

SAUDI ARABIA FACES A CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

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The calls for democracy during the “Arab Spring” presented the Saudi Arabian regime with serious challenges. Traditional allies such as the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt fell by the wayside leaving Riyadh practically alone as defender of an authoritarian government. The flames of protest grew closer as both Yemen and Bahrain experienced major unrest. An embryonic Saudi protest movement was snuffed out by a combination of threats and massive financial aid. The kingdom remains stable, since its rulers continue to maneuver skillfully between conservatives and reformers and oil revenue buys support. Still, Saudi Arabia’s rulers are watching matters closely and trying to manage slow change that does not undermine the regime.

Saudi Arabia’s royal family has faced major—but not unprecedented—challenges as Arab unrest has spread throughout the region since early 2011. The year had already started out poorly for Riyadh, when in January, the Lebanese government it had backed along with the United States fell due to pressure from the Syrian-backed Hizballah. Its ally, Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine bin Ali, was thrown out of office by a popular rebellion in mid-January, followed by Egyptian President Husni Mubarak’s departure from power on February 11. The demonstration effect was clearly evident as eruptions occurred in Morocco; Jordan; Libya; Yemen; Syria; Oman; Kuwait; and most ominously for Riyadh, in Bahrain. In foreign affairs, Saudi Arabia lost a close and strong ally against Iranian influence with Mubarak’s departure. Its Gulf protégé, the Sunni al-Khalifa family of Bahrain, was roiled by mass demonstrations by the country’s Shi’i majority. The situation in Bahrain had implications for Saudi Arabia’s own restive Shi’i population, located in the oil-rich Eastern Province.

Not immune at home, a few, small demonstrations took place and several petitions were circulated. A day of rage was called for March 11. While the petitions demanded more participation in decisionmaking, better governance, and an end to corruption, they did not call for an end to the regime. The slogan heard in Tahrir Square, “The People! Demand! The Fall of the Regime!” has yet to be heard in the streets of Riyadh and Jeddah.

DEALING WITH DISSENT: SAUDI ARABIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Saudi Arabia has gone through tremendous social change since it was established in 1932. The discovery of oil, economic growth, and major population increases all put strain on a very traditional country. Other political systems might have cracked under the strain, but the Al Saud put a system in place that has so far met these challenges and has seemed well-positioned to weather the current one also.

First, the founding fathers harnessed the tribalist nature of Saudi society to the state formation enterprise. Tribes were used as a military force and tribal values such as kinship played a key role in the state’s development. Founder Ibn Saud made it a point to marry many times, and he did so strategically, taking

wives from the regional and tribal elites. His sons and grandsons hold all important cabinet posts and are governors of the most important provinces. Using classic coup-proofing methods, King Faysal divided military forces between family factions, and drew internal security forces from the most loyal tribes of the Najdi heartland.

The Wahhabi religious establishment, so important for the Al Saud's ruling legitimacy, was coopted to support slow, careful modernization in the form of economic and social development, while protecting conservative values. King Faysal was the master of this approach, instituting women's education, television, and expanding a government bureaucracy many-fold to handle the new oil wealth and provide jobs for a growing population. He challenged the conservative Wahhabi religious establishment, and he won.

An alliance was made between the Al Saud and U.S. presidents in which the United States promised to protect oil installations in exchange for American oil company access and assuring the free flow of oil. As oil income began to become significant, the Al Saud used a distributive model to develop the country. Huge infrastructure projects, educational institutions, hospitals, and an enlarged military benefited many. Housing projects for previously nomadic or semi-nomadic Bedouin brought modern conveniences along with closer control by the central government. Huge subsidies for fuel and other goods, along with a stock market that the government occasionally propped up when it dropped, saw to it that the wealth was distributed to a large swath of people.

Yet as the population grew, it became harder to distribute the wealth. Nor was it distributed equally. People in the Hijaz complained that Najdis were favored, and the Shi'a of the Eastern Province suffered both economic and religious discrimination.

Corruption and nepotism of the royal family became a common complaint. While residents born during the early years knew of the tremendous progress the Al Saud had brought the country through oil wealth in their lifetimes, younger generations are less aware of these achievements and are less appreciative than their elders. Through the technology so readily available to them, they can see what is available in other places and share it with their friends. The government no longer monopolizes information.

There has always been political dissent in Saudi Arabia. The 1950s and 1960s saw the influence of Nasserism, Communism, socialism, and Ba'thism. The religious establishment helped combat these challenges from the left. Where violence occurred (such as among the disenfranchised Shi'a in the Eastern Province in the 1950s and in 1979-80), the government did not hesitate to send in the Saudi Arabian National Guard to restore order with a heavy hand.

Since the 1990s, two waves of political challenges have swept the country, each resulting in some reforms. The first, catalyzed by opposition to the presence of U.S. troops in the country during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, resulted in the announcement of an Al Saud-appointed Consultative Council. The second wave came after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by a mostly Saudi al-Qa'ida cell, when reformers took advantage of the event to press their demands. The Consultative Council was expanded, municipal elections (for half the seats of the municipal councils—the others would remain Al Saud appointees) were announced, and national dialogues were held. Often referred to as the "Riyadh Spring of 2003," this period came to an end with a series of al-Qa'ida terrorist attacks in May 2003 and the arrest of several reformers in March 2004.^[1]

The al-Qa'ida insurrection allowed the government to crack down on the reformists. However, the ascension of King Abdallah to the throne in 2005 gave reformers hope, as did the municipal elections, which were finally held that year. The al-Qa'ida insurrection was essentially suppressed by 2007, although sporadic attacks have continued. The suppression of al-Qa'ida, however, has contributed to the reopening of political space for the resurgence of the reformist activity being witnessed today.

