

## THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA: DETERMINING THE MODEL OF ARAB NATIONHOOD

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**Abstract:** The article is consecrated to exploring the genesis and specific features of the Saudi political system, viewed as a variant of nationhood model, that was shaped in the 20th century in the Arab world and appeared to be in the grip of crisis over the second and third decades of the 21st century. The research is based on a hybrid historic-politological methodology that permits to trace the genesis and evolution of the political system throughout a protracted period in retrospect. The source base of a historic research section is made up of documents compiled by Soviet diplomats as well as diplomatic records of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which detail the steps undertaken by Ibn Saud with the aim of setting up the institutes of political power in the Kingdom and defining its administrative and territorial structure. Drawing on these documents, the politological section of this article identifies three clusters of elements pertinent to the Saudi political model: a universal cluster, whose analogues can be found in the history of diverse state formations, an Arab-Muslim cluster, which is in correlation with the appropriate political culture, and an Arabian one. Other examples are revealed, where the above elements of nationhood have played a crucial role. The Saudi specificity, as shown herein, embraces both traditional and contemporary elements of statehood. A thesis is advanced by the authors regarding the existence of a specifically Arabian model underlying the genesis of a multicomponent state, also the ramifications of such genesis for the development of political system are laid out.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia, Najd, Hijaz, Hakimov, multicomponent state

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The Russian as well as international studies of the Middle East geopolitical landscape over the recent years, claim that one of the most debated problems is the crisis and changes affecting the Middle East model of nationhood (Zvyagelskaya, 2017; Truevtsev, 2017; Kuznetsov, Salem, 2016; Magen, 2013; Schwarz, De Corral, 2011). A certain impulse to its discussion was imparted by the dramatic processes that swept through the Middle East region in the 2010 – 2020-s, leading to the disintegration or sharp decline of the state system in some cases, to the clearly unsuccessful attempts at building up alternative models in other cases or to the revision of the already established models in third ones. The latter category is exemplified by the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, where the strategic plans published over the last years (Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030,<sup>1</sup> the UAE Centennial Plan 2071,<sup>2</sup> Bahrainuna in Bahrain<sup>3</sup>) envisage not only the launching of these or those reforms, as is the usual scenario for the development strategies (Todaro, Smith, 2009), but also problematizing the very foundations of national consolidation and progress.

The paradox of the evolving situation is that, while there exists a universal consensus over the recognition of the mere fact that the established model has slid into crisis, generally speaking, there is no commonly accepted description of its fundamental criteria, and each subsequent research effort, quite naturally, helps to discover new details.

Within the framework of the present article, we intend to highlight some peculiar aspects pertinent to the formation of political institutions of the Arab territorial state, using the example of Saudi Arabia, by designating the universal, Arab-Muslim and Arabian elements within the Saudi model. However, while describing the history behind the formation of the Saudi statehood, we will rely on the Soviet diplomatic documents of that time, as they provide a very detailed account of that process. Therefore, in regards to its methodology, this article is based on a specific hybrid historic and politological approach that permits to trace the genesis and evolution processes of political systems over protracted time spans.

### Formation of Saudi Nationhood

As is well known, the Saudi state emerged three times on the map of the Arabian Peninsula: in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when a pact was concluded between Muhammad b. Saud and Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab (Redissi, 2007); in 1824, when Turki b. Abd Allah b. Muhammad ibn Saud, who founded the Najd emirate,

<sup>1</sup> Ru'aya 2030. *Al-Mamlaka al-'arabiya as-sa'udiya* (Vision 2030. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). Available at: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/ar/v2030/overview/> (accessed 11 June 2022).

<sup>2</sup> *UAE Centennial 2071*. About the UAE. Available at: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/uae-centennial-2071> (accessed 11 June 2022).

<sup>3</sup> *Bahrainouna*. Available at: <http://www.bahrainouna.com> (accessed 11 June 2022).

rose to power in Riyadh, and finally in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Abdulaziz b. Saud initially managed to unify the fragmented tribes of Nadj (1902 – 1932), and then annexed Hijaz and a number of other Arabian territories (Vasiliev, 1999).

As far as the sources allow us to judge, over a period prior to the unification with Hijaz, the political entity founded by Ibn Saud was fairly unconsolidated and loose, and in many respects resembled what Chase F. Robinson, while expounding on the Umayyad dynasty, called “a polity of conquest” (Robinson, 2005), meaning such a political structure in which a deficiency of institutes is compensated by a constant external expansion strategy. Incidentally, even at this early stage, Ibn Saud undertook considerable efforts to increase the sustainability of a political project being implemented by him.

Like his ancestors during their first attempts to create a state in Arabia, Ibn Saud relied on an alliance with a fortified Wahhabi clergy to consolidate his support among the tribes. By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, the ruler of Najd, based on the growing popularity of the Wahhabi “remake” of the religion of their “righteous ancestors” (*al-salaf al-salih*), decided to carry out the first of his planned transformations for Bedouin society – the transitioning of nomadic tribes to a non-migratory lifestyle (Nahedh, 1989). The initiative launched by the monarch aroused natural resentment within Bedouin society and to justify that working the land was acceptable, the Wahhabi imams were forced to come up with a special fatwa.

