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Article

Narratives of the Quiet Political Founding Phase: A Geopolitical Reading of the First Seventeen Years of Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud's Rule (1727–1744 CE)

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Abstract

This study provides a rigorous examination of the early period of Diriyah's political history, spanning from Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's assumption of power in 1727 CE through 1744 CE. The investigation proceeds from a central problem: despite the limited territorial expansion during this interval, a cohesive political and social structure was nonetheless established that enabled Diriyah to consolidate its standing as a center of stability within the turbulent environment of eighteenth-century Najd. Employing the analytical-historical method within a structuralist framework, the study explores the dialectical relationships among the regional political context, prevailing economic conditions, dominant patterns of political behavior, and the nature of political discourse during the period under examination. The analysis concludes that the years between 1727 and 1744 CE constituted a quiet yet rational founding phase for the emirate, characterized by deliberate strategic caution and a sustained focus on consolidating internal stability rather than pursuing premature expansionist ambitions or narratives of exceptionalism. The findings affirm that the initial years under Imam Mohammad ibn Saud witnessed gradual institutional development and the progressive refinement of governance mechanisms, with emphasis placed on leveraging local resources and strengthening internal alliances while maintaining the tribal and social equilibria that prevailed across the Najd region. These policies contributed to achieving relative stability and laid the groundwork for the transformative developments that Diriyah would subsequently undergo. The significance of this phase resides in its establishment of a distinct political and administrative frame of reference for Diriyah, which shaped the administration of governance affairs and the formation of the emirate's identity. During this period, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud demonstrated an acute awareness of the necessity of avoiding internecine conflicts and steering clear of reckless expansionist ventures. Consequently, a thorough examination of this period enables a re-reading of the origins of the First Saudi State from a more comprehensive and analytically rigorous perspective, restoring due recognition to the role of prudent leadership in preparing the political and social conditions for the crystallization of the nascent political entity. In summation, the analysis of the first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule constitutes an essential entry point for understanding the trajectory of political transformation in Najd. It illuminates the dynamics of power-building and the development of the emirate's institutional structure and affirms that stability and gradualism were deliberate strategic choices that ensured Diriyah's capacity to confront challenges and sustain its historical course.

Keywords: First Saudi State; Mohammad ibn Saud; Diriyah; historical method; Najd; political founding; geopolitics

Introduction: The Problematic of Studying the Founding Phase

The preponderance of historical literature addressing the emergence of the First Saudi State has concentrated on the period following 1744 CE, treating that date as the decisive turning point at

which the expansionist political project was launched (Commins, 2006; Crawford, 2014). This scholarly orientation has resulted in a relative neglect of the seventeen years preceding this transformation, with numerous scholars treating them as a preparatory interlude devoid of the constituents for independent analysis and underserving of sustained inquiry (Al-Salih, 2010). Such a proposition, however, overlooks a fundamental truth well established in the study of state formation: political history demonstrates that the emergence of entities and states is invariably the product of temporal accumulations through which patterns of governance, mechanisms of power management, the boundaries of the politically possible, and the nature of the relationship between ruler and society gradually crystallize (Tilly, 1992). Confining analysis to the moment of 1744 CE without investigating the preceding period generates an incomplete understanding of the nature of the First Saudi State and the trajectories of its formation.

Major historical transformations do not materialize suddenly; they emerge as the result of objective and subjective accumulations that prepared the conditions for their realization. During the first seventeen years of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's rule, Diriyah experienced processes of institutional construction and political founding marked by wisdom and sobriety, processes that reinforced internal stability and strengthened Diriyah's position within its regional environment despite limited geographic expansion (Steinberg, 2005).

The early phase of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule represents the cornerstone for understanding subsequent transformations. It was during this interval that the foundations of governance were established and the contours of the relationship between authority and society were delineated within the constraints of delicate local equilibria. By transcending the reductive perspective and subjecting the Imam's political choices to sustained analytical scrutiny, it becomes apparent that gradual changes were foundational to the construction of a cohesive political entity capable of confronting formidable challenges. This study accordingly seeks to complete the historical picture by tracing the roots of transformation and exploring the local and regional contexts, as well as the economic and social conditions that surrounded political decision-making in Diriyah, while affirming the necessity of viewing this phase as a self-contained founding stage rather than a mere passing prologue. Such an approach enables a reassessment of the role of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud and his strategic decisions in shaping the emirate's identity and historical trajectory (Braudel, 1958).

Restoring due consideration to this phase does not merely represent a methodological desideratum; it constitutes a scholarly necessity for understanding the complexities of the political entity's genesis in Diriyah, analyzing the mechanisms by which its political and social structure took shape, and identifying the factors that enabled it to surmount internal and external challenges. During the first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule, the highest forms of judicious leadership, management of local equilibria, and exploitation of available capabilities were manifest, and the Imam's studied avoidance of reckless expansionist ventures enabled Diriyah to emerge as a center of political and social steadfastness in Wadi Hanifa and its environs.

This analysis reveals that a thorough study of the local environment in Najd during this period—encompassing its balance of forces, its economic and social patterns, and its formidable challenges—exposes Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's adeptness in navigating a shifting political reality, his commitment to building enduring internal alliances, safeguarding stability, and avoiding open conflicts. Furthermore, examining his political choices illuminates a rationalist methodology in the administration of governance and a deliberate pursuit of consolidating the emirate's authority and developing its administrative instruments, far removed from military adventurism or ill-considered expansion. The early years of his rule constituted a decisive test of the political experiment's viability and the construction of an emirate model capable of growth and continuity. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze that period as a self-standing founding phase and affirms that understanding the emergence of Diriyah as a political center requires meticulous research into the Imam's choices and the contexts of his actions (Al al-Sheikh, 2003).

From this vantage point, the problematic of studying the founding phase becomes evident not only in the scarcity of contemporary sources but also in the nature of historical narratives that

reduced that era to a preparatory context, disregarding its structural, political, and social dimensions. Overcoming this reductionism requires a multidimensional approach that integrates critical analysis of sources with contextual analysis of events and demands the interrogation of established accounts and the comparison of different testimonies in search of marginalized voices and obscured details that may contribute to a more accurate and profound portrait of the political transformations in Diriyah.

Moreover, studying this phase compels researchers to contend with methodological challenges related to the intertwining of tribal, economic, and social dimensions and the necessity of understanding the dialectical relationships between ruler and society, and between local authority and the regional environment. The political structure established during this period was not merely the product of an individual decision; it resulted from delicate equilibria among local forces and continuous interactions with the economic conditions and social transformations that characterized the Najd region.

In view of the foregoing considerations, the present study aims to re-read the first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule as a founding phase possessing distinctive political and social characteristics, deserving of independent analysis and deep methodological reflection. It affirms that understanding the emergence of the First Saudi State cannot be complete without exploring the roots of transformation and analyzing leadership choices within a turbulent local environment, while accounting for the interplay of regional forces and external influences that contributed to shaping the emirate's features and historical trajectory. Accordingly, this study seeks to transcend traditional narrative through the employment of the analytical-historical method and the structuralist approach, presenting an integrated vision of the dynamics of power-building and the development of the emirate's structure in Diriyah during the founding era, and providing a scholarly explanation for the role of prudent leadership in consolidating internal stability and shaping the identity of the nascent political entity.

Methodological Framework: The Historical Method and the Problematic of Sources

This study relies on the analytical-historical method in its treatment of the founding era of Diriyah's history, proceeding from the necessity of critical source collection and the deconstruction of their significations within their overlapping temporal, political, and social frameworks. This method is optimally suited for analyzing early periods in which direct testimonies are scarce, as it permits transcending traditional narrative toward interrogating the mental structures and the cultural and relational contexts that produced historical events (Howell & Prevenier, 2001). The approach is built upon integrated levels of analysis, drawing on the principles of historical criticism whose foundations were laid by nineteenth-century historiographers, which demand that historical sources be treated not as definitive data but as relative texts requiring comparative analysis and rigorous scrutiny (Langlois & Seignobos, 1898). This methodology encompasses an in-depth review of contexts and events, the deconstruction of narrative architecture, the exploration of implicit connections and underlying motivations, and sustained attention to the objective circumstances surrounding the process of documentation.

