

# Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia

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*This article looks at the Saudi voluntary sector and its relationship with the ruling family, the Al Sa'ud. It suggests that the voluntary sector in Saudi Arabia is a major agent for socio-political dialogue and social reform and that civil society in Saudi Arabia functions by using traditional forms of social interaction, such as the charitable sector. NGOs constitute an important arena of civil society wherein citizens and the governing Al Sa'ud have the opportunity to carry out a dialogue.*

**T**his article focuses on civil society in Saudi Arabia, a surprisingly under-researched and somewhat unrecognized subject. It concentrates in particular on the Saudi voluntary sector and on the development of Saudi associational life as functioning arenas of civil society. Civil society in most Middle East and North African countries has received massive academic attention and a consequent wealth of studies; that of Saudi Arabia has been neglected, receiving relatively little, if any, attention.

Indeed, many people doubt the existence of civil society in Saudi Arabia, supposing that what they see as a hegemonic and primitive monarchy could entertain neither civility nor an associational society. Likewise, informed Western perceptions of the complexity and depth of Saudi Arabian civil society are unfortunately scanty, except for a few scholars.<sup>1</sup> Equally, ignorance exists in the West about the prevalence of domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the domestic volunteer sector within Saudi Arabia, though since 9/11, charitable financial conduits funnelling money to al-Qa'ida and other extremist groups have become well known.

The overall Western lack of knowledge about Saudi society and the importance of the voluntary sector in Saudi Arabia skews Western understanding of the country and denies the Kingdom any respect for the development of its traditional charitable institutions and their modern counterparts. Although this lack of knowledge is regrettable,

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1. Some exceptions to this include Amélie Le Renard, "'Only for Women:' Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Autumn 2008); though there is also a teaching chapter in the OUP Online Resource Centre (David Pool, *Civil Society: Active or Passive: Saudi Arabia*). A Saudi academic friend confirmed that there are no major books by Saudi scholars on Saudi civil society, although scientific articles from newspapers, conferences, and research centers exist, including the series of articles by Mohammed Ibrahim al-Helwa, then a member of the Majlis al-Shura, in London's *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* in 2003. Other examples include Ibrahim al-Hatlani's 2007 study for the Al Aman Research Center, *The Historical and Political Limitations of Civil Society in Saudi Arabia*, and Hasanin Tawfig Ibrahim's *The Development of Civil Society Studies in the GCC Countries*, Gulf Center for Research, 2007.

Saudi academics only recently have begun writing about their civil society, and little research has been undertaken by Western academics. The dearth of attention contrasts unfavorably with the wealth of data on, for example, Yemen or Egypt, and reinforces Western views that a comparable civil society does not exist in Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, the NGOs, charitable sector, and associations have been major agents for socio-political dialogue and social reform, and provide an essential arena for discussion and dissent between the governing Al Sa'ud family and the people. This role is of course in addition to their traditional social and charitable activities. The NGO sector rarely can make progress on needed political change, but it remains a key player in social reform. Furthermore, the NGOs and the Al Sa'ud are locked together in this process; neither can do without the other. This article looks at the voluntary sector's relations with the Al Sa'ud and at their interdependence. It argues that, contrary to popular perceptions, Saudi society and its exchanges are complex, deep, diverse, and in many cases contradictory. If the voluntary sector is traditionally seen as a key part of civil society, then Saudi Arabia has a thriving civil society, and as a major national force, the voluntary sector is an important driver for social reform and modernization.

### *CIVIL SOCIETY*

The discussion of civil society in Saudi Arabia was eased when in the 1990s the definitions of civil society were broadened, allowing for a wider range of institutions and concepts to become recognized players. Until then Western scholars ignored Arab civil society that occupied the informal and traditional arenas. Western civil society theory describes a relationship between the state and society that in Western terms includes formal voluntary organizations, the rule of law, and — critically — an enabling political or state structure. Augustus Norton in his *magnum opus* on Middle East civil society defines it: "If democracy — as it is known in the West — has a home, it is in civil society, where a mélange of associations, clubs, guilds, syndicates, federations, unions, parties and groups come together to provide a buffer between state and citizen. Although the concept of civil society is resistant to analytical precision, the functioning of civil society is literally and plainly at the heart of participant political systems." So states that have the required political structure have civil society, and others do not. When hard-edged definitions are put aside in favor of more informal structures, civil organization becomes a different paradigm that reacts well with the Middle East's political arenas, governments, and citizens.

Saudi Arabia does not conform even to standard concepts of Middle Eastern power systems and civil society. In Saudi Arabia, despite a lack of formal pluralism, an integrative exchange exists between the state, the Al Sa'ud, and (broadly defined) civil society. In most Middle Eastern countries without a pluralist political base, relations between the state and civil society lack a formal interchange. In authoritarian regimes, power usually resides outside the state — in elite or monarchical/presidential hands. This is not the case in Saudi Arabia; power resides within the state; civil society functions within, and political activity crosses all boundaries, blurred or defined.

Once scholars began to look for systems different from Augustus Norton's

definitions,<sup>2</sup> civil society was found to be flourishing in states with more fluid processes of traditional interaction, and not just within Nortonian “legal states.” Walid Kazziha comments, “If civil society is viewed in terms of the existence of formal and informal initiatives in society which have a direct bearing on the political level then we might be getting closer to a more focused definition of our subject.”<sup>3</sup> Discussing Yemen, Sheila Carapico adds, “Civil society is not a binomial element, either there or not, but a variable that assumes different forms under different circumstances. Rates of activism — of joining, building, publishing, and meeting in the civic realm expand and contract.”<sup>4</sup>

Within these parameters, civil society in Saudi Arabia is everywhere. Social and political discussion abounds, not within political parties, but identifiable within groups of broad, informal structures and relationships. Social debate is widespread, as is discussion of Islam and its traditions, and of what constitutes liberal, conservative, or essentialist Islam.

