

*Prime Minister*

② 1981 New Syria  
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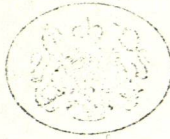
*Useful background.*  
SUMMARY

IS SAUDI ARABIA UNSTABLE?

1. Western press concern with the stability of Saudi Arabia is exaggerated; but Saudi Arabia faces grave problems. (Paragraphs 1 and 2).
2. Economic problems: will industrialisation continue to work after the oil runs out? Is economic development too fast? Danger from inflation, disparities of wealth, consumption of resources. (Paragraph 3).
3. Social problems: over-fast social change; the dilemma of Westernisation; dependence on foreign labour; the seclusion of women. (Paragraphs 4 to 6).
4. Political problems: the Royal Family's monopoly of power and the absence of democracy; criticism of the Crown Prince and the malpractices of other members of the Family. Possible rivalries within the Family not a great danger. (Paragraphs 7 to 9).
5. Regionalism no longer dangerous. Criticism of the Government's commitment to the West is powerful and reinforced by other Arab governments. The Palestine problem is a constant nag.
6. Sources of opposition: the religious extremists are few and lack support. The moderate conservatives are critical

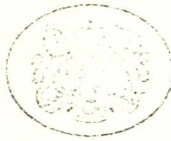
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- but not revolutionary. The radicals dislike the present system but are not sufficiently tough or indignant to rebel. Foreigners are not sufficiently interested. (Paragraphs 10 to 16).
7. We do not know enough about feeling in the armed forces; but a military coup d'etat would be very hard to mount. The tribes are no longer a decisive force. Workers' strikes are not the danger they were in Iran because there are very few Saudi workers. A strike in the oil-fields could do damage but would probably be contained. (Paragraphs 17 to 19).
8. There are countervailing factors of stability: the size and solidarity of the Royal Family, the strength of family life, the social conservatism of the people. (Paragraphs 20 to 21).
9. Conclusion: there are serious destabilising factors but they are long term. The present position is uneasy but not alarming. There will be no revolution in the next few years. Compared with most other Third World countries Saudi Arabia is stable. (Paragraphs 22 and 23).

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BRITISH EMBASSY

JEDDA

9 March 1981

The Right Honourable  
The Lord Carrington KCMG MC  
etc etc etc

My Lord,

IS SAUDI ARABIA UNSTABLE?

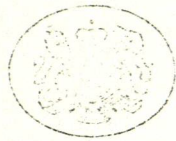
1. We have all been frightened by the fate of Persia. And mankind, always more attracted by prophecies of doom than by invitations to mirth, has made the fate of Saudi Arabia its next preoccupation. I find the concern of the western press with Saudi instability modish, exaggerated and at least partly motivated by a desire to sell more copies. But it is infectious and it has spread too far to be ignored.

2. In any case, there can be no doubt that Saudi Arabia faces grave problems. They may be divided (for convenience of exposition only, since they overlap and interact) into the economic, the social and the political.

Economic Problems

3. Vast quantities of oil have produced vast wealth and, only shortly afterwards, a realisation that the oil will not last for ever. What shall we do, now, to keep at least some of the wealth when the oil runs out? Answer: set up industry, expand and diversify the economy, educate and train the people so that they

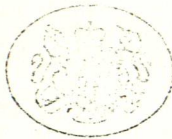
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can live off the new system when the old is done. But (first problem) will the new economy work when there is no longer oil to provide cheap fuel and cheap feedstock? Meanwhile shall we have lost the ability which once we had, none more so, to live tough and endure hardship? And (second problem) does not this policy require an accelerated economic development which will bring in its train the dangerous phenomena seen elsewhere: inflation, disparities of wealth, rising and perhaps unfulfillable expectations, precipitate consumption of resources built up by thrift and parsimony over thousands of years? Indeed these phenomena are already visible in Saudi Arabia to-day.