RIYADH'S WINTER OF DISCONTENT: POPULAR REACTION AND REGIME RESPONSE

The revolt in Tunisia caught the Saudi royal family at an awkward moment. The 87-year-old King Abdallah had been out of the country since November 2010, when he flew to the United States for an operation on what was publicized as a herniated disk. The Crown Prince, Sultan, nearly as old and also known to be ill, had flown back from Morocco to stand in for Abdallah, but day-to-day matters were actually being run by Minister of Interior Prince Nayif, potential crown prince to Sultan, and widely considered to be quite conservative and close to the religious establishment. Conservatives may have been satisfied with this line of succession, but it did not portend well for younger reformers influenced by the revolts sweeping the Arab world.

For many years now, the Saudi government has been fighting a losing battle to control the flow of information into the kingdom. It can no longer do that. It censors the internet, but not completely, and al-Jazeera is beamed into every Saudi home. Just as Tunisia's "Jasmine Revolution" was gaining steam in late December 2010 and early January 2011, the government announced that all blogs and news sites would now need to apply for a license.^[2] The new regulations had been discussed for a while, but the Al Saud saw fit to announce them exactly when social media was gaining prominence as a tool of the Tunisian revolt.

Unequal wealth distribution, corruption, inflation, unemployment, and lack of freedoms have bothered Saudis for many years. Demonstrations are rare—and illegal—in Saudi Arabia, but the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association requested to stage a sit-in protest in late December 2010. It was denied, leading the association to make a public statement demanding the firing and prosecution of Interior Minister Prince Nayif in early January 2011.^[3] Unemployed teachers had already demonstrated in August 2010, and did so again on January 8.^[4] In mid-January several Saudi women began a Facebook campaign to allow women to vote for municipal councils.^[5] Clearly, grievances were becoming more public, with events in Tunisia having a demonstration effect—still small—in Saudi Arabia.

While bloggers were discussing events in Tunisia and then in Egypt, two events put a damper on possible contagion from those countries. First, top leaders condemned the uprisings. The widely respected King Abdallah, from his sickbed in Morocco, came out strongly against the demonstrations in Egypt and in support of President Mubarak. Demonstrators were said to be inciting *fitna*, or discord, and therefore going against the traditional Islamic order.^[6] The General Mufti, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah Al al-Shaykh, echoed the king, accusing the demonstrators of sowing discord between the people and the rulers.^[7] Such strong statements by these two pillars of Saudi rule—the Al Saud and the religious establishment—signaled strongly that the kingdom would not tolerate similar acts at home, thus raising the stakes for anyone contemplating demonstrations.

However, the main event occupying Saudis in late January 2011 was the disastrous flooding in Jeddah, which killed at least ten people. People were trapped in cars and in office buildings. Similar flooding in November 2009 killed 123 people.[8] At that time, the government had imposed a news blackout on the floods, but outraged Jeddah residents posted images on Facebook and YouTube. The regime took notice, and it fired 50 officials deemed responsible. For Saudis, this was an example of what the internet could do.[9] And now, once again, the government's incompetence was on display for all to see. On January 28, 2011, police arrested dozens of protesters in Jeddah who were outraged by the floods.[10] Their attention had temporarily been distracted from Egypt and Tunisia, but people were making connections between their own government's lack of accountability and what was going on in Tahrir Square.

Attention moved back to the local implications of what was going on in Egypt as events became more dramatic there in February. Taking their cue from Tahrir's main slogan, a Facebook page was opened under the title: "The People Demand Reform of the Regime," stopping just short of Tahrir's call for toppling the regime. The group, perhaps connected to Islamist exile's Sa'd al-Faqih's Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, called for an elected parliament, political freedoms, and the right to organize political parties, women's rights, and a constitutional monarchy.[11]

On February 10, 2011, Islamists announced the formation of the Islamic Umma Party (IUP, Hizb al-Umma al-Islami). Most of the founders seemed to be clerics not connected to the religious establishment. They sent a letter notifying the Royal Court that the party had been established. Speaking in an Islamic idiom, the party demanded political freedoms, elections to the legislature, and the right to engage in advocacy of peaceful political reform.[12] Political parties are illegal in Saudi Arabia. The regime therefore did not take kindly to the establishment of the IUP, arresting several of its leaders on the night of February 16, 2011. [13]

While on the one hand taking swift action against those who crossed the line by forming a political party, the regime acted in the traditional manner by demonstrating that it was willing to lend an ear. Prince Khalid al-Faysal, a contender for the throne and governor of the Mecca Province, where Jeddah is located, invited five media personalities to a televised briefing on the situation following the floods. Among the invitees was Fuad al-Farhan, a blogger who had once been arrested and banned from traveling. Khalid asked Farhan to send his regards to the "young people on Twitter." [14] A slightly more pathetic step was a Facebook page apparently set up by the Chief of the Royal Court Khalid bin Abd al-Aziz al-Tuwayjri, where people were invited to fax in their complaints—something they could already do.[15]

This was all occurring while King Abdallah was still recuperating in Morocco. There seemed to be a sense of "no one at the helm." Abdallah was the most reformist-minded of the key family figures, yet was unavailable. The people were assured that his health was excellent and that he would return home soon. [16]

Yet while still in Morocco, the king responded to protests in a time-tested manner: He offered government aid. The first installment was the announcement that the king would write off \$156 million in housing loans. [17] The governor of Riyadh Province, Prince Salman, announced the expansion of a food bank, which he named for the king.[18]

However, the biggest announcement was timed for the king's return on February 23, 2011. With oil prices at over \$100 a barrel filling his coffers, the king opened the Privy Purse. Saudi Arabia would introduce 19

new measures at an estimated cost of over \$36 billion. The measures were aimed primarily at the unemployed youth, to help them with unemployment benefits and ameliorate trouble in finding affordable housing. According to the chief economist for Bank Saudi Fransi, John Sfakianakis, joblessness for Saudis under age 30 was 27 percent in 2009, including about 39 percent of those between 20 and 24. Huge sums were also allocated for students in higher income brackets studying abroad at their own expense. Grants were to be made for household expenses and renovations (the latter a gesture to those with homes damaged by the Jeddah floods); a temporary 15 percent salary increase for state employees was made permanent. Those in lower income brackets would “certainly benefit tremendously,” Sfakianakis stressed, but long-term solutions would still require extensive “Saudization” of the private sector, where only one out of ten employees was a Saudi citizen.[19] The private sector preferred to hire cheaper, non-Saudi labor.

