Political Consistency in Arabia

A Comparative Study of Iran and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The monarchical regimes of the Gulf States have for a long time remained outstandingly consistent. The aim of this thesis is to explain this political consistency by comparing Saudi Arabia with Iran, covering the time period from Muhammed Reza Shah’s accession to the throne in 1941 up until the Islamic Revolution of 1979. We agree that regime consistency theoretically depends on the legitimacy of the regime, the existence of preferable options, and the regime’s control over state and society. By analysing the economic performance, the ties between the monarchy and the religious establishment, and domestic repression, we conclude that the crucial element in preserving regime consistency in the Gulf-surroundings is to maintain good relations with the religious establishment. In doing so, the regime successfully maintains its legitimacy and simultaneously aggravates the position of oppositional groupings. It is possible that the results of this study may be valid in other countries in the Middle East with similar structural settings.

Key words: Political Consistency, Saudi Arabia, Comparative Study, Religion, Legitimacy
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1 Introduction

The Twentieth Century was a century of massive political change worldwide. Regimes of all sorts have succumbed and new ones have arisen. For many years, however, the monarchical regimes of the Gulf States have remained remarkably stable. The fact that the continued existence of the regimes never really has been in doubt makes their outstanding triumph evident. Even when one considers the region’s lively history including military campaigns, border conflicts, attempted rebellions and the unceasing rivalry within ruling families, this fact remains true. Other forms of regimes, mainly republics claiming to be more contemporary and thereby sophisticated, that reign in countries whose structural limits remind one of the Gulf States, have been less successful than the monarchies of the Gulf. Experience verifies that bringing political stability and economic progress in the Gulf surroundings is best, and most efficiently, achieved through a monarchical, absolutist form of government (Khalaf and Ciacomo 2006: 8). However, some scholars suggest that monarchical states decrease the amount of pluralism in society and thereby add to its political vulnerability. Monarchies are particularly fragile and exposed to revolution given that they have the property of directing disappointment and fury against a single person. This is exactly what happened in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. The Shah had systematically erected the state apparatus around his person and the fall of the man paved the way for the disintegration of his machine (Arjomand 1988: 189). The monarchical regimes of the Gulf, however, are still standing strong and defy practically all forms of political change and challenge.

1.1 Purpose

We have been intrigued by the fact that Middle Eastern rule is so permanent and foreign to change. Our purpose is to examine the unusual political consistency achieved in Saudi Arabia and thereby contribute to the political research concerning the Gulf States and their constitution. By comparing Saudi Arabia, an influential actor in the region, with Iran, we hope to shed some light on the lack of political development in Saudi Arabia, and possibly elsewhere in the Gulf region. This means, more specifically, that we aim to make clear the differences between the two countries’ regimes from Muhammed Reza Shah’s accession to the Iranian throne in 1941 and onwards up until the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and in doing so try to understand why the political outcomes in the two countries so greatly differ.
1.2 Problem

Our overarching problem is to investigate why Gulf State governments remain so constant over time. Why do extensive political changes not occur in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States? In other words, how do regimes of the Gulf States succeed in preserving their position and power in society? More specifically we intend to answer this problem by examining what gave rise to the political changes that the Islamic Revolution made possible in Iran, and why these political changes did not take place in Saudi Arabia.
2 Theory

This essay is inspired by transitional theories in view of the fact that we perceive constitutions as formed by conscious, devoted actors. According to transition scholars, modernizationists and structuralists regard economical and developmental factors as over-determining political results (Grugel 2002: 56). Concerning the Gulf States, however, it is not a question of waiting for economic conditions to mature, since these states already achieved highly developed societies. Structural explanations specify conditions under which democratization can take place. These explanations, however, are not to be considered mechanical rules, since they also allow for individual actors to shape the process of democratization. Therefore political change also ought to be studied from an actor-perspective (Sannerstedt and Jerneck 1994: 74).

Although inspired by transitional theory, we are not specifically interested in democratization itself, but rather the consistency of the present regime. Transitions can be defined as the interval between one regime and the succeeding one (Karvonen 1997: 76).

In order to answer why political change occurs, or as in this case why regimes persist, we need to apply relevant theory that seeks to explain why political change take place. Legitimacy is always essential for political actors, regardless of regime type. When a regime’s claim to legitimacy—the right to rule—is accepted by its subjects, they feel compelled to obey the regime’s rules and commands (Brooker 2000: 100). This goes for democratic regimes as well as for non-democratic ones and the importance of legitimacy has been recognised academically ever since Weber’s classic analysis of legitimate rule. However, Weber acknowledged that even a legitimate regime does not always enjoy the obedience of its subjects (Weber 1964: 124-125). Therefore, any regime—legitimate or not—also has to rely on its state machinery of administrators, police and military to make its public powers effective. These state organisations are of great importance since they use coercion as a mean to enforce the government’s policies. Without this coercive element in the state’s control over society, the policies could not be effectively implemented and consequently it is crucial for any regime to maintain the obedience of its state machinery (Brooker 2000: 101). The “loss of legitimacy-theory” implies that any regime requires legitimacy, support or at least consent in order to endure. When a regime loses legitimacy it must replicate it or risk failure. However, Przeworski argues that one can not maintain that a loss of legitimacy is enough for a regime to collapse. What is most important for any regime’s stability is not the legitimacy of this particular dominating regime but rather the existence of preferable options (Przeworski 1986: 50-52). ‘A regime does not collapse unless and until some alternative is
organized in such a way as to present a real choice for isolated individuals’ (ibid.: 52).

Although Przeworski highlights the existence of preferable options, other factors may also prove important concerning political change. The three main factors then, according to us, that bring about political change, are the loss of legitimacy, weakened control over state and society (coercion), and the existence of preferable options. Among these three factors, affecting the consistency of a regime, there is of course a great deal of interaction since they all influence each other.

