

# Saudi-American Forum

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## The Role of the Extended Family in Saudi Arabia

By David E. Long

### Executive Summary

Despite the furious pace of change and modernization that has occurred in Saudi Arabia over the last half century, the traditional extended family - parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and grand and great grand parents still form the basic unit of the society. Within the extended family, traditional respect for age, gender roles of men outside the home as providers and women in the dominant role inside the home are changing but still intact. The influence of the extended family thus carries over into social life, business and politics. Socially, the Saudis still tend to socialize, marry, and conduct business together.

A major reason for the resilience of the traditional extended family structure is the extraordinary strength of traditional Islamic social, economic and political values. Although behavioral patterns have changed with mind-numbing speed, these basic values are deeply held and are not likely to change rapidly over time.

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Many years ago, a friend of mine walking down the sidewalk of a small Georgia town with his father met a small boy whom his father hailed, "Howdy, son; how are your folks?" Surprised, Ed asked, "Did you know that little boy?" "No," his father replied, "but everybody's got folks."

What could be called a truism in small town America is a fact in Saudi Arabia. Virtually every Saudi citizen is a member of an extended family, including siblings, parents and grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. The extended family is the single most important unit of Saudi society, playing a pivotal role not only in Saudi social life, but economic and political life as well. Even personal self-identity posits a collective self. Each family member shares a collective ancestry, a collective respect for elders, and a collective obligation and responsibility for the welfare of the other family members. It is to the extended family, not to the government, that a person first goes to seek help.

### The Extended Family in Saudi Society

Raphael Patai, writing in the 1960s, stated that in every place where Westernization had not yet made appreciable inroads, the Middle Eastern family was patrilocal, patrilineal and patriarchal, meaning that they generally lived in close proximity, computed lineage by the male line, and were guided by family elders. The key question today is how much has Westernization modified the traditional role of the extended Saudi family.

Saudi Arabia is currently experiencing social change at an unprecedented rate, driven by oil wealth and the government's commitment to modernization. In the past fifty years, the Kingdom has spent billions of dollars on social, physical and economic infrastructure, including modern education, transportation, communications, health care and sanitation.

As a result, demographics have changed dramatically. Modern health care has helped create a population explosion of an estimated 3.5 percent a year. Saudi Arabia's population increased from about 2 to 4 million in the 1960s to about 16 million by the end of the century. Urbanization has changed the face of the country. In the 1960s, the population lived predominantly in small towns and villages. Jiddah, then the largest city, had a population of about 250,000, and Riyadh had about 200,000. Today, the great majority of Saudis live in urban areas; Riyadh now numbers over 3.5 million, and Jiddah over 3 million.

The information revolution has also had an impact on society, finally eradicating the physical isolation that has historically shrouded most of Arabia. Personal computers are now commonplace, and even small children can now be seen (and heard!) walking with their elders in modern shopping centers jabbering away on mobile telephones. News from around the globe is instantly available, and Saudis living and studying abroad are in daily communication with home. It is no longer possible to control information, not only about what is happening in Saudi Arabia, but about events impacting on the Kingdom from around the world.

One of the most obvious results of the population explosion and rapid modernization over the last fifty years is the creation of sequential generation gaps. If you were to interview a representative sample of children, young people, young adults, middle-aged people, and the elderly, you would probably get five very different views of Saudi behavioral tastes and mores.

Despite rapid modernization and adoption of many superficial aspects of Western pop culture, the extended family has been remarkably resilient to Westernization. With the move to the cities, members of Saudi extended families still tend to live in close proximity to each other whenever possible, and when not, they do a great deal of socializing with other members. In addition, many families retain homes in their hometowns as well as where they work.

A major reason for the resilience of the traditional extended family structure however, is the extraordinary strength of traditional Islamic social, economic and political values. Although behavioral patterns have changed with mind-numbing speed, these basic values are deeply held and are not likely to change rapidly over time. Moreover, Saudi Arabia never experienced the cultural assault of direct Western colonial rule and still retains an essentially closed society. Saudis generally prefer to socialize with, to do business with, and in general to communicate with their "own kind" than with outsiders.

## **The Extended Family Dynamics**

Three characteristics of extended family dynamics particularly stand out: gender roles, the role of elders, and the decision-making process:

**The Role of Family Elders:** It has already been noted that Saudi Arabia has a patriarchal society, maintaining a respect for age and seniority that has all but disappeared in Western society. The wisdom and authority of elders is seldom challenged, and younger men and women must wait their turn, often until their sixties or older, before they are accorded the role of family patriarchs and matriarchs.