Islam pervades Saudi society, but the study of Islam’s role in the Kingdom shows different political shadings between the Al Sa‘ud and the voluntary sector. Sami Zubaida remarked, “Political Islam in the Middle East is the new nationalism,”<sup>5</sup> a powerful, credible force, and one that could lead to unwelcome pluralist policies. The Saudi government has been all too aware of the impact of political Islam and the need to win and control hearts and minds. The Al Sa‘ud are aware that their grassroots penetration is shallower in much of the country than the traditional benevolent societies and will use any civil society tools available to gather information. An important tool is the voluntary sector, a source of information for the different wings of the royal family and for the regime’s core. The term “voluntary sector” is used in this article to describe any service-providing non-profit organizations, many of which are pioneers in the areas of social services, social reform, and community assistance. NGOs in any Muslim country have an important role as the channel for Muslims to fulfil the third of the five pillars of Islam, *zakat*.<sup>6</sup> In Saudi Arabia the voluntary sector is everywhere, from small benevolent societies in the country towns to major national or specialized NGOs. It should be noted that the radical Islamist community, still a part of Saudi Arabia’s civil society, has kept its allegiances to al-Qa‘ida hidden. Or more accurately, secret sympathy within sections of the country for Usama bin Ladin and his views has

2. Augustus Richard Norton, ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

3. Walid Kazziha, Enid Hill, and Keiko Sakai, *Civil Society and the Middle East* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 1997), p. 18.

4. Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 12.

5. Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. xix.

6. In Saudi Arabia *zakat* is collected by the state through the Department of Zakat and Income Tax. The state distributes *zakat*, using it for appropriate Islamic purposes, that is, to provide help to the eight categories of people described as eligible to receive *zakat* in the Qur’an. It also can be used for mosque- and madrasa-building under certain circumstances. *Zakat* is different from the voluntary alms giving of *sadaqat* (sing. *sadaqa*) by which many charities are funded, and from *awqaf* (sing. *waqf*), which are long-standing endowments. *Zakat*, for instance, will be used to provide funding for poor people, but Al-Birr, an organization discussed in detail later in this article, would have to draw on different government funds for its housing program in the Eastern Province. At the time of the writing of this article, The Centennial Fund, a foundation designed to encourage young entrepreneurs throughout the Kingdom, could not access *zakat* funds but had hopes of eventually being able to do so.

been sufficiently disciplined for radical Islam not to show up through civil society's traditional channels.

Add to this widespread suspicion of Nejd social and political hegemony, and the voluntary sector has another task: to act as a political player, calming or highlighting regional mistrust, and showing the Nejdīs that other areas should be respected for their cultural and socio-political aspirations. This leads the Al Sa'ud to the heart of the extended sprawl of Saudi society, to Clifford Geertz's "cloud of unstable micropolitics."<sup>7</sup>

If the Al Sa'ud needed any further confirmation of Islamist influence, the 2005 municipal elections told the tale. Having commented that the Islamists were better organized than the liberal Muslims, a lawyer in Riyadh suggested that there would be no further elections for a time because the Islamists would get in: "The likely outcome of a participatory government would be an Islamic government which could end up being more repressive. People in the elite are not ready to deal with Islamic parties."<sup>8</sup> It therefore comes as no surprise that the Al Sa'ud wish to retain strong links with the voluntary sector and foster a controlled but still vital civil society.

Thus civil society in Saudi Arabia assumes another layer of importance. Joel Migdal has commented, "Focusing studies of civil society exclusively on questions of legitimacy, consensus, and hegemony (the passive dimension) may draw attention away from important cases in which the state's right to rule is not widely questioned but where the growth of civil society's institutions (the active or volitional dimension), nonetheless, dramatically affects the overall distribution of power."<sup>9</sup> The Al Sa'uds' right to rule is often questioned but their usefulness as reasonably effective rulers is not, especially when compared with neighboring regimes. Where Saudi Arabia varies from normal interchanges in the Middle East between ruler and ruled is in the close relationship between the state and the voluntary sector and, as Migdal says, the way civil society affects power distribution.

### THE SAUDI POLITICAL CONTEXT

To recognize that the Al Sa'ud are not homogeneous nor hegemonic and that they pull in different directions is to start understanding them. They are, however, the center of state and society. Mamoun Fandy describes this phenomenon:

The royal family exists within both civil society and the state simultaneously. The Saudis may be hated as bureaucrats, regional governors, or heads of particular government agencies, yet they are loved as a magnanimous family at the level of civil society. It is that liminal nature of the royal family that makes it inside government and civil society at the same time.<sup>10</sup>

7. Clifford Geertz, "In Search of North Africa," *New York Review of Books*, April 22, 1971, p. 20. Quoted by Dale Eickelman in "Is there an Islamic City? The making of a quarter in a Moroccan town," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 5 (1974), p. 280.

8. Interview by author with lawyer, Riyadh, May 2005.

9. Joel S. Migdal, "Civil Society in Israel," in Ellis Goldberg, Resat Kasaba, and Joel S. Migdal, eds., *Rules and Rights in the Middle East Democracy, Law and Society* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), pp. 122-23.

10. Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1999), p. 35.