Whereas Ibn Saud’s initiative targeting the sedentarization of tribes was perfectly in line with the policy pursued by both the Arab leaders and colonial powers in other countries of the Arab world at that time (Kark, Frantzman, 2012), the instruments to be employed for its implementation and the very goal-setting logic of the ruler bore elements of substantially distinctive nature.

Like Prophet Muhammad and his closest associates, Ibn Saud and those actively supporting his faction of the Wahhabi *‘ulama* once again had to issue a *da’wah*<sup>4</sup> in order to convince the Bedouins to strictly observe the precepts of Allah, abandon the tribal *‘asabiyya*<sup>5</sup> blood vengeance, remnants of polytheism, sinful behavior and to be in solidarity with their brothers in their faith. Thus, in 1910, a new commonwealth of like-minded people appeared under the name *Ikhwān at-tawhīd* (Brothers in Monotheism). The not-always-declared but clearly visible imitation of Muhammad resulted in the reanimation of the *hijrah* concept, which had been known from the time of the Prophet and called for avoiding the world of sin and entering into a realm where true Muslims could fully practice the “true faith.” In 622 AD Prophet Muhammad left behind the inhabitants of Mecca who were not ready to support him and traveled to Yathrib (which later became Medina, one of two sacred cities for all Muslims), taking with him only a group

<sup>4</sup> Authors’ note: Arabic – literally, an invitation

<sup>5</sup> Authors’ note: *‘Asabiyya* – traditional commitment to one’s tribe, which the Prophet Muhammad called for replacing with Islamic solidarity.

of his loyal supporters (from this moment forward the Muslim calendar begins, according to the *hijrah*). But this time, the agricultural colony-settlements of those who decided to leave the desert began to be called *hijrah* (Al-Mubarak, 1999).

Therefore, it was not merely the whim of a ruler to restrict their movement but a forced transition to a way of life based on farming, motivated by pragmatic considerations relating to the strengthening of state power. Moreover, another lofty goal was at play: Ibn Saud undoubtedly wanted to repeat the feat of the Prophet Muhammad in the new chapter of Arab-Muslim history when he began to create a Muslim fraternity in the *ummah* community. Just as in 7<sup>th</sup> Century, inhabitants of Arabia had to abandon their tribal self-identification and feel themselves members of larger unity, held together by the bonds of solidarity of Muslim *ummah*. Now they again needed to unite as a community, not only Muslims but also as the Ikhwan (Arabic *ikhwan*, the plural of *akh* – brother) and respectively referring to each other as such. The Ikhwan, the most fanatical branch of Wahhabism, was designed by Ibn Saud to become a powerful military-police force in the conquests of the leader of Najd, in order to maintain his power and impose new order on the territories of his state. Thus, they were both a territorial-religious community and socio-economic unit of society; they were also the police and the army; in other words, the Ikhwan were a special military-religious movement, for which the 20<sup>th</sup> century has few, if any, analogues, though some can be found at earlier stages.

Initially, settlements were erected on strategic routes. The first of them, Al-Artawiyya, was erected in 1912 along the route to Iraq, and the second, Gatgat, along the route to Mecca (Leatherdale, 1983). By the end of the 1920s, hundreds of settlements already existed in Najd, the home of hundreds of thousands of tribes (Georgiev, Ozoling, 1983; Isa, 1975). As Soviet diplomats later reported to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs: "By now, according to information from knowledgeable persons, there are already up to 200 new settlements, such as Artavia (founded in 1918), which has 80,000 inhabitants. It is not yet possible to give a more detailed and accurate account of this extremely interesting phenomenon due to a lack of comprehensive and reliable source materials. However, the information that we possess and that is known partly from published literature (the Reyhani book) is satisfactory."<sup>6</sup>

In July 1924, Ibn Saud declared jihad against Hijaz located in the west of the Arabian Peninsula, where by that time a distinct state formation, with its capital in Mecca, had already been established. According to the Arabian standards of that time, Hijaz was undoubtedly a more modernized and more integrated into the world politics state, than Najd, while its rule – Sharif Hussein al-Hashimi – was aspiring to become the head of the all-Arab state.

<sup>6</sup> Kingdom of Hijaz and Najd and the Dependencies. *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF*. Fd. 08. Inv. 12. M. 94. F. 77, pp. 19–20.

Authors' note: The mentioned book belongs to the famous Lebanese writer Amin al-Reihani, who visited the Kingdom and communicated with Ibn Saud: *Tarih Najd al-hadith wa-mulhaqati* (Modern history of Najd and the Dependencies). Beirut, 1928 (In Arabic).

After Ibn Saud's call for jihad in July, 1924, the inspired Ikhwan were poised to launch a massive attack on the cities of Hijaz, which they considered to be breeding grounds for moral decay. At the same time, they strived to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, who had conquered Mecca and Medina in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the 1924 – 1925 period, Ibn Saud's troops successfully seized the principal city centers in Hijaz, and after the downfall of Jeddah in December, 1925, Ibn Saud was proclaimed King of Hijaz and the Sultan of Najd and dependent territories (prior to that, beginning in 1920, he was only the Sultan). As early as February 16, 1926, Karim Hakimov, the then Soviet Consul in Jeddah, sent the King a note that Saudi state was now fully recognized. Thus, the Soviet Union became the first foreign state to recognize Saudi Arabia.

