Introduction
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In a study dealing with the rule of Shari’a (the Islamic law) in relation to the Saudi political system, a brief discussion on the very concept of Shari’a becomes inevitable. Shari’a means ‘God’s given way of life.’ The authorities of Islam have enumerated that Shari’a covers all the affairs of human life, whether it is personal, social, political, or international. Here, the discussion will focus on the political aspect of Shari’a in the context of the Saudi ruling system.

The Shari’a accords a prime position to the Majlis Ash-Shura (The Consultative Council) in the administration of the State. The concept of Shura (‘consultation’) is rooted in Muslim political thought and is practiced in many different ways from the days of early Islam.

It is generally believed that Shura is based on the Quranic reference to “Amruhum Shura baynahum” (“those who conduct their affairs of government by mutual consultation”). It also states that the ruler should consult the men of knowledge and character in the conduct of the administration of the state. Shura is the genuine expression of the idea of government limited by the consent of the people and the rule of law.
The Saudi political system echoes the partnership between the religious and political elements of society. This system was established in the year 1744 by Muhammad ibn Saud, the amir in Al Dariyah near Riyad and Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, the Shaykh who came to the area to preach the doctrine of the Oneness of God as the true Islam, based on the ideas of Ibn-Taymiyyah (1268-1328). Ibn-Taymiyyah reopened the doors of Ijtihad which had been considered closed after the 10th century A. D. (3 rd c Hijra). Ibn-Taymiyyah's efforts led to a revival in Islamic thought. The next four hundred years, however, did not see any intellectual ferment until the appearance of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. At this stage we notice an emerging cooperation between Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Saud.

As a result of this co-operation based on the strict Hanbali interpretation of Islamic law, political rule was governed by the House of Saud. Al-Saud who was also given the title of Imam, which in common parlance meant "head of the state." Religious authority was in the hands of the Ash Shaykh (the family of the shaykh, Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab). This arrangement, however, did not give unchecked political power to the ruler because in accordance with the precepts of Abd-al-Wahhab, based on the political theory of Ibn Taimiya, secular authority must conform to divine law and produce civil order in order to be legitimate.
The collaboration of the Al Saud and the Al ash Shaykh resulted in the Al Saud dominion in Najd, the central region of the Arabian Peninsula, for more than two centuries, except for the brief period from 1891 to 1902 when the Al Saud was exiled by the Al Rashid to Kuwait. Najd has exerted an unusually strong influence on the jurisdiction of the Al Saud. In addition, because the region lacked large cities and the strong leadership they could provide, an interdependent relationship developed among Najdi towns, which paid tribute to tribes that provided protection. Traditionally, Najdi political power would lay with the tribal Shaykhs, who, when they became Amirs, or governors of a wider area, endeavored to dissociate themselves from their tribal rules because they were ruling a more diverse population.

The prominence of Al Saud is reflected in the name Saudi Arabia, the only country to be named by the ruling family. The present kingdom of Saudi Arabia derives its existence from the campaigns of its founder, Abd al Aziz ibn Abd ar-Rahman Al Saud, who initially captured Riyadh with his Beduine followers in 1902. Thereafter, with the aid of the Ikhwan, or the brotherhood, a fervent group of Wahhabi beduine warriors, he recaptured the rest of Najd, defeating the Al Rashid forces at Hail in the North in 1921, and in 1924 conquering the Hijaz, including Mecca and Medina. Chosen as the king of the Hijaz and Najd in 1927, Abd al Aziz was obliged to defeat the Ikhwan militarily in 1929 because in their zeal the Ikhwan had
Introduction of the Rule of Shari'a and the Contemporary Saudi Political System

encroached on the borders of neighbouring states, thereby arousing the concern of Britain, in particular. In 1932 Abd al 'Aziz proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which covered an area approximating the territory of the present state. The discovery of oil in 1938 ultimately transformed the kingdom and the lives of its inhabitants. During his reign, however, Abd al 'Aziz sought to obtain "the iron of the West without its ideas," as the king phrased it. He sought to make use of Western technology, but at the same time he wished to maintain the traditional institutions associated with Islamic and Arab life.

Upon Abd al 'Aziz's death in 1953, his son Saud ibn Abd al 'Aziz Al-Saud succeeded to the throne. Saud proved to be an ineffective ruler and a spendthrift, whose luxurious lifestyle, together with that of the advisers with whom he surrounded himself, rapidly led to the depletion of the kingdom's treasury. Al Saud was obliged to give executive power to conduct foreign and domestic affairs to his brother, Crown Prince Faisal ibn Abd al 'Aziz Al Saud in 1958, and again in 1962. In 1964 the royal family, with the consent of the Ulama, or religious leaders, deposed Saud and made Faisal the king, appointing Khalid ibn Abd al 'Aziz Al Saud, another brother, as crown prince.