#### Social Problems

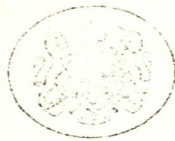
4. Nor is that the end of the story. Over-fast economic development produces over-fast social change which threatens to enfeeble the spiritual and moral roots of the community. A modern western and wealthy economy makes available the comforts and luxuries of modern, western and wealthy society. The offer is almost impossible to refuse. But acceptance means either social revolution or hypocrisy on a national scale. In Saudi Arabia all three responses can be observed: rejection of the new values, bold acceptance of them with all their consequences, rejection of them verbally combined with enjoyment of them actually. (I am tired of Saudis rebuking me for the moral decline of the West five minutes after telling me how much they enjoyed the Playboy Club). This situation is dividing the generations and the classes and cannot but lead to trouble.



5. A particular problem which the new economy generates is the need for foreign labour. It is normal - but still troublesome - for a developing country to be obliged to import highly trained foreigners: engineers, doctors, economists. Saudi Arabia goes much further. Because of its social traditions, its people will not work with their hands. So not only are there no Saudi roadsweepers or labourers: there are not even Saudi carpenters or electricians. As a result the Kingdom is entirely dependent on foreigners: without them there would be no roads, no airports, no water, no electricity, no industry. The effect of this preposterous situation on the Saudis' morale cannot be calculated. It increases their arrogance more than their humility. But either way it is malign. Moreover, the presence of two or even three million foreigners among a native population of only five strengthens and accelerates the encroachment of alien values. Yet though we know all this is a source of anxiety to the regime and a subject of debate, virtually nothing is being done about it.

6. The problem is made worse by another one, already troublesome in its own right: the seclusion of women, which nullifies half the potential indigenous labour force. I shall not here discuss the Saudi defence of the role which they have assigned to women. That role is not as black as it is painted, though in my view it is pretty close to charcoal grey. But as a plain matter of fact it is causing Saudi society a great deal of trouble and is going to cause a great deal more. The battle for women's education has been won: only a few obscurantists still resist. But if you

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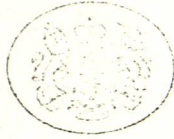


educate women, you cannot for ever confine them to the house (literally: even the supermarket is frowned upon and the hair-dresser forbidden). Either women are going to emerge, by slow and reluctant male consent, on to a wider stage; or they are going to agitate and rebel, with possibly an erosion and a collapse of the family structure on which much of Saudi stability depends. In either case the results are unpredictable.

### Political Problems

7. To this formidable list must be added another set of problems, more conventional, more commonly seen in other parts of the world, but no less daunting: the political problems of power, constitution, freedom, democracy, foreign and domestic policy. The Kingdom is ruled by a single family, the Al Sa'ud, which has held sway over various areas of the Arabian Peninsula, off and on, for more than 200 years. The present regime has been in power within the present boundaries for fifty years. The Family has always been philo-progenitive in the old semitic tradition: the latest genealogy assigns to King Abdul Aziz, the founder of the present dynasty, 37 sons and 21 daughters (but there are certainly more) and to his son, Sa'ud, the last king but one, 53 sons and 55 daughters. With all the cadet branches, there are several thousand members of the family on the male side, all of them called Prince and all of them entitled to special privileges in theory and in practice. The choice of King and Crown Prince and other basic decisions are arrived at by an undefined process of consensus among the Family. So the system is oligarchic rather than despotic.

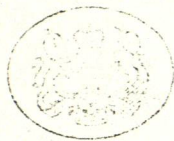
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The traditions of the land allow for debate within the Family and the circle of elders and advisers and, through the majlis system, for access to the King and other senior princes for citizens who wish to protest at injustice or claim redress of grievance. Moreover, there has been, for thirty years, a Cabinet, with considerable powers devolved upon Ministers and their departments. Nevertheless the King is ex officio Prime Minister and he alone appoints and dismisses his Cabinet. There is no parliament, no elections at any level, no participation by the ordinary Saudi in the process of decision-making, even in local government. In all this, the cynic would say, Saudi Arabia is no worse than most countries of the third world, which are dictatorships or one-party states. The difference here is that there is not even lip service paid to the idea of democracy. The poor Syrian or Iraqi, suffering under the Ba'th Party, has at least a constitutional framework to which he can pin some hopes - that one day the parliament may be given some power or the elections may be free and fair or he himself may rise in the Party. Here there is no constitution other than the Koran and only very mild reforms are contemplated. The big decisions of policy are taken, not even by the Cabinet, but by the ruling few, princes every one. And once born a commoner, you cannot become a prince.