The first level consists of external criticism of sources. This level is concerned with evaluating the authenticity and credibility of sources by verifying the temporal proximity of documentation to the narrated events, analyzing the intellectual and political affiliations of the authors, and assessing the extent of their connection to the First Saudi State, whether as sympathizers or adversaries (Ibn Ghannam, 1994; Ibn Bishr, 1983). The importance of this dimension is particularly pronounced in studying the founding period, given that many Najdi historians composed their works during phases after the state's emergence and expansion, which necessitates reading their accounts of the early years with a deliberate and carefully calibrated critical methodology (Al-Fahd, 2018). External criticism further requires verifying that texts are free from distortion or retroactive projection, while tracing the oral and written sources upon which historians relied and assessing the degree to which they

were influenced by the political and social transformations that followed the events under consideration.

Within this methodological framework, profound questions arise regarding the extent of historians' independence from authority, the degree to which they were influenced by their political and epistemic context, and the importance of analyzing the social and cultural backgrounds of the authors, which may be reflected in the content and orientation of their accounts. This approach enables the construction of a more consistent and objective understanding of events by identifying and accounting for potential biases and by attending to marginalized voices that did not receive adequate documentation. Through this method, the study's capacity to re-read historical transformations considering rigorous critical standards becomes evident, as does its ability to broaden the scope of inquiry to detect lacunae in official narratives and to remain open to alternative interpretations of Najdi and Diriyah sources.

The second level is embodied in internal criticism of sources, which is concerned with examining the accuracy and veracity of information through the systematic comparison of diverse accounts, the extraction of points of convergence and divergence, and the analysis of the implications of absence or historical silence—particularly with regard to economic matters and internal political arrangements that traditional historians often subordinated to military and political narrative. This level of criticism requires close attention to the details of texts and their deconstruction to reveal the degree of their consistency with their temporal reality and the extent to which they were affected by the authors' subjective circumstances or intellectual orientations. It also involves tracing the information sources upon which authors relied and examining the recurrence of events across multiple sources, which either enhances their reliability or raises suspicion regarding their provenance. Internal criticism pays particular attention to analyzing the obscuration of certain social and economic transformations in Diriyah and Najd, which are frequently elided within political narratives. It also permits an examination of the consistency of narrative with material evidence, such as architectural patterns, resource distribution, and population movements, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive reconstruction of historical reality. Through this analysis, the researcher is able to move beyond traditional narrative toward a deeper understanding of the internal structure of events and to uncover the hidden connections between political, social, and economic transformations—an endeavor that supports the reassessment of the founding phase and highlights its role in crystallizing the emirate's identity and trajectory (Burke, 1992).

The third level is manifested in contextual analysis, whereby local events are situated within their broader regional context, proceeding from the conviction that understanding the dynamics of power in Diriyah cannot be achieved in isolation from comprehending the political equilibria in the Arabian Peninsula and the patterns of alliance and competition among active forces. This analysis requires transcending the narrow geography of Diriyah to consider its interactions with the broader environment, including Najd's relations with neighboring urban centers, its exposure to prevailing intellectual currents, and the impact of regional economic conditions—including the movement of trade, agricultural productivity, and resource availability—on internal stability and political decision-making. Contextual analysis also involves studying the structure of tribal and urban relations and the effect of traditional conflicts on the shaping of rulers' choices and policies. It further requires examining major changes across the Arabian Peninsula, such as the decline or rise of traditional powers, and the role of external influences such as Ottoman intervention or commercial relations with neighboring regions in shaping the features of the founding phase.

This tripartite analytical framework contributes to highlighting the extent of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's ability to exploit available opportunities and mitigate risks through the construction of solid internal and regional alliances, the balancing of conflicting interests, and the consolidation of stability in a turbulent environment. Contextual analysis thus becomes a central instrument in re-understanding the genesis of the political entity in Diriyah and interpreting the dynamics of power and decision-making during that era, furnishing researchers with a more comprehensive and profound view of the region's political and social trajectory (Al-Juhany, 2002). The integration of

internal criticism and contextual analysis enables the construction of an integrated historical vision grounded in meticulous source examination and deep analysis of local and regional contexts, thereby transcending the reductions that characterized traditional studies. This integration grants the research a deeper capacity to interpret events and identify the operative factors that contributed to the consolidation of the emirate, underscores the importance of studying the founding era as an independent phase, and opens new horizons for re-reading the history of Najd and Diriyah within multidimensional scholarly and methodological parameters.

It must be acknowledged that studying this era faces a significant methodological challenge in the scarcity of contemporary and direct sources for the events, as most Najdi historians composed their works decades after the emergence and expansion of the First Saudi State, which lent their information about the early period a selective character, led to the condensation of details, and rendered them susceptible to retrospective readings that reinterpret the past on the basis of subsequent outcomes (Mouline, 2014). To address this challenge, the study relies on disciplined historical inference built on contextual analysis and systematic comparison, rather than limiting itself to the descriptive presentation of available accounts (Koselleck, 2004).

Table 1. Principal Historical Sources for Studying the Founding Phase.

Source	Author	Date of Composition	Relationship to the State	Type of Available Information	Degree of Reliability
<i>Rawḍat al-Afkār wa al-Afhām</i>	Husayn ibn Ghannam	Late 18th century	Supporter and contemporary of the state	Political and religious history	High, with reservations regarding ideological framing
<i>Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd</i>	Uthman ibn Bishr	Mid-19th century	Supporter and close to the ruling family	Comprehensive political and social history	High, with a generally balanced perspective
Ottoman archival records	Administrative officials	Contemporary with events	Neutral/external	Limited administrative and diplomatic information	Moderate; valuable for external verification
European travelers' accounts	Various authors	Varying periods	External observers	General impressions and geographic descriptions	Low for the early period; useful for corroboration

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Ibn Ghannam (1994), Ibn Bishr (1983), Al-Fahd (2018), and Vassiliev (2000).

Given the fragmented and sometimes conflicting nature of available sources, the researcher must approach the historical record with caution, employing a layered strategy that draws upon both direct and indirect evidence. This includes piecing together information from administrative documents, personal correspondences, oral traditions, and archaeological findings where possible, to support or challenge the prevailing narratives derived from major written accounts. By triangulating these diverse forms of evidence, the study seeks to mitigate the distortions introduced by temporal distance and authorial bias, thereby enhancing the reliability of its conclusions regarding the formative years of the First Saudi State.

In addition, the critical evaluation of these sources is not limited to questions of authenticity and accuracy; it also requires attention to the silences and absences within the historical record. For example, economic practices, daily social interactions, and the lived experiences of non-elite groups are often underrepresented or only indirectly referenced in the principal chronicles. Recognizing

these gaps, the study endeavors to read between the lines of extant texts, seeking subtextual clues and analyzing the broader material and cultural context to reconstruct a more nuanced picture of Diriyah’s early society.

This process of critical reconstruction is further strengthened by contextualizing Diriyah’s development within the shifting political, economic, and intellectual landscape of the Arabian Peninsula. By sitting local events against the backdrop of broader regional changes—such as the decline of older power centers, evolving trade routes, and the impact of external actors, the study can trace the emergence of distinctive political and social institutions in Diriyah and to better understand the strategic choices made by its leaders during the founding phase.

Ultimately, the combination of disciplined source criticism, comparative analysis, and contextual interpretation allows for a more comprehensive and balanced assessment of the era. This approach not only challenges simplistic or teleological renderings of early Saudi history but also opens the way for alternative perspectives that recognize the complexity and contingency of the emirate’s formative years. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper appreciation of how historical memory is constructed and invites further inquiry into the diverse forces that shaped the identity and trajectory of the First Saudi State.

Table 2. Levels of Critical Historical Analysis Applied in This Study.

Level of Analysis	Focus	Key Procedures	Relevance to the Founding Phase
External criticism	Source authenticity and credibility	Verification of documentation date, assessment of author affiliations, tracing of provenance	Accounts for temporal distance between events and their documentation by Najdi historians
Internal criticism	Accuracy and consistency of content	Systematic comparison of accounts, analysis of convergences and divergences, attention to historical silences	Reveals obscured economic and social dimensions overlooked by traditional political narrative
Contextual analysis	Regional and structural framing	Linking local events to broader peninsular dynamics, analyzing tribal-urban relations, examining economic and environmental conditions	Situates Diriyah’s emergence within the wider landscape of fragmentation and competition

Note. Adapted from the methodological frameworks outlined in Howell and Prevenier (2001), Langlois and Seignobos (1898), and Burke (1992).