The loss of legitimacy may derive from weak policies performed by the regime, such as military defeat, weak economic performances and domestic repression (Sannerstedt and Jerneck 1994: 77). Corruption within the monarchy and the spending of public resources definitely affect the subjects’ apprehension of their ruler and thereby its legitimacy. Economic policy enforced by the regime, for example educational- and infrastructural policies, is perhaps the sturdiest influence in people’s daily life and therefore an obvious choice when evaluating the legitimacy of a regime. The treatment of people opposing the regime affects the organisation of oppositional forces and thereby the spread of preferable options. Furthermore, the economic performance of the regime, as well as the domestic repression, affects the ability to maintain control over state and society. Additionally, we claim that in a region where religion permeates every aspect of society, religion too ought to be included when it comes to explaining loss of legitimacy. Middle Eastern rulers are notably known to utilize religion in order to enhance their legitimacy, therefore the relationship reigning between regime and religious establishment is imperative (Ayubi 1999: 72). Islamic groups in political power-positions are not merely a contemporary fact; for Islam itself, unlike Christianity that has a lengthy history of separateness between politics and religion, is a lifestyle in which adherents might see little or no partition at all between the spiritual and the secular (Haynes 1993: 4-5). Muslim religious scholars have often claimed and taught that anyone who possesses political power is to be obeyed seeing that even an unfair leader is better than civil conflict. Just as religion can be used as a tool for preserving the political status quo, so it can also work as a catalyst for change and a spearhead for revolution. Historically, a certain habit of rebellion has constantly been included in Islam (Ayubi 1999: 72-73).

It is not; however, only in the Middle East that religion plays an increasingly important role in the political arena. Religion’s political contribution has anew arisen in regions where it was long considered extinguished, for example in Germany, Russia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and more recently Burma (Haynes 1999: 3).

The regime can maintain the obedience of its state machinery either through its legitimacy or by coercion (Brooker 2000: 101). In the latter case, the most frequently used solution has been to deploy a security/intelligence organ—a political or ‘secret’ police—which exercise the most coercive form of control over society (Brooker 2000: 112). The issue of preferable options is also important. When the expected gains for the opposition are superior to the risks then it will
persist to advocate change (Schmitz and Sell 1999: 31-32). The coercive behaviour of the regime naturally goes hand in hand with the breathing space, in which oppositional factions may operate.

To clarify, our theoretical reasoning is summarised in the figure below. In the subsequent method chapter we will further explain this model.

Figure 1.
This essay aims to assess the democratic shortage in the Middle East via a case study including Saudi Arabia and Iran. For sure, we do not claim to explain all democratic difficulties in the region; however, granted Saudi Arabia’s dominant position in the Gulf-region, the analysis may very well bring generalizable advantages applicable on neighbouring Gulf States.

The reason we chose these countries is the opportunity to political change that the Iranian revolution presented its people. This opportunity is seldom observed in an overwhelmingly conservative region where absolute monarchy is still the dominating form of government. What developments made this profound change in governance possible within the Iranian society and why have these not occurred in other parts of the region? We believe the answer is to be found within the ruling elite contained by the monarchy, hence the state-apparatus. Middle Eastern rulers traditionally possess wide-ranging powers that affect all parts of society and should therefore be the first concern when studying political change in the Middle East. We want to conclude why political change in Saudi Arabia, and possibly elsewhere in the region, is so hard to obtain.

Applying a most similar system design we have chosen Saudi Arabia, being one of the region’s most influential actors, as our point of departure. Saudi Arabia is considered a case of a Gulf State. For many reasons Iran, also situated in the Gulf, is a suitable comparison: both states had monarchical institutions possessing extensive power, they are both geographically and population-wise big countries with great political influence in the region, and both states are economically oil-dependent.

The covered time period for the study is from Muhammed Reza Shah’s accession to the throne in 1941, since the abdication of the former Shah opened the way for a revival of political activity, and onwards up until the Islamic revolution in 1979. Concerning the empirical foundation of this essay, we solely use secondary sources since it is a historical lead period that we attempt to explain. On the other hand we have tried to use the greatest possible variety of sources.

The Islamic revolution in Iran made it possible for massive political change to take place in a profoundly conservative country. This possibility never occurred in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the possibility of revolution, or equivalent political change (i.e. change of regime), constitutes the dependent variable in the analysis. The independent variable consists, in accordance with our theoretical statement, of three factors: the loss of legitimacy, weakened control over state and society, and the existence of preferable options. The choice of explanatory variables must be based on theoretical criteria (Goodin 1996: 753). That means, in this case, that those variables affecting the regime’s legitimacy, the
control over state and society, and the preferable options are of interest. Of course there are many factors affecting the legitimacy of regimes as well as the control over state and society and the preferable options. One such factor could be the relationship between regimes in different cultural spheres. In many Muslim countries, the regimes’ relationships with Western countries have been a source from which oppositional groups have gained terrain. Concerning Saudi Arabia and Iran, however, this relationship was very similar. Both regimes have expected and received economic and political support from Western powers, mainly the US. Therefore we have chosen not to include these relationships as a separate variable. In compliance with the theoretic argument proposed by Sannerstedt, Jerneck and Brooker, we have chosen three explanatory variables, agreeing that these might very well be crucial elements when it comes to a change of regime. We also suggest that a smaller amount of variables bring greater explanatory power to themselves than does a larger amount brought together. Consequently the explanatory variables we set out to evaluate are economic performances of the regime, domestic repression, and ties between the monarchy and the religious establishment (illustrated in figure 1).

Economic performance will be conceptualized through the main policies imposed by the regime and their effects. The results of modernization-reforms in both countries will be subjects of evaluation, as will corruption within the monarchy in both countries. Domestic repression will be conceptualized through the level of political freedom and the treatment of people opposing the regime, which include the deployment of political police-forces. The connection between the regime and the religious establishment will be conceptualized through the degree of secularism within the state-apparatus and the cooperation between the two institutions. By religious establishment, we primarily mean the ulama of the two countries. The ulama are made up by theologians who are experts in Muslim religious sciences (Vassiliev 1998: 563).