8. For the critics of this system, the Crown Prince is a particular target. Fahd supervises all departments of government: commoner ministers never, and princes seldom, take an important decision without his approval. It is on his head therefore that most criticism falls for the regime's autocracy, for the royal

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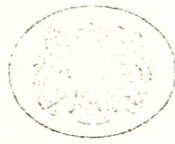


privileges, for the widespread corruption. The resentment against Fahd has been increased by his style of life, particularly abroad, which until recently embraced all the usual human failings: profligacy, drink, gambling and venery. He has in the last year or two avoided at least the public display of these weaknesses and has used his authority to moderate them in the junior princes as well. This is a welcome recognition of the Royal Family's need for a better image. But the ground lost over the years has by no means been recovered yet. Some princes, senior as well as junior, are notorious for shady property deals, large commissions on official purchases, private sales of oil at a premium and the snatching of valuable contracts away from ordinary merchants.

9. The Family provides one more problem for the regime which must be noted. In so large a tribe there are bound to be cliques and groups: full brothers combine against half-brothers, cousins against cousins, generations against generations. The most famous grouping is the so-called Sudairi Seven, the sons of Abdul Aziz by his wife Hassa, of whom the eldest and the leader is the Crown Prince. Recently there have been rumours that the sons of King Faisal are banding together in political ambition. No doubt there are manoeuvrings for places in the hierarchy and particularly for the succession to the throne. But the Al Sa'ud have never failed to rally in a crisis and to settle their differences by consensus and compromise. I do not believe the danger from this direction is very great.

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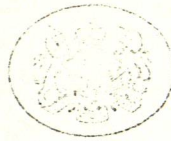
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10. There are other political dangers. The Kingdom is a number of provinces, with different histories and different characters, united by conquest in comparatively recent times. The Hejaz in the west, the Asir in the south and al-Hasa in the east are not yet fully assimilated and at times resent the dominance of the central Najd. The merchants of the traditionally commercial Hejaz have seen their status decline by comparison with the once rougher and less sophisticated Najdis, whom some of them still disdain. The people, the topography and the economy of the Asir share many of the characteristics of the Yemen across the southern border and are sharply different from the Najd, whence come their governors. The Eastern Province has a large Shi'ite minority, for long underprivileged and despised for its religious heresy and its social inferiority. It tends to feel, too, that as the area which produces the oil it deserves a larger share of the wealth than it gets. Some observers see a centrifugal force at work in the provinces. I think they are out of date: the process of assimilation, of migration and, more recently, of intermarriage is moving apace. Nor can any group claim that they would have been better off without unification except (very hypothetically) the people of the Eastern Province; and even they have been so diluted by incoming Najdis that the resentment can be only sporadic.

11. The political problems I have so far described are inherent in the system. There is also opposition to the Government's current policies. This is chiefly directed against what the critics see as the too close connection with the West and in particular with the United States. This connection, they contend, has led to the over-production of oil which in turn has meant excessive haste in the run-down of resources, in economic development and in social

/change



change. The policy benefits the West but produces too little by way of reward: the Kingdom's financial reserves, invested in the West, lose their value through inflation and falling exchange rates, and the one thing which would justify this sacrifice - a settlement of the Palestine question - is not forthcoming: on the contrary, western, and particularly American, support for Israel continues unabated. These critics, whose case can be rationally and powerfully argued, are given more importance by the coincidence of their views with those of many Arab governments outside the Kingdom: so that the Fahd regime must be constantly looking over its shoulder lest it antagonise its fellow members of the Arab League and risk the reinforcement of internal dissidence by external opposition. In the sixties, when Nasser was at the height of his power, this was a serious danger. It has by no means disappeared; it will probably never disappear, but certainly not before the Palestine problem has been solved. That problem is a stick always available to beat the West and those who give comfort to the West.