Faisal sought to modernize the kingdom economically, educationally, and in defense, while simultaneously playing a key role in foreign policy. For instance, during the October 1973
War between Israel and the Arab states, Faisal helped to initiate an oil embargo against those countries that supported Israel. The embargo led to the tripling of oil prices. He supported the education of girls and the opening of government television stations to promote education. Faisal was assassinated in 1975 by his own nephew.

Crown Prince Khalid ibn Abd al ‘Aziz became the king (and de facto prime minister) immediately. His brother, Fahd ibn Abd al Aziz Al Saud, served as deputy prime minister, and another brother, Abd Allah ibn Abd al ‘Aziz Al Saud, served as second deputy prime minister. Khalid dealt primarily with domestic affairs, stressing agricultural development. He also visited all the Gulf states, and took a keen interest in settling Saudi Arabia's outstanding boundary disputes, including that of the Al Buraymi Oasis with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1975. [The area near Al Buraymi disputed with Oman had been resolved in 1971.] Fahd became the principal spokesman on foreign affairs and oil policy.

King Khalid’s reign was an eventful one. It saw the attempt of strict Islamists (also known as purists), who alleged the corrupting Western influence on Saudi royal family, in taking over the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, riots in the Eastern Province in 1979 and 1980, and the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981.
Upon Khalid's death in 1982, Fahd ascended the throne, with Abd Allah becoming crown prince. Fahd soon faced the impact on the kingdom because the fall in oil revenues, which ended in the 1986 oil price crash. Recognizing the need for a more united Arab front, particularly in view of the deteriorating economic situation, he reestablished diplomatic relations with Egypt in 1987 (relations had been broken in 1978 as a result of Anwar al-Sadat's signing of the Camp David Accords creating a separate peace between Egypt and Israel). Fahd also played a mediating role in the Lebanese civil war in 1989, bringing most of the members of the Lebanese National Assembly to At Taif to settle their differences.

To understand the forces that have shaped the religion into the politics of Saudi Arabia, one must also consider the roles of geographic factors, tribal allegiance, the Bedouin life, the Al Saud, and the discovery of oil. Tribal affiliation has been the focus of identity in the Arabian Peninsula, approximately 80 percent of which is occupied by Saudi Arabia. Well in the present century, several deserts, including the Rub al Khali, one of the largest in the world, cut tribal groups off from one another and isolate Najd, from other parts of the country. As a result, a high degree of cultural homogeneity developed among the inhabitants. The majority follows Sunni Wahhabi Islam and a patriarchal family system. Only about 5 percent of the Saudi population adheres to the Shia sect. The Shia, in general, represent the
lowest socio-economic group in the country, and their grievances over their status have led to protest demonstrations in the 1970s and again in 1979-80, that have resulted in government actions designed to better their lot.

Saudi tribal allegiance and the Bedouin heritage have been weakened, however, since the mid-twentieth century by the increased role of a centralized state, urbanization, and industrialization that has accompanied the finding of oil. At the same time, the impact of Islam on different elements of the population has varied.

Many of the educated younger technocrats have felt a need to adapt Islamic institutions to fit the demands of modern technology. Other young people, more conservatively inclined, as well as a number of their elders and those with a more traditional Bedouin lifestyle, have deplored the alienation from Muslim values and the corruption that they believe Western ways and the presence of foreigners have brought into the kingdom (according to 1992 census figures, there are 4.6 million foreigners, in contrast to an indigenous population of 12.3 million). Their activist Islamism was reflected in the 1979 attempt by extremists to take over the Grand Mosque in Mecca and by other aspects of the Islamic revival, such as the prominent wearing of the *hijab*, or long black cloak and veil by women, and the more active role of the Committees for the
Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (mutawwiin) in enforcing standards of public morality.

The government found itself caught between these two trends. On the one hand, it feared the extremism of some of the traditionalists, which could well undermine the economic, educational, and social development programs that the government had been implementing and which also constituted a threat to internal security. On the other hand, as guardian of the holy places of Islam, the sites of the annual pilgrimage for Muslims the world over, the government needed to legitimize itself as an "Islamic Government".

The government therefore has sought to achieve political and social compromises. Repeated announcements have been made regarding the royal family's intention to create a consultative council, first proposed by King Faisal in 1964.