In the meantime, events in the kingdom and the region as a whole began a slide in the Saudi stock market, where millions of Saudis gambled their fortunes. On March 1, 2011, the Tadawul All Share Index saw its biggest drop in more than two years. Yet, true to form, it was reported that government funds had bought stock in all sectors, causing a recovery. On March 9, Saudi royal billionaire Prince al-Walid bin Talal gave the market a boost by announcing that he was buying \$133 million in Saudi stocks, and was considering another investment on the same scale. “The Saudi economy is solid,” he said in an e-mailed statement.[20] Once again, the Saudi state had come to the financial rescue of its citizens.

While the Al Saud timed the aid package for the king’s return and mass welcome by a grateful population, Saudi dissidents riding the wave of protests in the Arab world were preparing another kind of welcome. This was in the form of a “Letter from Saudi Youth” calling for a national dialogue conference with binding recommendations and massive governmental reforms that would allow young people a more active role in decision-making.[21] A few days later, another petition appeared with a bit more gravitas. Signed initially by more than 100 leading liberal Saudi academics, businessmen, and activists, the “Declaration of National Reform” called for the people to be the source of legitimacy, for the country to move in the direction of a constitutional monarchy, and for oversight of government spending to assure equitable distribution of wealth. Prominent Shi’i activists were signatories as well. By March 10, 2011, the document had nearly 900 signatures.[22] Other petitions were also issued. According to contacts in Saudi Arabia, the government was blocking the websites carrying the petitions. These petitions were reminiscent of previous ones issued in 1990-1991 and 2003, but this was now the age of the internet, and the new petitions echoed much more widely.

SAUDI SHI’A AND THE BAHRAIN EFFECT

The Sunnis are the majority in Saudi Arabia, and they do not have a historical tradition of mass political activity, such as in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. This is not the case with the Shi’i population, comprising 10-15 percent of Saudi citizens and concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province, just across the King Fahd Causeway from majority-Shi’i Bahrain. They have often demonstrated, including violently, and have been put down with equal violence. Throughout Saudi history, they have protested discrimination and persecution by their Al Saud rulers, who draw their inspiration from the viscerally anti-Shi’i Wahhabi trend of Sunni Islam. Many Saudis do not trust the Shi’a, believing them to be agents of Iranian influence.

It was no surprise, therefore, that the first serious signs of public unrest would come from the Shi'a. Following demonstrations by fellow Shi'a in Bahrain in mid-February, a small but vocal demonstration was held in Awwamiya to protest the detention of Saudi Shi'i activists. The government responded by releasing them, but this only drew another demonstration in Qatif the next week for more prisoners to be released. [23] On or around February 27, 2011, the authorities arrested a Shi'i cleric, Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amir, for calling for a constitutional monarchy. Yet true to its carrot and stick approach, at the same time the regime allowed the reopening of several Shi'i mosques in the city of al-Khobar. [24] Further small demonstrations in early March raised only the issue of prisoners. Demonstrators could be heard chanting "no violence, no violence" (*silmiyya, silmiyya*) as had protesters in Bahrain and Egypt. [25] In early October 2011, violent clashes in Awwamiya left several security personnel injured. The government accused Iran—"a foreign country"—of fomenting the riots. [26]

The Saudi regime sees itself as a patron of the Bahrain's al-Khalifa ruling family. Should the al-Khalifa fall, it would be a very bad sign for the Al Saud. It might signal the downfall of the Gulf rulers and would certainly encourage Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a. Residents of Saudi Arabia reported that YouTube videos of the Bahraini demonstrations were being blocked in the kingdom. Riyadh was understandably anxious—even desperate—to make sure that the al-Khalifa survived its most serious challenge to date. The Saudis called a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign ministers in Manama on February 17, 2011, who pledged full political, economic, security, and defense support for the al-Khalifa. [27] Together with the United States, Riyadh was trying to move the Bahrainis toward talks and some compromise with the opposition. [28] The GCC countries also were reported to be offering financial aid to Bahrain and Oman (which had also seen demonstrations). [29]

The main message was clear: "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stands with all its capabilities behind the state and the brotherly people of Bahrain," read an official statement. [30]

DAY OF RAGE? NOT YET.

The calls for a "Day of Rage" on March 11, 2011, after Friday prayers seems to have emerged from the influence of similar calls by Shi'i activists in Bahrain and Egypt. Several Facebook pages were established for the event but did not seem to gather more than a few thousand "likes." [31] The low number could be attributed to Saudi blocking but just as easily could be a result of most Saudis not willing to cross the line.

The stakes, however, had been raised. Could Saudi dissidents mobilize enough people? Would people take to the streets? Would it be mostly Shi'a whom the regime could dismiss, or would significant numbers of Sunnis join as well? With organizing and popular mobilization being closely monitored, the regime made it clear that no demonstrations would be tolerated. It mobilized close to 10,000 troops to be ready for protests in the Eastern Province and went through another round of arrests and releases in the region. [32]

A moment of reckoning was on the horizon. A Day of Rage was a level of magnitude much greater than the previous demonstrations, and the Al Saud were not backing down. The Interior Ministry warned on March 5, 2011, in no uncertain terms, that no demonstrations would be tolerated. Surely in the back of the

rulers' minds were the violent Iranian-inspired demonstrations in 1979-1980, known by the locals as the "Intifada of the Eastern Province." The Council of Senior Scholars, representing the religious establishment, published a paean to the regime as a rock of stability and unity based on Islamic principles, hinting at outside influences that had caused discord and crisis. The council stressed the necessity of unanimity of opinion under the benevolent rulers, and warned darkly against following deviant unnamed intellectual and partisan trends. The reference appeared to be aimed at the liberal petitions and the banned Islamic Umma Party. As it had on previous occasions in the 1990s, it stated that the proper Islamic way to redress grievances was through (silently offered) advice, and not through proclamations and demonstration.[33]

To many young people, the statement must have sounded like anachronistic and hackneyed palliatives that were out of touch with the internet age. Yet the massing of troops and the warnings from the highest authorities were designed to deter street protesters. The regime hoped that it would not be forced to use violence and open itself up to the kind of condemnation heaped upon bin Ali and Mubarak, but it seemed clear that it would not hesitate to do so.