At a minimum two circumstances made the state created by Ibn Saud unique. Firstly, it was dual, two-entity simply because it consisted of two different states, both united under the authority of a single ruler – Hijaz and Najd with the affiliated areas. Secondly, these two states – the Kingdom and the Sultanate – were dissimilar and even the ruler himself accordingly had two titles – King and the Sultan. On top of everything else, these two entities of a new government composition differed greatly in terms of economic and social development, culture and the make-up of the population.

Hakimov very much wanted the Soviet Union to become the first country to conclude an agreement with Hijaz / Najd, which would be a great personal victory for the Consul General. He wrote: "It should be noted that the international legal position of the new state, despite the presence of its *de jure* recognition, is still uncertain, just as its state and legal essence is uncertain. The fact of the matter is, in practical purposes, both states currently represent a real union since apart from the monarch's persona, they are actually united in that they conduct a common foreign policy, military administration, postal services, coinage, etc. At the same time, however, Ibn Saud's repeated statements about the complete independence of Hijaz and the need to define his relationship with Najd, as well as the idea of achieving the neutrality of Hijaz, put forward at the universal Muslim congress – all this suggests that Ibn Saud is inclined to consider Hijaz and Najd as two independent states that are only in a personal union. The texts of European states that recognize the new state are sufficiently unambiguous and enough to resolve this issue."<sup>7</sup>

Elaborating further, in several strokes, Hakimov illustrated the difference between Hijaz and Najd. "While Hijaz was recognized *de jure* by the great powers before it was taken by the Wahhabis and even was a founding member of the League of Nations (which, however, it did not join because Hussein's failure to ratify the Versailles treaty), Najd was not recognized *de jure*. On the contrary, the treaty of 1915, which places Ibn Saud under the protectorate of Britain, weighed heavily on Najd. Although the treaty by Ibn Saud was in fact violated, it can

<sup>7</sup> Explanatory Memorandum, 4 August 1926. *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF*. Fd. 4. Inv. 12. F. 69. M. 961, pp. 28–36.

nevertheless in the hands of the British serve as an instrument to apply pressure on Ibn Saud. Unification of Najd and Hijaz into one state (real union) will enable Ibn Saud, by concluding a treaty on behalf of the new state, leveraging the long-standing recognition of Hijaz, to save Najd from its past and strengthen its international position, which undoubtedly is in line with our interests. That is why the Agency and the Consulate General believe that the proposed draft contract being concluded unequivocally with the government of Ibn Saud, the King and the Sultan, will be looked upon with a sympathetic attitude by Ibn Saud himself. This project considers the proposed agreement as a general friendship treaty, which will provide, in its salient features, a resolution of potential general issues that may arise between both sides."<sup>8</sup>

Only at the end of January 1927 was one of the two asymmetries of the Saudi state system finally eliminated: the sultanate also became a kingdom, although its "dual-entity" nature remained until 1932.

In connection with the renaming of the sultanate, the Deputy Head of Foreign Policy Department in Hijaz, Yusuf Yasin, in early April notified the Soviet Consul General in a note pertaining to this topic:

"Letter from the Deputy Foreign Affairs manager, Hijaz, addressed to the Agent and the Consul General of the USSR in Hijaz, dated 2 Shawwal, 1345.

I have the honor to inform you that on the occasion of the visit of His Majesty the King to Riyadh, the capital of the Sultanate of Najd and the Dependencies, delegations representing the people of this Sultanate have paid him a visit. On the 25th of Rajab of 1345 (January 28, 1927), a solemn meeting was held under the chairmanship of Imam Abdul Al Faisal Al Saud, the father of His Majesty the King, during which it was decreed that the Sultanate of Najd and the Dependencies would be known as "the Kingdom of Najd and the Dependencies," as well the proclamation that His Majesty King of Hijaz and the Sultan of Najd and the Dependencies, of Abdul Aziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al Faisal Al Saud, as King with the title of "King of Najd and the Dependencies." This was proposed to the King, who issued the following highest decree:

"Based on the proposal made to us by the elders of our subjects in the Sultanate of Najd and the Dependencies, we command that the Sultanate of Najd and the Dependencies become the Kingdom of Najd and the Dependencies and that henceforth our title will read 'King of Hijaz, Najd and the Dependencies'. I ask God to assist in the implementation of our difficult tasks, for He is the best assistant. King of Hijaz, Najd and the Dependencies of Abdul Aziz."

Please bring this to the attention of your esteemed government.

Accept and other formalities

(signed by)

Yusuf Yasin."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Explanatory Memorandum, 4 August 1926. Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF. Fd. 4. Inv. 12. F. 69. M. 961, pp. 28–36.

<sup>9</sup> See these letters: *Archive of the Foreign Policy of the RF*. Fd. 0127. Inv. 1. F. 37. M. 3. Pp. 34–37.

The formal unification of two regions was followed by a whole series of administrative and political reforms.

