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## Stenslie, Stig. Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of Succession. London and New York: Routledge, 2012

Carool Kersten Ph.D.

King's College London, carool.kersten@kcl.ac.uk

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**Stenslie, Stig. *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of Succession*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012**

The danger of writing a book about succession in a country ruled by gerontocrats is that it will soon go out of date. Since the publication of the study under review, Saudi Arabia has seen the demise of two crown princes and, more recently, the monarch at the very center of the book, King Abdallah himself. While also the sets of data used to backup this study are quite sparse and often available in greater detail from other sources, the novelty and enduring value of *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia* lies in its theoretical framing and the explanatory model that is used to make sense of the longevity of certain monarchies in the Middle East.

Such research becomes all the more relevant in view of the recent tectonic shifts in the political landscape of the Arab world. Since 2011, we have seen regime changes in republics such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, with Syria descended into civil war, while Iraq has been unstable since 2003. By contrast, the Kingdoms of Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, the emirates of Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, and to extent even Bahrain, have withered the political storms of the Arab Spring quite well.

This context also forms the starting point of Stenslie's argumentation, which begins with a critique of the theories of Samuel Huntington and Manfred Halpern. Grounded in the turbulent events of the 1950s and 1960s, which saw indeed the disappearance of crowned heads in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, they claim that monarchies are ill equipped to curb the process of modernization. Huntington called it the "king's dilemma" in the face of growing and increasingly assertive middle classes: Giving in to their demands might result in losing one's traditional support base, whereas rejection could result in a revolution that ousts the ruler from power.

Because – so far – the outcomes of the Arab uprisings have undermined Huntington and Halpern's case, Stenslie looks for an alternative explanation. Drawing his inspiration from Michael Herb's *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies*, he looks at the phenomenon of "regime stability." Stenslie shares Herb's skepticism regarding the explanations brought forward in most writings on Saudi Arabia and its monarchy: Oil wealth, Wahhabi Islam, and the relationship with the West, in particular the USA. While monopolization of oil revenues by the Al Saud offers an explanation for the power of the state over a weak society, it leaves open the question how then an opposition calling for reform could arise at all. Turning Wahhabi Islam into a political ideology explains the formation of national identity, the legitimization of the regime and exercise of social control, but it does not account for alternative notions of legitimate authority which also exist. A security apparatus built with Western support and protecting the Al Saud from both external and internal threats has also bred domestic anti-Western sentiments as a source of political opposition.

Instead of focusing on political economy, political ideology and foreign relations, Stenslie concentrates on internal factors relevant to the formation of political elites; in particular those that contribute to "elite integration." First of all, there are sociological preconditions that help an elite to consolidate its position. A prime requirement for this is a certain homogeneous disposition and outlook, although it is important to realize that in the case of large dynastic monarchies this does not preclude the existence of any internal differences: "The hallmark of unified elites is [...] not the absence of disagreements, but rather sufficient mutual trust" (17). The required social homogeneity for elite integration also depends on shared values and

norms, as well as the observations made by other researchers that similarities in origin and educational background stimulate closer and more intense social intermingling, which further enforces an *esprit de corps*. Other factors are the existence of “unifying symbols and threats” (18), as well as institutional mechanisms arranged on the basis of certain recruitment patterns and the opportunity to “hold key posts simultaneously in more than one organization” (19).

The book’s theoretical framing is followed by two chapters mapping the royal strategic elite as the epicenter of power in Saudi Arabia, and the auxiliary role of what Stenslie calls “non-royal segment elites.”

A distinguishing feature of Saudi Arabia’s royal family is the lack of formalization in its decision-making processes, certainly in comparison to that of the state bureaucracy or business community. Although various formal consultative arrangements have been put into place, informal consultations remain central. An important aspect of this is that – in contrast to the kingdom’s early years – the constituencies of the most senior princes tend to be much more located within the royal family than before, not least because the Al Saud dynasty has grown exponentially in size. Here, Stenslie’s narrative has been overtaken by events. While it is still true that the Al al-Sudayri remains the most powerful sub-branch, many of the *dramatis personae* have changed since the writing of this book.

However, some of the general observations on the workings of the dynasty still hold true. The parallel existence of two authority hierarchies -- one visible, the other more opaque -- is still true. This helps explain why princes without formal positions in government can still be very powerful, and why some areas of policy-making do not follow “rational-bureaucratic principles” (34). A clear example of this is foreign policy, where the minister of foreign affairs -- despite being a very senior prince -- has been overshadowed by the king and crown prince since the position was created in 1975. While there has also been a Royal Family Council since 2000, this is not a politically significant institution, but rather a platform for bringing various branches of the dynasty together to deal with familial affairs.

Stenslie identifies four non-royal elites, but immediately adds the caveat that the alliances of all four with the strategic royal elite are asymmetrical. The religious establishment, tribal leaders, business community, and heads of the state bureaucracy have all been given institutional power bases, but these do not constitute formal corporative entities in their own right; rather they are broken down in discrete entities on local or national level. By creating such “parallel arenas” and consulting their dignitaries through informal channels rather than formal structures, the Al Saud have made sure that each one of them can be kept in check through a “policy of segmented clientelism” (42).