As expected, the Saudis were working their tribal and regional ties before March 11. Leaders came to the king's palace in Riyadh to proclaim their loyalty. The head of a clan from the Dawasir tribe disowned one of their dissident sons as a renegade.[34]

All mosque preachers and imams received orders from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs instructing them to read out the warning against demonstrations issued by the minister of interior, stressing that demonstrations were forbidden and sinful.[35] On the night of March 10, Shi'a in the Eastern Province city of Qatif demonstrated for the release of prisoners arrested for the al-Khobar Towers bombing, which had occurred 1996. The authorities opened fire, wounding three protesters.[36]

With this warning visible to all, the March 11 Day of Rage did not materialize. Saudi police flooded areas in Riyadh where demonstrators were urged to congregate. Friday prayers ended with no Sunni protests as worshippers left the mosques peacefully.[37]

Even though opposition groups of various stripes had called for a "Day of Rage" on March 11, the Saudi royal family made sure that it would not happen. Using a combination of tribal connections,[38] an appeal to religious legitimacy,[39] and an overwhelming deployment of force on the streets, the regime let it be known that no protests would be tolerated. In the end, journalists could find only one protester to talk to—and he was soon hauled off for questioning. The local Saudi Arabia press—all government authorized—praised the Saudi people for their loyalty to the leadership.[40] Minister of interior and third in line for the throne, Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, stressed that the Saudi people followed Islam and the religious leadership. The Saudi royal family and that of other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, he emphasized, wished "to provide means of a decent living for all citizens and mobilize their countries' resources for this purpose." [41] Saudi billionaire Prince Walid bin Talal was correct to call the failed Day of Rage a "tempest in a teacup." [42]

Across the board, senior princes weighed in with statements underlying the connection between the state and the people. Their view was that the leadership and the state were inseparable. Thus Prince Sultan bin Salman, chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities and son of the governor of Riyadh, announced, "Every citizen of this country is a responsible person. Here the state is the citizen and the citizen is the state. There is no division between the leadership and the citizens." [43]

Although one might be tempted to dismiss this self-congratulatory rhetoric, the failure of the Day of Rage could also be attributed to a deep sense of foreboding. While many types of oppositionists wished for quicker reforms, less corruption, and more equitable distribution of wealth, very few Saudis were ready to part with the monarchy and the stability it had provided for so many decades. This, combined with the lack of a tradition of mass political activity, turned the planned Day of Rage into the “Day of the Silent Pledge of Fealty,” or *bay’a*, as *al-Sharq al-Awsat* editor Tariq al-Humayd called March 11.[44]

THE KING’S SPEECH: \$91 BILLION FOR MY SUBJECTS

In February 2011, King Abdallah had announced a welfare package valued at \$36 billion, but more was yet to come. On March 18, he announced a further distribution of wealth to the tune of about \$91 billion. The handouts, detailed in a series of 21 royal decrees, included a payment of two months’ salary to all government employees, a two-month stipend to all students in institutes of higher education, a stipend of over \$500 a month to all job-seekers, raising the amount of interest-free loans, upgrading health facilities; the promised construction of 500,000 housing units to the tune of \$66.7 billion, and the creation of 60,000 law enforcement jobs at the Ministry of Interior.[45] Coopting more citizens into the ministry’s security apparatus was a master stroke—even more Saudis would have a stake in assuring stability.

The handouts represented more of the same Saudi style of placating discontent, but it seemed to have worked. It put the Saudi welfare system on a regular and established footing. The Al Saud-owned English-language daily, *Arab News*, might have been exaggerating when it wrote that the decrees had “opened a new chapter in the relationship between state and citizen,”[46] but they were a clear demonstration that the royal family would use its oil wealth to stay in power. According to John Sfakianakis of Banque Saudi Fransi in Riyadh, while all the measures could not be implemented immediately, with oil prices comfortably over \$100 a barrel and with \$444.5 billion in foreign assets, the government could comfortably sustain the measures.[47]

The announcement also had another intended effect. With millions of Saudis invested in the Saudi stock exchange, the decrees caused the market to spike, reaching a five-week high by the end of the month.[48] Saudi poured into the streets, screaming “I love you my King Abdullah!”[49]

SOME MOVEMENT: MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS HELD, WOMEN GRANTED FUTURE SUFFRAGE

A few days later, the Saudi government announced that long-delayed municipal elections would finally be held in September 2011. The turnout was meager, reflecting the general consensus that the councils had little real power. The move was widely seen as a concession to liberal activists, but it was essentially a minor step and would not placate them, particularly since women would not be permitted to participate—despite expectations to the contrary.[50] Although municipal elections of a sort had been held in the Eastern Province in the 1960s,[51] nationwide elections were held for the first time in 2005. They had been scheduled again for 2009, but the Al Saud had delayed them indefinitely in order to mollify conservatives during the years of the al-Qa’ida insurgency. While the elections were only for half the seats

in the councils—the others were appointees of the royal family—they represented an opportunity for some real politicking. Still, the move fell far short of reformist expectations.