In one of his articles published in early 1928, i.e. just two years after the proclamation of Ibn Saud as King of the Hijaz, Rafiq Musa (an assumed name for Soviet diplomat and intelligence officer Moisey Axelrod) gave a positive assessment of the results of the "internal construction" going on in Hijaz. In an essay of Axelrod's several key points can be identified. The first is that Ibn Saud carried out his own state-building project, which was discussed in detail in the article. The second is the restoration of relations from the "time of the birth of Islam" – the primary feature of this state building. Thirdly, the measures being taken by Ibn Saud can be qualified as reforms. Fourth – the policy document for the Hijaz adopted in August 1926 in the article is characterized as a "Constitution." Fifth, Axelrod gives a positive assessment of these events. The reforms "came one after another," the author notes, claiming that Ibn Saud took his first steps toward reform during the war between Najd and Hijaz. Proof of such a step was considered the creation of the Civil Council (*Majlis Ahl*) in an occupied part of the Hijaz, which consisted of representatives from the population of Mecca, to which the King submitted for consideration various events that he himself was organizing. Ibn Saud, according to the author, for the first time created "the country's administrative apparatus and various representative institutions, and radically transformed judicial bodies" (Henceforward: Musa, 1928).

After August 31, 1926, when the country published a document entitled "Basic Provisions of the Hijaz Kingdom" – a constitution of sorts, the reform process became systemic and programmed. Axelrod disagrees with Egyptian journalists who have had a taste of the "delights of European democracy in Egypt," who accused Ibn Saud of using his "key points" to allegedly establish an autocratic regime, since (Art. 5 of the "Provisions") "the administration of the Hijaz Kingdom will be in the hands of His Majesty the King Abdul Aziz," so that "the situation in Hijaz will not change at all compared to the era of Hussein," however, His Majesty will be limited by the norms of high Sharia." Rafiq Musa notes: "This is fully in line with the basic spirit of the Wahhabi doctrine, which seeks to restore the initial patriarchal-democratic relations existing at the time of the birth of Islam in all their purity." However, "it is difficult to say just how seriously Ibn Saud set himself the goal of restoring 7<sup>th</sup> Century Hijaz in a 20<sup>th</sup> Century setting, but, in any case, in the conditions of Najd, which successfully conquered Hijaz and left its ideological imprint on modern life there; saying that the King's power was restricted by Sharia norms is by no means just mere words. There, indeed, the King cannot take a single step without first receiving not only consent from all the tribe leaders, but also from the tribal masses. If these relations are not being transferred now to Hijaz entirely, but are at least to some degree, then this is great progress compared to the times of Hussein."

Now the Constitution provides for the creation of a number of advisory bodies from representatives of the population. At the center of this body is the Majlis al-Shūra (Consultative Assembly), consisting of the King and his Governor. On the



ground, district majlises are created in district centers and tribal councils among the tribes. To resolve municipal issues, municipal government bodies are created in the form of 'general city councils', having their own city halls and mayors."

The author notes that not all of the population was drawn to participate in these bodies, but "notable," "the best" people, which included (although there was no legislative provision for this) "rich merchants and homeowners – the most politically and economically influential element of Hijaz; participation in tribal councils envisaged the involvement of the shaykhs, i.e. tribal elders."

The formation of the administrative apparatus is also analyzed by the author, who writes: "Leaving supreme power with the King, the carrying out of which he is assisted by the General Governor (this innovation owes its appearance to the fact that Hijaz is currently in a union with Najd), the Constitution provides for six branches of government all entrusted to a special administrators (*mudiri*) having the rights of ministers ... Here a system is introduced of hierarchical subordination of local institutions to their centers."

This central system corresponds to the local one. The Constitution provides for the division of the country into provinces (*mudirias*), and the province into districts (*nakhias*). In the provinces, governors (*kaimakams*) held ministerial councils which consisted of the highest provincial officials."

Summing up the analysis of this document, Rafiq Musa notes that "the significant difference distinguishing Ibn Saud's Hijaz from the Hashemite's" in his opinion, "can be boiled down to the following: Hijaz is not a royal fiefdom, but a state ruled on the basis of known legal regulations (in this case, the Sharia). The King's powers are limited by Sharia Law. The population is involved in resolving state and municipal issues, but in a deliberative manner. A coherent system of central and local control has been established. Organized and centralized control occurs over the activities of institutions."

In addition to the "Constitution," Axelrod also analyzed the detailed provision on municipalities adopted in July 1927, which defines in detail "not only the functions of municipalities, their 'general city councils', councils and mayors, but also their staff and functions of individual employees". In general, municipalities were granted quite extensive powers to manage and streamline the city economy, as well were given corresponding rights to issue binding regulations and the collection of city fees and taxes.

The fact that the King convened a number of general meetings of citizens in order to discuss various events drew the author's attention. "For example, such an extensive meeting was convened on August 5, 1927 in Mecca. At this meeting a number of important issues were discussed (on religious education, on the temple, on waquf) and special commissions were allocated for their further study. A similar meeting was held at the end of September in Jeddah, where the King set forth the main tasks of government's activities in the nearest future, pointed out the need for strict observance of the rule of law and invited the people to address him directly with all sorts of complaints and statements."