This is not to say that there are no signs of change. The population explosion has dramatically lowered the median age, which is now 15 years old. At the same time, life expectancy has risen with modern health care, and elders are not relinquishing their leadership roles as soon as they once did. These trends have helped create a generation of young people who are increasingly frustrated in seeking to create meaningful lives of their own. Indeed, the most onerous authority figure for a young wife can often be her mother-in-law or her husband's grandmother, not her husband who, in matters dealing with the home, is as much under his own matriarchal domination as is his wife. Nevertheless, although young people find domination by their elders increasingly frustrating, it is still a dominant characteristic in family dynamics.

**Gender Roles:** Traditional gender roles in Saudi society share a number of common characteristics with other traditional societies, the most notable of which is that men's roles are outside the home as family providers, protectors, and managers, and women's roles are in the home. Men are predominant outside the home -- in business and public affairs and business, and women are to a large degree predominant within the home, particularly in parental decisions. Increasingly, however, the lines of distinction are being blurred. For example, as the population explosion has greatly reduced the per capita income, many young wives are finding employment outside the home, and husbands are assuming duties in the home unthinkable a generation ago.

Marriage customs are also changing. Many women are waiting longer before marrying, and although most marriages are still "arranged," most young people are now personally acquainted with their intended spouses. Young couples today can meet surreptitiously, often with the help of siblings, communicate by cellular phone, and then if mutually agreeable, ask their mothers to arrange the marriage. By tradition, however, married women do not assume their husband's surname, and if they are divorcees or widowed, may be reunited with their own families.

Frustration is increasing among Saudi women at social restrictions on mobility outside the home, such as wearing a veil and not being allowed to drive an automobile. A growing number of younger women in particular echo Western critics' views that such practices are demeaning and confirm an inferior status of women in Saudi society. In order fully to understand such practices and the frustration they engender, however, it is necessary to view them from the context of Saudi cultural norms and values, not Western norms and values. From a Western perspective, women should be liberated from such practices because they prevent them from achieving individual self-fulfillment. From a Saudi perspective, however, self-fulfillment is a far more collective concept, rooted in family identity. Ironically, however, the extended family, as the basic structural unit in the traditional society, is the source of these traditional practices; and it is inconceivable that a Saudi woman would seek to liberate herself from the institution, i.e. the extended family, that forms the backdrop for her own self-identity. From a Saudi perspective, therefore, those who seek change, do not seek to alter the traditional society, but rather to rid themselves of practices they find onerous.

The Decision-Making Process: The traditional method for reaching and legitimizing group decisions in Arabia is through consultation (shura) among those within the group whose opinions are considered important. From consultation emerges consensus (ijma`), and is binding on all members of the group. Within the extended family, the principal consensus makers are senior members or elders.

This ancient Arabian process of consultation and consensus was given religious sanction in Islam. From texts in the Qur'an and the Sunna (Prophetic traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), comes the belief that God would never permit a consensus of the Islamic community to be in error. Consensual decision-making is still the norm in Saudi Arabia, whether in family, government, or business decisions.

Senior women may also participate in family consultations and consensus making, not only on issues involving the home but also on issues involving family businesses and on occasion where the family is involved, even in politics. King Abd al-Aziz (Ibn Saud) regularly consulted with his full sister, Nura, who was one of his closest advisors on matters of state; and King Faysal's wife, `Iffat, who was also active in public affairs, particularly women's education, was universally called "the Queen" out of respect for pioneering efforts even though the title technically did not exist.

## **The Impact of the Extended Family on Politics**

Saudi Arabia has often been characterized in the West as an absolute monarchy with no public participation in the political process. It is not democratic in a Western sense to be sure, but neither is it absolute. There are two principal constraints on the ruler. First, the constitutional system of Saudi Arabia is based on Islamic law, and the ruler is not above the law. Second is the consultative nature of decision-making.

John Esposito describes the political process in seventh century Arabia, at the dawn of Islam:

Tribes were led by a chief (shaykh) who was selected by a consensus of his peers --, that is the heads of leading clans or families. These elders formed an advisory council (majlis) within which the tribal chief exercised his leadership and authority....

Then as now both the political leader was as much consensus-maker as chief executive. Then as now, the consensus makers were the elders of the extended families and clans. Saudi Arabia is not a country of individuals ruled by a single, absolute monarch, or even an autocratic royal family ruling over a country of individuals. It is a system whereby the patriarch of an extended royal family ruling with the consensus of leading members of a nation of extended families. Moreover, in a land where Islamic law forms the constitutions, the current appointed Saudi Consultative Assembly (Majlis al-Shura) is not an embryonic secular legislature. It is a modern institutionalization of a tradition of consensus extending back to the seventh century and beyond. There has been recent talk of making it an elective body, and if it continues to evolve, there is a possibility of its duties being expanded to include formulation of enabling decrees for government operations. But however it evolves, it will be a reflection of an extended family

structure and the Islamic values of Saudi society.