The multiplicity of information sources and the varying degrees of their reliability impose upon the researcher the adoption of a critical analytical approach that accounts for the overlapping temporal, political, and epistemological dimensions in constructing the historical narrative of the founding phase. This problematic necessitates the adoption of precise comparative mechanisms between local and external sources and a review of the evidence found in Ottoman archival material and European travelers’ accounts—despite their limitations—to evaluate the overall picture of events and transcend the justificatory or selective tendencies that may characterize certain local historians.

Furthermore, overcoming the scarcity of direct sources requires drawing upon auxiliary disciplines such as historical sociology, the study of economic and architectural patterns, and the analysis of archaeological and linguistic evidence, thereby enhancing the interpretation of historical data and broadening the circle of inference, particularly with regard to the evolution of local power structures, patterns of alliance and conflict, and the impact of regional transformations on leadership choices in Diriyah.

From this standpoint, the study’s analysis is grounded in the integration of the analytical-historical method and the structuralist approach, with a commitment to interrogating prevailing

narratives and exploring alternative interpretations that may enrich understanding of the founding phase, free from stereotypical conceptions or preconceived judgments. The central objective of this methodological framework remains the construction of a balanced scholarly narrative that reflects the complexity of historical reality and the multiplicity of its dimensions, granting the researcher the capacity to reconstruct the image of the First Saudi State’s emergence within its local, regional, and international contexts.

Accordingly, the study employs multilevel critical analysis and the tools of comparison and contextualization to overcome the methodological challenges associated with the scarcity and biases of sources, and to re-read the political and social transformations in Diriyah during the founding era from a modern and comprehensive scholarly perspective.

Political Geography and the Limits of Power: Features of Regional Fragmentation and the Emergence of Diriyah in the Eighteenth Century

The Arabian Peninsula during the first half of the eighteenth century presented a complex political landscape characterized by fragmentation and the absence of central authority, producing a system of competing local entities embodied in emirates and sheikhdoms of varying influence and resources. This state of political fragmentation was clearly reflected in the reality of Najd, where the reins of power were distributed among small emirates of limited capability, dependent for their continuity on fragile tribal alliances that shifted constantly in accordance with changing interests and circumstances (Al-Rasheed, 2010; Al-Juhany, 2002). Despite the seemingly anarchic character of the political scene, these conditions afforded Diriyah, under the leadership of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, an exceptional opportunity to emerge and fashion a model of governance founded on internal cohesion and the judicious exploitation of tribal and regional equilibria, at a time when major powers such as the Ottoman Empire maintained only a symbolic presence and limited intervention at the peripheries without effective control over the interior of the peninsula (Kühn, 2011).

This regional context gave rise to a dynamic environment that permitted local initiatives to flourish. Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud demonstrated notable political skill and a far-sighted strategic vision that enabled him to enhance Diriyah’s standing and transform it from a local emirate of limited influence into a firmly established political entity capable of confronting the challenges of fragmentation. His policies were distinguished by their balance, combining firmness and flexibility in building alliances and neutralizing adversaries, capitalizing on the absence of a dominant hegemonic power that might impede his consolidation project (Al-Juhany, 2002; Al-Juhani, 2016). These achievements were not the product of fortuitous circumstances; they resulted from conscious planning and judicious management of Diriyah’s human and social resources, redefining the equations of power in favor of stability and gradual growth.

Table 3. Major Political Entities in the Arabian Peninsula and Their Characteristics (Early 18th Century).

Political Entity	Geographic Base	Primary Sources of Power	Relationship with Ottoman Authority	Degree of Regional Influence
Banu Khalid Emirate	Al-Ahsa and eastern Arabia	Military strength, maritime trade revenues, tribal supremacy	Intermittent and contested	High; dominant in eastern and parts of central Arabia
Sharifate of Makkah	Hijaz (western Arabia)	Religious legitimacy over the Holy Cities, Ottoman patronage, pilgrimage revenues	Formal vassal relationship	High; significant religious and political prestige
Various Najdi emirates (e.g., Al-Uyaynah, Riyadh)	Central Najd, Wadi Hanifa	Tribal alliances, oasis agriculture, limited trade	Minimal to nonexistent	Low to moderate; confined to

Diriyah under Imam Mohammad ibn Saud	Wadi Hanifa, central Najd	Strategic leadership, tribal alliances, oasis economy, social cohesion	Nonexistent	Growing; increasingly prominent within central Najd
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Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Al-Juhany (2002), Al-Rasheed (2010), Vassiliev (2000), and Kühn (2011).

Under these circumstances, Diriyah was distinguished by its unique capacity to transcend local divisions. Imam Mohammad ibn Saud succeeded in transforming the challenges of fragmentation into opportunities for strengthening communal unity and cementing loyalty, and for constructing a cohesive governance system capable of withstanding regional fluctuations. His policies contributed to preparing the appropriate groundwork for the eventual launch of the First Saudi State project, as Diriyah during the first seventeen years of his rule became synonymous with relative stability and measured political ambition within a profoundly complex regional reality (Al-Uthaymin, 1999; DeLong-Bas, 2004).

At a time when major regional powers—the Banu Khalid emirate in the east and the Sharifate of Mecca in the west—imposed structural limits on early expansionist ambitions, Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s wisdom in managing Diriyah’s relations with these powers became particularly evident. He avoided direct confrontations and devoted his efforts to strengthening internal construction and achieving the political and economic fortification of the settlement. This first phase of his rule reflected a rare ability to read the regional reality with precision and leverage existing equilibria in favor of the nascent state project, paving the way for the major transformations the region would later witness (Al al-Sheikh, 2003; Vassiliev, 2000).

The transformations Diriyah underwent under the leadership of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud were not confined to reshaping local power balances; their effects extended to the social and economic fabric of the broader region. Through his methodology of exploiting opportunities arising from regional competition and neutralizing sources of threat, he succeeded in transforming Diriyah into a point of attraction for tribes and clans seeking security and stability, thereby enhancing its standing as a haven and political reference point at the heart of Najd.

The new dynamic imposed by Diriyah also contributed to redrawing the map of traditional alliances. Relations between the settled population and the Bedouin became more open and complementary, and tribal disputes receded in favor of a system of shared interests that bolstered regional stability. This outcome is attributable to the leadership’s ability to achieve a delicate balance between tribal values and the requirements of centralized administration, lending the Diriyah political project a realistic and flexible character capable of adapting to evolving challenges. Over time, Diriyah emerged as a center for political and administrative decision-making, as active elements from various regions converged upon it, and its standing as an incubator for the intellectual and social transformations that paved the way for the emergence of the First Saudi State was progressively consolidated. This gradual accumulation of experience and legitimacy represented a decisive development, as Diriyah became capable of asserting its presence in regional equations, drawing on legitimacy earned through practical achievement and the demonstrated capacity to respond to the challenges of the period.

It thus becomes clear that Diriyah’s emergence in the eighteenth century was not merely the result of a political vacuum or the weakness of surrounding powers; it was the fruit of a conscious strategic vision and a leadership capable of transforming challenges into opportunities and deploying society’s resources with creativity and flexibility. The Diriyah experience constituted the nucleus of the First Saudi State project and established a distinctive model for political and social stability in a region long afflicted by volatility and fragmentation.

The Structure of Authority and Internal Challenges: The Equation of Stability Achieved

On the domestic front, Imam Mohammad ibn Saud demonstrated exceptional political capacity in confronting the compound system of challenges facing the nascent state, drawing on flexible sagacity and consummate skill in managing equilibria and building alliances. In an environment dominated by traditional modes of authority and lacking clear institutional mechanisms or codified systems to regulate the transfer of power and define the roles of political actors, the Imam had first to consolidate the pillars of his rule within the Al Saud family. Competition among members of the ruling family was a salient feature of the political landscape, as each faction sought to enhance its position through familial alliances and the cultivation of local notables and tribal leaders. In the absence of a codified system of succession, power accrued to the individual most adept at forging alliances and wielding influence, rather than necessarily to the eldest or the most juristically entitled.