In a more significant move, King Abdallah made a surprise announcement in late September 2011: Women would be allowed to vote and be candidates in the next round of elections, scheduled for 2015. Women were also to be appointed to the essentially powerless Consultative Council. Though these were still limited steps, joining the Consultative Council and the severely hamstrung municipal councils were socially significant developments, as they moved women more into the public sphere—from which they are conspicuously absent. Some women, though, were quoted by the foreign press as preferring the right to drive over voting for bodies with little power; at least driving would bring practical improvement to their lives.[52]

SAUDI-LED FORCES DEPLOY TO BAHRAIN

“Tsunami of Saudi Consciousness” (<http://www.alriyadh.com>, via <http://www.jadaliyya.com>)

The Saudi leadership watched nervously as the Shi'i majority in Bahrain was engaged in mass protests beginning in mid-February 2011. It offered expressions of support for the ruling al-Khalifa family, and even financial aid, but it was clear that the Al Saud would not be able to stand idly by while the rule of a fellow Gulf royal family was being mortally threatened. Furthermore, if the Shi'a of Bahrain overthrew the al-Khalifa, it was sure to give encouragement to the Saudis' own minority Shi'i population just across the 16-mile King Fahd Causeway in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Finally, Iran stood to gain tremendously in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia should the Shi'a win in Bahrain. The repercussions were simply too grim for the Al Saud even to consider.

Even though the Shi'a of Bahrain had significant and legitimate grievances, for the Saudi leadership—which had counseled the al-Khalifa to seek rapprochement with the Shi'i opposition—an Iranian gain could not be countenanced. Some liberal Saudis on Facebook, who at first admitted that the Bahrainis had grievances, patriotically fell in line behind the royal family once it and the press began to paint the picture in purely Sunni vs. Shi'a terms, and in Saudi vs. Iran terms. The lines were clearly drawn. A new Facebook page, “We are all the Al Saud” (*Kullna Al Sa'ud*), went up and received over 22,000 likes,[53] just as Saudi troops poured over the causeway into Bahrain on March 14, 2011. Many Saudis feared that Bahrain could become like Lebanon, riven by sectarianism and controlled by radicals like Hizballah. There could be no doubt that Saudi Arabia had legitimate security concerns in Bahrain.

The Saudi forces, mostly from the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which King Abdallah himself had personally commanded since 1962, were invited into Bahrain by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. The UAE, Qatar, and Oman said that they would also send contingents.[54] The Gulf Cooperation Council had been founded in May 1981 as a reaction by the Gulf monarchies to the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Its

Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), to which the Saudi forces were ostensibly subordinate, was created in 1984 to defend against Iran. The PSF was a convenient form of political branding for an overwhelmingly Saudi force.

For the Saudis, the GCC deployment to Bahrain was a clear case of self-defense. Although it was portrayed as answering the call of a sister Gulf nation in need, the Saudis left no doubt that Iran was responsible and had to be stopped. The GCC's March 10, 2011, statement was clearly aimed at Iran:

The [GCC] member states and their peoples... oppose any attempts at foreign intervention in their affairs. They declare that they will stand firmly and with determination against anyone who tries to ignite ethnic fanaticism or to spread sectarianism among them and among their peoples, or against anyone who dares to threaten their security and their interests. Any harm to the security of one member country will be considered as harm to all member countries, and will be dealt with immediately and without hesitation.[55]

The shaky state of neighboring Bahrain and the contagion it represented was a shock to the Al Saud, and it was clear that they were reassessing their security posture as a result. Speaking in Abu Dhabi, Prince Turki al-Faysal, former head of Saudi intelligence and former ambassador to the United States and Britain, called for a united Gulf army, questioned relying on the United States for security, and ominously warned that Saudi Arabia might consider nuclear arms to face Israel and Iran should the international community fail to prevent Iran from going nuclear.[56] The wobbly U.S. response to recent events in the Middle East contributed to the reassessment. Saud's statements and the Saudi deployment to Bahrain was a clear signal that the Al Saud were displeased with the United States and would act in consonance with what they perceived as their interests.

U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS: IT'S COMPLICATED

The so-called Arab Spring was the kind of development that causes states to scramble for a sure footing amid major changes. Heading a superpower with multiple interests across the globe, the Obama administration was torn between liberal interventionists or idealists, who saw U.S. interests as being nearly synonymous with democracy promotion, and pragmatists (also known as realists), who believed that U.S. interests were much wider and that many other factors had to be taken into consideration.[57] Yet the Saudis were a regional power and had to deal with the revolutionary fires licking at their borders in Bahrain, Egypt, and Yemen. Their interests were more clear-cut, the threats closer by and much more immediate.

As the United States searched for a clear and meaningful response to the events in Egypt, Bahrain, and eventually Saudi Arabia itself, the Al Saud were puzzled and eventually angered by Washington's policy. In the Saudi view, it had treated Mubarak shabbily, and it was reported that King Abdallah had upbraided President Obama about it.[58] The royal family was asking, "Is this any way to treat a U.S. ally?" The

head of al-Arabiyya satellite channel, prominent journalist Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, wrote that Obama was encouraging Iran and meddling in Egyptian affairs; the Egyptians in the street would not requite the U.S. love.[59] The veteran Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faysal, spoke sharply of “interference in the internal affairs of Egypt by some countries.”[60]

Toward the end of February 2011, Obama sent the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael Mullen, to calm the Saudis and others in the region.[61] But On March 7, 2011, State Department Spokesman P.J. Crowley said that the United States supported the right of peaceful assembly, “including [in] Saudi Arabia.” Foreign Minister Saud al-Faysal was livid. The Saudis supported dialogue, he said. “Change will come through the citizens of this kingdom and not through foreign fingers, we don’t need them. We will cut any finger that crosses into the kingdom.” The last phrase may have referred to Iran as well.[62] Relations appeared to be under strain. An unnamed U.S. official sought to calm the Saudis in an interview with *al-Hayat*, stressing that relations were firm and based on principles and mutual interests. [63] Still, it was clear that the United States now believed that democracy in Egypt and reform in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were the key to stability. The Al Saud would probably have to give, somewhere.