## The Impact of the Extended Family on Economics and Commerce

Extended families dominate most of the largest private business firms in the Kingdom. Prior to the oil era, the Hajj, or Great Pilgrimage to Makkah was the backbone of the Saudi economy. Over the centuries, great merchant families had arisen in the Hijaz, providing goods and services to pilgrims to Makkah and al-Madinah. About 2 million Muslims now attend the Hajj annually, making it the largest commercial retail season of the year, roughly corresponding to the Christmas season in the United States. In the Eastern Province, a similar phenomenon occurred following the discovery of oil, as oil workers from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf shaykhdoms founded great merchant families, initially specializing in providing services for Aramco.

With oil revenues, the public sector now dominates the national economy, but extended families still dominate the private sector. Moreover, the government made an effort to award contracts to provide goods and services to the merchant families as one of the means of distributing public wealth to the people. In recent years, a new class of venture capitalists has appeared, many of them younger members of the old families. In the absence of income taxes, they have continued to create private wealth even as government contracts have declined.

It should also be noted women play a major role in the economy of the country. The Qur'an and the Sunna (the traditional inspired sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), the basic sources of Islamic law, provided for women to inherit, hold and bequeath private property. In the seventh century, these women's property rights were revolutionary, and were not adopted in the West for many centuries. Saudi women now own in their own right a considerable amount of the national wealth -- in securities, real estate, and ownership of shops and other businesses. Restrictions on their physical mobility have not impeded them from prospering in Saudi Arabia's free market economy.

In sum, the extended family, as the basic structural unit of Saudi society, continues to be a major influence on all aspects of Saudi social, political and economic life despite the centrifugal forces of modernization eroding its cohesion. Given the furious rate of social change that is occurring, the remarkable thing about the traditional society is that it has survived intact as long as it has.

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### Notes:

i Raphael Patai, *Society, Culture and Change in the Middle East*, (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 2nd ed., 1969), p. 28.

ii Estimates are based on several sources, including The Saudi Arabian Information Resource, <http://www.saudinf.com> ; and CIA, *World Factbook, 2000*, (Washington: GPO, 2000).

iii Ibid.

iv Ibid.

v S. G. Vesey-Fitzgerald, "Nature and Sources of the Shari`a," in Majid Khaduri and Herbert J. Liebesny, eds., *Law in the Middle East*, (Washington: The Middle East Institute, 1955), p. 95.

vi John L. Esposito, *Islam The Straight Path* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5.

vii The greatest opposition to a secular legislature comes from the religious establishment on grounds that Islamic law is divine and complete, and that any secular changes would be heresy.

viii The only recognized "law" in Saudi Arabia is Islamic law. What might be called enabling legislation in the West

are called *nizams*, or decrees.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dr. David E. Long** is a consultant on Middle East and Gulf affairs and international terrorism. He joined the U.S. Foreign Service in 1962 and served in Washington and abroad until 1993, with assignments in the Sudan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. His Washington assignments included Deputy Director of the State Department's Office of Counter Terrorism for Regional Policy, a member of the Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff, and Chief of the Near East Research Division in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research Bureau. He was also detailed to the Institute for National Strategic Studies of the National Defense University in Washington, 1991-92, and to the United States Coast Guard Academy, 1989-91, where he served as Visiting Professor of International Relations and in 1990-91 as Acting Head of the Humanities Department.

A native of Florida, he received an AB in history from Davidson College, an MA in political science from the University of North Carolina, an MA in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a Ph.D. in International Relations from the George Washington University.

In 1974 -1975, Dr. Long was an International Affairs Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations and concurrently a Senior Fellow at the Georgetown University Center for Strategic and International Studies. While on leave of absence from the State Department, he was the first Executive Director of the Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1974-1975. In 1982-1983, he was a Senior Fellow of the Middle East Research Institute and Adjunct Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1987-1989, he was a Diplomat in Residence and Research Professor of International Affairs at Georgetown.

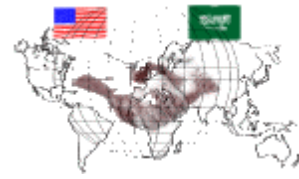
Dr. Long has been an adjunct professor at several Washington area universities, including Georgetown, George Washington and American Universities and the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. He has also lectured extensively in the United States and abroad on topics relating to the Islam, the Middle East and terrorism.

His publications include *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (co-editor with Bernard Reich, 4th ed. 2002), *Gulf Security in the Twenty-First Century* (co-editor with Christian Koch, 1998), *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (1997), *The Anatomy of Terrorism* (1990), *The United States and Saudi Arabia: Ambivalent Allies* (1985), *Saudi Arabian Modernization* (with John Shaw, 1982), *The Hajj Today: A Survey of the Contemporary Makkah Pilgrimage* (1979), *Saudi Arabia* (1976) and *The Persian Gulf* (1976, revised 1978).

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