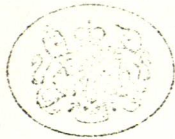
#### Sources of Opposition

12. This is a formidable list of problems. Let us now look at those elements within the Kingdom which might have the desire, and the ability, to exploit them in order to overthrow the regime, and try to assess their chances of success.

#### The Right

13. First, there are the conservatives, those who think that the changes in Saudi society have gone too far and too fast. They themselves may be divided into two other groups, the extremists and the moderates. The extremists are the religious obscurantists,

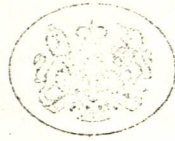
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the men who were behind the Mecca rising of December 1979, who preach a return to a society which is in fact gone beyond recall. I do not believe that they are sufficiently numerous, sufficiently organised or sufficiently supported by public opinion to represent a serious threat to the regime. They are a nuisance, a factor which the Government must never forget, because they have links of emotion and of history with the divines on whose alliance the Al Saud came to power and because some of their criticisms find an echo in a wider audience than their own fanatical adherents: corruption, black market liquor, ostentatious wealth. But few Saudis sympathise with their absurd attacks on girls' education, television, bicycles, Christmas trees and the like. The average Saudi, though he does not want the gates of licence opened wide, would not welcome any more restrictions on his new aspirations and his (very few) material pleasures than are applied at present; and the Government on the whole steers a sensible line, making concessions to the diehards from time to time, but slowly and continuously introducing innovations. That has been the process since the twenties. That is how the wireless, the telephone, television and education for women have been eased in. No substantial body of opinion wants that particular clock turned back.

14. The moderates are a more sensible and more substantial foe. They are for the most part devout Moslems, concerned at the pace of change and the decay of Islamic values. Their austerity has targets in common with the extremists, but they accept the need to come to terms with the modern world. They acknowledge, for

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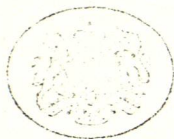


instance (even advocate) the need to give women a larger life,  
to allow them to work outside the home - but in Islamic  
conditions, a phrase which means for them segregation of the  
sexes. Ironically, they join with the radicals of the left  
in their criticisms of the Government's commitment to the West,  
though more for moral and religious reasons than for political.  
These conservative religious moderates are sincere, even indignant,  
but they are by their nature fabian rather than revolutionary.  
They are no threat in themselves to the regime; but if there were  
an upheaval they might lend their support or their neutrality to  
other groups of a more violent approach.

#### The Left

15. As for the left, we see reports from time to time of Saudi  
Communist, Socialist and Ba'thist parties. All sources seem  
agreed that they are of little account. But there are certainly  
radicals - some of them talk to us quite frankly when we are  
alone - who detest the Al Saud and the whole system. They are  
for the most part younger men, educated abroad or at least  
familiar with the West from visits, who want the usual things that  
Arab radicals have wanted for the past thirty years (democracy,  
political freedom, better social services, fairer distribution  
of wealth) plus faster social change (cinemas, cafes, the company  
of their wives in public). But they are less certain, less  
single-minded than their fathers and their elder brothers because  
the early heroes of Arab radicalism are by now largely discredited.

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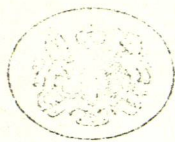


Few can still look at the revolutions of the past in the Arab world and take Nasserist Egypt or Ba'thist Syria as an ideal to aim at. Moreover, though there are still gross inequalities of wealth and privilege in Saudi Arabia, no one can deny that the social services are being rapidly improved; cars, video machines and trips abroad have become commonplace and even the young radicals are comfortably off, if not positively rich. Have they enough fire in the belly and fury in the heart to bare their chests to the guns and tanks if the barricades go up? They are there, they are unhappy, they may well have their cells and their secret meetings, but I do not judge that they have, yet, the stomach or the apparatus for a revolution.