Since we already know our dependent variable the design of our study should be considered “in reverse” according to Esaiasson et al (2004: 113). One negative aspect of the employment of the most similar system design is the necessity of great variation within the dependent variable. However, this problem is bypassed since our study includes two completely different outcomes (revolution/not revolution). Another more relevant problem is the need for homogeneous units included in the analysis. Both countries are, as written above, similar in many structural aspects. However, as Teorell and Svensson attentively call attention to, no two cases differ solely in the independent and the dependent variable. There are always alternative explanations to the variation in the dependent variable, other than the one suggested in the independent variable (Teorell and Svensson 2007: 227). By selecting three explanatory variables we hope to bypass this problem as we are confident that the explanatory power of these three variables is considerable. In doing this, we might on the other hand run the risk of losing accuracy in the determination of the intergroup effect of the different variables. Concerning this problem, we believe that the empirical analysis will bring clarity since we expect to find differences between the chosen variables within the two countries.
As follows from the above mentioned, the methodology of the essay is qualitative. While quantitative studies have a tendency to abstract particular phenomena from their context with the purpose of comparing them across cases, qualitative studies look at the phenomena inside their contexts looking at the cases as complex combinations of variables (Hopkin 2002: 261). More recent research concludes that qualitative methods are more applicable than what prior research claimed. Under certain conditions generalizations can be made from qualitative research (Lundquist 1993: 105). Eckstein means that legitimate generalizations can be made from the comparative case method, since it is not just descriptive. He explains the importance of the case method to the testing and construction of theory (Rhodes 1997: 81). Yin develops the previous argument by showing how to apply the theory in comparative studies. To begin with, a theoretical assertion must be made, which is afterwards compared to the conclusions of an initial case. The theoretical assertion is then to be revised according to the findings of the first case. Next, the revised theoretical assertion should be compared to the facts of a second or more cases. Provided that this line of action is pursued, generalizations can be made from explanatory case studies (Yin 1984: 108-109). The explicit purpose of this essay is not to make generalizations. Saudi Arabia, however, as mentioned above, is one of several Gulf States with immense structural similarities. These similarities may very well result in comparable political stability elsewhere in the region.

This essay does not primarily attempt to describe the constitutional arrangements in Iran and Saudi Arabia but rather the policies performed by the existing institutions. As Lowndes (2002: 97-98) argues: “political institutions are no longer equated with political organisations; rather, they are seen as sets of “rules” that guide and constrain the behaviour of individual actors”. We are concerned to discover how institutional stability is achieved through human action. The institutional dynamics of the monarchy are best understood when studying the particular arrangement of inferior institutions contained by it. These subordinate institutions are influenced by the “rules” that characterize the broader government (ibid.: 2002: 98-99).
4 Results

In this chapter we will present the results of our study. To put the reader in context we shall begin with a brief summary of the historical development in Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively. Thereafter follows, in accordance with our methodological framework introduced in the previous chapters, a compilation of our results divided into three categories: Economic performance, Ties between the monarchy and the religious establishment, and Domestic repression.

4.1 Historical Context

4.1.1 Saudi Arabia

Right through the history of the Arabian Peninsula, the lack of a central political power has been outstanding. During the Eighteenth Century, however, a Saudi state materialized in Arabia on the basis of Wahhabism. Wahhabism, a Muslim reform movement, arose in the Najd-region, the frame within which also the Saudi state came into being. Since 1745 three different Saudi states have existed altogether (Vassiliev 1998: 29). The first decades of the twentieth century resulted in the breakdown of earlier local Arabian emirates and the rise of Ibn Saud, the founder of the current kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed 2002: 39). Ibn Saud was born about 1880 to the Saud family of Riyadh. His royal family had, since the middle of the Eighteenth Century, made up the political foundation of the puritanical sect of Islam that originated from Muhammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab. The Saudis were benevolent propagators of Wahhabism throughout Arabia (Fisher and Ochsenwald 1990: 546). After successively and successfully conquering vast territories of the Arabian Peninsula, Ibn Saud finally declared his kingdom on 22 September 1932. The new name, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, stressed the unification of its two most important provinces, Hijaz and Najd, and, more significantly, honoured its founder and his authority. In order to provide permanence to the leadership, the King subsequently ventured to establish and consolidate a royal lineage of his own. This was achieved by marginalizing other high-ranking members of the royal family, such as Ibn Saud’s brothers and nephews, and by producing sons of his own that in time developed into a separate royal group (Al-Rasheed 2002: 71-72). Ibn Saud applied a vigorous strategy of polygamy in order to strengthen his own line. This rather controversial strategy, considered excessive even in a polygamous culture such as Arabia, resulted in the
birth of forty-three sons and more than fifty daughters (ibid.: 75). The King’s marital unions made up a proficient divisive instrument, preserving and enhancing existing social hierarchies, but also producing new ones (ibid.: 79).

4.1.2 Iran

Contrary to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran has existed, in a variety of forms and under various names, for a very long time. It is interesting to observe that within the Muslim world Iran practically stands out as the only country that maintained strong and mindful ties to its pre-Islamic heritage. Despite the marching in of Islam, Iran preserved its distinctive cultural attributes, such as the Persian language and the epic poem, the stories of Iran’s traditional history and its rulers (Hourani 2001: 69). In 1501, Ismail of the Safavid family declared himself Shah of Iran and Shia Islam as the enforced religion of the state. The fall of the Safavids commenced during an extensive phase of decentralization in Iran. In 1794, Fath Ali Shah, a Turkish clan leader, instituted the Qajar dynasty that would govern the country until the 1920s, but the Qajars were never successful in reprising the royal despotism or the bureaucratic centralism of the Safavids (Cleveland 2004: 52-55). In Iran, the Safavid shahs were acknowledged as descendents of the Prophet Muhammad and hence secured the support of the religious establishment. Unlike the Qajars, who did not invoke divinity at all, this acknowledged religious influence helped the Safavids legitimize their earthly power (Omid 1994: 3). The ultimately undermined Qajar state produced tensions within Iranian society as a whole and the shahs were no longer considered as capable of fulfilling their customary role as defenders of Islam and the Iranian territory. The public discontent culminated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. A new constitution was established and a parliament was assembled thereby relocating some of the monarchical power to the legislature (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 25-32). In 1921, the Cossack Brigade, led by Brigadier Reza Khan, staged a coup d'état. This was the first time the military intervened in Iranian politics. Reza Khan soon rose in stature and was ultimately proclaimed king in 1925, thereby establishing the Pahlavi-dynasty which was to rule Iran until 1979. While the Qajars combined subjective rule with political decay, the Pahlavi monarchy would become a profoundly modernizing factor in Iranian politics (ibid.: 36-41).