Already indignant at the way Washington washed its hands of Egypt’s President Mubarak, the Saudis were further disappointed with the Obama administration’s handling of the crisis on Bahrain. For Riyadh, Washington’s lack of resolve toward what the Al Saud perceived as a real Iranian threat was not easy to stomach. After all, it was King Abdallah who had asked the United States to “cut off the head of the snake.”[64]

Contacts between the two countries were already tense just before the Saudi deployment. Both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were forced to cancel visits to the kingdom. “They’re just not in a mode for listening,” said a senior American official.[65] Gates visited Bahrain on March 11, 2011, but was not informed of the pending Saudi deployment, according to the Pentagon.[66] While the administration wanted the Saudis to counsel the Bahrainis to open up their system, the Saudis answer to that effort came with the deployment.[67] They would have preferred that the United States mount a serious defense of the al-Khalifa. All the United States did was urge “restraint.”[68] In Egypt, Secretary Clinton was not helpful in the Saudi view. “We find what’s happening in Bahrain alarming,” said Clinton. “We think that there is no security answer to the aspirations and demands of the demonstrators.” [69] The Saudi attitude was summed up in a cartoon in the Saudi-owned daily *al-Hayat*, which showed an Iranian tinkering with a nuclear missile. As an American tank commander barks at him from a megaphone, the soldier’s cannon emits a white flag that says: “Bang.”[70]

All this did not mean that the United States and Saudi Arabia were about to part ways. There were still deeply entrenched defense procurement and training relations, and the Iranian enemy was not going away. Nevertheless, relations were shaken. U.S. officials were probably looking closely at Crown Prince Sultan and third-in-line Prince Nayif to assess what would come next. Abdallah did not seem to be recovering well from his operation in the previous year, and he looked visibly weakened when appearing in public.[71]

According to reports, the United States had tried to head off the deployment of Saudi troops to Bahrain. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman was on the ground in Manama trying to mediate an agreement between the ruling al-Khalifa family and the opposition.[72] After what the Saudis saw as the U.S. abandonment of Mubarak, even a phone call from President Obama did not go well.[73] Aware that the Saudis were angered at the choices made by the United States in the Arab

Spring, in April 2011, the United States sent in top officials to mollify the rulers of Riyadh. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates arrived in Riyadh early in the month and met with King Abdallah, after having been rebuffed (along with Secretary of State Clinton) in March. Gates did not reveal much about the meeting, but he did repeat previous statements: “We already have evidence that the Iranians are trying to exploit the situation in Bahrain,” adding, “We also have evidence that they are talking about what they can do to try and create problems elsewhere in the region.”[74]

Less than a week later, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon arrived in Riyadh to deliver a personal letter from Obama to Abdallah. Although the contents of the letter were not revealed, the back-to-back visits suggested that both countries were keen to put the relations back on an even keel. According to a senior Saudi official, the trips were an effort to discuss “how do we move forward...given all the things that are happening, in ways that best protect interests.” Donilon told *Washington Post* writer David Ignatius the letter contained a message about “the bond we have in a relationship of 70 years that’s rooted in shared strategic interest.”[75]

The Saudis, however, rallied support for their approach and signaled to the United States that it was not the only fish in the pond. At the end of March 2011, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former ambassador to Washington, was dispatched to China, India, and Pakistan. Bruce Reidel, a career CIA officer who has advised four presidents on Middle East and South Asian issues in the White House on the staff of the National Security Council, wrote that Bandar was reportedly checking out Pakistani readiness to send troops to Gulf countries to support regime stability. According to Reidel, he invoked an understanding from the 1980s when the Pakistanis had sent over 10,000 troops to protect the kingdom after the revolution in Iran. His trip to China was also designed to shore up Beijing’s support for the Saudi regime.[76] The courting of China (as well as Russia) is not new. For many years, but with greater intensity under the Obama administration, the Saudis have been hedging their bets.[77]

PUTTING THE UNITED STATES ON NOTICE—WHILE DEFENSE COOPERATION CONTINUES

On June 10, 2011, former Ambassador to Washington Prince Turki al-Faysal published an op-ed in the *Washington Post*[78] excoriating President Obama for his support of Israel and abandonment of the Palestinians in his May 19, 2011, speech (which many pro-Israeli forces believed was anything but pro-Israel). Yet the Arabs also have a term for what Prince Turki and some other Saudi talking heads have been saying lately: *kalam fadi*—empty words.

With Saudi Arabia challenged by the “Arab Spring” and accused of leading the counter-revolutionary forces,[79] Turki sought to boost the legitimacy of the Saudi ruling family by taking up the Palestinian cudgel and waving it at the United States. In doing so, he was following a time-honored practice of Arab leaders: divert attention from domestic shortcomings by talking up the Palestinian issue.

According to Turki, Saudi Arabia was a “bulwark of the Middle East”; if Americans thought that Israel was an indispensable ally, “They will soon learn that there are other players in the region.... The game of

favoritism toward Israel has not proven wise for Washington, and soon it will be shown to be an even greater folly.” Turki huffed, “There will be disastrous consequences for U.S.-Saudi relations if the United States vetoes U.N. recognition of a Palestinian state.”

Turki’s op-ed came about a month after Saudi security consultant Nawaf Obaid ominously declared[80] that Saudi Arabia, angered over American’s “ill-conceived response” to the Arab protests and support for Israel, had brought the “oil-for-security arrangement” between the countries to an end. Obaid works for Turki, who chairs the King Faisal Center for Research & Islamic Studies in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia, he concluded, would “recalibrate the partnership.” If they could ever even get it published, one can only imagine the Saudi response to American leaders using this tone in the Saudi press.

