Saudi Arabia is in flux—in domestic politics, society, the economy and foreign relations. That much is clear. The succession from the long-incapacitated King Fahd to Crown Prince Abdullah, expected any time after this book goes to press, will be only the most immediately visible instance of this, and indeed will be a transition around which many of the key questions of policy now being faced by the kingdom crystallise. Yet the preceding chapters make clear that in such flux a number of patterns and trends can be identified, which this final chapter attempts to draw together. It is immediately apparent that, although the book was divided into four parts, the contributions in each reached into parts other than the one where they were located. This reflects not only a conscious approach by the editors but an intrinsic intertwining of these different aspects. It is not just that the Saudi state is obviously not the ‘billiard ball’ of traditional realist assumptions (nor indeed is the House of Sa’ud). The many-faceted case study that this volume represents once again demonstrates the artificiality of the traditional distinction between domestic and external politics and policy: one is reminded here of Putnam’s ‘two-level game’¹, of David’s ‘omnibalancing’ by regimes,²

¹ For a discussion see e.g. Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
and of the central role allocated to the domestic in the analysis of foreign policy by one of the present authors. Not only do the domestic and the external turn out to be tightly linked, as is shown in almost all the chapters; the ‘ideological/religious’, ‘social’, ‘economic’ and ‘political’ are similarly intertwined. None of these can be quite understood without the others. Convenience dictates a practical division below into sections on religion and ideology, the economy, external relations, regime and opposition, and the politics of reform, but their mutual overlap and interaction will be readily apparent: there is a religious-political nexus as much as there is an economic-political one, and one between foreign relations and domestic politics, but the linkages spread right across the spectrum of factors, actors and dynamics discussed in the book.

A key question of policy interest addressed in this volume from various angles is whether the Al Sa’ud regime or the Saudi political economy more broadly can weather changing conditions at home and abroad—political, social and economic (and indeed within royal ranks). Oil apart, the most generally recognised pillar of the regime has been the alliance with the ‘Wahhabi’ creed and establishment. Wahhabism has at the same time also been at the centre of accusations concerning the Saudi role in fostering terrorism—while also apparently forming the soil within which the royal family’s most virulent challengers have flourished. Let us start, then, with the religious-ideological dimension.

Religion and ideology: transformation and divisions of Wahhabism

As will be clear from the foregoing chapters—even those most critical of the regime—a consensus exists that the House of Sa’ud is not about to collapse. There is no question that the regime faces major challenges on almost all fronts, even if temporarily and partly relieved by the high oil prices of the 2000s, but none of the authors conclude that the system’s days are numbered—for a range of reasons to which we return in the course of this chapter. One reason is that the relationship between Wahhabism’s two premier families, the

Al Sa‘ud and the Al ash-Shaikh, remains intact. Yet shifts in the relationship have occurred since the very early days. The Al ash-Shaikh has long since become the junior partner, and, just as important, has adopted a policy of pragmatism over ideological purity, firmly prioritising the joint survival of the Al Sa‘ud, the Al ash-Sheikh and the rest of the religious establishment tied to Al Sa‘ud rule. This has been clear for most of the existence of the third Saudi state, but it has if anything been further consolidated and, as it were, raised to an art form in the ensuing decades. This was strikingly illustrated in 1990 when the Council of Senior Ulama under Ibn Baz at the request of the royal family issued a fatwa in effect approving the presence of foreign troops on Saudi soil. It was again evident after 9/11 and especially after the wave of terrorist attacks in the kingdom from May 2003 onwards. Just as in earlier days, particularly in 1929 and 1979, the official religious establishment was once again challenged by more radical brethren who attacked both the royal family and its American allies, and, exactly as before, the establishment chose the side of the ruling power. This led to further disenchantment among large parts of the population and an equivalent reduction in the religious establishment’s authority.