Analyzing in detail the system of centralized power created in Hijaz, the author named the six branches of government provided for in the "Constitution": Sharia (in religious affairs, it was in charge of judicial institutions), internal affairs (which included healthcare, post and telegraph), education, finance, foreign affairs and military. Military affairs were managed not by the head of the branch, as in other industries, but by the King himself. "Some of these departments have more or less important and independent departments. So, for example, in the management of internal affairs, headed by the Governor himself, the post, telegraph and health departments are included."

The only one of the government agencies to have a branch office, wrote the author, was the Department of Finance – and located in key centers (for example, in Jeddah, Medina). Originally the Majlis al-Shura was intended to become the highest representative institution and the highest administrative body. But then Ibn Saud decided to create an executive committee of the heads of central administrations. In this manner, says Axelrod, something resembling a cabinet was formed. And on the ground, administrative councils that were composed of all the highest provincial officials corresponded to this executive committee. A decree on the organization of such Councils in Jeddah and Medina was published on September 14, 1927. But otherwise, he concluded, "the administrative structure of Hijaz maintains the same chaotic appearance it had during the times of Hussein. Even though indicated in the new Constitution, the division of the country into provinces and districts in reality doesn't exist."

In Moscow Ibn Saud was viewed as cruel but fair. Order was maintained, as Rafiq Musa noted, not only on the basis of the power and authority of the ruler, but also on a purely material basis: "The Bedouins, on whose lands the pilgrimage routes passed, were allocated a certain, precisely fixed allowance, for which they pledged not only to maintain order and safety on their lands, but would answer with their heads should anything go wrong". Of course, this remuneration could not be compared with the former income of the Bedouins, yet, on the other hand the increase in Hajj (as a result of increased security) and the increase in fees for the transport of pilgrims (which the Bedouins mainly handled) compensated to some extent for their losses.

In Hijaz the main obstacles on the path to the strengthening of the beginnings of merchant capitalism were the interests of the tribes, who were the antagonists of urban culture and supported the Wahhabi approach toward all different typenahy 'an alpmenkarrs of heresy, and were for "pure Islam."

The entry into the Kingdom of Najd, Hijaz, Al-Hasa and Jabal Shammar in the recent past, Soviet diplomats concluded in their correspondence, predetermined the King's actions in organizing the management of these areas and their economic and political integration. Showing determination, combined with caution, the King proceeded from the need for a diversified approach to the above areas, as diplomats believed, based on the characteristics of the situation in each of them. In Najd, the royal court played the role of the government, which was also

the government of the entire state. And Hijaz was endowed with autonomous rights of sorts, and the third son of the King, Emir Faisal, became King's Governor (Vasiliev, 2010; Yakovlev, 1999).

Simultaneously with the appointment of the Emir Faisal as Ibn Saud's Governor in Hijaz, the Emir of Saud was appointed to the same position in Najd. The fact that the King's sons became governors in the provinces was intended to promote the *de facto* unification of the country under the auspices of centralized power. To a narrow circle of emirs participating in the governing State, entered Emir Muhammad, who became governor of Medina, and later also Emir Khalid. Establishing and perfecting the system of transfer of power and participation in it within the ruling family, Ibn Saud pursued this endeavor not only to strengthen the centralized nature of the state, but also to achieve a balance of power at all levels, allowing the possibility of eliminating or paying off rivals, eliminating the causes that could give rise to conflict. The equilibrium, which was based on checks and balances, played a big role in stabilizing the Kingdom's domestic political life.

The Foreign Affairs Department established in Jeddah (*Mudiriyat al-Shu'un al-Kharjiyya*) handled all the Kingdom's foreign relations until 1930 when it was reorganized into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – the first of such ministries to be created in the Kingdom. The King continued to pay close personal attention to this ministry because of its importance, and Faisal bin Abdul Aziz steadily led the Department first and then the Foreign Ministry as its Minister. According to the royal adviser Kheireddine al-Zarkali, Faisal continued to supervise foreign policy even after becoming King.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, it can be seen that upon completion of his military expansion program, that practically lasted for a quarter of a century, Ibn Saud swiftly transitioned to the formation of a political system based on institutions.

Despite significant changes introduced into the political system of Saudi Arabia over a subsequent period, many governance mechanisms laid down by Ibn Saud have retained their relevance and practicability to this day. Moreover, if we consider the system created by Ibn Saud as a variant of the models underlying the Arab statehood of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then several types of elements can be singled out in it, accordingly, corresponding to the universal principles of state governance, Arab Muslim, Arabian and specifically Saudi political cultures. Since the Saudi elements are unique, they cannot by definition be considered as part of a more general model. It's therefore important to unpack the remaining ones. Az-Zarkali. Op. cit. P. 369.

## Elements of the Saudi Model

### *Universal Elements*

Notwithstanding the fact that Ibn Saud's state is distinctly unique and singular, its universal elements are clearly in evidence – the above documents compiled by the Soviet diplomats underscore this very "normality" of the Saudi state, perceived

<sup>10</sup> Az-Zarkali. Op. cit. P. 369.

by them in the functional distribution of administrative duties, in the territorial system of governance and in the very process of building up a system on the basis of a certain analogue of constitutional precepts. Overall, the governance mechanisms depicted by them align with the logic underlying the Westphalian territorial state involving its division of administrative powers among specialized agencies, on the one hand, designation of several layers of administrative and territorial system, on the other hand, and construction of the feedback channels, thirdly. To a certain extent, while designing such governance architecture, the King, most likely, proceeded merely from the common sense, whereas some concrete decisions might be advised to him by his foreign consultants (Yizraeli, 1997).

