Chapter 3

Perceptions of Security Concerns

The Al Saud family articulated two major security goals throughout its 65-year rule: to maintain custodianship over the holy sites of Makkah and Madinah and to preserve the commanding role of the ruling family. Both, it was posited by every ruler, ensured their legitimacy and, as a consequence, their power. Both provided stability and preserved the Kingdom from internal challenges.

Historically, nearly all family members united whenever faced with challenges. Differences were quickly resolved through negotiations, brokered agreements, and concessions, as appropriate. Above all, succession crises, which intruded on internal stability, were settled without jeopardizing existing accords. During each succession, the Al Saud chose the designated Heir Apparent as ruler, and because succession was subject to a consensus decision, disagreements within the family over a successor were never allowed to endanger existing alliances. In fact, the Al Saud diligently strove to ensure that the succession issue never escalated into an open “struggle for power” that would weaken their authority and, after 1932, the monarchy.

Similarly, custodianship of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah bestowed upon the ruling family tremendous political responsibilities. When Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman, the father of modern Saudi Arabia, consolidated his power in the 1920s, he found it necessary to promote strong ties with key tribes and influential religious figures. Abdul Aziz relied on senior family members to enhance internal stability by appointing several princes to critical defense and security posts. In response to popular demands, Riyadh adopted consensus-driven measures, which placed the country on the path to unity. Thus, the ruling family buttressed its authority by articulating a clearly defined vision of security, and by sharing power with the Al Shaykh family. In doing so, they equipped the nascent country with a decision-making establishment that, over
time, developed specific institutions to protect the Al Saud from all opposition forces.

The Alliance with the Religious Establishment

To end the chaotic tribal environment on the Arabian Peninsula, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman forged a new order, adopted a unique political system, and bequeathed power to his progenitors. His transformation of the peninsula’s many tribal units into a unified force ensured the formation of a modern state. By acting decisively early on, he denied leadership contenders any influence and stripped contentious tribal chiefs of their ability to rule in remote areas. The ruler deliberately placed his sons—and other family members—into sensitive regional administrative posts, without exposing the Al Saud to undue criticism. To achieve his objective, he sought assistance from the religious establishment by fostering alliances with senior ulama, as well as key tribal families. Despite these efforts, rivalries developed among his successors over conflicting security perceptions, which in turn led to several costly crises.

King Abdul Aziz and the Ikhwan

Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman’s ability to co-opt the Ikhwan cemented the various Arabian tribes that formed Saudi Arabia. As early as 1913, Abdul Aziz led Ikhwan armies to conquer the Jabal Shammar, the Hijaz, and Asir Provinces, by convincing local leaders that the security of the country required control of these regions. However, his deliberate policies angered the Ikhwan. Between 1927 and 1930, Ikhwan troops rebelled against the ruler because they wanted to preserve their independent power base and the Peninsula’s traditional socioethnic frameworks. While they did not disagree with his security goals, the Ikhwan objected to Abdul Aziz’s methods, going so far as to label them as a betrayal of unitarian doctrine.

In October 1928, when the Ikhwan withdrew their support from him, Abdul Aziz called for a conference of Najdi tribal leaders. In a classic move, he challenged them to choose another member of the family to replace him if they objected to his methods. Since there were no alternative leaders, the stratagem succeeded, as Ikhwan leaders pledged themselves anew to support and obey Abdul Aziz. This was a clear demonstration of trust in his leadership. Not satisfied with this considerable achievement, Abdul Aziz further split the ranks of the remaining rebels with gifts and, whenever appropriate, intermarriage. These maneuvers, however, did not