Despite the limited detailed information regarding the nature of the understandings or disputes that accompanied Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s assumption of power, his continuity in governance for seventeen years constitutes clear evidence of his competence in managing the delicate equation of power and his ability to encircle challenges and co-opt potential rivals within his governance system (Ibn Bishr, 1983; Commins, 2006). Available evidence suggests that the Imam employed a judicious combination of firmness and flexibility, leveraging prevailing social values such as respect for elders and esteem for competence and courage to attract supporters and neutralize opponents.

Crawford (2014) observes that patterns of governance in Najd’s traditional emirates rested on a delicate balance among essential elements, foremost among them hereditary legitimacy based on belonging to the ruling family, the capacity to provide security and protection for subjects, and the maintenance of positive relations with community notables and tribal leaders. Imam Muhammad ibn Saud succeeded in achieving a firm balance among these components, enabling him to fortify his rule against destabilizing forces with a degree of skill that distinguished him among the rulers of his era.

Table 4. Components of Political Legitimacy in Najdi Emirates and Their Manifestation in Diriyah.

Component of Legitimacy	General Pattern Across Najdi Emirates	Manifestation Under Imam Muhammad ibn Saud in Diriyah
Hereditary lineage	Belonging to an established ruling family was a necessary but insufficient condition for authority	The Imam drew on the Al Saud family’s longstanding presence in Diriyah, reinforcing dynastic continuity
Capacity to provide security	Protection of subjects from raids and external threats was a primary obligation	Fortification of Diriyah, organization of local garrisons, and development of early warning systems
Tribal alliance-building	Rulers depended on shifting tribal coalitions for military and political support	Deliberate cultivation of durable alliances through intermarriage, economic incentives, and balanced diplomacy
Personal qualities of leadership	Courage, wisdom, generosity, and rhetorical skill were valued attributes	Imam Muhammad ibn Saud was recognized for prudence, strategic patience, and exceptional interpersonal acumen
Provision of justice and dispute resolution	Rulers served as arbiters of intra-communal disputes	The Imam reinforced local systems of justice and adjudication, enhancing trust between ruler and subjects

Note. Compiled by researchers based on Crawford (2014), Al-Juhany (2002), Al-Rasheed (2010), and Ibn Bishr (1983).

Internal challenges were not limited to competition among family members; they also extended to managing relations with all components of the local community. Diriyah brought together sedentary inhabitants—farmers and artisans—residents of neighboring villages, and the Bedouin tribes that surrounded the settlement and controlled trade and supply routes. The Imam succeeded in securing a meaningful level of loyalty and obedience from all these constituencies without relying on vast financial resources or overwhelming military force (Al-Salih, 2010). Political acumen and

shrewdness in building personal relationships and calculated alliances thus became the foundation for achieving stability, far removed from conventional reliance on patronage or coercion (Al-Juhani, 2016). Historical evidence confirms that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud succeeded in establishing a pattern of governance characterized by relative stability during the period under study, one founded on a productive balance between the exercise of authority and the achievement of social satisfaction (Ibn Ghannam, 1994). This pattern became an essential prerequisite for any project of expansion or state-building, since any external venture amid internal instability would inevitably have led to fragmentation and collapse.

The equation of internal stability was not confined to political and social dimensions alone; it also encompassed economic dimensions that constituted an additional layer of challenge. The authority had to ensure a minimum level of food security and economic stability for the population despite limited resources and fluctuations in agricultural output caused by climatic conditions or disputes with neighboring tribes. Cooperation among prominent families and the exchange of benefits with Bedouin groups contributed to achieving balance and continuity, as complementary relations between the settled and nomadic populations prevailed, with roles distributed among agricultural, pastoral, and commercial production to ensure a minimum level of self-sufficiency and reduce the likelihood of crises (Hourani, 1991).

It thus becomes clear that the equation of stability established by Imam Muhammad ibn Saud was not the product of fortuitous circumstance; it resulted from a conscious interaction among elements of political and social strength, a wise investment of local community resources, and the ability to leverage the flexibility of regional alliances without entering into debilitating wars of attrition. This balanced approach laid a solid foundation for the subsequent launch of the First Saudi State project, as Diriyah was able to maintain its internal cohesion and gradually expand its sphere of influence, drawing on legitimacy earned through practical achievement and the demonstrated capacity to respond to the challenges of the period.

As the years progressed, Diriyah became increasingly capable of asserting its political presence in the Najdi landscape, as the scope of its alliances broadened and it attracted new elements from neighboring tribes and towns, reinforcing its standing as a political and social reference point. This gradual accumulation paved the way for its emergence as a center of decision-making, particularly as the influence of the major powers on the peripheries waned and the need grew for an authority capable of maintaining equilibrium and protecting local interests from the threat of destabilizing chaos.

Within this framework, the compound nature of the transformations the region experienced comes into clear focus. State-building was not a linear or one-dimensional process; it was the product of continuous interaction between forces of push and pull, and a precise balancing of the imperatives of stability against the demands of change. The most enduring lesson from Diriyah's experience in the eighteenth century remains that political success is not achieved solely through the availability of resources or military superiority, but through the capacity to read reality with discernment, absorb its complexities, and deploy available capabilities with wisdom and flexibility while preserving internal unity and social cohesion in the face of perpetually renewed challenges.

Economic Structure: Enduring Stability and Cohesive Growth

During the period under study, Diriyah was characterized by its reliance on the traditional oasis economy that prevailed across central Arabia. Date palm cultivation constituted the primary pillar of agricultural production, complemented by the cultivation of grains and vegetables in gardens irrigated by wells and springs (Al-Juhany, 2002). Although these agricultural resources were modest and did not generate significant economic surplus, they secured for Diriyah's inhabitants a minimum level of self-sufficiency and contributed to consolidating social stability, as the distribution of water and produce was conducted on familial and communal bases that ensured a degree of equity and mitigated disputes (Al-Uthaymin, 1999).

Caravan trade passing through Diriyah lent a vital dimension to the local economy, as the emirate served as an important station on internal trade routes, even though the volume of exchange remained limited compared to the major commercial centers of the peninsula. Exchange relations with the surrounding Bedouin tribes constituted an essential complementary element in the construction of the regional economy. Agricultural oasis products were traded for Bedouin products such as dairy, meat, and wool, reinforcing the stability of social and economic relations and contributing to a pattern of mutual dependence between the settled and nomadic populations (Vassiliev, 2000).

Vassiliev (2000) observes that the economic structure of the Najdi emirates at that time was characterized by relative constancy and a meager surplus, as most resources were consumed locally to meet basic needs, with a very limited margin for accumulation or investment in military capability. This economic reality served as a constraining factor on rulers’ ability to form large standing armies or finance extensive military campaigns, rendering military engagements short and limited in their objectives. This economic pattern was also reflected in the social structure, where values of contentment and solidarity prevailed and sharp class disparities were absent circumstances that contributed to maintaining social cohesion and reducing internal tensions.

Historical sources confirm the absence of any qualitative economic transformation or productive breakthrough during the first seventeen years of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud’s rule (Al-Fahd, 2018). The economic structure remained fundamentally unchanged, relying on traditional stability, which allowed the emirate to survive and persist without notable difficulties. The stability achieved in Diriyah was thus traditional in nature, founded on the maximum utilization of available resources without the emergence of structural innovations, positioning the emirate in an intermediate zone between mere survival and gradual development.

Table 5. Comparison of Economic Resources of the Principal Najdi Emirates (1727–1744 CE).

Emirate	Primary Agricultural Resource	Commercial Activity	Relationship with Tribes	Economic Surplus
Diriyah	Dates, grains	Limited (local caravans)	Balanced exchange	Limited
Al-Uyaynah	Dates, grains	Moderate	Exchange-based	Moderate
Riyadh	Dates, grains, vegetables	Moderate	Occasionally tense	Moderate
Al-Ahsa (Banu Khalid)	Dates, rice, fruits	Extensive (maritime trade)	Domination and extraction	High

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Al-Juhany (2002), Vassiliev (2000), and Al-Uthaymin (1999).