That establishment also saw its traditional role in the Saudi education system challenged in the wake of 9/11 and the combination of external pressure and internal reappraisal that took place in Saudi society and among the leadership: pressures to reform education at all levels, from primary to tertiary, accumulated fast. In this ‘war of ideas’ the House of Sa‘ud faces the difficulty that significant interventions in the school curricula are all too easily interpreted as yielding to American pressure—something which in turn is grist to the mill of radical-salafi strands of opinion and activism (even as a string of bloody attacks within Saudi Arabia itself had undermined support for the most radical groups). As a consequence the government has moved cautiously. Educational reform is firmly on the agenda, but implementation proceeds tentatively, amid assertions that the bulk of the curriculum is unproblematic and that adjustments must be in the spirit of local culture and Islam. This is one example of the regime’s (and liberal Saudi society’s) wider dilemma: in countering the radical Islamist opposition they rely largely on the very same conservative religious establishment that presents the main hurdle in the way of introducing social, cultural and economic reforms.
Yet one of the more striking effects of 9/11 in this sphere has been the increased differentiation within Saudi religio-political thought, in particular with the emergence of what Lacroix calls an 'Islamo-liberal trend'. At the end of the 1990s and in the early years of the twenty-first century the ‘established’ Islamist opposition—the sahwa, or Islamic Awakening—was being challenged from two directions. On the one hand, the challenge came from a radical jihadi-salafi trend, supporting Usama bin Laden and the ‘global jihad’; on the other, a number of individuals from an Islamist background emerged who criticised the regime-allied Wahhabi establishment and called for political reform. This latter ‘Islamo-liberal’ trend stood out because of its willingness to form de facto coalitions with previously unimaginable partners such as liberals and Shi’ites. However, it is notable that this trend itself consists of two wings, one more concerned with social and religious criticism, the other more directly politically active. It is this latter wing that achieved the highest public profile through the initiation or support of a number of petitions to the regime. Although at least Crown Prince Abdullah was at first prepared to engage with some of these trends, by the end of 2003 the phenomenon took on such proportions—with coalitions straddling previously clear dividing lines—that key petitioners were arrested. At the time of this volume going to press three remained in custody, having received extended jail sentences in a trial verdict in May 2005 and declaring their intention to appeal. While the very fact that a trial was being held—with, for the first time ever, one open session, and extensive media coverage and discussion—was in itself an interesting departure, it nevertheless appeared that the ‘Islamo-liberal trend’ had become the victim of its own success, raising the question whether this kind of ‘post-Islamism’ really has a chance of succeeding in Saudi Arabia. Adding to a potential negative answer to this question is the finding that the movement also appeared to undergo a tentative reorientation back towards a more Islamist profile, thus perhaps losing its attraction to its more liberal adherents or sympathisers.

However, the evidence from Saudi Arabia does once again confirm the need to avoid ‘essentialising’ even supposedly rigid bodies of religious thought such as Wahhabism. Not only are the facts, on examination, likely to prove quite different, featuring far greater historical and current diversity than assumed, but fluctuations within and on
the margins of such traditions are likely to remain significant, allowing for a range of religious, ideological and political interpretations and outcomes. In particular the Saudi case also confirms the evidence from other Muslim societies and movements that even varieties of ‘strict’ Islamism are not necessarily incompatible with a democratic impulse. We return to the implications for regime and opposition in a later section; first we need to consider the other two main areas of challenge and regime policy: the economy and foreign policy.

Changing political economy and the question of reform: beyond the rentier state?

High oil prices in the first years of the twenty-first century brought Saudi Arabia a major windfall, for a while reducing some of the pressures that had been building up. In 2003 GDP growth of 7.2% was achieved, and estimates for 2004 indicated a similar figure. Even so, the economy’s structural problems are deeply rooted and require far-reaching reform. There remains a need to prepare for the return of periods when oil revenues will be less plentiful, especially given continued population growth. Most acutely, there is the challenge of providing jobs for young Saudis streaming on to the labour market—with possibly one in three of their number facing unemployment.

A number of partial reforms have gradually seen the light of day. Since 2000 some significant moves have been made with regard to privatisation and foreign direct investment. Yet such initiatives have not amounted to cross-sectoral reform: they remain incomplete, implementation has been slow and patchy, and the effect limited. Much more is needed, not least to make the economy compatible with WTO requirements, to control government expenditure (not least in the 40% still estimated to go to the military sector), and especially to raise the productivity and competitiveness of Saudi labour. Nor should the expectation be allowed to take hold that the execution of such measures would swiftly reduce unemployment—indeed in the short term the opposite could occur, which might be politically difficult.

Previous scholarship has suggested that the underlying problem has been the very nature of the Saudi political economy as a rentier state, with both the economy itself and the political system that relies
on it being rooted in the distribution of the oil ‘rent’ and people’s focus on accessing it. In this context, it was suggested, the pursuit of economic efficiency and competitiveness (as well as political participation) inevitably receives the least priority and indeed is largely incompatible with the central rationale and dynamic of the rentier political economy. In this schema the state has a large measure of autonomy in relation to the society. Despite some recent attempts to question this picture, it has remained perhaps the dominant analysis. The evidence and analysis put forward in this volume show that this can no longer be satisfactory. Not only have parts of the Saudi economy become significantly more productive and economically ‘rational’, as the chapters by Malik, Niblock and Luciani illustrate, but in the chapters by Hertog and Luciani the analysis is taken significantly further. Hertog provides an original and compelling explanation for the persistent difficulty of implementing cross-sectoral reforms, by complementing rentier state theory with the concept of ‘segmented clientelism’; Luciani suggests that the Saudi economy has in fact to a significant extent moved beyond the pure rentier stage—something that has political as well as economic implications.