Thus they are everywhere in society and in the state; they are *al-dawla* (state) and *al-hukuma* (government; in the Saudi context, the ruling family). They can be Islamist or conventional Sunnis; they can be secular but not Western, venal or upright, conservative or liberal. Overarching any ideological differences is the Third World nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century nation-state of Saudi Arabia: traditional but modernizing, unified through religion and conquest, but ideologically, culturally, and ethnically fragmented, where there is “no merging of state and society as common expressions of shared values.”<sup>11</sup>

Saudis express concern about the fragmented nature of their country. A female activist and academic commented,

The society is in turmoil and polarized; people have the same education but come from different standpoints. It is not a nation; it is still in flux. We need to change the mentality, but because of the changes in society the dividing lines are blurring. Because it is still polarized and divided it is a society in danger. Women are the best candidates to bring people together and to open up the rules and regulations. Women activists and the NGOs are less interested in divisions; they work together.<sup>12</sup>

A Riyadh lawyer added, “The creation of the Saudi state destroyed the old forms of organization; only family and religion keep people together. Now the most important issue is sectarianism.”<sup>13</sup>

As the Al Sa‘ud family is neither hegemonic nor homogeneous, any concept of a Saudi state as an “ideal type” authoritarian regime is deceptive. It is correct, but misleading, to say that political parties are banned in Saudi Arabia. The senior princes’ constituencies are clientelist and top-down, but like a political party they represent and further their clients’ interests. Their differing individual features give them a group chameleon quality. The fragmented nature of the Al Sa‘ud allows Saudi citizens, or at least the Saudi elites, some choice. People know by word of mouth or through instinct and upbringing the different objectives and behavior of the different factions.

Groups can be thwarted by different factions. For instance, the prince in charge of the 2005 municipal elections was Mansur bin Mut‘ib bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, but it was the conservative Interior Minister, Nayif, who finally stated in a speech outside Saudi Arabia that women could neither vote nor stand for office. Those elections were a litmus test for the empowerment of women, and for understanding the country’s sympathies, the power of Islamist factions, and factions within the Al Sa‘ud. An academic remarked,

The officials have no choice but to make changes, as they want to appear to be changing. However, the changes are not far reaching but touch the surface only. It is foreign influence that matters, not the Saudi grassroots. Reform is not sincere; look at the municipal elections: they gave only half the places for the elective process.<sup>14</sup>

But another commentator pointed out that some people in Saudi Arabia had voted as they wished and not according to the government. The voting in Burayda, capital of

11. Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 42.

12. Interview by author with female activist and academic, Riyadh, May 2005.

13. Interview by author with lawyer, Riyadh, May 2005.

14. Interview by author with academic, Riyadh, May 2005.

al-Qassim province in north-central Saudi Arabia, showed active local participation: "People in Burayda did not vote for the government's 'Golden List' but for those they wanted."<sup>15</sup>

The Al Sa'ud have had to recognize that they cannot exercise tight control on society, and that the rise of extreme Islam partially stems from their own actions in 1979 when they gave the '*ulama*' influence on the educational curriculum:

A Saudi observer noted that the government's reaction to the events in 1979 was an indication that the Islamists had started to dictate the rules of the game: 'it created a generation of angry, confused young people, many of whom have become fanatics.'<sup>16</sup>

As the old unity of *umara*' (rulers) and '*ulama*' (clerics) breaks down, the Al Sa'ud's need to forge national identity increases and thus their reliance on the voluntary sector's good offices.

A radio journalist talked about the need to marginalize the extremists and to find good people for management throughout the country. Her comments reflect a transitional state in a period of political Islam: "Reform needs support; the government is involved in identifying potential leaders and marginalizing extremists. The reforms are filtering down but incompetence and complacency are holding the country back. There's a need for more good people in management positions across the country, not just in government, but there aren't enough good people to go into higher positions of authority."<sup>17</sup>

The voluntary sector provides an informal opposition and challenge to the Al Sa'ud's vertical, patrimonial control by creating horizontal but traditional *shura* (discussion). It fosters cross-cutting "middle class" groups bound by similar interests and cuts across social, ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. For instance, according to a Riyadh academic, the National Dialogue, an example of associational life begun in 2003 and set up by the Al Sa'ud, is bringing people together from across the country.<sup>18</sup> Another example is the Khadija bint Khuwailid Center, the women's section of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI). Discussion of this Center began in 2000 and the Center itself was set up in January 2004. The women's branch of the JCCI was started by the voluntary work of a small handful of middle class women who began presentation and confidence-building classes for women. A further example is Mayadin, a Riyadh-based private-sector NGO consultancy company. Mayadin is the brainchild of four elite women who have both professional lives (in academia, education, or government administration) and powerful positions in the NGO sector.

However, these developments do not make managing difference any easier; if anything, by focussing on pluralism, individual, and minority rights, the National Dialogue makes differences stand out. For instance, in the session on "Women's Rights under Is-

15. Interview by author, Eastern Province, May 2005.

16. Michaela Prokop, "The War of Ideas: Education in Saudi Arabia," in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonnerman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), quoting an article in the *Arab News*, May 20, 2002, p. 61.

17. Interview by author with radio journalist, Jeddah, May 2005.

18. Interview by author with academic, Eastern Province, May 2005.

lam” an emotional scene erupted as conservative men and liberal women clashed verbally. Another important cross-cutting event used to be the annual women’s NGO conference, but it was closed down in 2003 by the government for bringing up overly sensitive issues. The conference used to bring women together from all regions of Saudi Arabia, providing a rare cross-Kingdom networking and exchange of views, and was particularly useful for more enclosed communities such as the Burayda women’s charity, King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Women’s Charity Society. “The conference is the spearhead of the women’s movement,” said a consultant to Agfund (Arab Gulf Fund for UN Development Organizations, based in Cairo and the brainchild of Talal bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz), in early 2003.<sup>19</sup>

If, as Fandy suggests, the Al Sa‘ud are at the center of civil society and the state, the voluntary sector is complementary to them, both as a force in society and as a state support, becoming a listening post for dissent and a provider of emergency aid. For instance, in the suburbs of south Riyadh, people depend on charitable hand-outs. There is no employment, no housing, no street lights, and no policing; children look for food in rubbish bins, and rural migrants and divorced women live in huts. Efforts have been made by al-Nahda, an umbrella women’s charity in Riyadh, to create employment in south Riyadh by setting up women’s-only factories. Riyadh is no megalopolis, but its problems, while on the smaller Saudi scale, are similar to those of bigger Third World cities: extreme wealth and unacceptable poverty levels, made worse when their proximity to one another is considered.