However, universal elements are related not only to the political design – they can be segregated within the very process of state building.

In order to see them, it is sufficient to distract our mind from the Saudi experience as such and to compare it with something entirely different. Thus, José Ortega y Gasset commences his essay "Invertebrate Spain" with a discourse on Theodore Mommsen and the origins of Roman statehood – the sole statehood whose history, as noted by the Spanish philosopher, is made available to us fully – starting from its genesis until its decadence. A key point for Ortega y Gasset concerning his research of the Roman origins, following in Mommsen's footsteps, is his assertion that "The history of every nation, and especially of the Latin nation, is a vast system of amalgamations" (Ortega y Gasset, 2002). The notion of amalgamation remains to be of critical relevance to the author: "...historical amalgamation is not the expansion of an initial nucleus, but the organization of many pre-existent social units into a new structure. The initial nucleus neither devours the people it conquers nor cancels their character as vital units in their own right" (Ortega y Gasset, 2002).

Elaborating on the subject, he further asserts that if "national unity" is construed as an "essentially dynamic system," then "the centrifugal force is just as necessary for its maintenance as is the centripetal." And while the centrifugal forces are retained in the system due to its ways of formation, the centripetal ones are formed through "an inspiring plan for a life in common": "Nations are made and go on living by having a program for the future" (Ortega y Gasset, 2002).

It is quite understandable that for Ortega y Gasset, all this reasoning is meaningful only to the extent that it helps him to describe the specific features of Spanish nation-building process through the unification of Castile and Aragon first, and then other states on the Iberian Peninsula.

It is also clear that, technically, the model underlying the formation of nationhood advanced by Ortega y Gasset can be easily detected in many other cases, exemplifying different scenarios. The first such cases that spring to mind include Russia, Germany and Italy. Although these states were formed in totally different historical epochs, the very principle for the genesis of a single entity through a symbiotic unification of several communities is demonstrated in all of them very explicitly. Bearing in mind that in some cases, such way can lead to the development of feudalism, this does not happen in every instance at all.

The above principle is quite vividly manifested in the history of Saudi Arabia, whose project was based, first, on the idea of implementing the Salafi "program of the future" (in this sense, the infighting between Najd and Hijaz was extremely significant, as the Hashemites, who ruled and administered Hijaz, also espoused a long-term strategy of uniting all Arabs), and second, was sustained through the unification of different areas of Arabia.

While familiarizing ourselves with Hakimov's documents, where he characterizes Ibn Saud's state as a "real union," it's quite natural to refer to other well-known unions – primarily the Polish-Lithuanian and the Austrian-Hungarian ones. A radical difference between the Saudi case and European cases consists in several aspects. First, in the European cases, the question was about either a unification of several more or less homogeneous states, or, on the contrary, a decentralization of power within the framework of an earlier single state, as was in the event of Austria-Hungary. In both cases, the constituent parts of the union were similar to each other in the institutional sense and, broadly, aligned with each other in terms of development level and socio-economic paradigm. Second, under the European circumstances, the unions that originally emerged as personal or dynastic and then transformed into real ones, were not formed with a view to imposing this or that religious doctrine by one party to another. Finally, third, if we assume that in the European Union there was a certain drive analogous to striving towards a tribal balance, then it was only concerned with political elites pertinent to the component parts of the emerging state, but not the entire society at all.

This allows us to refer to the second cluster of elements inherent to Ibn Saud's political system – the Arab Muslim cluster.

#### *Arab Muslim Elements*

If we get an insight into the formation of the Saudi nationhood, within the context of the Arab Muslim political history, we can see that it has largely followed the same way that was covered by the state of Muhammad and Rightly Guided Caliphs, whose experience was deemed to be exemplary for the Islamic political tradition already in the medieval period. This was not only because Ibn Saud was intentionally seeking to metaphorically reproduce the Prophet's path, which was mentioned by the Soviet diplomats, but also due to the objective coincidence of a number of circumstances.

Over the period of its formation the state of Muhammad has knowingly undergone three major phases.

The first one was linked to the migration of the Prophet and his companions muhajiruns from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) in 622 CE. Then, an agreement was reached between the Muslims and various tribal groups inhabiting Yathrib, which was referred to in the historiography as the Constitution of Medina (Bolshakov, 2002). In essence, the document was a certain social pact made between the groups of Medina population, who had been in competition before, it stipulated for the maintenance of some balance of forces, on the basis of common rules

of conduct that were considered justifiable by all the parties to the agreement. This paved the way for shaping the concept of Ummah as a political and legal community (Nassar, 1992; Naumkin, 2022).