Hertog argues that both the resilience of the current set-up of institutions and political coalition, and their capacity to scupper wide-ranging reform projects, can be explained by the phenomenon of segmented clientelism. The ‘state’ in Saudi Arabia is not simply a unitary, autonomous actor separate from ‘society’. State autonomy, in other words, is less than rentier state theory has assumed; rather, the state has co-opted chunks of society into itself, which has generated a rapidly growing state apparatus that is increasingly hard to control. As rentier state theory stipulates, distribution of revenue and the resulting intended formation of groups remain key features of the system, but the dynamics then quickly get complicated and entangling: ‘state-society links and interaction have become much more complex than the original rentier state theory model allows.’ We subscribe to Hertog’s analysis that the Saudi polity came to be composed of ‘a large number of parallel institutions which have grown on oil income, are suffused with informal networks, and coordinate and communicate little’. This is a process in which numerous factions have acquired stakes and effective veto power: the fiefs have become more than their holders. These ‘fiefdoms’ have emerged
both in state structures proper and in society, linking one to the other. The political corollary is that while clients in these ‘segments’ compete for top-level access, they remain fragmented and relatively easy to control. However, stability has thereby been purchased at the expense of reduced manoeuvrability for the Saudi state: Hertog suggests that even top-level willingness to reform is thus not sufficient to induce structural change.

The private sector in Saudi Arabia has clearly become more important and independent, often using the Majlis al-Shura, for instance, as a means to express views and pursue interests. Yet in the scheme proposed by Hertog, this does not make it a key opponent of the structures of segmented clientelism: given that private sector actors often boast personal links to key figures in various segments, ‘the private sector is willing to speak, but not to openly confront the system which brought it into being.’

Luciani’s analysis would seem to allow a somewhat more positive interpretation, at least in the longer term. In comparative context, the longer term is indeed the more relevant framework when examining processes of democratisation, absent sudden shocks: significant short-term democratisation is not a likely prospect in the Kingdom, nor should structural factors such as those examined in comparative democratisation studies be expected to yield short-term change. Luciani, too, develops and complements his own earlier rentier state theory, but does so by stressing the changing nature of the Saudi economy and political economy, and the emergence of what he terms a ‘national bourgeoisie,’ numbering at least half a million.

He shows that the activity, size and wealth of the private sector—even if originally rooted in rent circulation—has reached a level where it has meant the acquisition of a measure of genuine independence both in its economic activities and interests, and in its position vis-à-vis the state. He agrees with Hertog that these individuals remain close to the state and the ruling family, and cannot be construed as an ‘opposition’, nor do they have one single class interest or one single political position. Similarly, while he believes they are likely to favour greater transparency in (especially economic and commercial) decision-making, that does not necessarily translate into concerted support for democratisation—or a best in a very cautious gradualism. Yet, although this bourgeoisie remains attached to
Saudi Arabia—as also evidenced in the expansion of private investment within the Kingdom—they are not ‘trapped’ in the country: they have the demonstrated capability and willingness to invest elsewhere in the region and beyond, as shown in the spurt of investments in places such as Dubai: ‘The game of competition in governance is very clearly on,’ Luciani concludes. If the interests of this new national bourgeoisie were threatened by issues of Saudi governance, he suggests, it is at least conceivable that they might make more of their independence and economic wealth and clout.

Rentier state theory, then, clearly needs qualifying—and not just with regard to Saudi Arabia. The most obvious qualification is that where resources (rent) become limited—as they almost inevitably do, at least in relation to demands—some of the theory’s ideal-type assumptions by definition no longer apply in quite the same way. Secondly, other social, cultural, political, and environmental factors are always likely to cut across, and interact with, the simple rentier dynamic, which means that ‘rentierism’ on its own can never provide a full explanation or description. Third, as it is in the GCC states that the most ideal-type confirmation of the theory’s assumptions about the nature of economy and politics has been found, we must ask whether the model’s view of state autonomy in the distribution of rent and in the formation of groups assumes not merely (1) exceptional wealth, but also (2) a small, homogeneous society, and (3) a unified elite. A useful contrast here would be Nigeria, where a vast, heterogeneous polity with a multiplicity of competing elite factions has given rise to quite different dynamics. The final qualification is to acknowledge a need to historicise the rentier state, showing that its nature and implications are path-dependent.

External Relations
In addition to the ideological/religious and the economic, the third area to form a nexus with the political is that of external relations. In this volume, the external factor was understood as a resource or a constraint for the regime, as a resource or perceived target for domestic audiences, and also as the wider context within which the Saudi political economy functions. Nonneman argues that ‘what the regime has been, largely successfully, doing for many decades, is “omnibalancing” between different (and fluctuating) threats and needs located
in its multiple environments (domestic, regional and international), while attempting pragmatically to carve out a measure of autonomy from domestic, regional, and international structures and actors simultaneously. This explains the instances of apparent ‘polygamy’ in its external relations, both today and in much of the twentieth century. In that light, neither the country’s cautious and pragmatic regional policy, nor the apparent cooling in relations with the US in the first five years of the twenty-first century, balanced with efforts to strengthen relations elsewhere, should be particularly surprising—although Bronson makes the point that, contrary to previous moments of friction, the relationship faces a new context, where the ‘glue’ of the Cold War that gave the United States and Saudi Arabia an overarching set of compatible interests, is no longer present. Even so, Paul Aarts makes the case that, rather than heading for separation, the United States and Saudi Arabia are more likely entering a more ‘normal’ relationship, which is nonetheless still very much dictated by the logic of energy and security. Indeed, the new common interest in containing the threat from Islamist terror, together with the continued older shared interest of stabilization in the Middle East, mutual interests over oil and economic security, and the protection the US can still offer, increase the likelihood that the relationship will remain relatively close, albeit in need of some careful management. Aarts points to the possible future appearance of a ‘China factor’, where the aspirant superpower’s thirst for energy might lead some US policy-makers to contemplate a ‘denial strategy’—although the likelihood of such a scenario and the precise implications this would have for Saudi Arabia remain hard to gauge.