In the section on the religious establishment, Stenslie pays attention to the prominent role played by the descendants of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1793), the religious scholar who became the chief ideologue teaming up with the Al Saud’s ancestor in the middle of eighteenth century, and who provided the strict puritanical interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism. Called the Al Shaykh, members of this family have intermarried with the royal family and continue to occupy important positions in ministries such as education, justice, and religious affairs. Identifying the Senior Council of Religious Scholars, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Imam Muhammad bin Saud University, and Islamic Charities as the main institutions through which the religious establishment exercises its influence, nothing is said of Saudi-based organizations such as the Muslim World League and the Organization of

Islamic States, which contribute to Saudi Arabia's international standing and influence in the Muslim world.

While the power of the religious establishment rests on its privileged access to the royal family and to public opinion, the leaders of the once powerful tribal confederations of the Bedouin no longer command the influence they had during the kingdom's formative years in the early part of the twentieth century. While tribal identity is still alive and the Al Saud very much profiles itself as a "super tribe," the latter has come at the expense of the tribal chiefs whose influence has been reduced from the national to the regional or local level at best. The one concession made to the original tribal character of the kingdom is the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which for more than half century was the powerbase of the late King Abdallah.

Saudi Arabia's business elite consists of regional merchant families, which have operated often for centuries in the Hijaz and Persian Gulf region, as well as in the interior of the Najd plateau. Also some new mercantile dynasties have emerged, but their fortunes are very much tied in with the royal family. In fact, the whole business community is beholden to the Al Saud, due to its control over the oil revenues and the prospect of competition from ambitious princes. The effective political influence of the business community is therefore debatable. However, among the first commoners to receive a modern education, many mercantile families have transformed themselves into a bourgeoisie that – although maybe not independent from the royal family – is autonomous from the state and certainly "ready to play a political role". (61) According to Stenslie, the late King Abdallah also "attached great importance to the views of the Saudi commercial elite" for his own vision of Saudi Arabia's modernization and industrialization (ibid).

As a result of the increased complexity of running a country like Saudi Arabia, the state bureaucracy has become increasingly important. Although a Council of Ministers was first appointed in 1953, King Abdulaziz and his successor King Saud had to rely on a handful of individuals to run the rudimentary state institutions. Only from the 1960s and 1970s onwards has this expanded into something resembling a modern state bureaucracy. It remains a fact that even its most senior figures are mainly employed to help run the country rather than set out its policies. The positions of these technocrats depend not only on their competence, but also on their loyalty. The only partial exception to this is the state oil company ARAMCO; its technocratic elite has tremendous and virtually unchallenged authority over the five-year development plans made on the basis of the underlying royal decrees.

Stenslie closes his book with two analytical chapters, dealing with the mechanism of elite integration and with royal succession respectively they revolve entirely around the Al Saud as the strategic elite.

The sociological preconditions that bring about elite integration are shaped by the Al Saud's shared blood and marriage ties; a traditional ethos revolving around notions of honor, justice and loyalty; a sense of *noblesse oblige*; and the modes of social interaction determined by affiliation with certain sub-branches of the royal family, in which also the women play an important cohesive role. In terms of unifying symbols and threat, the royal family presents itself as the guarantor and sponsor of Islam. The King is not only the *Imam* of the Saudi Wahhabi community, but, since 1986, also referred to as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" (85). Also the swearing of allegiance is an important unifying symbol, both in binding the rest of royal family to the king and the heir-apparent and as a display of royal

unity. The latter is very important in the face of real or perceived threats, both internal and external. In terms of institutional mechanisms, the Basic Law of 1992 and the formation of the family council in 2000 provide some formal structure, but informal mechanisms such as arbitration, mediation, and conflict-management, preferably by non-action, are much more important to settle or divert from disputes. Both inside and outside the royal family order is maintained by a subtle game of “deterrents and decoys.” (97).

With the passing of King Abdallah and the first two crown princes of his reign, parts of the final chapter are now obsolete. However, it contains valuable information about the history of “elite integration” during the reigns of successive Saudi Kings. While gossip about the machinations within the royal family are a favorite pastime of both Saudis and outside observers, I agree with the author that much of the often sensational speculations about internal strife are exaggerated and that “succession demonstrates the unity of the House of Saud.” (104)<sup>1</sup> Also the profiling of the incumbent of the Saudi throne, King Salman, allows for some projections regarding future “elite integration” in Saudi Arabia. And while he correctly identifies the current minister of interior and new deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Nayef as the man to watch among the next generation of princes, Stenslie was wrong in dismissing the current Crown Prince Muqrin as a contender for the throne. Another astute observation is the possible disintegrating effect of a burgeoning royal family composed of younger generations of princes, raised in luxury without exposure to the frugality of early life in the kingdom and without a realization of how precarious the hold of the Al Saud on power was at that time. These experiences are still vividly alive in the minds of the most senior princes today, but with their imminent demise these will pass from memory and the lessons they teach may be forgotten too.

Carool Kersten PhD  
King’s College London  
[carool.kersten@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:carool.kersten@kcl.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Carool Kersten, “Succession in Saudi Arabia: No Surprises Here,” *Open Democracy*. 28 January 2015, <https://opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/carool-kersten/succession-in-saudi-arabia-no-surprises-here>