Yet the truth is that the Saudis are all bark and no bite. They have been complaining openly about U.S. policy in the Middle East since before the establishment of Israel but have not hesitated to reassure U.S. officials privately[81] that these policies would not jeopardize the relationship with Washington.

U.S.-Saudi defense and energy relations are simply so tightly woven that petulant Saudi princes and their minions cannot tear them apart.

First, Washington is far and away the main arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, and the United States continues to train its troops. In addition to an arms deal worth over \$60 billion[82] announced to Congress in October 2010, from November 2010 to June 2011, an additional \$3.7 billion in weapons sales were announced, ranging from Patriot air and missile defense systems to cluster bombs. The United States apparently continues to train a nearly secret new Facilities Security Force (FSF) designed to protect sensitive oil installations. Overseen by Central Command through the Office of the Program Manager – Facilities Securities Force (OPM-FSF), the unit was expected, over time, to reach 35,000 strong.[83] As of June 2011, there were over 450 active duty military personnel in the kingdom[84] and countless other civilian personnel under military contract. During May 2011, over 20 U.S. defense and security companies joined in a trade mission to Saudi Arabia headed by former American Secretary of Defense William Cohen.[85]

As oil prices climbed to over \$120 a barrel in May-June 2011, Saudi and U.S. fundamental interests intersected once again. The Saudis were worried that consumers would cut use or move to alternative energy, while Washington was concerned that high prices would impede economic recovery. In secret meetings between U.S. and Saudi officials in May 2011, the Saudis initially refused to increase production. Ahead of the June 2011 OPEC meeting, the United States also proposed putting urgently needed high quality crude from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve on the market, to be replaced by low-quality Saudi crude. The Saudis initially refused both. But in the end, Riyadh did increase production, and the United States opened the SPR. Oil prices dropped.

Despite Obaid’s grouching, the administration was making an effort to come toward the Saudis. In President Obama’s May 19, 2011, speech he seemed to be giving Riyadh a pass on reform and democracy: “There will be times when our short-term interests do not align perfectly with our long-term vision of the region.”[86] A mention of Saudi Arabia was noticeably absent from the speech.

Like with another defense partner, Israel, it is clear that the United States and the Saudis will not always see eye-to-eye and at times may conceive of security interests differently. Yet in the grand scheme of things, the United States shares with the Saudis and the other GCC countries a desire for stability and the free flow of oil. Iran is a threat to this strategic goal. It would seem that the United States will let the Saudis

have their head on this issue. Despite Saudi talk of recalibration, Riyadh knows that when push comes to shove it can count on the United States.

This is certainly a rocky stretch in relations between Riyadh and Washington. As the United States struggles to align its interests with its values, it finds it more difficult to support authoritarian monarchies like Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Values and interests, however, do not neatly align themselves in international relations. While the United States wants to be on the side of democracy and against authoritarianism, the authoritarian Islamic regime in Riyadh is still essential to long-term interests of stability and assuring oil supply.

There have been those who have counseled the administration to reach a new understanding with the Saudis that would lead to the establishment of constitutional monarchies in the region.[87] It seems, though, the Saudis are in no mood for such talk and will not be in the mood for many years. King Abdallah is over 90 years old and ailing. The Crown Prince, Sultan, passed away in late October 2011. The next in line, Prince Nayif, is a known conservative. It is hard to conceive of the Saudi ruling family countenancing any power-sharing arrangement in the near future. Both countries will have to continue strategic cooperation, even as their values continue to be at odds. But the United States could help the relationship by ramping up pressure on Iran.

SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONS: TEMPERATURES AT THE BOILING POINT

Saudi Arabia relates to Bahrain much like America relates to Latin America,[88] which it views as its sphere for influence. For Saudi Arabia, having an Iranian presence there is what it would be like for the United States to have Russian troops stationed in Puerto Rico, or perhaps more like having Soviet missiles in Cuba. It is simply too close for comfort. Saudi King Abdallah was firm: “The security of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is indivisible—two bodies with one soul.”[89]

The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, rejected “Iranian interference” in their internal affairs at a meeting of foreign ministers held in Riyadh on April 3, 2011.[90] Assistant Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Sultan told Saudi troops to be prepared for all eventualities: “Iran should listen to reason while making statements. What we care about the most is the directives of our leadership to protect the security of our borders and our region.”[91] The clerical establishment, led by General Mufti Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh decried Iranian “hypocrisy and deception,” calling them “Zoroastrians,” or pre-Islamic Persian polytheists, a common Sunni epithet for Shi’a.[92]

Across the Gulf, a stream of invective poured forth from Iran. In early April 2011, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called on Saudi Arabia to remove its troops from Bahrain, saying that the “Saudis did an ugly thing to deploy troops.”[93] Alaeddin Borojerdi, chairman of the Iranian parliament’s national security and foreign policy committee, called the Saudi move an “occupation.”[94] “Students,” or perhaps members of the government-sponsored Basij organization, firebombed the Saudi embassy in Tehran.[95] The hardline daily *Keyhan* called the leaders of Saudi Arabia “Hebrews” since they supposedly did the

bidding of Israel. The daily also warned the kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia that they would face the same fate as Mubarak.[96] Leading cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati said that the “Wahhabi” leaders of Saudi Arabia “stunk” because of their invasion of Bahrain.[97]

Iranian websites carried videos purported to be images of Saudis destroying eight Shi’i mosques in Bahrain and burning pages of the Koran.[98] The Chief of the General Command Headquarters Maj. Gen. Seyyed Hasan Firuzabadi stressed that the “Islamic awakening” could not be stopped by the Saudis. “Saudi Arabia made the biggest mistake when it intruded into Bahrain,” he said.[99] One of the leaders of Ansar-e Hezbollah with close ties to the regime, Hossein Allah Karam, threatened to send suicide bombers to Saudi cities.[100] A ranking member of the Revolutionary Guards, Mustafa Mlkotien, called for the training of Shi’i cells in Bahrain to carry out sabotage in Saudi Arabia.[101] Most ominously, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i, threatened, “The presence and attitude of Saudi Arabia (in Bahrain) sets an incorrect precedence for similar future events, and Saudi Arabia should consider this fact that one day the very same event may recur in Saudi Arabia itself and Saudi Arabia may come under invasion for the very same excuse.”[102]