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greater the resources available domestically—whether material or political—the greater will be the regime’s room for manoeuvre regionally and internationally, while conversely adroit and pragmatic handling of the international and regional levels can further enhance domestic strength. Equally clearly, though, success at this omnibalancing act will in part be a matter of regime skill. None of this is to suggest that voluntarism is adequate to explain outcomes; the structural environments within which these regimes have to function—both ideational and material, and both domestic and external—determine the broad parameters within which they can operate. But in the crucial interaction between those different parts of the environment, the role of agency can be highly significant.  

Saudi Arabia itself, at the time of going to press in 2005, was facing particular challenges at all levels—challenges converging on a new King Abdullah following his expected succession. Precisely because he has been seen within the kingdom as somewhat more sensitive to local nationalist, Islamic and Arab concerns than Fahd, and somewhat less willing to follow Washington’s lead unquestioningly (even if the difference is relative at best), he may be in a better position to deal with the tensions between the requirements of the domestic and regional scenes on the one hand, and the international on the other. It is worth stressing again, however, that within each of those levels there are conflicting demands and interests to be met, adding to the complexity of the regime’s calculations. At least, however, Abdullah’s accession is likely to reduce a little the diffuse nature of policy-making prevalent since King Fahd’s stroke in 1995—although certainly it will not make him the sole arbiter. Together with his stronger legitimacy within the kingdom, that might make both for continued ‘polygamy’ in foreign policy and a better chance of success in reconciling the simultaneous demands of the different environments.

Domestically the demands of a burgeoning young population and a nationalist reflex will require a delicate balancing act when it comes to foreign policy and responses to external pressures over reform and the fight against terrorism. Regionally the environment is in a period of striking flux: first, the situation in Iraq poses challenges of violent

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4 See also Raymond Hinnebusch, ‘Explaining International Politics in the Middle East’, in Gerd Nonneman (ed.), Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies (Routledge, 2005), pp. 243–256.
and jihadist spill-over at worst, and the novel possibility of boisterous if not wholly democratic politics being installed next-door at best; second, the Syrian regime is in a hard-to-predict period of transition and certainly weakness; third, Iran’s regime may be pulling back from reforms and harbouring at least some who are considering the desirability of pursuing the nuclear option; fourth, Yemen suffers intermittent upheaval, acting as a reservoir and refuge for radical Islamist opponents of both regimes; and fifth, the kingdom’s small neighbours show an increased determination to escape their neighbour’s regional hegemony. Internationally, the combined pressures of the ‘war on terror’, the Zeitgeist regarding political reform, and the demands of economic globalisation, complete the circle of multiple challenges.

By the same token the opportunities for the pragmatic pursuit of multi-dependence persist even with the United States as sole superpower: other older as well as emerging powers offer complementary resources (‘alternative’ would be putting it too strongly; at least for the foreseeable future) politically and economically—something which Saudi Arabia under Abdullah, as indeed under his successors, will doubtless continue to make the most of.

Regime, opposition, and the question of political reform

Each of the three areas dealt with in the preceding sections has its own intrinsic demands and drivers; yet both individually and in mutual interaction they also form a nexus with domestic politics, including the questions of regime legitimacy and stability, and political reform. The political scene itself of course also features additional factors, including the nature and strength of the opposition; the performance, cohesion, and response of the regime; and the question of succession. The prospects for political stability, as for reform, depend on (1) the depth and breadth of the demands and pressures in each of the four areas dealt with in this book (both separately and in their cumulative interaction); (2) the strength and cohesion of organised opposition, in large part dependent on structural socio-economic factors; (3) external attitudes; and (4) the resources, skills and response of the regime, and its willingness to consider reform.

It will be clear from the chapters of this book and from the summing-up in the current chapter so far that the Saudi political system
faces serious challenges in all the ‘sectors’ surveyed, and that a careful and precarious balancing act is required between the demands in these sectors (religious/cultural; economic; foreign relations; politics) and between the three levels (domestic, regional, international). We have seen also that against a proven record of pragmatism and adaptability, with skill at co-optation and an ability to mobilise legitimising resources while avoiding the coalescence of opposition strands, the regime faces several problems: (1) a population that has grown rapidly; (2) an apparently intractable youth unemployment problem; (3) the lack of manoeuvrability that has emerged as the price for the segmented clientelism that has characterised the Saudi polity; (4) the paradox that the reforms that are both needed and clamoured for from outside are opposed by the very actors in society and the polity (the non-radical Islamists and clerical establishment) whose help is needed in combating the appeal of the anti-regime extremists; and (5) the continued and arguably worsening puzzle of reconciling close relations with the United States (essential both for regime and more widely the economy) with the domestically delegitimising effects this has against the background of events in the Arab-Israeli and Iraqi theatres.