Despite the modest economic surplus and limited commercial activity, Diriyah’s enduring stability was largely anchored in its adaptive responses to environmental and social constraints. The emirate’s leaders, aware of the challenges posed by fluctuating agricultural output and the unpredictability of caravan trade, prioritized the cultivation of cooperative relationships both within the settled population and with neighboring Bedouin tribes. This approach fostered mutual dependence, enabling the exchange of agricultural products for pastoral goods and contributing to the resilience of the local economy even in times of scarcity. In contrast to the more economically diverse and commercially active emirates such as Al-Ahsa, Diriyah’s system of resource management emphasized equity and social cohesion over the accumulation of wealth. Water and agricultural produce were distributed on communal and familial lines, reinforcing bonds among inhabitants and mitigating the risks of internal disputes or class divisions. This equitable model not only stabilized daily life but also underpinned the emirate’s ability to maintain internal unity—a crucial factors for its gradual political ascent and regional influence.

As Diriyah expanded its sphere of influence, the pattern of balanced exchange with Bedouin groups and neighboring villages allowed for incremental growth without provoking destabilizing

competition or conflict. The emirate’s leadership recognized that the sustainability of their authority depended less on rapid economic transformation and more on the careful management of relationships and resources. This pragmatic approach, rooted in the realities of the oasis economy, provided a foundation for long-term stability and laid the groundwork for future state-building efforts.

Ultimately, Diriyah’s experience during this period exemplifies how enduring stability and cohesive growth can be achieved through prudent leadership, effective resource utilization, and the fostering of social solidarity. The emirate’s ability to navigate economic limitations while maintaining internal cohesion became a defining feature of its legacy and a model for subsequent developments in central Arabia.

Table 6. Economic Constraints and Their Political Implications for Diriyah (1727–1744 CE).

Economic Constraint	Nature of Constraint	Political Implication	Leadership Response
Limited agricultural surplus	Oasis economy met basic needs but generated minimal accumulation	Inability to finance large military campaigns or standing armies	Focus on diplomacy and alliance-building rather than military expansion
Dependence on climatic conditions	Fluctuations in rainfall and water availability affected crop yields	Periodic food insecurity threatened social stability	Cultivation of cooperative networks with Bedouin suppliers and neighboring oases
Limited commercial throughput	Diriyah served as a secondary trade station rather than a primary hub	Revenue from trade was insufficient for ambitious state projects	Emphasis on maximizing local exchange and strengthening reciprocal economic relationships
Absence of external revenue sources	No access to maritime trade, pilgrimage revenues, or external tribute	The emirate could not subsidize loyalty through large-scale redistribution	Reliance on symbolic capital, justice, and personal leadership qualities to secure allegiance

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Vassiliev (2000), Al-Juhany (2002), Al-Fahd (2018), and Hourani (1991).

The preceding tables reveal that Diriyah’s economic structure during this era relied on markedly limited resources compared to certain neighboring emirates such as Al-Ahsa, which was distinguished by its economic surplus, extensive commercial activity, and capacity to dominate surrounding Bedouin tribes. In contrast, Diriyah focused on achieving a balance between its modest agricultural resources and its exchange relations with the tribes, which contributed to consolidating a form of economic and social stability, even though this did not enable it to achieve qualitative leaps in growth or economic expansion.

This reality compelled the political leadership in Diriyah to pursue pragmatic policies centered on sustainability and social solidarity, strengthening internal bonds rather than venturing into expansionist projects that might exceed its economic capabilities. Moreover, the limited economic surplus made it imperative to rely on non-material means to enhance the legitimacy of governance and ensure the entity’s continuity, such as the construction of tribal alliances and the enshrinement of social values as instruments of stability.

Considering these considerations, it is evident that Diriyah possessed at that stage the requisites for survival and stability, even though it did not yet possess the factors of economic superiority or the elements necessary for rapid domination. This reality impelled the political leadership to focus on strengthening political legitimacy and consolidating social cohesion, relying on non-material factors of strength rather than depending solely on economic surplus or military superiority.

The absence of economic transformation acquires particular analytical significance: it clearly demonstrates that any future advance in Diriyah’s standing would not be the product of a material

windfall or the discovery of new resources, but rather the fruit of the interaction of non-material political and social factors, chief among them the strengthening of political legitimacy and the deepening of regional alliances (Steinberg, 2005). Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's success in achieving internal stability despite constrained resources confirms that the decisive factor in political construction was primarily political and social in nature, rather than purely economic.

Thus, economic stability in Diriyah was not merely the product of the availability of natural resources; it was the fruit of a complex interaction among elements of the traditional economy, the cohesion of the local community, and the leadership's skill in managing available capabilities. This approach formed a solid base that subsequently paved the way for the launch of the Saudi state project, as Diriyah, despite the modesty of its resources, was able to maintain its survival and establish the foundations for gradual and balanced growth.

Political Behavior: Consolidating Foundations and a Policy of Strategic Patience

The political approach of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud during the first seventeen years of his rule in Diriyah was distinguished by qualities of wisdom and deliberation. He accorded the highest priority to consolidating internal stability and strengthening the emirate's institutional structure while studiously avoiding engagement in expansionist ventures that might destabilize the cohesion of the nascent political entity. The Imam adopted what may be characterized as a strategy of "defensive equilibrium," consisting of preserving the status quo and refraining from provocative steps toward neighboring parties. This approach reflected an advanced political awareness of the necessity of protecting the entity from external threats while focusing on strengthening the internal front through fortifying Diriyah and enhancing its defensive and administrative capabilities. The strategy encompassed the construction of walls and fortifications, the organization of local garrisons, and the development of early warning systems, which cumulatively reinforced the sense of security and reassurance among the population, supported social cohesion, and reduced the prospects of unrest or mass displacement in search of stability (Commins, 2006; Walt, 1987; Al al-Sheikh, 2003).

Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud's second strategic pillar was the formation of local alliances with neighboring tribes and groups, predicated on mutual interests and balanced power. The Imam was meticulous in his choice of allies, relying on tribal bonds and intermarriage in some instances and employing economic incentives or commercial privileges when circumstances required, in a manner that ensured the durability and stability of these alliances without exposing Diriyah to obligations that might draw it into conflicts beyond its capacity. This approach conferred on the emirate a high degree of flexibility in managing its regional relations, enabling it to reshape and adapt its alliances in response to shifts in the political environment while preserving the independence of its decision-making and avoiding subordination to any external party (Al-Juhany, 2002).

The third pillar of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's political strategy was the avoidance of direct confrontation with the major regional powers, foremost among them the Banu Khalid emirate with its extensive influence in eastern Arabia. The Imam recognized, with penetrating insight, that entering open conflict with a major regional power could pose an existential threat to Diriyah or lead to the exhaustion of its limited resources. Consequently, his relations with these powers were marked by extreme caution and abstention from provocation or intervention in their spheres of influence, while ensuring that channels of communication and mutual interests were maintained at the minimum level necessary to achieve regional stability. This policy granted the emirate of Diriyah precious time to strengthen its institutions and develop its autonomous capabilities and contributed to prolonging the viability of the nascent political entity (Vassiliev, 2000).

Table 7. Pillars of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s Political Strategy (1727–1744 CE).

Strategic Pillar	Description	Primary Instruments	Intended Outcome
Defensive equilibrium	Preserving the status quo and refraining from provocative actions toward neighboring powers	Construction of fortifications, organization of garrisons, development of early warning systems	Internal security, social cohesion, population retention
Local alliance formation	Building durable coalitions with neighboring tribes and groups based on reciprocal interests	Intermarriage, economic incentives, commercial privileges, tribal diplomacy	Flexible and stable regional relationships; enhanced political support base
Avoidance of major confrontation	Refraining from direct military engagement with dominant regional powers, especially the Banu Khalid emirate	Diplomatic caution, maintenance of minimal communication channels, non-interference in external spheres of influence	Preservation of the emirate’s existence and resources; time for institutional development
Strategic latency	Prioritizing internal institutional construction and social consolidation over outward projection of power	Administrative organization, reinforcement of the social fabric, investment in symbolic capital	Maturation of the political entity and preparation for future expansion

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Al-Rasheed (2010), Commins (2006), Vassiliev (2000), Walt (1987), and Crawford (2014).