#### The Foreigners

16. There are, as I have said earlier, some two or three million foreigners here. Is there a Spartacus among them who will rouse them to a revolt and a take-over? The answer must be no. The Americans, the Europeans, the Far Easterners and most of the workers from the sub-continent must be excluded from such a proposition: they have no stake in the country other than a temporary interest in high wages and fast savings which argues against rocking the boat. They do not speak the language, they know nothing of the social and political structure of the country, they come rather reluctantly and they depart with relief. Two groups of foreigners must be taken more seriously: the Palestinians and the Yemenis. But the Palestinians in Saudi Arabia are relatively few in number, unlike those in Kuwait or the United Arab Emirates,

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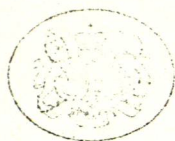


and for the most part in middle-class, profitable jobs with little incentive to stick their necks out. The Yemenis are numerous, a million or more, industrious, under-privileged, conscious of their hosts' unjustified contempt. They have reason to be resentful. But their aim is to make money and go home (where there is, Heaven knows, plenty of scope for revolution if their bent lies in that direction). I am sure their instinct is to let the Saudis stew in their own juice. But even if it were not, even if the Yemenis were to rise up, nothing is more likely to rally the Saudis to the national flag, to Ibn Khaldun's 'asabiyya (tribal solidarity) than what would be seen as bumptious impudence in these little men from the south; who are, moreover, unarmed. The same is true of the foreign Saudis or Saudi foreigners, the Shi'a of the Eastern Province. Most of the regime's critics would put aside their own grievances if those non-U heretics were to get too big for their boots.

#### The Armed Forces

17. There are two sections of Saudi society about whose political feelings we in the Embassy are ill informed: the armed forces and the tribes. We do not know the strength, among the officers, of religious fundamentalism or radicalism or resentment of the Royal Family. Even though we have various military missions attached to the National Guard and the Royal Saudi Air Force, they find it hard to establish social contact with Saudi officers, much less to get them to talk about politics. But my predecessors

/have



have examined the possibility of a classical coup d'etat and have concluded that it is, on logistical grounds alone, highly unlikely to succeed. The Army (controlled by Fahd's full brother, Sultan) is stationed round the periphery of the Kingdom, separated from the insurgents' traditional targets of ministries, radio stations and royal palaces by several hundred miles of desert, crossed only by ribbon roads. Getting the tanks to Riyadh would be a formidable task even for a force provided with competent planners and well-maintained vehicles. No Saudi force is likely to have either. If it did, against expectation, reach the capital it would have to overcome the National Guard (commanded by Prince Abdullah) which is stationed there and whose true, though unacknowledged, purpose is to resist such an attempt. The co-operation of the Air Force (also under Prince Sultan) would be essential to the success of a coup; yet the involvement of the Air Force would greatly increase the risk of discovery in the early stages of planning. Discovery would in any case be highly likely, since members of the Royal Family are scattered throughout the officer corps in all the forces. An Air Force coup was in fact planned in 1969. It was nipped in the bud and the plotters arrested. They were dealt with leniently: none was executed; all prisoners have been released. I see from time to time the man who had been designated as president of the putative republic: he is now a fat and prosperous merchant, closely associated with Prince Sultan, the Minister of Defence. I should expect that in present circumstances the same thing would happen again.



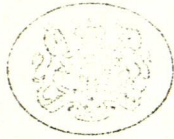
### The Tribes

18. The tribes are even more of a mystery. Nomadism is on the decline. The camels have been replaced by Toyotas and Chevrolets. There are schools and settlements and subsidies. The numbers and the vigour of the bedu are much reduced. How much reduced we do not know and must try to find out. But my firm impression is that the tribes are no longer (if they ever were) a cohesive, unified force capable of deciding the fate of the Kingdom.