4.2 Economic Performance

In 1963 the Shah announced a reform-proposal to move Iran towards Western standards. The proposal was launched as the White Revolution, implying reform without bloodshed, and it aimed to change the structure of social relations in Iran and to enable more effective resource mobilization (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 58). The preceding years had been marked by a severe economic recession due to an austerity package prescribed by the International Monetary Fund and the regime
needed to respond to this rising threat to the ruling order. Corruption and economic mismanagement were by many perceived as the sources of these problems (Moghadam: 1996: 62).

The White Revolution consisted of several major projects, among them land reform, expansion in social services and education, and extension of suffrage to women. The land reform was the centrepiece of the White Revolution and it was intended to limit the power of the landlords by forcing them to sell their excess to the state, which then redistributed it to the peasant cultivators. It was questionable however, whether the new landowners gained any real economic benefits from their ownership rights. Even though some of them did become self-sufficient farmers, the vast majority received plots of land that were less than the minimum size needed to sustain a rural family at basic subsistence level. This resulted in huge migration to the urban centres, a process which was further intensified by lower demand for labour caused by developments in mechanized farm equipment (Farhi 1989: 97).

In addition to the specific projects set forth by the White Revolution, the shah sought to improve Iran’s communications through the construction of roads and railways and the expansion of port facilities. The state also invested heavily in industrial enterprises. The rising industrial capacity was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of workers (because of the migration to the urban areas) and Iran’s industrial output increased dramatically (Cleveland 2004: 296). Strictly economically the 1960s was a decade of relative success. Real gross domestic product for this period grew at an average of 9.2 percent, among the highest in the Third World and between two and three times the average for developing countries (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 60). However, since the state-controlled labour organizations deprived wage earners of true collective bargaining rights, wages tended to remain low while the prices of basic consumer goods rose, sowing the seeds for future social discontent (Cleveland 2004: 296).

The economic development in Iran in the 1960s was largely based on import substitution industrialization. The idea was to encourage the establishment and growth of domestic manufacturing firms by implementing high tariffs on foreign firms (Farhi 1989: 99). Although successful at first, import substitution resulted in political and economic challenges in the long run. By emphasising capital-intense industries and thereby neglecting small-scale production and the agricultural sector, the Iranian import substitution led to uneven development, rapid urbanization, and income inequality (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 61).

In 1973 OPEC raised the price of crude oil two times and by the end of the year the posted price was 11.65$ per barrel, a year earlier it had been less than 3$ (Fisher and Ochsenwald 1990: 522). The rise in the price allowed the shah to spend more freely on industry, infrastructure, and social programs. At the same time, the high oil prices hurt the pattern of economic development. Whereas growth earlier had been based on import substitution and the rise of the private sector and had been managed by autonomous state agencies, growth now relied more on oil income and it was more directly under the control of the shah (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 62).
The vast oil revenues created bottlenecks in the economy and led to careless spending on big-time projects such as advanced war material, nuclear power plants and public enterprises of doubtful value (ibid.: 62). The government’s wasteful spending generated runaway inflation and showed how unevenly distributed the benefits of the oil wealth were. Urban areas, the armed forces, some industrial workers, and especially the top government officials were much better off, while ethnic-linguistic minorities, rural regions, the unemployed, and most peasants were either worse off or only slightly in a better situation (Fisher and Ochsenwald 1990: 531). At the brink of the Iranian Revolution, in the summer 1978, the Shah’s government adopted a new economic policy to reduce inflation. It was a political disaster and it created an economic recession that led to even deeper unemployment among urban workers and eventually spread to labor unrest (Cleveland: 429).

All together, this reduced public trust in the management of the economy and the rapid growth-pace created social faulting, cultural alienation, and new political demands that the state was both unable and unwilling to deliver. In addition the newfound wealth encouraged corruption which in turn lowered public moral. The oil revenues also raised expectations so high that the state not only received no political support for its efforts, but also found itself falling short of fulfilling expectations (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 62).

The purpose of the White Revolution was to consolidate the Shah’s personal power and legitimize his reign on other grounds than the use of force. However, the outcome turned out to be quite the opposite. Without a doubt, there were substance to many of the projects, but their benefits were limited to the privileged few. The land reform was allowed to pine away after its promising beginnings, leaving peasants with shattered hopes and landlords with lingering anger. The regime’s support of large-scale industry and its encouragement of foreign investment weakened the traditional bazaar economy and ruined the handicraft industry. Thus, even though producing substantial advances in social services and economic performance, the White Revolution did not generate the deeper approval of the regime that the Shah had hoped for. The Shah failed to project the image of a ruler who truly cared about Iran and its people. One of the reasons for this failure was undoubtedly the extensive corruption and mismanagement within the government. The Shah and his family stole millions of dollars a year from Iran’s revenues for their private use, and privileged aristocrats could make fortunes on bribes from foreign firms in exchange for arranging import licenses and top level contacts. There was lots of money to be made in Iran in the early 1970s—but only for those with connections to the crown (Cleveland 2004: 295-298).

Although Ibn Saud initiated important changes in Saudi Arabia, not the least the establishment of a central government, the patriarch still ruled the kingdom with an iron fist. There were no constitution, no political parties and the King made all policy decisions. Ibn Saud legitimizied his family’s right to rule through the ideology of Islam—the Quran was the constitution and the shariah was the law. In 1953, Ibn Saud was succeeded by one of his many sons, Saud. The new King lacked his predecessor’s competence and swiftly drove the kingdom to the
brink of bankruptcy by funding the royal purse from the state treasury. On top of that the King’s foreign policy caused annoyance among the radical Arab states since he opted for hostility toward Nasser and the Pan-Arabism-doctrine, and in 1964 a coalition of family members overthrow him in favour of his brother, Crown Prince Faysal (ibid.: 452-453).

Faysal’s reign (1964-1975) was associated with a steady increase in oil revenues and the gross domestic product grew from 10.4 billion riyals in 1965 to 164.5 billion in 1975 (al-Rasheed 2002: 120). It was only with the accession of Faysal to the throne that modern development in Saudi Arabia really began. The enormous size of the country, in combination with the relatively modest oil revenues prior to 1970, however, aggravated rapid development (Birks and Sinclair 1982: 199).

