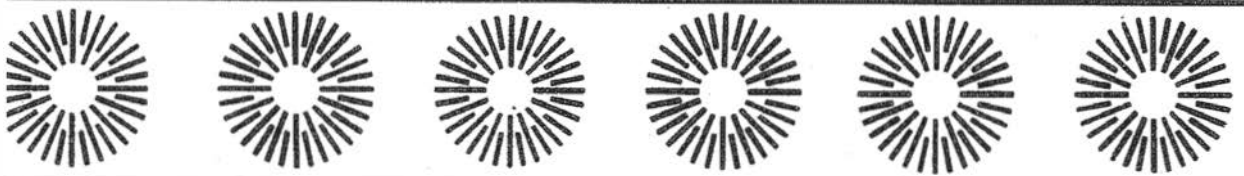


Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia

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and Industrialization**

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Saudi Arabia: From Tribal Society to Nation-State

John Duke Anthony

In any discussion of economic development in Saudi Arabia, the matter of linkages to social and political variables is often raised. In the present context, this is not only natural but realistic and appropriate, serving as it does to underscore the interdependent universe in which development is proceeding. Whether one is examining five-year plans or such technically complex phenomena as absorptive capacity and industrialization, the utility of sociological perspectives would seem to be self-evident. In considering the circumstances of the people affected by the development process, some brief comments on the Kingdom's basic social units—in this instance, tribes—may therefore be of value.

This focus on a traditional "interest" group is admittedly limited. It clearly highlights but one kind of voluntary association among many others involved in the development equation. Depending on perspective, there may be other limitations in this approach as well: more than a few critics who grapple with the amorphous concept of social change in Saudi Arabia, for example, consider contemporary concern with such phenomena as distinctly unmodern, if not anachronistic. Yet, in terms of examining the impact of development in the Kingdom, the tribe qualifies as well as any other grouping as a useful unit of analysis.

The Tribe's Established Role

A consideration of particular relevance in this regard is the fact that tribes were the basic social and political units to which many Saudi Arabians looked for centuries for the preservation of order and the resolution of conflict. More than that, in pre-oil Arabia they were the repositories of both the means and actual process of a substantial proportion of what limited production occurred in the nonurban areas.

To be sure, the functions of maintaining order and administering justice are nowadays attended to by somewhat newer political structures associated with the central, regional, and local governments. Even so, there remain hundreds of tribes and subtribes scattered across the Kingdom, as in

the two Yemens and Oman. And while the numbers of tribes are not nearly as great outside those four countries, the same phenomenon persists throughout all Arabia. Indeed, despite a half-century's official campaign against tribalism in the name of encouraging national and Islamic solidarity, clan and lineage links remain a potent force in Saudi Arabian society. The ongoing manifestation of such forces has long been especially pronounced in terms of the innermost circle of the Ruler's entourage, the Ahl Al Sheikh, the Ahl al-'Aqd wa al-Hal, and even the Council of Ministers.

Among the most important tribes in the Kingdom over the years have been the following: 'Anaza, Harb, Utaybah, Al Murrāh, Shammar, Mutayr, and Qahtan, to name perhaps the seven largest in terms of members. Hardly less significant have been the Ruwala, Dawasir, Manasir, Munjaha, Yam, Ghamid, Shah Ran, Al Jahadilah, Juhaynah, Balt, Huwaytat, Bani Hajir, Bani Khalid, Quraysh, Al Rashid, 'Ajman, and Awazim. For much of Arabian history—indeed, until well into this century—most of these tribes existed as independent political entities in microcosm. As such, they were capable, like other groups (for example, the *ulama* or religious leaders, the merchants, and members of important families) of uniting for common action. At the same time, however, they more often than not acted as divisive forces in any larger societal context.

It was this latter characteristic as much as any other attribute that prompted the late King Abdul Aziz, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, to seek a number of means by which he could integrate the various tribes into the new national political structure of the Kingdom. The religious content of Abdul Aziz's message as he set about knitting Arabia into a single state proved to be his greatest source of strength. He was able to direct and control a strict adherence to Islamic doctrines and, in this manner, affect a significant modification of the tribal distinctions which formerly had divided the realm.