The second phase in the formation of Islamic nationhood can be associated with Muhammad's victory over Mecca, that brought about not only a unification of two political centers of then Arabia, but also cooptation of the Quraysh into the political elite of the new state, the most illustrative example of which was the adoption of Islam by Abu Sufyan, leader of the Quraysh, in 630 CE. His son Muawiya would subsequently become first governor of Syria, and then founder of the Umayyad dynasty.

Finally, the third phase was represented by *ar-ridda* – an attempt made by several Arabian tribes to break away from the Islamic Ummah after Prophet Muhammad's death under the pretext that the oath taken by them (*bay'a*) was not applicable to his successors. The expansionist campaigns beyond the boundaries of the Arabian Peninsula, that were launched when the fight against this breakaway faction was terminated, epitomized a far more important instrument for consolidating the community than the mere opposition to the secessionists by forcible actions.

Thus, in the earlier history of the Islamic state, apart from the already mentioned community unifying elements, for the sake of a common future project, some other elements can be also detected. The state is built upon a foundation exhibiting a balance of interests among the tribal groups united by a common ideology. However, later, throughout the entire history of the Arab Muslim nationhood, here and there we come across a hardly varying pattern: a religious preacher enters into an alliance with leaders of some tribe and they create a state together. Under a different version of the same scenario, the preacher himself builds up a group of companions around him, which starts to act like a tribe, with resort to violence and religious idea, consolidating other tribes around itself.

Such are the histories underlying the emergence of the great Arab Muslim empires of the Fatimids, the Almoravids, the Almohads, the Senussi state in Cyrenaica and the Mahdists in Sudan.

In the history reflecting the formation of Ibn Saud's state, we trace the same motives – the unification of Najd is seen as a certain analogue of the establishment of the Muslim rule in Medina, while the reunification of Najd and Hijaz is analogous to the Muslim victory over the Meccans.

At the same time, not only the overall pattern is recurrently reproduced to legitimize the efforts undertaken by Ibn Saud in the eyes of his subjects. Even some individual elements of the system are reproduced, alongside the general pattern.

Thus, the Ikhwan phenomenon that seemed unique within the context of contemporary history of the region, is easily correlated with the Muhajiruns and the Ansar in Muhammad's Medina, and even more precisely with the *Murabitun*, who founded the Almoravid Empire (Vidiasova, 1987), the Sudanese Mahdists (Smirnov, 1950) and the Senussi in Cyrenaica (Mironova, Yegorin, 2006). In all cases,

it was the question of generating, within the tribal society, a non-tribal religious community inspired by the idea of restoring the genuine faith and performing the function of violence agents.

The practice of building up a political system, employing the technique of establishing new settlements in strategically critical centers, and making ex-Bedouins move into such settlements also resonates with the early Islamic history. This instrument was widely used at the times of Caliphate expansion, cities that later became its centers and originally emerged in the same way include Kufa, Basra, Fustat, Kairouan etc.

Ultimately, the third element is connected with the very essence of royal power, also perfectly well correlated with the ideas that proliferated in the Islamic political philosophy beginning with Middle Ages. According to those ideas, the ruler's function of paramount importance was the protection of Islam, construed, on the one hand, as provision of security for the population, and, on the other hand, as observance of the Sharia norms all across the governed territory. Within this context, a totally reasonable comment was made by the Soviet diplomats to the effect that the monarch's power was limited by the "norms of the lofty Sharia law." In harmony with this is the fact that one of the essential areas falling into the administrative governance of the King, as designated by the monarch himself, appears to be the Sharia domain, comprising, among other things, the entire legal system of the Kingdom, which was subsequently granted greater autonomy from the Royal power, as is well known.

#### *Arabian Elements*

Apart from universal and traditional Arab Muslim elements, specific features can be identified within the political system of Ibn Saud's state, precisely characteristic of the Arabian monarchies, meanwhile a similarity of the social order of the above presupposed a similarity of the mechanisms of political power.

We are inclined to single out three categories of such elements.

The most obvious of them is the organization of political system on the basis of tribal relationships, when a definitive tribal group becomes a pivot of political system. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the very name of which includes the name of the founder of the ruling dynasty (The Arab Kingdom of Saud), this principle is expressed to the fullest degree among all Arabian monarchies. It is also reflected in the nationhood of Morocco and Jordan, whose full names mention the ruling dynasties of the Alawi and Hashemites, which is linked to the initial Arabian origin of those dynasties and their ancestral roots and noble descent of Prophet Muhammad.

Another, slightly less conspicuous element, is that nationhood is developed through a unification of regions controlled by these or those tribal groups or on the basis of a compromise or with the employment of submission strategies. In both cases, there exists a certain mutual arrangement among the key groups, who are in control of various territories. As far as the Saudi Arabia is concerned, regardless of the fact that the unification of the Kingdom occurred through annexing various regions to Najd, in each individual scenario, the status of those

regions was determined specifically proceeding from the balance of forces existing in reality. However, as shown by historian Grigory Kosach (Kosach, 2008), despite the fact that the Hijaz elites were not directly coopted into the political leadership of the nation, in reality, they took up a domineering position in a whole array of the executive power spheres, particularly, in diplomacy. In the history of the UAE formation, similar agreements among the ruling emirate families find even a more vivid illustration, whereas the denial to join the federation, on behalf of Qatar and Bahrain, was linked precisely to the impossibility of establishing such a power balance. Eventually, modern statehood in the sultanate of Oman was also produced on the basis of merging two state formations – the sultanate of Muscat and the imamate of Oman; while in Yemen – initially, through uniting the state formations in the southern part of the country within the framework of South Yemen, and then – through uniting the south and the north.