To this must be added longer-term structural changes in society and the economy, not least in the context of economic, technological and political globalisation; and a changing regional environment. The latter includes Iraq’s democratic experiment, and the pattern of political reform in the neighbouring GCC states setting a standard to which the Saudi public are exposed daily, given the regional integration of personal, professional and media networks.

For the regime, then, a coherent policy response is essential in order to address these conflicting pressures, craft a sustainable omni-balancing act, and maintain or rebuild legitimacy. Policy coherence and regime cohesion are closely connected. Emerging from the analysis of Glosemeyer, Al-Rasheed and Hertog is a picture which suggests that such cohesion is often lacking when sustained, coherent policymaking in the domestic arena is called for. Al-Rasheed’s ‘headless tribe’ simile, referring in particular to the period since 1995, expresses the phenomenon most starkly. Clearly there are positive aspects to a system that in effect produces a version of limited pluralism in decision-making, especially since each of the ‘segments’, or
‘circles of power’ links into sections of the society, which makes it easier to pre-empt discontent (and, from the regime’s point of view, to co-opt). But in key areas such as economic policy and political reform, it would appear that output has suffered, contradictory strands of policy have stymied each other, and little concerted, in-depth and trans-sectoral reform has been effected.

Intra-family disagreement and competition have been an element in this. As long as King Fahd remained the notional head of state, this situation was perpetuated, as Crown Prince Abdullah and his ‘circle’ proved unable fully to stamp their authority on the policy process and the ‘vision’ for the kingdom. While there can be little doubt that this will improve with his accession, it remains to be seen how wholeheartedly the other senior princes will follow the traditional pattern and swing behind their half-brother at that point. Abdullah, moreover, while in good health, is nevertheless in his eighties, so that in the medium term a further succession looms—probably to Prince Sultan. Hence the fundamental direction of policy will remain in doubt for some years—unless Abdullah can set in place a number of hard-to-reverse *faits accomplis*. For the sake of the regime’s own long-term future, and for the sake of overall sustainable development in Saudi Arabia, that would seem to be important, but it is not at all clear whether the resistance built into the system as a whole (the segmented-clientelistic version of rentierism), powerful factions in the royal family, or even the likely limits to Abdullah’s own reform-mindedness or acceptance of opposition voices, will allow this to happen. One needs to note also the absence of a natural pro-reform alliance among key parts of Saudi society: opposition exists, along with demands for reform, but this is not united nor does it yet stretch in any significant and organised fashion into those key middle-class and elite sectors of society that have proved necessary elements of a liberalising and democratising coalition elsewhere.

At the more radical end of the opposition spectrum it is notable that the violence of *Al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula* seems to have brought it up against the limits inherent in the Saudi ‘cycle of contention’ (of social movement theory), undermining its appeal with the wider population while attracting effective government counter-action. At the same time, however, more liberal trends in Islamist thinking and opposition appear at least for the time being to have
come up against limits of their own, both because of regime unwillingness to countenance what was turning into a coalition of previously divided voices, and because of the tentative return to more purely Islamist agendas on the part of some within this Islamo-liberal movement.

This leaves a large body of Islamist- and economic-grievance-inspired discontent especially among the younger generation, spurred on by younger preachers who have parted ways with the pro-regime religious establishment and are harshly critical of the regime, but without the determination, clout or organisation to pose an imminent threat to the system. It also leaves a—much smaller—liberal elite who want to see greater transparency and a gradual political opening-up. The latter are not on the whole interested in fast, comprehensive democratisation for fear of the influence of radical Islamist activism. In between there remains the majority of the population, who may feel disgruntled and criticise aspects of royal family rule, but who remain otherwise unwilling to become politically active in pursuit of political change. In many cases this is reinforced by the clientelist links discussed in the chapter by Hertog—links that continue to be fostered in all sectors of society, including among members of the emerging new ‘national bourgeoisie’ discussed by Luciani. Especially when oil revenues are high, the regime can continue for some time to employ its time-honoured strategy of co-optation and clientelism combined with repression of more significant perceived threats. Indeed the Saudi state has been doing just what social movement theory predicts will be the most successful strategy in dealing with the various strands of ‘contention’: it has followed a combined strategy of repression + accommodation + facilitation.

Even so, the growing challenges already referred to, together with the continuing changes in the nature and composition of society and the demands of economic, technological and political globalisation, mean that adjustments at the social, economic and political levels will in the short-to-medium term become inevitable if the stability of the regime is to be assured. If such change is to come from within the royal family, it would seem that, after King Abdullah, the best prospects may lie in the next generation of princes—although opinion and interests among that generation are by no means undivided. When the shift to that generation is at last made, of course, the choices will be determined very much by the intra-family politics
already in evidence, making the outcome unpredictable. Yet as Glosemeyer shows, the system has already begun tentatively to adapt. As she points out, after 9/11 and the attendant domestic but especially international challenges, the rulers ‘for the first time found themselves in a situation where they needed the active cooperation of a variety of social groups’ to help secure the Saudi polity and its reputation. This experience will probably inform future calculations, and the underlying dynamic is now unlikely to disappear for any great length of time.