The Gulf War was, however, a watershed in the history of the desert Kingdom. It was the first opportunity for dissidents to come out in the open. The stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia led to massive resentment amongst the Ulama. The younger generation vociferously protested against the stationing of foreign troops. Anti-state criticism thundered from the pulpits of the mosques, and the Kingdom witnessed an avalanche of cassettes, books, and pamphlets about the Saudi State. The
established clergy, however, rallied to the defense of the state, and Saudi Arabia became an arena where pro and anti-regime forces debated both taking recourse to the Quran and the Hadith to defend their respective positions.

The younger Ulama drew support from university professors, teachers, theology students, businessmen, etc. They were influenced by political Islam, which was the inspiration behind radical resurgent movements throughout the area. With the end of the war, the King was forced to confront the demand of the radical (revolutionary) Ulama. This led to his proclamation of a package of reforms in March 1, 1992. Most significant was the formation of the Majlis Ash-Shura, a demand that had been promised ever since the 1930s.

As a means of giving a greater voice to the people, on August 20, 1993, Fahd announced the appointment of sixty men to the Consultative Council. Members of the Council were primarily religious and tribal leaders, government officials, businessmen, and retired military and police officers. An additional step was King Fahd's decree of March 1992, establishing a main, or basic, code of laws that regularizes succession to the throne (the king chooses the heir apparent from among the sons and grandsons of Abd al-'Aziz) and sets forth various administrative procedures concerning the state.
Fahd also issued a decree concerning the provinces, or regions, of the kingdom. Each region is to have an Amir, a deputy, and a consultative council composed of at least ten persons appointed by the Amir for a four-year term. The code does not, however, protect individual rights in the western sense, as many professionals and technocrats had desired. Rather, it says that "the state protects human rights in accordance with the Islamic Shari'a."

The Islamic law, the Shari'a, gives a very prominent position to the Majlis Ash-Shura in the administration of the State. The context of 'Shura' (consultation) is rooted in Muslim political thought and practice harking back to the early days of Islam. It is based on the Qur'anic reference Amruhum Shura baynahum (who conduct their affairs of governance by mutual consultation). 1) It states that the ruler should consult the men of knowledge and character in the conduct of the administration of the state. The head of the state should rule with the consent of the people and the ruler should elicit support of the masses. 2) Consultation is the very basis of political life. Shura is the genuine expression of the idea of government limited by the consent of the people and the rule of law. 3) Islam teaches that people's conduct in life should be determined by mutual consultation, and people should adhere to the decisions reached through consultation. 4) Thus, consultation is the key word of Ash Shura, and it suggests the ideal way in which a good man
should conduct his affairs, so that he may not become too egotistical, and on the other hand, he may not lightly abandon the responsibilities which devolve on him as a personality whose development counts in the sight of Allah. 5) Majlis is the formal institution where the ruler consults with the men of knowledge, experience, and character in the administration of the state. This practice has been in existence even before the emergence of Islam in Arabia. With the advent of Islam and rule of the Prophet Muhammad (s: s:) in Madina, Majlis received renewed attention and political recognition.

The Saudi concept of legitimacy of the government is akin to the beduin concept of tribal democracy in which the individual exchanges views with the tribal shaykh. Saudi rulers and most traditionalists reject Western participatory democracy, because the latter establishes the people as the source of decision rather than the will of God as found in the Shari'a and as interpreted by the Ulama. In their view, moreover, democracy lacks the stability that a Muslim form of government provides. Thinking this to be reason enough, the government has tended to repress dissent and jail dissidents. Such repression has been applied to students and religious figures belonging to such organizations as the Organization of Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (active in January and February 1992 in criticizing the ruling family and the government).
Socially, the education of girls, although placed under the supervision of the religious authorities, has existed over the period of four decades. There are a considerable number of women graduates who are seeking employment in various sectors and who increasingly are making their presence felt. This trend has coincided at a time of rising unemployment for Saudi males, particularly for graduates in the field of religious studies, and posed a further potential source of dissidence. In addition, growing urbanization was tending to increase the number of nuclear as opposed to extended families, thereby breaking down traditional social structures. There were also indications that drug smuggling and drug use were rising; twenty of the forty executions that occurred between January 1 and May 1, 1993, were drug related.

The Al Saud played the central role in achieving the needed compromises in the political, social, and foreign affairs, as well as in directing the economy with the support of the technocrats and the merchants.

The crown prince was also considered closer, than the king to the religious establishment, or the Ulama. Thirty to forty of the most influential Ulama, mainly members of the Al ash Shaykh, constituted the Council of Senior Ulama, seven of whose members were dismissed by the king in December 1992 on the pretext of "poor health." The actual reason for their dismissal
was their failure to condemn July criticisms (published in September) of the government by a group of religious scholars who called themselves the ‘Committee for the Defense of Rights under the Shari'a’. The king named ten younger and more progressive Ulama to replace them.