As popular demonstrations spread in Syria, with which Riyadh has been at odds for years over Lebanon, the Saudi press condemned Iranian support for the Bashar al-Asad regime.[103] Iran itself blames Saudi Arabia, along with Jordan, for the unrest in Syria.[104] Gen. Hasan Firuzabadi lashed out at the Saudi presence in Bahrain, stating that “unfair and unIslamic moves will hurt the honor of Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and it will threaten the security of Saudi Arabia.”[105] The Saudis refused to see Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi during a tour of Gulf countries in early May 2011. Saudi sources said that in order to see Salehi, Iran would first have to apologize for the vandalism to its consulate in Mashhad and the attack on its embassy in Tehran.[106] An attempt by an Iranian flotilla to support the Shi’a of Bahrain was turned back by GCC warships.[107]

In early May 2011, the GCC said that statements such as those by Firuzabadi were “aggressive and reflect [Iran’s] expansionist intentions.”[108] Saudi King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz told his cabinet in mid-March 2011 that the GCC would remain united against any outside country that threatened a member country.[109] To emphasize the point, it was announced that Saudi forces would remain in Bahrain even after the promised lifting of emergency rule in June 2011.[110] Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Shaykh Khalid al-Khalifa told PBS NewsHour that the Gulf countries were looking for ways to expand the GCC forces in order “to have multiple bases everywhere in the GCC.”[111]

Meanwhile, on May 16, 2011, a Saudi diplomat was gunned down in Karachi, Pakistan, just four days after a grenade attack on the city’s Saudi consulate.[112] While the Pakistani Taliban claimed credit, the Saudi press blamed Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.[113] In mid-October 2011, the U.S. Justice Department indicted an Iranian-American and an Iranian for plotting to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington. The Saudis were livid, and tension increased palpably.

ASSESSING SAUDI ARABIA AND THE “ARAB SPRING”

Many in the West have looked upon the “Arab Spring” with hopeful optimism, but for the rulers of Riyadh,

it has been a train wreck. Although the movement has brought some minor protests at home, viewed from Riyadh, the Arab Spring's primary result has been a shaking of the strategic foundation and alignments that have shaped Saudi regional policy since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Previously it had believed that it was the leader, with U.S. backing, of a united Sunni coalition against Shi'i Iran. Now its partners were falling by the wayside. Egypt appeared to be opting out, Bahrain was threatened, and the United States was wobbling.

Indeed, Iran—and it should not be forgotten that Tehran is well on its way having a nuclear weapon—is now truly the main factor looming over Saudi concerns regarding the Arab Spring. It has long been Riyadh's Islamic rival across the Persian Gulf, the Shi'i powerhouse confronting the conservative Sunni monarchy. It has significant influence among Saudi Arabia's restive minority Shi'i population, which has been demonstrating during the Arab Spring, and was responsible for the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex. Saudi Arabia and Iran lead two rival Islamic traditions and have tangled many times over the years. A Shi'i government is already in power in Iraq (on the United States' watch). Therefore, with the advent of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia believes itself engaged in a zero-sum game in which it can give no quarter.

DO THE SAUDIS HAVE ANY OPTIONS? THE KING'S DILEMMA

While the influence of the young has grown, Saudi Arabia remains a very traditional society. Too much reform, too fast, and the Al Saud will undermine the support of its conservative base. King Abdallah will have to continue the balancing act of reform and tradition that he has been carrying out since his influence began to be felt in 2000 while still crown prince.

There are some steps the Al Saud can take without undermining the current order. Women could finally be allowed to drive, which is a symbol of modernity that many Saudis want. This was a concrete step proposed by Prince al-Walid bin Talal in an interview with Reuters on March 9, 2011. According to Walid, it would immediately send over 750,000 foreign drivers home.^[114] The government could step up Saudization of the private sector to counter unemployment. Other possibilities for reform include allowing elections for the appointed Consultative Council, as demanded by the reformers. The Al Saud could initially monitor candidates by vetting them, as is done in Iran, with a promise to allow entirely free elections in four years.

Meanwhile, the steps the regime has been taking to defuse the current crisis seem to be working. For the present, the Sunni majority is not culturally accustomed to mass demonstrations; the violence in Libya has reminded many of the consequences of chaos. Tribal and family connections remain very strong in the kingdom and militate against an organized opposition in such a large and heavily populated country. Still, it will be fascinating to watch this current young generation. It is too early to assess the effects of social networking, but it will be interesting to see if connections made online someday compete with traditional social ties.^[115] The jury is still out. After all, tribes also have websites.^[116]

Columnist Maureen Dowd once remarked that observing change in Saudi Arabia was like watching a snail on Ambien. The Saudis will have to consider picking up the pace, but no doubt are painfully aware of what

Samuel Huntington once termed the “king’s dilemma,” meaning that “limited reforms introduced from the top often increase rather than decrease bottom-up demand for more radical change.” The Iranian shah’s “White Revolution” was a case in point, as was Gorbachev’s perestroika.^[117] It is therefore likely that Ambien will remain the preferred medication of the Al Saud snail.

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[19] *Arab News*, February 24, 2011; "Banque Saudi Fransi: Flash Note: Reaching Out: Saudi King Unveils String of Social Benefits, Debt Write-offs," February 24, 2011, http://groups.google.com/group/kantakjigroup/browse_thread/thread/4c3e2b67e56c1112. In another decree issued a few days later, all those on temporary employment contracts with the government were given permanent jobs. Nearly 180,000 employees stood to benefit from this largesse. *Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2011; *Arab News*, February 28, 2011.

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