The voluntary sector provides an alternative permitted structure — not a shadow state, but a structure of authority supporting traditional moral values, which often contrast with those of the modernizing state and which show how a Muslim state should act, not how the Al Sa‘ud do act. The Al Sa‘ud can stand before the voluntary sector displaying their piety as a government and magnanimous Muslim family, or fail in both respects. The voluntary sector can take a complementary role and become an informal ethical arbiter or an opposition to which the Al Sa‘ud can respond.

In the state arena a political contest exists within the Al Sa‘ud between liberal and conservative members, corresponding to the country’s debate between liberal and conservative Islamic praxis and to the gap between Saudi Arabia’s conservative majority and liberal minority. Given these differences of opinion, the polymorphic and agile Al Sa‘ud can both uphold conservative values and welcome reform, coming as it does “through the back door” of the voluntary sector. They do not have to formally endorse liberal Islamic concepts, but when support builds in the country, they can act and bow to the winds of change.

An example of the latter is the Women’s Campaign for Refuges against Domestic Violence, which was underway by 2005. It started with a shadow group who created the studies and statistics needed to suggest a procedure for dealing with domestic violence. The group then placed itself under the umbrella of Crown Prince ‘Abdullah’s National Guard Hospital in Riyadh. This gave powerful protection and high political influence. A campaigner said,

The problem is festering and there are no protocols [to deal with it]. Two aspects need addressing: protection — physical shelters for women, and redress — and

19. Interview by author with consultant to Agfund, Riyadh, January 2003.

lawyers to ensure women and children get their rights under Islam. We need a protocol to bring in legal advice and to bring in the police. No system exists.<sup>20</sup>

The strategy of using the Crown Prince's patronage showed how people exercised a choice in regards to their representation and clientism. The group chose to put itself into the Crown Prince's constituency because he was the right member of the Al Sa'ud for this campaign, both due to the hospital and to his known concern for women's issues.

Many of the big charities have become instruments of local government, asked by the state in the Seventh Five Year Plan (2000-5) to become service-providers of housing, health, education, social and housing benefits, and disability provisions. So too have some of the foundations set up by particular companies or individuals, such as Al-Rajhi Banking and the Prince Walid bin Talal or Abdul Latif Jameel Foundations. The umbrella charities, such as Al-Birr, have expanded; and though the Al Sa'ud are dependent on them, they could not function without Al Sa'ud patronage.

The Al Sa'ud have left little formal room for the voluntary sector's engagement or disagreement. Formal opposition groups or public demonstrations of dissent are forbidden; combination, marches, trades unions, and political parties are banned, though some Eastern Province Shi'a demonstrations in favor of Hizbullah in August 2006 took place, and universities are being encouraged to help their students form student unions. The impact on the government of 9/11 and the domestic bombings in Saudi Arabia cannot be overestimated. Islamic dissent of the 1990s type is not allowed; politics are no longer broadcast from the pulpit, and "deviant" preachers are recanting.

Despite the absence of formal arenas, civil society has not stopped its engagement; it has adopted different models through the voluntary sector. Minorities of all sorts — Shi'a, liberals, general and specialized charities, women's groups, and associations with political, professional, vocational, or social objectives — meet but without an overt political agenda. Over 12 years ago, a number of Riyadh women, spearheaded by an academic, Hatun al-Fassi, created an informal discussion group known as Al-Multaqa al-Ahadi (The Sunday Group), with annual programs which have included as topics women in society, family violence, the municipal elections, and, in 2006, Saudi literature. This group formed a lobby encouraging women to stand in the 2005 municipal elections, using media, TV, and government officials to promote the cause. Another notable group is Towards Responsible Work (NAAM), an informal gathering in Jeddah mainly of people in the media and Al Sa'uds, charged with the aim of "creating a healthier social environment," combating "negative aspects of Saudi society," and after 9/11, of "countering extremism and protecting human rights and civil liberties."<sup>21</sup>

20. Interview by author with campaigner, Riyadh, May 2005.

21. The *Nahnu 'Amalin Mas'ulin* (Towards Responsible Work) booklet (Jeddah, 2005?). According to Khalid Almayeena, Managing Editor of *Arab News* and one of NAAM's founders, "NAAM is an NGO group formed in 1998 to create awareness in Saudi society of enhancing people's roles. It tries to fill the vacuum in the absence of a civil society. It creates awareness of rights, promotes the role of women, and supports their integration in the workforce and the enhancement of their role in the decision-making process. It has taken up the role of neglected young people, addresses their needs, and voices their concerns. It supports the reform movement and highlights the challenges that the movement faces. It assists social research and public attitudes. On the international front, NAAM focuses on dialogue and cultural and interfaith initiatives. It brings cultures together to create better understanding and to address misconceptions."



## THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR'S ACTIVITIES

Reference has been made to the voluntary sector providing cross-cutting bonds among regions with different tribal, ethnic, and cultural origins and in many cases little, if any, historical knowledge of each other, despite government policies that might facilitate such linkages, such as subsidized domestic airfares. However, the shared issues of civil society and traditional problems allow people to override their differences in favor of common solutions or mitigations. For instance, among serious countrywide issues is that of endogamy (marriage within a specific tribe or similar social unit), which leads to a tragic range of hereditary diseases and conditions. Cancer, naturally, is another issue which affects Saudis from all regions and walks of life. In a cancer hostel in Riyadh run by the women's charity al-Wafa, families and patients from very different parts of Saudi Arabia have come together: men and women from Riyadh, where veiling is *de rigueur*, were alongside unveiled tribal families from the Rubh al-Khali. Thus, the shared problem of cancer leads dissimilar groups to seek communal solutions in which their cultural differences are — at least temporarily — buried.