During Faysal’s reign expenditure on education increased to an annual level of roughly 10 percent of the budget. The other planned expenditures were concentrated on defence, infrastructure, and social services. This covered the construction of roads, airports and ports, the extension of electricity supplies, telephones and communication in general. Furthermore, hospitals and medical centres multiplied and began to reach a wider section of the population. The King’s wish to develop the economic infrastructure was promoted by the increase in oil prices in 1973 and the oil revenues allowed for expansion of the state machinery and bureaucracy (al-Rasheed 2002: 121-122).

In order to be able to more efficiently manage the economic development and to administer the extensive social welfare programs he wished to establish, Faysal sought to deepen the role of the government. To do so, he needed an educated staff and therefore initiated a program of educational expansion. New universities were built and thousands of young Saudis were sent abroad to study, mainly in the US. However, Faysal made sure that the Western-educated elite were excluded from the decision-making process which was exclusively reserved for members of the royal family. Although many of the members of the new administration were aggravated, they accepted the lack of participation in policy-making as long as they benefited from the wealth and prestige that went with their positions (Cleveland 2004: 453).

The 1973 oil embargo resulted in substantial oil price increases which affected the Saudi revenues dramatically. Apart from spending major sums on defence, King Faysal and his successor King Khalid decided to use the kingdom’s wealth to launch a massive program of economic and social development. The oil price hikes allowed for the government to attack infrastructure problems more aggressively than before and during this period a number of human social welfare goals were reached, including the provision of free medical services, subsidised housing, and expense-free education (Wright 1996: 17-18). Not even the assassination of Faysal in 1975 could prevent Saudi Arabia from embarking on an unsurpassed decade of development that included all sectors of the country’s infrastructure. Transportation and communications were improved, architecturally spectacular university campuses were constructed and modern industries produced (Cleveland: 458-459).
The Saudi Arabia of the early 1980s appeared similar in some respects to Iran in the final years of the Shah’s rule. They had both experienced extensive economic, educational, and military development without a corresponding change in politics. However, as we will notice in the next section, there was a major difference in the ways the Shah and the Saudi family related to the religious establishment in the two countries.

4.3 Ties between the Monarchy and the Religious Establishment

In Iran, the monarchy sought to diminish the role of religion in people’s daily life while simultaneously praising itself in order to reduce the Islamic norms of identity. The ulama and the state elite had previously coexisted symmetrically up until the end of the nineteenth century. The government’s modernization reforms influenced by Western socioeconomic changes, however, were in conflict with the ulama (Kamali 1995: 108). By abandoning the established political two-party system and introducing a single-party system made up by the Resurgence Party, the monarchy also hoped to additionally strengthen its power over the Iranian masses. Via the Resurgence Party and its subordinate organizations, the Shah intended to expand influence over powerful groups within Iranian society, such as the bazaar merchants and the religious establishment (the ulama). These groups had, despite controlling measures from the monarchy, been able to maintain a relatively vast autonomy from the government. The measures, introduced by the monarchy so as to further isolate the religious establishment and the bazaar merchants, had the opposite effect however. Instead of isolation, these measures stimulated the traditional alliance between the just as well traditional groups. Amongst others, the measures included the replacement of the Islamic calendar with a royal substitute originating from the period of Cyrus the Great, a measure so provocative that it challenged the role of Islam in Iranian society (Cleveland 2004: 424, Ansari 2003: 189).

Unlike the Pahlavi monarchy, the House of Saud produced an image of itself as a puritanical Islamic regime. The rule of Ibn Saud and his successors derived its legitimacy from the preservation of Islamic principles. The royal family of Saudi Arabia enjoyed an allowable government because it argued to be bound by the Quran and devoted to impose its shariah-laws. Contrary to the secular monarchy of Iran, the Saudi Arabian royal family legitimizes its position in power by creating itself the patron of Islam (Cleveland 2004: 460). Despite the swift socio-economic developments taking place in the kingdom, due to increased oil-revenues, the royal family’s connection with Islam remained its primary legitimizing factor. Ibn Saud created a liaison with the ulama and gradually incorporated them into the state bureaucracy. By tolerating this incorporation and the House of Saud’s right to rule, the ulama were granted sweeping influence concerning important aspects of public policy, such as the supervision of public
morality, educational matters and the legal system in general. The status of the religious establishment was treasured and the Saudi kings sought the consent of the ulama regarding policies affecting the royal family’s Islamic position. However, the ulama were not involved in the devising of state policy altogether. Quite contrary to Iran, the ulama in Saudi Arabia were not autonomous of the government, nor were they assaulted by it. Because of the influence the ulama maintained in their customary areas of activity, they agreed to their exclusion from power concerning foreign affairs and petroleum development. The ulama possessed the power to restrain sensitive domestic policies and the royal family that put them forward. In 1960, for example, when King Faysal intended to introduce public education for women, the ulama were against this. The policy was ultimately adopted but the religious establishment was allowed to oversee the arrangements of classrooms and members of the ulama were chosen for prestigious posts within the Ministry of Education. Later on, in 1963, King Faysal also proposed the introduction of television to Saudi Arabia. The ulama opposed this novelty, but the King launched it anyway, as part of a compromise with the religious establishment that allowed for the ulama to supervise the programming (ibid: 461).

