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## Saudi Shura Council is not the Parliament

Of course Saudi Arabia's Shura Council was elected; I remain by my conviction that elected members will not be more competent than those who were appointed. As we know, in the arena of politics it is not necessary that the most competent will be the most likely to win in a vote.

At this point it is prudent that we differentiate between the Shura and the parliament. The Shura Council is consultative, advisory and complementary while the parliament represents the people and makes essential decisions.

Democracy in the Middle East We all saw the problems that political transition has bought about in the last two years. Of course it is still too early to judge the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan experiences Abdulrahman al-Rashed When talking about democratic practices in societies the world over, we have to admit the presence of structural problems in the developing world, particularly the Arab world. These structural problems are related to the political and community systems in place, as well as the local culture.

Whether you believe it or not, on a wall in London you will find a hanged photograph of an elected Iraqi parliament that visited Westminster in the 1950's. This Iraqi parliament was established before many countries in modern history established their own, it was founded ninety years ago. The mess Iraq is currently in proves that the original parliament was more effective than the one created by the Americans after their invasion.

Sudan, Egypt and Syria's history is similar to Iraq's. During colonization, the European powers in charge of these countries established parliamentary institutions. These institutions, however, collapsed soon after the colonization period ended. These countries went on to be ruled by suppressive regimes which did away with monarchies that were characterized by a comprehensive political system and a modern administration.

We all saw the problems that political transition has bought about in the last two years. Of course it is still too early to judge the Egyptian, Tunisian and Libyan experiences. We are still in the first quarter of a long match, the outcome of which we cannot speculate.

For countries like Saudi Arabia, its experience in Shura and syndicates is limited, although there were attempts around 80 years ago. This year, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz took a difficult step when he involved women in the Shura Council for the first time. The percentage of women in the council is 20%, this is higher than the percentage of women in the American Congress (18%.) If there had been public elections, perhaps not a single Saudi woman would have won. Keep in mind that we are talking about one of the most conservative countries in the world. Some strongly oppose the king's recent move, they wrote a petition of nine points protesting his decisions to involve women in the council. This is a

However, the kingdom has, across history and ever since its establishment, tried to instill changes in society, albeit with extreme caution. Leaders make use of the fact that it is a pastoral state where most of the citizens depend on the government.

Opposition to the king's move in Saudi Arabia I think that a Shura Council that includes assigned, competent members and elected representatives will ease the pressure on the state. The government has increased its responsibility in the country, it is heavily involved in all aspects of the kingdom's day to day life. By taking on more responsibility it has increased citizens' expectations thus increasing accountability.

We have to note that the biggest obstacle to the progress of Arab societies is the inherent weakness of political culture. The kind of candidates, the percentage of voters, the nature of discussions and the act of holding parliamentarians accountable are weak to the extent of frustration. For example, in the last municipal elections in Riyadh, only 100,000 people voted out of half a million eligible citizens!

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