Women's empowerment also creates bonds between different areas. The heavy restraints on women travelling without a guardian — or at all — have made women's issues develop in a fragmented and isolated way. The relaxation of the rules on women's travel, combined with the Internet and email, have brought women together. Women in the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry keenly watched the progress of the elections for women to the Jeddah Chamber. Even Nejd, always more rigid and socially conservative than the Hijaz, has developed a women's section in the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry and watches the others. A 2007 women's conference in Jeddah under the patronage of Adilah bint 'Abdullah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz had the nationwide title of the "Saudi Women's Forum."<sup>22</sup>

It would be interesting to analyze the relative strengths of the Al Sa'ud patrons, on the one hand, and the voluntary sector activists and reformers and charity directors on the other, but it is beyond the scope of this article. What appears to be the case is that, as with Fandy's "liminal" description, the boundaries between patron and client within the voluntary sector, and particularly within the charities, are blurred. These boundaries depend on the type of organization and its objectives. For instance, Al-Birr is almost a part of the government.<sup>23</sup> It and others are used from time to time to imple-

22. The Council of the Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the central Riyadh association of all the chambers, and the provincial chambers themselves are probably the most powerful non-governmental organizations in the country. They have active contested elections for their committees and are an example of a nationwide NGO (in reality "corporatist" entities, private sector not-for-profit organizations with government appointees) which both provides information to the government and lobbies it effectively. All ministries and the Majlis al-Shura consult the Council on any proposed business legislation. Through an order from King 'Abdullah, then Crown Prince, every ministry has to involve the private sector and therefore consult the Council, including on all government tenders. It acts as a pressure group, appealing finally to the King as a last resort for resolving disputes.

23. Al-Birr receives *zakat* from the Department of Zakat and Income Tax, a government department. The *zakat* funds it receives are monitored by the government and only can be used for *zakat* purposes. Al-Birr is used by the government as a funding agency for purposes that fall within the *zakat* criteria. In the Western Region, if it is asking for funding for, say, a kidney dialysis machine, it would be following a prince's initiative to put dialysis machines across the Kingdom but presumably would

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ment government policy, like the establishment of women's shelters, a key 2005 policy. Power is divided between activists and political patrons; activists and professionals have the hands-on expertise without which the political patrons would be powerless. But it is important to note that without the support of an Al Sa'ud patron — except in the case of business families' enterprises — the activists and professionals would be active but ineffective.

For example, Sara bint Talal bin 'Abd al-'Aziz is a very active patron of the Down's Syndrome Riyadh charity DSCA, but needs the expertise of a professional director and of a non-Al Sa'ud academic as her mentor and adviser.<sup>24</sup> A director of the Saudi Management Association, Women's Section, commented, "The involvement of a prince or princess in an NGO helps enormously to get things happening. It is another route to change,"<sup>25</sup> contrary to accepted views on government intervention in authoritarian states. The women's issue of driving cars in Riyadh in 1990<sup>26</sup> is probably the only major example of activists hijacking their patrons, though it is said to have been encouraged by a prince. Using members of the Al Sa'ud to "get things happening" in an NGO and "as a route to change" is politically interesting and might be a contrary move in another monarchy. But in Saudi Arabia the enmeshing of voluntary sector activists and Al Sa'ud (such as the use of the National Guard Hospital) is tight; many Al Sa'ud wish to see change and can attempt it only through the voluntary sector. Thus, they create a reverse patrimonialism by acting as "clients" of the voluntary sector in order to achieve reform.

Patrons can be effective in bypassing bureaucracy. For instance, through the patronage of Nura bint Muhammad bin Sa'ud, wife of the governor of al-Qassim, the Burayda women's charity brought in foreign trainers despite the government's general reluctance to allow in foreign trainers and an often impenetrable Saudi bureaucracy. Privilege does not always work. The family cancer charity Sanad apparently waited five years for registration with the Ministry of Social Affairs,<sup>27</sup> in spite of its patron being Adilah bint 'Abdullah bin 'Abd al-'Aziz. The Mothers of Riyadh (a family violence organization) had to go under the umbrella of the Handicapped Children's Association to become legitimate, while the woman's branch of al-Eman (a cancer charity), according

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procure the funds from *sadaqa*. When Al-Birr funds affordable housing in the Eastern Province, it would not be receiving *zakat*, but rather government funds, perhaps through the governorate or, possibly, directly from government housing funds. Also, Al-Birr in the Eastern Province can only work there because it is licensed through the Ministry of Social Affairs, not by royal decree — which would give it a countrywide mandate. In terms of patronage, it is worth noting that the ultra-modern, specialized charities, often set up by merchant families to deal with a disability common to their family or common in the community, have as patrons that family, such as the Ali Reza's Jish. The Shi'a charity in Sayhat naturally does not have a member of the Al Sa'ud as a patron, but rather a senior member of the community.

24. Interview by author, Riyadh, May 2005.

25. Interview by author with director of the Saudi Management Association, Riyadh, May 2005.

26. In 1990, some 47 women decided to challenge the ban on women driving and drove around Riyadh's most populous streets for several hours. This demonstration was partly in response to the ability of refugee Kuwaiti women's ability to drive in the Eastern Province. See Robert Lacey, *Inside the Kingdom* (London: Hutchinson, 2009), pp. 136-40.

27. Interview by author, Riyadh, January 2003 and May 2005.

to a director in 2005, had no long-term plans as it still had no legitimate foundation.<sup>28</sup> Yet this charity was started by a senior doyenne of Saudi NGOs, a member of a family close to, and married into, the Al Sa'ud.

An interesting variation on patronage is the family therapy charity in Riyadh, where professionalism and the Al Sa'ud come together. A princess from the 'Abd al-Rahman branch of the Al Sa'ud is also a professional family therapist. Her board members are her family, both males and females. She started this charity, the first family therapy unit in Saudi Arabia, and could not have founded it without such strong family support.<sup>29</sup>

Other Al Sa'ud patronage is given to non-profit organizations (NPOs); Lulua bint Faysal has set up Iffet College, a private girls' university in Jeddah, as an NPO. The foundations fall into this category of Al Sa'ud-sponsored NPOs, such as the King Faisal Foundation (culture) or the King Khalid Foundation (social affairs) or Prince Sultan City (disability). These organizations have such a high degree of Al Sa'ud patronage that they can pull in the professionals instead of requiring validation from them.

