Chapter 1

The Current Generation

The stability of Saudi Arabia is largely determined by the nature of its political system, which is, in large part, centered on the ruling Al Saud family. While ruling family politics in the Kingdom share many characteristics with other hereditary monarchies, it is unique in a number of aspects. The family’s sheer size and complexity, in terms of both its internal structure and composition and its connections to Saudi society, make the Saudi political system markedly different from other past and present monarchies. In addition, family politics have developed in the context of vast wealth and profound transformations that have altered the face of Saudi Arabia, perhaps permanently. Thus, it is on this basis that family politics is analyzed with an emphasis on determining the interplay between politics and policy on the one hand, and the balance between cohesive and disintegrative forces within the family on the other. These implications for Saudi behavior have a direct bearing on Saudi stability.

Indeed, to assess the legacy of King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman—certainly the leading Al Saud figure in the twentieth century, who branded the country into his image—and to better understand the many changes that occurred within the ruling family, a careful look at the latter is necessary. Abdul Aziz’s progeny institutionalized the Kingdom’s political features, ranging from governance to succession, and, despite serious challenges, managed to preserve the dynasty’s authority. Four of his sons succeeded him into power. In less than a century, these successors further legitimized the founder’s—as well as their own—power bases, adding value to both country and family against some odds. Even if Abdul Aziz’s successors were relatively ensured of their positions, all had to distinguish themselves and come to terms with the many limitations that the complex Al Saud entity represented.
The Al Saud Family: Size and Structure

The ruling Al Saud family is notable for its sheer size, diverse composition, and complex internal structure. Because these features directly influence the political dynamics of the family, it is useful to examine them in some detail. The exact size of the family is not known to any outsider, although educated estimates range between five thousand and eight thousand adults. A more useful breakdown is to consider three politically relevant groupings from which all current and future leaders will probably emerge: (a) descendants of King Abdul Aziz, (b) descendants of Abdul Aziz’s brothers, and (c) cadet branches of the Al Saud dynasty. These three groupings must, in turn, be broken down into several subgroupings, to better identify rising leaders. Whether the founder had a clear idea of what his succession should look like, or what patterns it should follow, is difficult to determine. Suffice it to say that challenges from several cousins (also known as the Saud Al-Kabir line) as well as from the Araif and Jiluwi branches of the family all influenced the founder’s preferences. If anything, King Abdul Aziz was determined to avoid disputes that had dominated 200 years of family discord, weakened it, and allowed outside powers to interfere in the country’s internal affairs.

The Legacy of King Abdul Aziz

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman founded the third Saudi Kingdom in 1932 and ruled as monarch for 21 years until his death in 1953. In many respects, he was the “father” of modern Saudi Arabia, although his rule was carefully balanced with a reinvigorated alliance with members of the Al Shaykh clan. Moreover, and because his campaign to unify the many tribes on the Arabian Peninsula required it, Abdul Aziz married a large number of women from important tribes, who gave him 36 sons. The sons of Abdul Aziz form the core of the ruling family (see appendix 6). His four successors—Saud (1953–1964), Faysal (1964–1975), Khalid (1975–1982), and Fahd (1982-present), along with the rest of his surviving sons, occupied the most important political positions in the country. Still, it would be a mistake to assume that King Abdul Aziz’s sons either formed a unified bloc in the past or can claim to have established such an “institution” since 1953. Apart from each individual’s personal attributes, which may be issue driven within family politics, several topics determined the direction many followed. These ranged from ideological preferences to business interests, and helped form the pattern of