These three pillars reflect a mature political vision on the part of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, grounded in a profound awareness of local and regional power balances and a precise assessment of the margins of possible action and the limits of available capabilities within a turbulent political environment. The Imam pursued what may aptly be termed “strategic latency,” choosing to consolidate the internal front, strengthen the institutions of local governance, fortify Diriyah, and reinforce the social fabric, rather than engaging in risky expansionist ventures. This practical policy was embodied in the organization of administrative affairs, the realization of social justice, and the attraction of loyalty from neighboring tribes through privileges and incentives, contributing to the construction of robust internal cohesion and an increasing capacity to withstand external threats (Crawford, 2014).

This cautious approach and strategic latency should not be interpreted as indicative of weakness or an absence of political ambition; rather, they represent an expression of pragmatic wisdom imposed by the circumstances of the period and the limits of available capacities. The option of expansion or direct confrontation with the major regional powers would have exposed Diriyah to existential risks, given its limited resources and the superiority of rival forces in the east, chief among them the Banu Khalid emirate (Al-Juhani, 2016).

This strategic choice afforded the emirate of Diriyah the time necessary to build its institutions and develop its autonomous capabilities. Historians have noted that this cautious and measured character was not unique to Imam Mohammad ibn Saud but constituted a common feature among the rulers of Najdi emirates during that era, where survival and continuity demanded perpetual vigilance and the avoidance of strategic errors far more than the pursuit of rapid victories or geographic expansion. The emirate that avoided major confrontations and balanced ambition with realism ensured its own continuity and standing among local political entities, even in the absence of extensive territorial expansion. Strategic caution and the consolidation of foundations thus functioned as a governing principle for the administration of power in Najd and a supreme priority for ensuring stability and the sustainability of nascent political entities (Commins, 2006).

Considering the foregoing, it may be affirmed that the strategy of patience and focus on internal founding was not merely a circumstantial defensive posture, but a conscious vision aimed at building a solid base for future political growth. This approach enabled Imam Muhammad ibn Saud to create an environment of stability and trust within the local community and paved the way for subsequent, deeper transformations in the structure of the nascent state. Despite the limited resources and opportunities available, Diriyah was able to establish its political presence and preserve its independence, making it a subsequent launching point for the greater Saudi state project.

Moreover, the policy of consolidating foundations and strategic patience provided the Imam with a margin for political maneuvering and rendered him capable of exploiting opportunities that would subsequently emerge amid shifting regional power balances. With the entry of Diriyah's partnership with Sheikh Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab into the implementation phase, the political entity had attained a degree of maturity and institutional stability that qualified it to adopt a broader religious and political project, drawing on the network of local alliances and the strength of social cohesion that had been painstakingly constructed during the years of patient internal reinforcement.

It thus becomes clear that Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's policy of consolidating foundations and strategic patience was not merely a circumstantial response to imposed constraints but an expression of rare political wisdom, a deep understanding of the realities of the Najdi environment, and a precise appreciation of the importance of institutional construction as a foundation for ensuring permanence and continuity. This policy subsequently bore fruit in Diriyah's emergence as an influential political and religious force in the Arabian Peninsula and paved the way for the establishment of the First Saudi State.

The Nature of Political Discourse and Its Implications

The first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule in Diriyah were distinguished by elevated qualities of political acumen and an exceptional capacity for establishing stability within a turbulent Najdi milieu. The Imam pursued a policy founded on strategic caution and the consolidation of the foundations of governance, through fortifying Diriyah and strengthening its defensive structure, organizing its administrative and military affairs with efficiency, and building balanced local alliances with neighboring tribes and groups. This afforded the emirate a considerable margin of independence and a high degree of flexibility in managing its regional relations, enhancing its standing among neighboring political entities (Commins, 2006; Vassiliev, 2000).

The political discourse of that phase rested on the pillars of traditional legitimacy prevailing in the Najdi emirates, encompassing distinguished familial lineage, the ability to provide security, and the construction of solid tribal alliances. Although this discourse did not depart fundamentally from the general framework operative in neighboring emirates, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud was adept at deploying it with skill to preserve the unity of the political entity, relying on the legitimacy of inheritance, strength, and alliances, while simultaneously providing security and stability for Diriyah's inhabitants.

This pragmatic approach contributed to fortifying the emirate against major threats and consolidating its standing in Wadi Hanifa and its environs. It becomes clear that the founding phase of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's rule was distinguished by its substantive contribution to consolidating stability and establishing the pillars of governance, laying solid foundations that enabled Diriyah to endure and persist within a highly competitive and volatile political environment, thereby affirming the importance of this era in delineating the features of the nascent political entity (Al-Juhany, 2002; Crawford, 2014).

Table 8. Dimensions of Political Discourse Under Imam Mohammad ibn Saud (1727–1744 CE).

Dimension of Discourse	Content	Function	Outcome
Legitimacy of lineage	Emphasis on the Al Saud family’s established position and ancestral authority in Diriyah	Establishing the hereditary right to rule and continuity of dynastic authority	Enhanced the ruling family’s claim to leadership and reduced challenges from rival claimants
Provision of security	Articulation of the ruler’s duty to protect subjects from external raids and internal disorder	Demonstrating the practical efficacy of the Imam’s leadership	Strengthened popular confidence and loyalty to the emirate
Alliance and solidarity rhetoric	Appeals to shared tribal values, kinship bonds, and mutual interests	Cementing alliances with neighboring groups and neutralizing potential adversaries	Created a network of durable relationships that expanded Diriyah’s political support base
Pragmatic restraint	Emphasis on measured action, avoidance of reckless ventures, and prioritization of communal welfare	Framing strategic caution as wisdom rather than weakness	Maintained social cohesion and justified the focus on internal consolidation

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Commins (2006), Crawford (2014), Al-Juhany (2002), and Bourdieu (1991).

The political discourse of that phase was not merely a tool for conferring legitimacy on governance or garnering transient loyalties; it functioned as a regulatory framework for the practical policies the Imam pursued in administering the emirate’s affairs. The discourse contributed to ingraining values of discipline and commitment within the local community and encouraged solidarity among various social groups under the umbrella of centralized leadership. Moreover, the pragmatic discourse that balanced ambition with capability and interests with risks played a pivotal role in enhancing Diriyah’s image as a balanced entity capable of navigating crises without being drawn into wars of attrition with the major regional powers (Cook, 2000).

The political discourse of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud also displayed flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, as he directed his messages in a manner suited to developments in the political environment while preserving the constants of traditional legitimacy. This balance between authenticity and pragmatism enabled the emirate to capitalize on available opportunities and avoid potential risks, thereby reinforcing its stability and consolidating its image as a rising force at the heart of Najd (Bourdieu, 1991).

It is important to observe that the political discourse of this era was not isolated from social and economic realities; rather, it was reflected in the strengthening of internal cohesion, support for administrative reform efforts, and the consolidation of local systems of justice. This integration between discourse and practice contributed to building substantial symbolic capital for Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, enabling him to overcome the challenges of the Najdi environment and preparing the ground for the subsequent launch of the Saudi state project (Commins, 2006). In this connection, Bourdieu’s (1991) theoretical framework proves particularly illuminating, as it demonstrates that symbolic power—the capacity to define legitimate categories, establish authoritative narratives, and shape collective perception—can be as consequential as material power in the construction and maintenance of political authority.

Historical Significance of the Phase: Quiet Construction as a Foundation for Continuity

The first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s era in Diriyah constitute a pivotal milestone in the trajectory of the emirate’s formation, during which the Imam succeeded, with

wisdom and foresight, in establishing the foundations of political and social stability while navigating the complexities of the turbulent Najdi environment of the time. The Imam directed his efforts toward strengthening the unity of the internal front and fortifying Diriyah on both the defensive and administrative levels, adopting a policy of strategic caution and conscious latency—an approach that enabled him to avoid direct confrontations with the major regional powers, foremost among them the Banu Khalid emirate, while preserving the independence of local decision-making and the cohesion of the emirate’s social fabric (Crawford, 2014).

The importance of this era becomes strikingly apparent when one examines the nature of the institutional construction achieved during it. The emirate did not witness qualitative transformations in economic resources or military capabilities; the oasis economy remained unchanged, with no surge in wealth or armament (Vassiliev, 2000). However, the real transformation was embodied in the construction of a robust governance system capable of managing internal and external equilibrium with a considerable degree of efficiency and flexibility.