In the process of changing from traditional charities, i.e., benevolent societies, to modern charities the sector has been increasingly strictly regulated, reflecting Al Sa'ud fear that the sector might slip from their control. Many NGOs started as local benevolent societies; in the 1960s the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (changed in April 2004 to the Ministry of Social Affairs, MSA) enacted heavy-handed regulations, limiting their activities and ensuring that the government could monitor their funding (though clearly this was not occurring effectively by 9/11). By the end of the 1980s, due to its own financial constraints, the government loosened its hold, unable to cope with the country's social problems.

Though in the 1990s the voluntary sector gained more freedom, the state continued to control the NGOs by allowing them little contact with the outside world or with international charities except through the government.<sup>30</sup> Up to 2000, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) only could approach a Saudi NGO through the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Saudi Arabia still lags behind other countries in the number of charities *per capita* and in the breadth of their activities, according to the Minister of Social Affairs.<sup>31</sup>

The Al Sa'ud's attempts to control the voluntary sector reflect its concern to control what could be a parallel power structure and threat. A Riyadh lawyer commented, "The government wants NGOs but it wants to control them."<sup>32</sup> For instance, in late 2004 or early 2005, the MSA sent the Majlis al-Shura the draft of a charter that would bring the new professional associations under ministry regulation and give them independence, as they hitherto had to exist under the "umbrella" of a university, hospital, or similar organization. However, the Majlis al-Shura's acceptance of this charter has

28. Interview by author with a director of al-Eman, Jeddah, May 2005.

29. Interview by author, Riyadh, January 2003.

30. The author is indebted for this paragraph to an interview with a former Ministry of Labour and Foreign Affairs official, Riyadh, May 2005.

31. Interview by author with a former Ministry of Labour and Foreign Affairs official, Riyadh, May 2005.

32. Interview by author with a former Ministry of Labour and Foreign Affairs official, Riyadh, May 2005.

been delayed by difficulties in determining the composition of the board that would oversee the implementation of the charter. As of this article's publication, the charter still has not become law and is currently with the Consultative Committee for Administrative Reform, after already having been to the Shura and the Council of Ministers.

The Ministry accepts that the Saudi environment has not been receptive to the modern international NGO movement but suggests that, before becoming part of an international voluntary sector, the Saudi NGO sector must be seen as credible in its own right, without external assistance.<sup>33</sup> The government also controls the sector by perpetuating its fragmentation and by not encouraging countrywide integration. Charities are either licensed through the MSA or set up by royal decree. If the former, they only can operate regionally; if the latter, then they can operate cross-Kingdom. As there are some 320 charities licensed with the MSA and only some six by royal decree, most charities have a limited remit.

In contrast, the National Dialogue has drawn on a wide cross-section of men and women from all over the country and from different ethnic, cultural, and religious groups. If the Al Sa'ud thought it would serve their political and social interests, they would take over the voluntary sector. As it stands, a strictly controlled and fragmented voluntary sector is useful; indeed, it could be argued that this deliberate fragmentation is an aspect of the Al Sa'ud's policy of divide and rule.

Allowing discussion on social issues also diverts attention from political *dirigisme* or stagnation. On social issues and reform people divide more fundamentally into liberals and conservatives, thus allowing the Al Sa'ud to be seen as mediators. Political issues create greater cohesion than social issues among different groups, whatever their social or religious complexion. Organizations like the National Dialogue are the new tools to meet this explosion in political discussion and civil society engagement, but social discussion may be seen by the Al Sa'ud as a deliberate means of deflecting the political debate.

The contemporary voluntary sector has spread out in four main ways. The first is the development of associational life. This associational life is either instigated by the government, like the National Dialogue, Saudi Arabia's National Association of Human Rights,<sup>34</sup> or the Saudi Journalists Association set up under the universities — which makes them quasi-state professional associations, such as those for management, engineering, economics, and literature. Only recently have women set up their branches of these professional associations (or of the traditional charities). Other associations are set up independently, which, provided they do not have an overtly political agenda, meet regularly, like NAAM; others with an agenda unsympathetic to the government, like the 2000 independent human rights organization, are shut down.

The National Dialogue has held meetings across the country with a good cross-section of people and topics: social issues (Riyadh), women (Mecca), youth (Medina), human rights (Eastern Province), and dialogue with the West: "Us and the Other" (Abha). Members are pleased with its progress in discussing issues but disappointed in

33. Interview by author with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Riyadh, May 2005.

34. The National Association of Human Rights was established by royal decree on March 9, 2004. Its head office is in Riyadh, and there are two offices in Jeddah and Jizan, with a third office expected to be built in the Eastern Province.

the poor follow-up.<sup>35</sup> Another is the National Association for Human Rights, set up by royal decree in 2004 as a national, non-governmental organization; however, although senior princes emphasize its independence from the government, concern is expressed about its close links. Its head office is located in Riyadh and its branches are in Jeddah and Dammam. One thousand two hundred complaints were received in Riyadh in the first year and 700 in the first six months in Jeddah; many relating to labor problems (non-payment of foreign workers), and to domestic and family violence.<sup>36</sup>

The second strand is the development of new specialized service-providing charities, mainly concerned with mental and physical disabilities. These break down into the huge state of the art medical institutes, set up by merchant families in Jeddah, for physical and mental disabilities, deafness, autism, and pre-school learning difficulties, which occasionally receive government funding, or foundations like the Abdullatif Jameel Foundation, which provide training and other services throughout the country. These institutes often reflect the inherited disabilities of their founders' families. The second type of specialist charities are those providing specialist services, like Sanad, DSCA, the Riyadh family therapy institute (called The Charity Center for Social Guidance and Family Consultation), or the new Abdullatif Jameel charity in a Jeddah suburb (which provides training, education, and primary healthcare in a poor urban area). Some of the new specialized charities are run by women for women, others by women for both sexes, and others by both for both.