Recent Reforms
The most immediately visible sign of reform has been the municipal elections of 2005. These came against a background of already expanded room for discussion both in the media and in the context of the ‘National Dialogue’ started by Crown Prince Abdullah, which had reached its fifth session by mid-2005 (when among other topics that of women driving was to be discussed). However constrained in its remit, and however limited the feed-through to society at large and to actual policy, the Dialogue was nevertheless an indication of a changing context and an awareness on the part of at least elements of the regime of a need for a different response (whether substantive or tactical). The very fact that a number of previously taboo issues could now at least be discussed, and that in the process previously ‘illegitimate’ voices such as those of Shi’a religious figures were given formally equal standing as discussion partners in a forum established publicly by the Crown Prince, was without question an important departure—even if conservative counter-pressure meant that the remit, participants and dissemination of the results of the Dialogue sessions became markedly restricted.

Another part of the background consisted of the earlier reforms in the shape of the Basic Law and the introduction of the Majlis al-Shura in the early 1990s—a Majlis that carved for itself an increasingly significant role even behind the curtain of secrecy that officially shrouded its work, especially through the workings of the specialised committees that were established in 2001. Shortly before the com-

5 See Mohammad al-Muhanna, ‘The Saudi Majlis al-Shura: Domestic Functions and International Role’ (PhD thesis, Institute of Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies,
pletion of the municipal elections in April 2005, the new Majlis was sworn in with an expanded membership of 150, and intimations that it was to be allowed, among other things, to scrutinise the budget. Its debates are now televised and increasingly watched. Moreover, Prince Mansour and Prince Sa’ud al-Faisal suggested that the Majlis would eventually be two-thirds elected. Almost simultaneously, a major reform of the much-criticised judicial system was announced. Even if question marks inevitably hung over the time-scale and effectiveness of implementation, the comprehensive nature of the changes was striking: a Supreme Court was to be established (taking over the functions of the Supreme Council for the Judiciary), along with a network of appeal courts, commercial courts and labour courts.

But it was the municipal elections, for half of the nearly 12,000 seats of the country’s 178 municipal councils, that drew the most attention internationally among media and policy-makers. Originally announced for 2004, they took place in three regional rounds between 10 February and 21 April 2005. The remaining half of the seats were to be appointed; the councils deal not with ‘political’ issues but only with local services and planning matters; women were barred from either standing or voting, albeit for ‘logistical’ and not legal reasons; and no group campaigns, platforms or manifestos were allowed—let alone political parties. Moreover, and contrary to the ubiquitous assertion of almost all commentary on the elections, these were not in fact the kingdom’s first-ever. When first conquering the Hijaz, Abd al-Aziz Al Sa’ud had taken account of local sensitivities by establishing an elected Majlis ash-Shura for the region in addition to five municipal councils for the main towns.

Durham University, 2005). This is also the only study to provide comprehensive detail on the nature, extent, and effect of the work of the Committees, and to survey systematically Majlis members’ views on their own powers.

6 Strikingly also, a debate was held on Saudi TV in early April on the merits of elections for the Council (even if both invited speakers advocated gradualism, thus mirroring the majority view among members). Saudi Gazette, 13 April 2005; Arab News, 13 April 2005; SPA dispatch 13 April 2005; Economist Intelligence Unit, Saudi Arabia Report May 2005, pp. 12–16; for the views of Council members themselves see also Al-Muhanna, ‘The Saudi Majlis ash-Shura’.


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and in the 1950s under King Sa’ud local elections were begun, only for the experiment to be shelved when King Faisal came to power.\(^9\)

Even so, from the perspective of the post-1960s era the 2005 elections were a significant development, both in themselves, and for the way in which they evolved, including the atmosphere that developed around them. The three rounds\(^{10}\) produced a similar pattern:

(1) fairly low voter registration, varying between a quarter and one-third of the possible electorate—whether due to unfamiliarity, uncertainty about relevance and purpose, or cynicism;

(2) high turn-out among those registered, at 70–75% in the first two rounds and well over 50% in the third;

(3) vigorous competition for the seats, with for instance in the first round over 1,800 candidates fighting for 127 seats. There were hard-fought and sometimes expensive campaigns by individual candidates (the only campaigning officially allowed), complemented by mobile phone message campaigning for slates of moderate Islamist candidates by anonymous senders, claiming that they were supported by religious scholars (they became known as the ‘golden lists’). Because this was banned under the election rules, complaints were lodged with the Grievances and Complaints Committee and widely discussed in the local media, but as the sources could not be traced, the complaints could not be upheld.

(4) In many places those moderate Islamist candidates swept the board, not least because—as was recognised in Saudi media commentary afterwards—they had been the better organised.