Bourdieu’s (1991) theoretical framework is instructive in this context, as it demonstrates that symbolic capital—manifested in political legitimacy and the capacity to build alliances—represents an exceptional resource whose impact may exceed that of traditional material resources. Imam Mohammad ibn Saud succeeded in converting this symbolic capital into solid political and social support, thereby enhancing Diriyah’s standing among neighboring emirates. In this manner, the pragmatic political discourse and the balanced local alliances became fundamental pillars in consolidating the foundations of governance and reinforcing stability.

Through in-depth historical analysis, it becomes evident that Diriyah’s success in navigating the challenges of that phase was not the product of material or military changes of substance; it constitutes, in its essence, a distinctive political and administrative achievement. Quiet institutional construction did not furnish Diriyah with vast armies or immense wealth, but it bestowed upon it a solid internal stability that enabled it to endure amid the vicissitudes of the political environment (Commins, 2006). This accords with the broader observation in the literature on state formation that the robustness of institutional construction frequently constitutes a decisive factor in the longevity of nascent political entities and their capacity to confront challenges (Cook, 2000; Tilly, 1992).

Table 9. Comparative Framework: Characteristics of the Founding Phase (1727–1744 CE) and the Post-1744 Expansion Phase.

Dimension	Founding Phase (1727–1744 CE)	Post-1744 Expansion Phase
Territorial scope	Limited to Diriyah and immediate environs in Wadi Hanifa	Progressive expansion across Najd and beyond
Primary strategic orientation	Internal consolidation, defensive equilibrium, strategic patience	Outward expansion, religious reform, active confrontation
Source of legitimacy	Hereditary lineage, provision of security, tribal alliances	Religious legitimacy added through alliance with Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab
Economic base	Traditional oasis economy with limited surplus	Gradually augmented by revenues from expanded territories
Military posture	Defensive; avoidance of large-scale engagements	Increasingly offensive; organized campaigns
Institutional development	Foundational; establishment of basic governance mechanisms	Accelerated; formalization of administrative and judicial structures
Key achievement	Stability, survival, and preparation of the political entity for future growth	Transformation of Diriyah into the capital of a major regional state

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Commins (2006), Crawford (2014), Vassiliev (2000), and Al-Juhany (2002).

From this comparative framework, it may be inferred that the quiet, gradual construction pursued by Imam Mohammad ibn Saud was not merely a circumstantial response to constraints but a strategic choice that proved its efficacy over the long term. This approach established enduring traditions in the administration of governance and created a political culture that elevated stability and internal cohesion above military ventures or precipitated expansion. This founding phase also constituted a model experience in how to convert structural challenges into opportunities for strengthening the political and social entity.

Perhaps the most significant historical implications of this era reside in the fact that the institutional and social cohesion achieved during the founding phase formed a solid base from which the major subsequent transformations in the history of the Arabian Peninsula were launched. Thanks to this quiet construction, Diriyah became a center of political and social attraction, capable of accommodating new alliances and openness to projects of reform and change without forfeiting its identity or internal cohesion.

The observer of the trajectory of the First Saudi State's emergence recognizes that the factors of permanence and continuity are not determined solely by the volume of resources or military strength; they are intimately connected to the maturity of institutional construction, the depth of political legitimacy, and the effectiveness of political discourse in unifying society and directing it toward shared objectives. The Diriyah experience during Imam Muhammad ibn Saud's era embodied these values, becoming a paradigm in the trajectories of state-building in volatile and complex environments.

It thus becomes clear that the first phase of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's rule represents a historical lesson in the importance of gradualism, strategic patience, and the necessity of investing in symbolic and social capital as indispensable pillars for any political project seeking survival and continuity in the face of radical transformations and formidable challenges.

Discussion: A Reading of the Founding Phase's Achievements

The findings of this study highlight a distinctive model of state-building that merits contemplation from the perspectives of comparative political science and the history of political entity formation. During the first seventeen years of his rule, Imam Mohammad ibn Saud achieved remarkable accomplishments in the context of a highly complex and volatile political environment, transforming an emirate of limited resources into a durable and increasingly influential political entity. The humane dimensions of this experience become apparent in the leadership's capacity to confront challenges and convert them into opportunities for growth and institutional maturation. Imam Mohammad ibn Saud displayed a profound awareness of his responsibilities toward society, choosing stability and security over adventurist ventures and prioritizing the welfare of the population over narrow personal or dynastic interests. Crawford (2014) observes that this type of wise and measured leadership was rare among the rulers of Najdi emirates during the period, as many of them were consumed by exhausting tribal conflicts that depleted their resources and undermined their political standing.

The significance of this founding experience also resides in the establishment of a system of political and administrative values that was advanced relative to prevailing traditional practices across the region. The Imam achieved a productive balance between the requirements of authority and the imperatives of social justice, which strengthened trust between ruler and ruled and grounded the emirate's legitimacy because of practical achievement and responsiveness to the community's needs. Vassiliev (2000) affirms that this balance constituted a decisive factor in distinguishing Diriyah from the other local emirates and enabling its long-term survival.

From an institutional perspective, this phase serves as an exemplary case of how to build a political entity from the ground up, as the Imam worked to strengthen social cohesion and develop the mechanisms of local governance before contemplating external expansion. This approach aligns with Tilly's (1992) observation that the most enduring political entities are those that prioritize internal construction over rapid military expansion. Subsequent events confirmed the soundness of

this choice, as the institutional and social capital accumulated during the founding phase constituted the powerful base from which the First Saudi State project was launched and expanded.

Table 10. Assessment of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s Founding Achievements (1727–1744 CE).

Domain of Achievement	Nature of Achievement	Significance for Subsequent State-Building
Internal political stability	Consolidation of authority within the Al Saud family; neutralization of internal rivals through co-optation and alliance	Provided the indispensable domestic precondition for the post-1744 expansion and the partnership with Sheikh Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab
Social cohesion	Integration of diverse social components (sedentary, semi-nomadic, Bedouin) under a unified governance framework	Created a resilient social fabric capable of absorbing the stresses of territorial expansion and ideological transformation
Institutional foundation	Establishment of basic administrative, defensive, and judicial mechanisms	Furnished the organizational scaffolding upon which the more elaborate state apparatus of the later period was erected
Symbolic capital accumulation	Enhancement of the Al Saud family’s prestige and legitimacy through practical achievement and just governance	Positioned Diriyah as a credible center of authority capable of attracting broader allegiance
Regional positioning	Maintenance of balanced relations with major powers while preserving autonomy	Ensured Diriyah’s survival and created the conditions for its subsequent assertion of regional influence

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on Crawford (2014), Vassiliev (2000), Commins (2006), Tilly (1992), and Al-Juhany (2002).

Studying this experience reveals a leadership possessed of a future-oriented vision that combined ambition with realism and immediate interests with long-term objectives. This balanced approach contributed to transforming Diriyah from a small emirate into an important political and social center that attracted loyalties and reinforced society’s confidence in the leadership’s capacity to manage the affairs of governance with wisdom and prudence. Commins (2006) observes that success in building legitimacy through practical achievements is among the most prominent characteristics of the first Saudi experience, distinguishing it from many regional experiences of the same period. Accordingly, the founding phase of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud’s rule may be considered an important chapter in the history of state-building, worthy of study and attention not only for its institutional and political successes but also for the humane values it embodied, including the prioritization of stability, justice, and service to the community.

Analysis of the founding phase reveals discernible connections between the principles established by Imam Mohammad ibn Saud and the foundations upon which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 rests. Gradualism in construction, long-term planning, and the balancing of ambition with realism are shared elements that demonstrate a continuity of leadership philosophy across time. Imam Mohammad ibn Saud adopted a policy of “strategic gradualism,” favoring continuous construction over rapid expansion—a principle clearly manifest in Vision 2030, which sets long-term goals for economic and social transformation while recognizing that genuine change requires sustained effort and cumulative progress. Scholarship on development has indicated that gradual institutional reform achieves more lasting results than sudden transformations (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud understood that reliance on a single source of strength threatens the stability of a political entity and therefore sought to build multiple alliances and deploy symbolic and social capital alongside limited material resources. Vision 2030 adopts a comparable approach by focusing on diversifying national income sources and reducing dependence on oil revenues, while

developing the tourism, entertainment, industrial, and technology sectors to ensure economic resilience and sustainability.