The third strand is the development of the traditional charities into a wider range of activities, sometimes funded by the voluntary sector and at other times through government agencies, such as the Department of Zakat and Income Tax or the regional governorates. As a result, some charities, such as Al-Birr, that started out as traditional charities have broadened their scope. Al-Birr has become an occasional instrument of government policy; for example, until the program was taken over by the government, it ran the state program against child trafficking; it also receives *zakat* for its major orphanage and childcare programs in the Hijaz, where state funding is under strict government supervision. In the Eastern Province, where it is building thousands of units of affordable housing, it is under the umbrella of the governorate. Housing does not qualify for *zakat* funds, so the government funding for housing projects would come from Riyadh or from the governorate, which is, after all, an arm of the government. Other charities have moved from the traditional reactive charity model to being proactive, such as Al-Nahda, with women's factories in south Riyadh, Al-Wafa, and Al-Khairiyya, or the Burayda-based King 'Abd al-'Aziz Women's Charity, which has helped set up small *artisanat* industries for women in Qassim. Some in the Eastern Province provide services primarily for Shi'ites, like the Sayhat Charity and the Qatif Charity, and are privately funded except in their monthly provision for orphans.<sup>37</sup> The expansion of the traditional charities' activities is a mark of their power; the growth of the women's sections of the provincial charities that began in late 2002 will expand the types of services in the state's regions.

The fourth strand is the activism and calls for reform that spring from Saudi men

35. Interviews by author with members of the National Dialogue, Riyadh, Eastern Province, and Jeddah, May 2005.

36. Interviews by author with female members of the NAHR, Jeddah and Riyadh, May 2005.

37. In Saudi Arabia, the definition of an orphan is a child with no father.

and women.<sup>38</sup> The issues and campaigns arise from the three strands above. The most important (in no particular order) are women's empowerment, women's representation in the courts, family law change, political and human rights, unemployment, the medical impact of endogamy, disabilities of all sorts, thalassaemia (a kind of congenital anaemia), family violence, sexual abuse, poverty, and environmental issues. Political and human rights reform come from the activists and the associations; social reform from the activists and the specialized charities.

Western media highlight the calls from women for empowerment, the righting of social grievances, changes in family law, and women's visibility. Less vocal but just as important are the many professional men underpinning the reform movements: judges, lawyers, businessmen, civil servants, princes, and doctors. I was told that women could not have gotten so far in the municipal elections campaign without the support of *Shari'a* judges, some of whom were disaffected with the regime; that calls for reducing Al Sa'ud power have come as much from men as women; and that male lawyers are calling for changes in family law to make it more equitable.

In developing societies it is normally educated elites, rather than grassroots organizations, who spearhead social reform, even when the issues affect primarily ordinary people. The issue of hereditary diseases is one such cross-cutting concern in Saudi Arabia and is worth a short case study. Until the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the topic of hereditary diseases was culturally taboo, mentioned in a newspaper once every six months and kept behind closed doors as a family and private matter. Since then the voluntary sector has taken the lead in bringing the issue of hereditary diseases into the open. The NGOs have long been addressing the results of this problem as they look after the medical and social effects of endogamy: physically and mentally ill children; family abuse that goes with disabled children in the house; poor parenting; the embedded cultural tradition of marrying first cousins; the calling for shelters for the victims of family violence; and setting up a public campaign to teach people about hereditary factors.

In the past 30 years the effects of endogamy, along with a high population growth rate (over 3.5% in the 1980s; now down to 2.5% according to the 2003 census) and low infant mortality, have led to major increases in disability. No countrywide statistics exist, just as no baseline poverty data exists. While some statistics on physical disability exist, there are none on mental disability; society still tends to call mentally disabled people "*majnun*" (mad) and hide them. In the conservative provinces, cultural change or medical understanding naturally has not kept up with improvements in primary healthcare, so a woman who produces one disabled child will produce more and more in the hope of producing a healthy child. In the tribal region of Ha'il nearly half the population are disabled, according to UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA).<sup>39</sup>

This problem cuts across all cultural, social, and political situations and boundaries, and demonstrates the interdependence of the voluntary sector and shows how the

38. Calls for "liberal" reform are expressed in many ways — through associations licensed by the government; through groups, like Hatun al-Fassi's The Sunday Group; or through charities and individuals, either professionals and/or Al Sa'ud. Calls for more Islamic reform come from mosques, *fatwas*, and '*ulama*', and other groups.

39. Interview by author, Jeddah, May 2005.

Al Sa'ud ushered in reform by the back door. The trail has a Saudi "through the looking glass" quality. The voluntary sector starts campaigning on issues; the government takes them up, be they endogamy or thalassaemia. Quietly the private sector takes it up; some time later a major business family will be featured in the papers handing a senior prince a check for an institute to promote "research" into what actually turns out later to be directly related to the problem originally identified by the voluntary sector. Then the paper will start a publicity campaign and the Al Sa'ud will come out in favor of this "back door" reform.

After the campaign for greater awareness of family violence, the MSA requested that all charities set up women's shelters. The campaign to demand blood tests for all young couples before marriage to prevent disabled offspring came from individuals and charities working on hereditary disability, but the blood tests only have limited application. Women's employment in socially unusual occupations, like the women's factories in downtown Riyadh, has come from old established charities, like Al-Nahda, that have moved from traditional handouts to sustainability and self-reliance.

The Al Sa'ud would find it hard to lead the campaign to erode such a strongly based and pervasive cultural tradition as cousin marriage. On the other hand, the voluntary sector, and especially women, has no problem. An activist said, "The Ministry of Social Affairs is concerned about housing and sheltering battered women. We have offered to help because the ministry is bogged down by *haram* [forbidden] spaces and social restrictions, while we don't mind going all the way."<sup>40</sup> It will lead with conferences on family therapy, incest, disability, parenting, marriage, and cousin marriage, but behind it are its facilitators, the Al Sa'ud patrons who quietly encourage the initiatives, often without putting their heads above the parapet by instead reducing red tape, providing funding or seed money when necessary, lobbying ministers and family members, and providing the "space" in which reformers can operate.