As a result of the increased education, the appearance of modern industries and new administrative and economic activities, Saudis augmented travelling out of the country and the arrival of foreigners, the influence of the ulama declined during the initial decades of the oil era, which started in the 1950s, in Saudi Arabia. Despite these developments, the basic position of the religious establishment remained unharmed, for the ulama were a traditional force that the ruling House of Saud could not afford to overlook. When the government, in 1960, endeavoured to initiate income tax, the ulama required a restriction to foreigners only. Simultaneously, the King constantly stressed his allegiance to religion. He considered himself the imam, the head of the Saudi Muslims, which implied him to confer with the ulama and to recognize their elevated power. A central cause for the ulama’s strong position in Saudi Arabia was the fact that it contained the motherland of Islam and two of its foremost holy places. The cities of Mecca and Medina granted the Saudi Arabian kingdom a particular status within the Muslim world. Thus, the preservation of Islamic institutions, principles and ethics matched both the domestic undertaking of conserving the key basis of the government, that is to say the Islamic belief, the influence of the ulama as protectors of the shariah and the King’s authority as imam, and the improvement of Saudi Arabia’s international position (Vassiliev 1998: 439-440). All in all, it is astonishing in a firm tribal society like Saudi Arabia that one tribe can attain the degree of hegemony that the Sauds successfully have been able to achieve. This success can mainly be attributed to the decisive Wahhabi tie which granted the Saudis a supra-tribal ideology to operate in their drive to found a lasting kingdom, rather than the unstable and often brief tribal unions that had been so frequent in the Arabian Peninsula before (Salamé 1989: 70).

While intimately connecting the ruling family and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia, Muhammed Reza Shah of Iran tried to avoid any connection between the monarchy and Islam. The Shah stressed that his dynasty, which his
father installed, was the successor to the pre-Islamic Acheminid and Sasanian dynasties. Muhammed Reza Shah thereby chose to completely disregard the Islamic history of Iran and did not connect the monarchy to the religious customs of its subjects. This reduction of Islam was manifested in 1971 during the celebration of 2500 years of incessant Iranian monarchy at Persepolis. The excessive ceremony was perceived of as blasphemous and attracted widespread criticism (Cleveland 2004: 297). At first, the ulama, being an important part of the religious establishment, supported the establishment of a monarchy since this constitution was considered the most fitting form of government for Iran. They argued that it was not possible to ignore the connection between Western political development and republicanism (Akhavi 1980: 29, Kamali 1995: 103).

However, by initiating vastly invasive reform-programs, the Shah got on the wrong side of the Iranian ulama. Land reform openly endangered the sources of revenue of the ulama since it made it possible for the state to confiscate land from the ulama, land that provided the religious establishment with profits supporting its activities. The Shah also introduced secular education as an alternative to the religious schools of the ulama, which previously exclusively provided the Iranian people with education. The religious establishment also questioned reforms concerning gender equality. By asserting that alterations in the status of women were in tune with Islam, since they would create equality and justice, the Shah endeavoured to challenge the ulama’s protests. According to the Shah, the ulama ought to confine themselves to matters of private piousness and not public policy. It was not, however, only the economic threat that the monarchy posed to the religious establishment that was the basis of the ulama’s antagonism. Religious activists found the autocracy of the monarch and corruption within the monarchy provocative and in great contravention of Islamic ideas of social justice. The assimilation of Western models of development, consumption and living was considered promoting disparity and indecency (Cleveland 2004: 289-299).

Like his father before him, Mohammed Reza Shah of Iran received decisive support from the religious establishment in Iran. Reza Khan had practised a policy of alliance with the ulama in order to gain their support, thereby stimulating his own career and rise in the ranks (Akhavi 1980: 28). Leading figures within the religious establishment for example, supported Reza Khan and his accession to the throne by branding those who conflicted with the Pahlavi as enemies of Islam. However, the relation between the monarchy and the religious establishment was not to the latter’s mutual satisfaction. Both monarchs of the Pahlavi dynasty thought they could abolish the support of the religious establishment once they had consolidated their rule by ascending to the throne. The modernization and centralization of the Iranian state under the rule of the Pahlavis definitely shattered the previous division of political power between the religious establishment and the state, implemented by the Qajar dynasty. By shattering the institutional groundwork of priestly power and authority, the monarchy managed to completely estrange the religious establishment from the state (Arjomand 1988: 81). Mohammed Reza Shah continued to undermine the incorporation of the religious establishment in the state via his land reforms during the 1960s (ibid: 83). The secular reforms initiated by the Shah provoked the religious
establishment and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini appeared as the leading figure of the protests organized against the government. Khomeini considered the reforms introduced the first step toward the elimination of Islam itself. Khomeini also condemned the enfranchisement of women as an endeavour to obliterate the traditional form of family and encourage the increase of prostitution. The clerics were additionally provoked when the Shah proposed the White Revolution in 1963, concerning the six main principles of the reform program. This caused Khomeini to blame the monarchy of contravening its pledge to defend Islam and the Iranian Constitution. The Shah was furthermore attacked for maintaining relations with the state of Israel. Khomeini’s opposition was propagated as a “black reaction” to the reforms by the Shah. From his exile in Turkey, Khomeini went on to criticize the policy of the Shah and his subordination to the United States (ibid: 85-86).

During the period between 1956 and 1976, urbanization in Iran increased immensely. A number of urban centres arose within which strength and potency in different religious activities thrived. Religious literature achieved increasingly wider circulation (ibid: 91). Religious associations and societies were formed in universities as well as within Iranian society on the whole. An Islamic revival took place, at once strengthening the impact of the increasing propaganda stemming from the religious establishment. While ignoring the influence of the religious establishment, the monarchy also forfeited its chance to take advantage of that influence for its own purposes (ibid: 93).

### 4.4 Domestic Repression

Although never a colony, Iran was nonetheless denied its sovereignty throughout the first half of the twentieth century. During the period from 1951 to 1953 the nationalist and antiroyalist Muhammad Mosaddiq tried to mobilize Iranian society in an attempt to recover national sovereignty and establish an alternative to royal autocracy. He was overthrown in 1953 in a coup that brought about the return of royal dictatorship. In order to prevent the re-emergence of organized opposition, the Shah, with assistance from US and Israeli advisors, established a secret political police, SAVAK. This organization became notorious for its strident surveillance operations and its brutal treatment of the political prisoners who filled Iran’s penitentiaries. From 1953 to 1979, political freedom did not exist in Iran and although there were periods when limited expression was permitted, the comprehensive picture was one of repression, manipulation and coercion. Elections to the Majlis were rigged and the two-party system adopted by the shah to provide the appearance of democracy was merely a façade (Cleveland 2004: 289-293).