Besides military conquest and spreading the discipline of the Hanbali school of Islamic law, Abdul Aziz employed to great effect one other means of unification—the institution of marriage. Through this device he was able to fuse further the interests and destinies of the tribes. In his own case, he married into many of the most important tribes and, through this device, produced a far more numerous progeny than ordinarily would have been possible. Many of Abdul Aziz's numerous sons (plus more than one hundred grandsons and more than five hundred great grandsons) and daughters have continued the broadening of the base of support for the ruling family by marrying, in their turn, the members of families of different tribes. As a result, it is now difficult to find major tribes in the Kingdom without some close family link to the ruling household. Both his efforts and those of his successors necessitated the creative ingenuity of compromise. The accommodations produced, however, have resulted in new patterns of order in a national context.

To be sure, the compromises required and the adjustments achieved could hardly be expected to have been entirely satisfactory to either the tribal sheikhs or the country's development leaders. Yet the process itself, half a century old, is much further along than in several neighboring countries. And, as the 1980s began, there was little doubt that countrywide there had been a definite shift in the direction of public sentiments and outlook. In essence, the shift was away from the more traditional and local orientations of the past to more general affiliations.

Even so, for most of the population born before World War II, tribal affiliation has remained an important symbol identifying their membership in the wider Saudi Arabian society. Such affiliation in the contemporary era has been a significant link between a great many individuals and the regime in Riyadh, providing them with *prima facie* evidence of a claim to the rights, duties, and privileges of citizenship. The point is hardly an insignificant one: such documentation has frequently constituted the all-important admission ticket for the positions of employment available to Saudi Arabians. Equally, in the absence of any other form of documentation for purpose of identification, it has made possible the entrance of countless Saudi Arabians into one of the local school systems, gained them access to the government's health facilities, and, for those who sought to travel abroad, warranted the issuance of a passport in their name.

Distinguishing Tribal Factors

In the early years of this century, a number of tribes proved politically decisive both to the ongoing acceptance of Al Saud rule in the Najd and, no less important, to the extension of the ruling family's writ to areas previously under different administrative control. Among the more highly regarded tribal groupings in this regard were the Qahtan, the Mutayr, Utayban, Dawasir, the Shammar, the Al Murrah and, of course the 'Anaza, from which the Al Saud themselves claim to originate (as do their dynastic counterparts in Bahrain and Kuwait).

The importance of these and other tribes derived more often than not from a combination of one or more of the following factors: size, military power, geographic location, form of livelihood, character and orientation of leadership and progeny, and/or religious outlook. In earlier times, another factor was often identification with one side or the other in a fundamental genealogical (not necessarily ethnic) distinction between the Adnani and Qahtani elements among the tribal population whose roots predate the Islamic era.

That the size of a given tribe has not always been directly related to its influence, however, has been exemplified historically by the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad. Several tribes are larger. Similarly, the

importance of other tribes in earlier days stemmed less from their numbers than their military power and—of crucial importance in determining their influence over time—their reputation of being among the most consistently loyal to the central government. In recognition of these two traits, it is of considerable contemporary significance that members of such tribes form to this day a substantial segment among the country's National Guardsmen, headed by Emir Abdallah.

The Manasir, Al Murrah, the Shammar, the 'Anaza, Ruwala, and the Huwaytat, among others, have long been of special importance strategically, owing to their location near (and often extending beyond) the country's borders and to their traditional ties with neighboring states. A number of these tribesmen at times have made the conduct of relations between the Riyadh government and such states as Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), and Oman much more complicated than would have been the case had they been positioned instead deep within the interior of Arabia.

Other tribes have been influential for reasons having little to do with their numbers, military prowess, or territorial position. Due to their origins, substantial segments of some tribes, for example, remain distinguished by their long-standing cultural orientation toward areas other than Riyadh: the coastal communities of the Gulf or the Red Sea in some instances, the east Arabian areas beyond the Rub' al-Khali Desert in others, and now and again one or the other of the Yemens. One tribe, the Shammar—whose members extend into Syria and as far into Iraq as Mosul—is of added significance owing to the fact that the mother of the previously mentioned Emir Abdallah, a key leader in the ruling family, was one of its more important members.