(5) There was a clear sectarian tinge to the results in those areas where minorities feature, particularly in the Eastern Province. Thus Qatif and Ihsa returned almost exclusively Shi’a members.


\(^{10}\) On 10 February in Riyadh and the surrounding region, on 3 March in the Eastern province, Najran, Al Baha, Jizan and Asir, and on 21 April in the Hijaz and Tabuk.
whereas Dammam elected Islamist Sunnis. This, like the text messaging campaign, showed that, even though group platforms and campaigning had been banned, the election process did in fact feature clear evidence of group politics.

(6) Even so, it was also striking that the essence of the campaigning was very much on real local issues of practical importance to the daily lives of local residents, and not on broader philosophical or ideological questions.\textsuperscript{11}

In sum, while this was by no means a democratic breakthrough, the elections both illustrated and stimulated interest in participatory politics and in the wider issues and questions associated with it. Much will depend on how the councils and elected members are seen to perform over their term in office, but it is conceivable that this will become not merely an incremental institutional move but add to the patterns of discussion and behaviour in society that may become increasingly hard to ignore or reverse.\textsuperscript{12} In combination with the expansion of numbers and powers of the Majlis al-Shura, the mooted introduction of elections for this body, the expected expansion of voting rights for women (an expectation further strengthened and discussed in the Saudi media after the Kuwaiti parliament passed a law in May 2005 granting women the vote), this may indicate that further reform is indeed a likelihood. It will continue to be very gradual at best and controlled by the Al-Sa’ud, while by contrast a concerted and determined social alliance for democratisation is


unlikely to crystallise for many years. But, together with the growing challenges enumerated above and the changing structure of Saudi society, these signs of change do seem to point in the direction of medium-term change to the Saudi polity—fairly smooth if a coherent reform-minded leadership emerges soon, rather more unsettled if that condition remains absent.

Towards liberalised autocracy or beyond?

It has been plausibly suggested that monarchies may be the type of Middle Eastern regime best prepared—and most likely—to effect such reforms.13 This argument suggests that a non-ideologically buttressed monarch has less to fear from reform than a president in a one-party republic tied to a particular ideological platform. As Lucas has noted, in monarchies such as the small GCC states, tolerance or mobilisation of social pluralism is ‘dramatically different’ from the nationalist mobilisation used by most republican regimes in the Arab world. Indeed, such monarchies have often allowed or even reinforced social pluralism all along, hence opening up does not necessarily mean fundamental discontinuity.14 If anything, such monarchies may be particularly well-placed to use a measure of political liberalisation as a survival strategy: it may not only take the sting out of immediate pressures, but may in effect serve as a ‘divide-and-rule’ tactic, whereby the opposition or its various strands become ‘submerged’ in a more diverse number of social groups now given access to a limited form of political participation. The various groups and representatives may both acquire a stake in the system and continue separately to seek the ear and favour of the monarch, who remains the ultimate arbiter and source of authority.

Conclusions


14 Russell Lucas, ‘Monarchical Authoritarianism.’
Thus reform and liberalisation do not equate to democratisation—nor do they necessarily lead to it. The constraints referred to above mirror factors that elsewhere, and especially across the Middle East, have been recognised as obstructing moves beyond the limits of ‘liberalising’ or ‘modernising autocracy’, or ‘political decompression’: i.e. moving beyond the stage where reform and liberalisation are in essence no more than a tool used by the regime to maintain ultimate control.  

Three central and intimately interrelated factors are: evolving variants of rentierism (intertwined in the Saudi case with segmented clientelism and more generally with corporatist features); the limited and particular character of civil society with its own divisions, not least between an arguably illiberal majority and a liberal minority (even if both want a greater say and greater transparency); and a middle class lacking a united political purpose. It is especially in such an environment that regimes may use liberalisation to co-opt and/or divide actual and potential opposition forces most successfully, without intending to cede their position as the ultimate source of authority. Brumberg has argued that the longer such ‘liberalised autocracy’ is practised, the harder it may be to move to real democratisation; as he puts it, ‘The very success of liberalized autocracy can become a trap for even the most well-intentioned leader.’  

Can Saudi Arabia—or other ‘modernising autocracies’—escape this trap? Brumberg has classified the Kingdom as a ‘full’ or ‘total’ rather than a ‘partial’ autocracy, and therefore not yet even at the ‘liberalising’ stage. The evidence of this book—not least in the chapter


17 Brumberg, ‘The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy.’
by Glosemeyer—shows that, even if the system remains undoubtedly autocratic and includes repression among its tools, such a judgement must be challenged. Some of the features associated with ‘partial autocracies’ have been present to a certain extent in Saudi Arabia for some time, and certainly the reforms that have been tentatively introduced since the 1990s make it seem appropriate to place the country in that category—albeit still at the lower end of the spectrum. While it seems likely that Saudi Arabia will move further in the direction of liberalisation, it is, for the reasons indicated, unlikely that it will move beyond the confines of ‘liberalised autocracy’ for at least a generation.