As in Iran, political freedom in Saudi Arabia was extremely limited. A 1961 decree forbade the profession of any ideology other than Islam or the formation of political parties and it called for execution of anyone who ‘engaged in violent action against the state or the royal family’. In addition to this, the state
completely controlled the radio and television media, and films were forbidden. In 1962 the Ministry of Information was created to monitor the press and the right to start a newspaper was drastically restricted. Editors could be fired and newspapers shut down at the Ministry’s command and only ‘selected’ material about the regime was provided. This situation at least partially explains why the oppositional activity was so limited (Salamé 1989: 85-86).

During the economic recession between 1960 and 1963, the Shah, pressured by the US to liberalize his regime, allowed the organization National Front to participate in election campaigns. The major criticism of the regime by the National Front candidates and the worsening economic conditions provoked an outbreak of strikes and demonstrations. The protest movement reached a climax when Ayatollah Khomeini began to preach against the regime and its US ally. Khomeini was then arrested by SAVAK and when the word of the arrest spread, Iran’s major cities exploded in a wave of antigovernment demonstrations that lasted for three days before the military could strike them down at the cost of hundreds of lives (Cleveland 2004: 293-294).

Although the protest movement failed, it had the effect of committing the state to a greater use of force in contending with the opposition. From this point forward, the security apparatuses of the state, most notably SAVAK, would use repressive measures, including detentions and torture to suppress the opposition. The closed political system and the ruthlessness of SAVAK left the opposition no other options but to resort to violence. Urban guerrilla groups ushered a campaign of terror against representatives of the state and its US ally (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 60). The guerrilla movements were continuously decimated through arrests and executions but their activities during the 1970s kept alive a spirit of resistance among Iranians and in 1975, partly as a response to these activities, the Shah tightened the reins of repression, as he abandoned the two-party system and introduced the Resurgence Party (Cleveland 2004: 298-299).

The opposition to the Pahlavi regime was concentrated round the middle and lower middle classes. It was strong among Iranian intellectuals and university students, as well as among the merchants in the bazaar—whose economic wealth had declined as the state looked to large industries to foster development (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 67). The regime’s failure in economic management was one cause of popular discontent, the Shah’s reliance on foreign experts was another. To be able to efficiently manage the inauguration of the large-scale development projects, the regime was compelled to recruit a substantial number of foreign advisers; by 1977 there were more than 60,000 of them in the country. The presence of so many non-Muslim foreigners acted as a constant reminder of the Shah’s rush to copy the West and his dependence on the agents of the Western imperialism and it provoked a broad section of Iranian opinion (Cleveland: 424-425).

To some extent, the development in Saudi Arabia followed a similar pattern. Material improvement and social change brought pressure for political change and the country’s acute shortage of manpower forced the regime to employ large numbers of foreign workers. At the end of the 1970s there were 2,1 million foreign workers in the country, out of which the majority came from other Muslim
countries, but 100,000 being Westerners, mainly from the United States and Britain. The presence of such a large number of foreigners, many of whom practiced patterns of living contrary to Islamic principles, led the regime to attempt to isolate its foreign residents. Westerners were concentrated primarily in the enormous compounds near the oil fields and other foreigners were closely monitored by Saudi security agencies and were quickly deported if they showed any signs of troublesome activity (ibid.: 459-460). Saudi Arabia’s new indigenous middle class created by the rapid modernization was another potential source for new ideas (Heller and Safran 1985). Despite this elite’s growing responsibility in managing the machinery of government, its members were excluded from participation in decision-making. The regime hoped to survive by rewarding the new elite with well-paying positions and providing the population at large with generous welfare systems (Cleveland: 459-460). The true magnitude of this new middle class is however questionable. According to Salemé, it is even hard to state that this class existed at all, since ‘hundreds of millionaires living on the fringe of the regime do not make a class’ (1989: 88).

As a reaction to the poor financial administrations of the country in the late 1950s, a variety of oppositional groupings figured in Saudi Arabia. It is however difficult to identify the extent to which these groups were organised. Even though there is some documentation on the activities of these organisations, their true influence must be considered modest (Buchan 1982: 113-114). The most influential part of the Saudi opposition consisted instead of the Islamic traditionalist. Much of the recent history of Saudi Arabia is a story of conflict between religious zeal and the ruling family’s endeavour for economic and social progress (ibid.: 120). Although King Faysal promoted an Islamic world-view, the rapid economic modernization, the excessive wealth and the corruption flawed the reputation of the royal family and made a mockery of its claims to conform to the standards of Islamic behaviour. This led the opponents of the regime to accuse it of hypocrisy (al-Rasheed 2002: 144). On several occasions this conflict led to violence, for example at the opening of a girl’s public school in 1960 and at the al-Riyadh television station in 1965. Over time the regime’s skill in dealing with the ulama increased but the cleavage between the advocates of the Wahhabite tradition and the regime remained (Buchan 1982: 120-121).

The 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca was the most obvious example of religiously based discontent within the kingdom. The seizure was led by Juhayman al-Utaybi, an active preacher who demanded the dismissal of the corrupt royal family. Juhayman and his followers accused the Saudi rulers of moral laxity and assailed the regime’s materialism, and its relations with the United States and other ‘infidel powers’. They also blamed the ulama of being too supportive of the actions of the regime. After the two week long occupation, Juhayman and his surviving followers were captured and executed without any visible negative reactions from the population. However, the episode alarmed the Saudi authorities because it represented a failure of their domestic intelligence service and damaged the reputation of the regime (al-Rasheed 2002: 144-146). The Mecca rebellion clearly showed that the prospect of success for the Saudi opposition, whether the religious traditionalists, the potential opposition of the
new middle class or any other political group, was extremely limited (Salamé 1989: 87).

The two most important opposition parties in the revolutionary protest movement in Iran were the Freedom Movement, led by Mehdi Bazargan, and the militant wing of the ulama, led by Ayatollah Khomeini (Cleveland 2004: 425). Although being the strongest voice in the modern middle class and among intellectuals and students, the Left failed to influence the far larger lower middle class, which was deeply tied to religious values. People of this class instead turned to the fundamentalist ideology favoured by Khomeini (Gheissari and Nasr 2006: 67-68).