In a peculiar Saudi case, where the power balance was established not through a compromise among the regional elites, but through their submission to the Al Saud House, a combination of the two outlined Arabian elements – a tribal foundation upon which power resides and a multicomponent structure of the state – led to a situation where a key institute of governance was embodied in the vicarious authority: the greater part of the hereditary Princes of the Kingdom, over one or another period of their activities, served as governors of the Kingdom's key provinces. Meanwhile, a symbolic significance of the province and a place held by the Prince in the informal hierarchy of the ruling House were commensurable with each other: three out of six Saudi Arabian Kings, prior to ascending to the throne, served as governors (Sharifs) of Mecca (Hijaz), and two – of Riyadh.

Finally, the third purely Arabian feature of the analyzed model can be seen in the formation of various feedback channels between the ruling elite and society, through tribal institutes, with emphasis on the Islamic principle of consultation (*shura*). In the more or less modernized Saudi model, this approach is manifested in the introduction of various consultative bodies of executive authority (*majlis ahli* etc.) or legitimization of these or those political decisions through the appeals made by public representatives to the monarch (tribal delegations or joint letters), in the same vein as it happened regarding a decision to unite Najd and Hijaz.

## Conclusions

The conducted study allows to draw two substantial conclusions.

First, the state founded by Ibn Saud embraced both traditional and modern elements. The external observers were prone to perceive the political system of the Kingdom, accentuating modern elements, easily aligned with the experience known to them regarding the existence of Westphalian states. In turn, in the eyes of Saudi nationals, a more meaningful role was attributed to the traditional elements which were in line with both Islamic and Arab (in their Arabian variation) political traditions. Despite further evolution of the Saudi statehood and its gradual modernization under subsequent rulers, the very principle of conflating these elements in the political system has remained up until the present day.



However, at the current stage of development, the system seems to encounter three major challengers. The modernizing society should focus, to a greater degree, on modern elements of the system, putting less trust in the elements that were inspired by tradition. Nevertheless, a rejection of traditional elements should be accompanied by their replacement with some modern analogues, which will inevitably be fraught with a temporary attenuation of the spirit of tradition. Interestingly enough, additional uncertainty is extrapolated by the Westphalian model of nationhood that is undergoing a crisis today, for an obvious reason, and its blind borrowing can hardly contribute to the improvement of the system efficiency.

Second, the Saudi case allows to reaffirm the existing conception regarding a specific formation of the multicomponent state system. As was our observation with respect to the common governance mechanisms, here, we also detect a combination of universal and specifically Arabian elements. A matter of principal importance is that the internal heterogeneity of the multicomponent state is compensated, on the one hand, by a certain future project (in the event with Saudi Arabia of the early 20th century – a religious one, and today – Vision-2030), and on the other hand, by a possibility for achieving a balance of forces among the regional elites (evidently, provided that the central authority retains its monopoly on the legitimate use of violence). The Arabian monarchies demonstrate that such balance is achieved through agreements among the tribal groups, however, in other regions, this can be accomplished differently. As shown by the example of Saudi Arabia and other nations as well, whatever the selected model of the administrative and territorial structure is, the multicomponent nature of the state has remained a principal characteristic of its internal architecture throughout an extremely protracted period and has been overcome very seldom, if ever.

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## КОРОЛЕВСТВО САУДОВСКАЯ АРАВИЯ: К ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЮ МОДЕЛИ АРАБСКОЙ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОСТИ

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**Аннотация:** Статья посвящена исследованию генезиса и особенностей саудовской политической системы, рассматриваемой как вариант модели государственности, сформировавшейся в XX веке в арабском мире и оказавшейся в кризисе во втором и третьем десятилетиях XXI века. В основе исследования лежит гибридная историко-политологическая методология, позволяющая проследить генезис и эволюцию политической системы в длительной ретроспективе. Источниковую базу исторической части исследования составляют документы советских дипломатов, а также дипломатические документы Королевства Саудовская Аравия, в которых подробно описаны шаги, предпринятые Ибн Саудом, по формированию институтов политической власти в Саудовской Аравии и определению ее административно-территориального устройства. Опираясь на эти документы, в политологическом разделе статьи выделяются три группы элементов, соответствующих саудовской политической модели: универсальная, присущая самым разным государственным образованиям, арабо-мусульманская, соотносящаяся с соответствующей политической культурой, и аравийская. Выявляются и другие примеры, в которых вышеперечисленные элементы государственности сыграли решающую роль. Как показывает статья, саудовская специфика охватывает как традиционные, так и современные элементы государственности. Авторами выдвигается тезис о существовании специфической арабской модели, лежащей в основе генезиса многокомпонентного государства, а также излагаются последствия такого генезиса для развития политической системы.

**Ключевые слова:** Саудовская Аравия, Неджд, Хиджаз, К. Хакимов, многосоставное государство