In a move in July 1993, the king named Shaykh Abd al-'Aziz ibn Baz general mufti of the kingdom with the rank of minister and president of the Administration of Scientific Research and Fatwa. ‘Abd al ‘Aziz ibn Baz was also appointed to preside over the new eighteen-member Higher Ulama Council. Based on Abd al ‘Aziz ibn Baz’s advice, instead of the Ministry of Pilgrimage Affairs and Religious Trusts, the king created two new ministries: the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call, and Guidance; and the Ministry of Pilgrimage. This action gave the religious sector an additional voice in the Council of Ministers.

Saudi Arabia had taken the lead in 1970 in establishing the Organization of the Islamic Conference to bring together all Muslim countries. In addition, the kingdom followed a policy of supporting Islamic countries in Africa and Asia and providing military aid to Muslim groups opposing secular governments in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and, formerly, in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.
The discovery of oil in commercial quantities in 1938 was the major catalyst that transformed various aspects of the kingdom. The huge revenues from the sale of oil and the payments received from foreign companies involved in developing concessions in the country enabled the government to launch large-scale development programs by the early 1970s. Such programs initially focussed on creation of infrastructure in the areas of transportation, telecommunications, electric power, and water. The programs also addressed the fields of education, health, and social welfare; the expansion and equipping of the armed forces; and the creation of petroleum-based industries. From this beginning, the government expanded its programs to drill more deep wells to tap underground aquifers and to construct desalination plants. These water sources, in turn, enabled ventures to make the country more nearly self-sufficient agriculturally. In many instances, however, such undertakings seriously depleted groundwater.

In pursuit of industrial diversification, the government created the industrial cities of Al Jubayl in the Eastern Province and Yanbu al Bahr (known as Yanbu) on the Red Sea. The government also encouraged the establishment of non oil-related industries, anticipating the day when Saudi Arabia's oil and gas resources would be depleted. Furthermore, the kingdom also has some promising copper, lead, zinc, silver, and gold deposits that have received little exploitation.
The kingdom's economic plans, including the Fifth Development Plan (1990-95), continued to emphasize training the indigenous labour force to handle technologically advanced processes and hence to enable Saudi Arabia to reduce the number of its foreign workers. The plan also encouraged the creation of joint industrial enterprises with GCC member states and other Arab and Islamic countries and the development of industrial relations with foreign countries in order to attract foreign capital and transfer technology.

The major event affecting Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States in the early 1990s was clearly the Persian Gulf War. The effect of that war on the kingdom is yet to be assessed.

More difficult to measure, however, has been the social impact of the war. Many foreign observers had speculated that the arrival in the kingdom of more than 600,000 foreign military personnel, including women in uniform, would bring about significant changes in Saudi society. Military personnel, however, tended to be assigned to remote border areas of the country and were little seen by the population as a whole. The net effect of their presence was therefore minimal in the opinion of a number of knowledgeable Saudis.

As Saudi Arabia entered the final years of the twentieth century, there were signs, however, that the expression of public dissent, once unthinkable, was becoming more commonplace.
Such dissent was usually couched within an Islamic framework, but nonetheless it represented a force with which the Al Saud had to reckon. King Fahd had succeeded thus far in balancing the demands of modernists and traditionalists domestically and in pursuing a policy of moderation internationally. Some observers wondered, however, how long Fahd would be able to rule and how adaptable the more conservative crown Prince Abd Allah would be as Fahd’s successor.

The Gulf War could prove to be the harbinger of many changes in the policies of Saudi Arabia internally or externally. The reform introduced by King Fahd in the early 1990s might well become the first step towards gradual change in the Kingdom’s political system.

Joseph Nevo in his article (published in Middle Eastern studies Quarterly, vol:34, ‘Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia’ narrates the sayings of Madawi al-Rasheed that the royal family has come to realize that Islam applied to legitimize a political system is a double-edged sword. It invites opposition groups to debate the degree to which Islam has been incorporated into politics. The contemporary Islamic oppositions that contest the legitimacy of the monarchy are using the same rhetoric employed by the royal family to legitimize the monarchy, shifting the focus from Islam as the source of legitimacy of the ruling family to Islam as the source of the uniqueness of the
Saudi nation, is the regime’s line of defense against the aforementioned challenges.

While introducing the theme Shari’ā as the Saudi political system the above discussion would be a prelude to the succeeding chapters.