During his time in exile, Khomeini had continued to speak against the regime and his most persistent charges was that the Shah was selling Iran to Western interests and that this was tantamount to the destruction of Iran’s Islamic identity (Mackey 1996: 275). Khomeini demanded the dismissal of the shah and the establishment of a government ran by the ulama, a demand not fully accepted by the Freedom Movement and other elements of the opposition who hoped for a more secular government. However, as the idea of a revolution grew stronger among the Iranians, Khomeini’s program attracted a growing measure of support. His religiously based political activism deeply embedded in Iranian society overbridged the contretemps between different generations and classes (Cleveland 2004: 428).

In January 1978, an article in a government-controlled newspaper criticizing Khomeini caused a large demonstration of students in Qum. In the following facedown, at least 70 people were killed by the government security forces and the killed students immediately became martyrs (Mackey 1996: 278). Massive memorial demonstrations were arranged 40 days later to solemnize the victims; these occasions again resulted in new deaths which led to a new demonstrations and more killing. New martyrs meant even more and larger demonstrations that eventually spread to cities throughout all of Iran and involved millions of people (Fisher and Ochsenwald 1990: 531-532).

After the economic recession in the summer of 1978, the urban working classes joined the protesters in the streets and the demonstrators’ cries took on a more radical tone as they demanded the death of the Shah and the return of Khomeini. The regime responded by banning street demonstrations but the ban was ignored and on Friday, September 8, the capital city of Tehran exploded in a series of confrontations between the military and protesters from all classes of society. Hundreds of unarmed civilians lost their lives and the episode became known as Black Friday (Cleveland 2004: 429). The regime’s brutal response drove the masses strongly into Khomeini’s camp and the culmination of the revolutionary protest movements occurred in December when between 6 and 9 million people demonstrated on various locations all over Iran in what may have been the largest protest event in history (Kurzman 2004: 122).

During these demonstrations, one thousand men a day defected from the army and the military foundation on which the Shah’s regime rested began to collapse (Mackey 1996: 281). On January 16, 1979, Muhammad Reza Shah fled Iran for
Egypt and on February 1, Ayatollah Khomeini arrived at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran, ready to reclaim Iran’s Islamic identity (Cleveland 2004: 430).

4.5 Concluding the Results

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia experienced decisive economic development during the second half of the twentieth century due to the discovery of large oil-resources. Similarly, both countries also introduced vast economic reforms in order to strengthen the regimes of the countries and achieve economic modernization. However, the reforms initiated resulted in different outcomes. Although conceived of as successful, the reforms in Iran resulted in great inequality between different fractions of society, hence the rich became richer, and the poor became poorer. Conversely, Saudi Arabian reforms, while unequal in their own way, benefitted everyone within society.

Corruption within the monarchical institution was widely spread in both countries during the analysed period. In both cases, the royal families embezzled large amounts of public funds.

Concerning the ties between the monarchy and the religious establishment, great differences appeared. The Iranian monarchy sought to estrange itself from the ulama and Islam as a whole and stressed the connections to its pre-Islamic history, whereas the royal family of Saudi Arabia intimately connected itself to the religious establishment.

Neither in Iran nor in Saudi Arabia did political freedom exist. In Iran, a widespread opposition ultimately materialized through the charismatic leader of the religious establishment, Ayatollah Khomeini. Thereby, a preferable option to the monarchy became visible. Two main factors contributed to the differences in opposition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. As mentioned above, the failing economic policies in Iran made up a hotbed for discontent. The great cleavage between the monarchy and the religious establishment also easily paved the way for the opposition and the ulama to join forces against the monarchy.
5 Conclusion

The purpose of this essay is to shed some light on the lack of political development in Saudi Arabia as a part of the Gulf-region. Therefore, we propose the question: Why have extensive political changes not occurred in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States? In other words, why do regimes of the Gulf States succeed in preserving their position and power in society?

In order to answer this question we need to know what stimulates political change. In accordance with other political theorists, we concur that the loss of legitimacy, weakened control over state and society, and the existence of preferable options greatly affects political change. We compared Saudi Arabian rule and policy to Iranian equivalents, divided into three categories: Economic performances, Ties between the monarchy and the religious establishment, and Domestic repression. Our results suggest that the single most important factor, when it comes to explaining the regime consistency of Saudi Arabia, is the relations between the monarchy and the religious establishment of the country.

Theoretically, the course of events in Iran can be summarized as follows. Because of the unfortunate results of the economic reforms introduced in Iran, widespread discontent emerged within broad sections of society. The economic reforms introduced contributed to a loss of legitimacy amongst the populace. Secular reforms aimed at diminishing the political influence of the religious ulama further reinforced the religious opposition. The lack of cooperation with the religious establishment of Iran initially resulted in a loss of legitimacy for the Iranian monarchy within the powerful religious elite that eventually spread like a wildfire amongst the population. The breaking relations between the regime and the religious establishment also allowed for a preferable option to materialize. The constant elimination of oppositionists in combination with Ayatollah Khomeini’s charismatic leadership ultimately led to a revolution that enjoyed unusually massive support from the society from which it emanated. Roaring masses demonstrating in the streets alongside defecting state-functionaries made the Shah lose control over the state-machinery. And once the preferable option gained more legitimacy than the current monarchy, the Shah was finally ousted, and a change of regime had taken place.

In contrast to Iran, the Saudi regime has succeeded tremendously in balancing appropriate economic policies with crucial religious legitimacy. The Saudi royal family has always, in a successful manner, made sure to nurse good relations with religious representatives. By preserving this relation the Saudis have prevented the religious establishment from becoming a preferable option and thereby a threat to the regime. A preserved relation also hinders other forms of opposition from gaining terrain. The influence of other forms of opposition has successfully been reduced not only by the regime itself, but also by the powerful ulama in
combination with the ruling family. All in all, the closely maintained connection between the religious establishment and the House of Saud has conserved the regime’s legitimacy and thereby its consistency.

The results of this study may very well be applicable in other Middle Eastern countries with similar structural settings. It is possible that Islamic movements of various kinds stay rather muted in monarchies that maintain religion as the basis for their legitimacy. A quick overview seems to confirm this as Jordan, some small states in the Gulf and Morocco, which have similar constitutional arrangements, show comparable patterns (Ayubi 1999: 91). The task of further studying these results, however, we shall modestly surrender in favour of other scientists.
6 References