Even so, there are both generic and specific reasons for thinking that the Saudi polity need not necessarily remain trapped there. The generic reasons are that, just as happened in Europe in transitions from absolutism, and in the more recent Latin American transitions from autocracy, limited moves made by ruling elites as a tactic of ‘decompression’ can, in combination with growing pressures from below, lead such trends to slip beyond the control of what these elites originally intended, especially when alliances develop between key social groups and elements within the regime.\(^{18}\) In some sense this may already have begun to happen in Kuwait, and it may be in its initial stages in Bahrain. It is true that, just as in various European precedents over past centuries, there may be setbacks when the regime attempts to reverse the tide. This indeed has been the pattern rightly identified, and feared for the future, by Brumberg. But that may not be a sustainable strategy in the long run, if those earlier precedents are anything to go by. (Also, of course, they tell us once again that the dynamics producing real democratisation may only bear fruit in the much longer term.)

In the case of Saudi Arabia the fundamental status quo may ultimately not be sustainable against the changes and challenges that the

system will increasingly face. Social, economic and technological change will over the long term change the ‘distribution of power resources.’ The growth of a more independent bourgeoisie will be only one element in this. Practices and institutions that are being gradually established may take on a life of their own: there has been some evidence of this with the judiciary in Egypt, the parliament in Kuwait, and indeed the cautious drive towards a greater role in decision-making from within the Majlis al-Shura in Saudi Arabia.

It is also conceivable that a key factor in other processes of democratisation—namely allies for further reform emerging within the ruling elite—becomes a reality in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia will not go the way of those Eastern European regimes that collapsed dramatically amid a fiscal and legitimacy crisis: material and legitimacy resources remain more abundant, so a sudden overall change of the system is highly unlikely. Hence the outlook for change must be divided in two stages.

Further reform towards liberalised autocracy is likely in the short-to-medium term. It is impossible to predict whether the Saudi polity will remain locked in that stage for the foreseeable future, with all the inevitable dysfunctionality this would bring in the longer term. Quite possibly the continued segmentation and clientelism that characterise the country’s political economy, together with the limitations of Saudi civil society, differentiate the Saudi case from a considerable number of comparable cases where democratisation did take hold. Additionally, some of the factors that have been suggested as making the smaller Gulf states candidates for eventual democratisation of sorts (including their very smallness, and the absence of a formal legitimising ideology) do not apply to Saudi Arabia. Even so, the possibility that this polity, much more complex in its dynamics than usually recognised, and subject to continuing change in its domestic and external environments, might eventually escape the ‘trap’ of liberalised autocracy also cannot be dismissed. If that happens, it will come as the result of a very gradual process, driven and signalled as much by

20 See also Baaklini et al, Legislative Politics in the Arab World.
Conclusions

the incremental expansion of the grip of representative institutions on day-to-day and technical decision-making, and of the habit-forming effect of even limited exercises in political participation and discussion, as by grand political departures. 21

21 One particularly interesting development has been the stance of the Shura Council on matters of taxation: in the words of one acute Saudi observer, the pattern of the Council’s decisions shows it ‘has taken a decision in principle not to agree to any imposition of taxes or higher fees unless they get a say over expenditure’ (personal communication, March 2005): about as literal a reflection of the old ‘no taxation without representation’ maxim as it is possible to get.
The second Dimension or principle in the Saudi foreign policy is the one concerning the Arab nation. The Kingdom is one of the founding members of the Arab League in 1945, and has given its Arab relations a high priority, and has sought to strengthen the joint Arab action within the framework of the League of Arab States, with a keen desire to develop and coordinate these relations so as to preserve the interests of the Arab world as a whole. 10 Islamic principles, the importance of its strategic location and the essential role it plays in the regional, Arab, Islamic and international contexts, being the cradle of Islam and the largest producer and exporter of energy in the world. The basis of the foreign policy strategy of Saudi Arabia is the vision of the ruling dynasty of al-Saud and the religious elite of the situation in the international arena. Their representations are reduced to the necessity of maintaining the authority of the Kingdom in the Muslim world, as well as ensuring the national interests of the KSA. Pragmatism, combined with ideological and religious motives creates the uniqueness of the foreign policy thinking of political and military leadership of Saudi Arabia. The main tool of foreign policy in the region for Saudi Arabia armed forces of the state For a contrasting juxtaposition regarding liberal economic ideologies and the Asian cases see also Yu (1997) for example. 3 Non-exhaustive list that suits the purpose of this essay, as found in Niblock & Malik (2007: 9f.). Â Policy-making through a process of negotiations between the state apparatus and critical private sector investors (ibid.). As Peter Evans (1995: 60) asserts, â€œmost developing states offer combinations of (â€“) predation and (â€“) embedded autonomyâ€œ. He calls those â€œintermediate statesâ€, presenting India and Brazil as two exemplary case studies (ibid.). Â The rent income granted the Saudi polity full autonomy in distribution and institutional design, making Saudi Arabia at that time the classic rentier state as described by Luciani & Beblawi (1987).