### Strikes

19. I come now to a point which strongly impressed me in the Department's post mortem on the Persian debacle. Sir Anthony Parsons said that it was not the marches and the demonstrations which brought down the Shah: it was the strikes. Could the same thing happen here? It is hard to believe. There are, as I have explained, few Saudi workers in Saudi Arabia: the work is done by foreigners. It is arguable that there is no such thing as a Saudi proletariat. We dispute inside the Embassy whether there are any Saudi poor (as opposed to Yemeni or Pakistani poor). There cannot be many and they are mostly rural poor in remote and scattered country districts which cannot in the nature of things provide the base for a revolution. The one place where a strike could be both practicable and damaging is in the oil fields of the Eastern Province, where the work force is, untypically, Saudi and, in large measure, Shi'ite and therefore vulnerable to agitation. But it is at the same time a place which can be easily isolated by the security forces and firm measures applied; and though a surcease of oil

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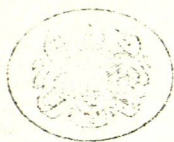
production would have grave consequences in the long term, the Kingdom's financial reserves would provide time for corrective action. It is a threat which needs further investigation but I do not judge that it is an immediate danger at the moment.

#### Factors of Stability

20. I have concentrated so far on the dangers to stability. But there are countervailing factors. The Saud family itself, though it arouses hostility among outsiders and competition among its own members, is well equipped for survival. The Mecca incident was nothing new or unique. Since its establishment the Kingdom has weathered a civil war against its own perfervid supporters, the Ikhwan; the trauma of King Saud and his abdication; the treason of the free Princes in the early sixties; the assault on the television station in 1964, led by a Prince of the blood royal; the assassination of King Faisal - the list is long. There are four or five thousand princes spread through every walk and degree of life, military, administrative and commercial. The family may be privileged but it is not an isolated clique; rather it is a ubiquitous intelligence service, producing in times of crisis considered and loyal assessment and advice. At the same time, through the dispensing of privileges and rewards it is an agency for the recruitment of support, influence and constancy. This is, in Saudi eyes, the acceptable face of corruption.

21. Moreover, the Royal Family is in one sense the paradigm of the whole family system which is the basis of Saudi social life. Every Saudi will tell you of his pride in the strength

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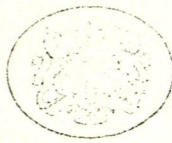


of the family. Nepotism to us is family loyalty to them. To overthrow the regime when it means overthrowing the cousins with whom you grew up is a repugnant commission. Respect for the hierarchy within the family produces respect for the hierarchy within the state. Despite the rapid changes in society, even because of them, Saudis remain essentially conservative, bound together by the conviction that they are special, different from and superior to all varieties of foreigner.

#### Conclusion

22. It is time to draw conclusions. There are in Saudi Arabia problems, dilemmas and tensions, of which government and people alike are well aware. So far they have not brought themselves to face the difficult, even terrible, decisions which a cure demands. The absence of a cure will have a destabilising effect in the long term and even now casts doubt on the permanence of both regime and society. But neither the problems themselves nor the opposition groups who are angered by them are of a nature to threaten immediate upheaval. Some problems (the status of women, for example, or the work force) may dig away at national tranquillity until it is undermined. Others (like regionalism) will gradually disappear. The position is uneasy but not alarming. Even if there were a sudden turn for the worse (and there is no sign of that) I believe we should have ample warning. In short I do not think there is going to be a revolution in Saudi Arabia for as long ahead as I can see (which is two or three years).

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23. Finally, we must put Saudi Arabia in perspective. No doubt there is more chance of serious instability here than there is in Britain or Holland or the United States. But look instead at Syria or Iraq or Pakistan or Argentina. Compared with them, Saudi Arabia is an island of peace and prosperity. The difference is that Saudi Arabia matters to us very much more. So we must consider earnestly what lessons we should draw from the present position.

24. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Representatives at Washington, Cairo, UKMIS New York, Kuwait, Doha, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Muscat, Sana'a, Aden, Damascus and Amman.

I have the honour to be,

My Lord,

with the utmost truth and regard

Your Lordship's most humble and obedient servant

(James Craig)