Imam Mohammad ibn Saud focused on strengthening social cohesion and building trust among members of society, convinced that the state’s strength derives from the loyalty and well-being of its inhabitants. Vision 2030 continues this logic through programs for youth and women’s empowerment, the development of education, and the improvement of quality of life, with the human being regarded as the axis of genuine development. The United Nations Human Development Report has emphasized that investment in human capital is among the most important determinants of sustainable development (United Nations Development Programme, 2022).

Imam Mohammad ibn Saud was committed to the independence of political decision-making and the construction of balanced relations and alliances that served Diriyah’s interests without entailing subordination to any regional power. In the contemporary context, the Kingdom pursues a dynamic foreign policy that enhances its regional and international standing, preserves the independence of its national decision-making, and remains open to diverse partnerships that support development and stability objectives.

Table 11. Foundational Values: Historical Parallels Between the Founding Phase and Vision 2030.

Foundational Value	Manifestation Under Imam	
	Mohammad ibn Saud (1727–1744 CE)	Manifestation in Vision 2030
Strategic gradualism	Prioritization of incremental internal construction over premature expansion	Long-term phased transformation targets across economic, social, and cultural domains
Diversification of sources of strength	Deployment of multiple forms of capital (tribal, symbolic, economic, diplomatic)	Economic diversification away from oil dependence toward tourism, technology, industry, and entertainment
Investment in human and social capital	Strengthening social cohesion, fostering trust between leadership and community	Youth and women’s empowerment, educational reform, quality of life enhancement
Independence of decision-making	Avoidance of subordination to regional powers while maintaining pragmatic relations	Sovereign foreign policy combined with openness to diverse international partnerships
Institutional capacity-building	Establishment of foundational governance, defense, and administrative mechanisms	Comprehensive government modernization, regulatory reform, and institutional development

Note. Compiled by the researcher based on the study’s findings and the official Vision 2030 framework; historical parallels drawn from Commins (2006), Vassiliev (2000), Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), and United Nations Development Programme (2022).

The invocation of the foundational values of the First Saudi State represents more than historical reminiscence; it is a conscious drawing of inspiration from principles that have demonstrated their effectiveness in building a resilient and progressive political entity. Vision 2030 embodies this continuity of values, integrating heritage and modernity and drawing on historical experience to forge a sustainable future for coming generations.

Conclusions: Toward a Cumulative Understanding of the First Saudi State’s Emergence

The first seventeen years of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud’s era in Diriyah, spanning from 1727 to 1744 CE, constitute a pivotal founding phase in the construction of Diriyah’s political entity. They cannot be viewed as a mere passing prologue; they represent a complete phase of founding and institutional development. This study has demonstrated that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud possessed

political wisdom and an exceptional capacity for engaging with the complex Najdi environment, which was characterized by regional fragmentation, the multiplicity of competing power centers, the scarcity of economic resources, and the weakness of the traditional institutional infrastructure.

These structural determinants compelled the Imam to adopt a balanced and pragmatic policy characterized by strategic caution and the consolidation of the foundations of internal governance, alongside the fortification of Diriyah, the enhancement of its defensive and administrative capabilities, and the development of solid tribal alliances. This approach contributed to granting emirate independence of political decision-making and enabled it to avoid entanglement in debilitating conflicts with the major regional powers, foremost among them the Banu Khalid emirate, thereby strengthening its stability and laying the foundations for continuity and permanence.

The study calls for a revision of traditional narratives that focus predominantly on the events following 1744 CE and for broadening the scope of research to encompass the institutional and social accumulations of the founding phase. The cautious political approach adopted by Imam Mohammad ibn Saud was not a reflection of stagnation or a lack of ambition; it was a judicious choice dictated by the realities of the situation and the constraints of the Najdi environment, and it contributed fundamentally to ensuring Diriyah's survival and establishing the preconditions for its subsequent flourishing.

It should be emphasized that this founding phase was characterized by a wise, traditional political discourse in which Imam Mohammad ibn Saud relied on the legitimacy of inheritance and demonstrated capability, and on the construction of pragmatic alliances, enabling him to consolidate stability and establish the foundations of governance far from reckless ventures. This approach paved the way for consolidating Diriyah's standing as a center of stability in its surroundings, as the institutional and social gains formed a solid base for safeguarding the political entity and enhancing its capacity to confront challenges.

Despite the limited contemporary sources and the difficulty of documenting certain precise details, this study has adhered to a critical-comparative methodology in analyzing historical accounts, relying on contextual and logical analysis of available data. The findings reached remain open to development and revision considering any new archival discoveries or future critical readings that may emerge.

The study affirms the importance of deepening research through systematic comparisons between the emirate of Diriyah and its counterparts among Najdi entities and through analyzing the structural and social transformations that characterized that era, while broadening the scope of attention to include the interactions of surrounding regional forces. Such approaches can enrich the academic understanding of the trajectories of political entity formation in the Arabian Peninsula and contribute to transcending narratives of ambiguous or one-dimensional interpretations toward a comprehensive and balanced structural vision.

From this standpoint, the need emerges to re-read the founding phases of the First Saudi State's emergence from a cumulative and multidimensional perspective that takes into account the interconnection among political, social, economic, and cultural factors. The success of the Diriyah experience was not the product of chance or dependent solely on individual leadership; it was the fruit of a complex interaction among wise leadership, structural reality, and the capacity to leverage symbolic and social capital in confronting internal and external challenges.

The continuity of Diriyah's political entity in a turbulent Najdi environment reflects the effectiveness of the institutional tools established during that era, which subsequently became a model for managing internal equilibria, building alliances, and safeguarding stability. Among the most prominent lessons of this experience is that gradualism in construction, strategic patience, and the prioritization of political realism over adventurism represent fundamental factors in the permanence and survival of nascent states in the face of major transformations.

For this reason, the future of historical studies on the First Saudi State is contingent upon intensifying critical research on sources and exploring the non-traditional dimensions of the founding trajectories, including the social, cultural, and religious impact on political decision-making.

Attention should also be directed to analyzing the regional and international contexts that surrounded the era, in pursuit of a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the state-building experience in the Arabian Peninsula.

This study thus opens the field for researchers to undertake further excavation and analysis and calls for the construction of new historical narratives capable of encompassing the variables and events of the First Saudi State's emergence, free from preconceived judgments or one-dimensional interpretations, thereby contributing to enriching the academic understanding of the trajectory of political entity formation in the Arabian Peninsula and offering instructive lessons for future generations in the fields of leadership, decision-making, and the management of existential transformations.

The invocation of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud's experience in the context of modern historical studies affirms that sound institutional construction, even if slow in its beginnings, constitutes the fundamental pillar for the sustainability of the state and its success in confronting internal and external challenges. Under the complex environmental and social conditions of eighteenth-century Najd, the focus on consolidating the foundations of governance and activating the local justice system was among the most important requisites for success—a fact that was positively reflected in Diriyah's stability and its capacity to contain crises and forge effective alliances.

Analysis of the founding experience also reveals the importance of investing in symbolic and social capital, as the Imam recognized that genuine legitimacy is not acquired solely through force or inheritance but is strengthened through practical achievement and responsiveness to society's needs. This awareness contributed to building a bridge of trust between the leadership and the community, making Diriyah a model for achieving a balance between authority and social responsibility.

Among the principal lessons drawn from this phase is that state building is not achieved instantaneously; it is a cumulative process that requires a strategic vision and prolonged patience in the face of obstacles. The connection of these principles with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 embodies the continuity of a leadership philosophy that balances ambition with realism, places the human being at the center of development, and is committed to developing society from within before venturing toward the horizons of external transformation.

In conclusion, the experience of Imam Mohammad ibn Saud in building Diriyah affirms that wise leadership, investment in human capital, and the reinforcement of social cohesion represent fundamental pillars for any national project that aspires to continuity and development. This historical model remains a source of inspiration in confronting the challenges of the present and in shaping a future of greater stability and prosperity for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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