The notion of "tribe" has not in every instance involved a social or political entity. Indeed, at times some groups have been considered tribes even though they may not have been known or prone to act as a single unit. For these and other groups, the term *tribe* has become associated more and more with the idea of a loosely knit membership unit. Such groups are typically devoid of any past or present implications of sovereignty or even autonomy. Yet they manifest such unifying characteristics as ethnic homogeneity, cultural continuity, linguistic similarity, and/or a common, deep-seated attachment to a given geographical area. In the past the close identification of many tribes with the last-mentioned trait gave rise to much strife and internecine tension between neighboring tribes, causing in turn the creation of competing coalitions of tribal groupings from different descent groups.

No less affected by the changes of the past half-century have been the tribal sheikhs. The tribal sheikhs have traditionally played a role that goes far beyond merely enhancing tribal identification in the Kingdom. The influence of tribal leaders for many years derived largely from their role as a

major channel of communication between the authorities in Riyadh and the country's hundreds of thousands of tribesmen. Yet there were always well-defined limits to the manifestation of their influence. Whether the tribe was settled or nomadic and whether its lands were strategically important or not, their influence seldom extended beyond the geographic locus of the tribe itself.

The Family Unit in Saudi Society

Finally, with respect to all the tribes in the Kingdom, it is impossible to gain an adequate picture of their social and political organization without an examination of family structure. The impact of the family as an extended unit on government has, of course, been immense in the formation of past and present political structures in Arabia. Yet its paramountcy in the initial formation of the tribes themselves has often been overlooked along with the predominant role of one or more families in the determination of the political functions expected of the tribal sheikh. Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that tribal roles were usually the roles of a particular family writ large. This certainly appears to have been the case with respect to the Al Saud, which over time eclipsed the political role of its tribal progenitors.

As the core unit within the overall system of political activity in the Kingdom, the government knows it is on firm sociological and doctrinal ground in emphasizing, as it has repeatedly done, the ongoing importance of familial solidarity as a fundamental value. In its view, the family—far more so than the tribe or other kinds of societal groupings—remains the structural foundation on which, ultimately, the edifice of the Saudi Arabian state will stand or fall. Indeed, much is made of the fact that this one unit remains at the center of the process through which the procreation and perpetuation of all the other social units in the Kingdom is manifested. Of no less significance, it remains the key unit through which lineage (read individual and group identity) is maintained, social cohesiveness is reinforced and nourished, and, by extension, structural integrity up through the highest levels of the national government is enhanced. By contrast, the overall degree of influence wielded by tribal leaders as a whole has been diminished considerably as a result of numerous forces of change, which they find increasingly difficult to control or influence in their favor.

Tribal Units and the Future

The growing impact of the central authority on traditional tribal autonomy and the effect of a rapidly expanding national economy continue to affect the influence of all the Kingdom's tribal leaders. The first factor has been

manifested by the ambitious development programs and administrative machinery of Riyadh and the individual governates that have drawn the tribal population and its leaders ever closer into the government's orbit. The second has long been evidenced by the growing numbers of Saudi Arabian citizens migrating away from the Kingdom's villages—and in the process, of course, from the authority of the tribal sheikhs—to the urban centers of Riyadh, Dhahran, Abha, Jeddah, and elsewhere, where opportunities for wage and salaried employment abound.

Although it may yet be too early to discern the ultimate impact of these phenomena on the roles of individual tribes and their sheikhs within the national political structure, there is evidence enough to indicate some of the consequences of the trend to date. There is little doubt, for example, that the previous rather marked polarity between the interior-based capital and some of the country's more remote areas—indeed, among the coastal, mountainous, and desert regions in general, not to mention more intricate polarities between and within these regions—has become more and more blurred with each passing year. In its place there is no question that new links between and within these areas have emerged. The tribal sheikhs, moreover, have long since been unable or unwilling to reverse this trend that has relegated more and more of them to a lower echelon within the overall political structure.

To conclude, it is clear that the process of modernizing and diversifying the economy and other sectors of national life has brought vast changes to the position and role of the Kingdom's tribes. Looking to the future, the process seems certain to continue, given the government's ongoing commitment to promoting economic growth, industrialization, and numerous other changes along a broad societal front. Equally assured will be the continuing challenge to development planners, economists, and many other Saudi Arabian leaders of managing some of the basic kinds of conflict—especially those associated with psychological stress and moral unease—which often become manifest in such a process, and of working these conflicts out between the central and local authorities.