The voluntary sector has been a key arena for women's empowerment and helped women become more visible. Examples of this are the municipal elections, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry elections in Jeddah and the Eastern Province, women advisers' inclusion in the *Shura*, and the rise of the women's NGO movement and their advocacy for social change. Women's NGOs are on the whole sophisticated and well managed. An academic commented that men's NGOs have not yet grasped that NGOs should act like the private sector; but women's NGOs are "scientific, understand sustainable development, and are systematic."<sup>41</sup> Family law is an area women are trying to change. According to a female media expert, women are taking more control over the issue of divorce, which apparently ends 50-75% of marriages in the Kingdom.<sup>42</sup> An academic said that the content and implementation of the legal framework and family law are under review, but a great disparity exists between any international model and the local need to create a new legal framework; rewriting is needed to guarantee basic human rights and account for women's and family rights under Islam. She added, "The legal framework is so weak that women do not get into the courts and get treated equally."<sup>43</sup> A group of men and women, including *Shari'a* judges, are working to reform

40. Interview by author with activist, Riyadh, May 2005.

41. Interview by author with academic, Riyadh, May 2005.

42. Interview by author with female media expert, Eastern Province, May 2005.

43. Interview by author with academic, Riyadh, May 2005.

mulate family law.

However, many educated women do not want any change. A member of the Saudi Management Association, Women's Branch, commented that a large section of women are not concerned, and some think the changes are wrong; others do not want women to change or be visible.<sup>44</sup> According to one lawyer, there are far more educated women who do not want change than those who do.<sup>45</sup> Within both groups, however, women are calling for a re-examination of the Qu'ran, the *hadith*, and early texts to highlight essentialist Islam in contrast to "custom." Earlier interpretations of the texts and the Qu'ran show a more equitable society for women. This articulate, educated, conservative majority see Islamic society, as it is in Saudi Arabia, as a better place for them than a more secular and liberal environment. The state has to deal with this dilemma: how to modernize without losing its Islamic identity.

The traditional power base of the voluntary sector has been the local benevolent societies of the towns and villages and the obligatory donation of *zakat* (generally 2.5% of liquid assets annually) and *sadaqa* (alms). An executive of the umbrella charity Al-Birr commented, "The Al-Birr philosophy is that we in Saudi Arabia believe charity is part of our religion."<sup>46</sup> One of the most progressive "traditional" charities is in the heart of Nejd, the King 'Abd al-'Aziz Women's Charity Society, Burayda,<sup>47</sup> run by local women and backed by Nura bint Muhammad bin Sa'ud. This charity is an outstanding example of a regional charity taking on a wider role: 25 years old, it performs all the traditional services, plus micro-credit schemes, parenting training to prevent child abuse, family counselling for men by men, conflict resolution with *qadis* (judges), lectures on endogamy, drugs, hereditary diseases, pre-marriage blood tests, mental health, training the parents of handicapped children, family therapy, environmental and water issues, shelters and the legal position on family violence, and finally outreach in the villages around Burayda. There are many distinguished traditional charities, but two Shi'a charities also deserve mention: the Sayhat Society for Social Affairs, the first charity started by 'Abdullah Matrud to look after his community, and the Qatif Charitable Society for Social Service. Both provide a range of traditional and modern services. Traditional charities are the backbone of the movement and it is within their capacity to take on new activities and help the provinces develop, a process that will encourage greater coordination between culture and conservative traditions and a transitional economy and modernizing.

Civil society in Saudi Arabia is a topic worthy of considerable research and respect, particularly if perceived, as Sheila Carapico does, as "a variable that assumes different forms under different circumstances." The arenas of civil society in Saudi Arabia are limited but within those that exist discussion, activism, and civil and societal energy are apparent. Associational life in Saudi Arabia is developing, though it is still in need of a massive push to fully join the mainstream.

The domestic voluntary sector in its many guises is the most powerful actor in Saudi civil society. Its relations with the Al Sa'ud give it *gravitas* and informal power. The Al Sa'ud, ever keen to maintain their formal power, respect the voluntary sector's

44. Interview by author with member of Saudi Management Association, Riyadh, May 2005.

45. Interview by author with lawyer, Riyadh, May 2005.

46. Interview by author with Al-Birr executive, Jeddah, May 2005.

47. Interview by author, Riyadh, May 2005.



authority in socio-political issues, using it and being used by it. In any Muslim country the voluntary sector is fundamental to its society, as the channel for the dispensation of, and the visible sign of adherence to, *zakat*, the third of the five pillars of Islam. In a pious and conservative country such as Saudi Arabia, the voluntary sector assumes major importance, despite any restraints imposed on it by the government.

This article has argued that the Al Sa'ud themselves are not homogeneous and thus represent different aspects of Saudi Arabian society, which is equally heterogeneous. The Al Sa'ud demonstrate this polymorphic quality in their relations with civil society and they show their strengths and their weaknesses in their interdependence with the voluntary sector. This leads to the point that Saudi Arabia is a complex and deep society, not a superficial rentier economy nor a hegemonic primordial monarchy. It is rather a fragmented society reflecting its background of different cultural traditions and history of a single group, the Al Sa'ud, who have tried to weld a diverse region into a nation-state. By conquering most of the country through force, the government has little natural mandate in many areas, such as Qatif, Hijaz, or the 'Asir.

The domestic voluntary sector, however, has direct lines into all areas of Saudi Arabia and a network of contacts. Its informal structure, parallel to the Al Sa'ud's formal structure, provides an alternative channel of communication and influence. By meshing the Al Sa'ud and the voluntary sector, the two can achieve a degree of cohesion and social reform; but, massive efforts are still needed to bring further substantive reform in both political and social arenas.

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