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### Saudi Arabia in the Shadow of the Arab Revolt

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My dissident Saudi driver asked a startling question: “What do you think? Will it be reform or revolution here?” I avoided an answer by asking him the same question in return. He, too, demurred, saying only that he thought Saudis were better off than the people in Egypt and Tunisia where, unexpectedly, uprisings had toppled autocratic leaders in lightning speed earlier in 2011.

The term “revolution” has quickly taken hold in the Arab imagination to describe the exercise of a new-found people’s power in imitation of the various “color revolutions” that shook Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So far, the main parallel has been the ousting of unpopular leaders propped up by ubiquitous security services—a

feat so extraordinary in itself that Arab and foreign commentators alike regard it as a watershed in Arab history. Lasting change has yet to take place, however, in the ruling Arab elite, and the fate of democracy remains uncertain. Still, the emergence of the *vox populi* in Arab politics has been so earth-shaking in its ramifications that the term “revolution” seems justified in the eyes of hundreds of millions of Arabs whose voices have never counted for anything.

Signs of even slight unrest in Saudi Arabia have become enough to send international oil and stock markets into a tizzy and for good reason. Beneath the vast desert of its Eastern Province lies a gigantic reservoir holding one quarter of the world’s known oil reserves. Saudi production capacity of 12.5 million barrels a day is the largest of any producer, giving it the moniker of the “central bank” of the oil world. Even after making up for much of the loss of strife-torn Libya’s output, the

## About the Middle East Program

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The Middle East Program was launched in February 1998 in light of increased U.S. engagement in the region and the profound changes sweeping across many Middle Eastern states. In addition to spotlighting day-to-day issues, the Program concentrates on long-term economic, social, and political developments, as well as relations with the United States.

The Middle East Program draws on domestic and foreign regional experts for its meetings, conferences, and occasional papers. Conferences and meetings assess the policy implications of all aspects of developments within the region and individual states; the Middle East's role in the international arena; American interests in the region; the threat of terrorism; arms proliferation; and strategic threats to and from the regional states.

The Program pays special attention to the role of women, youth, civil society institutions, Islam, and democratic and autocratic tendencies. In addition, the Middle East Program hosts meetings on cultural issues, including contemporary art and literature in the region.

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kingdom had spare capacity of three to four million barrels. Oil speculators and traders ponder daily whether Saudi oil will continue to be available and, if so, at what price. Former Saudi oil minister, Sheikh Zaki Yamani, opined in early April 2011 that serious unrest in the kingdom could see the price of a barrel of oil skyrocket to \$300, crippling the world economy. When the Associated Press reported from Cairo one day in early March that Saudi police had fired “on” Shiite protesters in the Eastern Province city of Qatif, the price of oil jumped \$3 within 12 minutes.

A Reuters correspondent living in Riyadh filed a more cautious report stating Saudi police had fired “over the heads” of protesters to disperse them. Even that version was so disturbing to Saudi authorities that they expelled the correspondent.

No wonder so many eyes remain fixed on the state of the kingdom’s political health.

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In mid-March 2011, I visited the kingdom to make my own assessment of its stability in the midst of the political turmoil churning the Arab world and lapping at Saudi borders. It was my fourth trip since the horrific 9/11 events and probably the 20<sup>th</sup> since I first started visiting there in 1976. This time was my first, however, to visit the kingdom while hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy protesters were in the streets in neighboring countries. In Yemen to the west, two months of almost daily protests to force President Ali Saleh from power had reduced his writ to the gates of the presidential residence. To the east, the Shiite majority in Bahrain had gone from pressing for reforms to calling for the end of the two-century old Sunni rule of the Al-Khalifa family.

Trouble was also brewing inside the kingdom, where I found signs of social and political unrest similar to what Egypt and Tunisia had witnessed prior to their “revolutions.” Saudi liberals and Islamists alike, inspired by events in Cairo and Tunis, had delivered petition after petition to King

Abdullah demanding elections and other reforms leading to a powerless constitutional monarchy. The more militant liberals had called for a “Day of Rage” in the streets on March 11 to increase popular pressure on the Saudi royal family. The king, now 87, had returned on February 24 from a three-month stay in New York, where he had undergone a back operation for a herniated disc. His fitness to continue on the throne was very much on the public mind, and hopes ran high that he would announce a new government and at least

partial elections for the appointed consultative Shura Council. Enjoying arguably the highest popularity ratings of any Arab leader, Abdullah had received a truly warm welcome aided by a massive government public relations campaign aimed at his glorification. Immediately upon his return, the king had offered \$36 billion in additional government spending to relieve some of the stress on the financially struggling middle class.

The much ballyhooed “Day of Rage” proved a bust. Organizers said they had signed up 17,000 Saudis, on their Facebook page promoting the event, to participate. Only one protester turned out in Riyadh on March 11, though several hundred Shia had

demonstrated the day before in Qatif. The government had won hands down the test of loyalty to the king, after using every asset at its command to make sure it would. Not only had authorities made clear through the state-controlled media that participation was a ticket straight to jail, they had also mobilized the powerful Wahhabi religious establishment to issue a *fatwa*, or Islamic decree, declaring public protests to be socially divisive, Western-inspired, religiously deviant, and thus *haram*, or strictly forbidden. Failure of the “Day of Rage” reinforced the official conviction that Saudi Arabia remains fundamentally different from other Arab countries, enjoying a special immunity from the contagious pro-democracy bug skipping from one country to another.

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The Saudi royal outlook on the kingdom's place in the Arab firmament begins with a belief in its exceptionalism, just as many American historians and politicians hold about the United States. Both point to their countries' special history, geography, and enormous natural resources that have combined to forge unique characteristics. The Saudi case relies heavily on the kingdom's religious roots as the birthplace of Islam and the location of its two holiest sites, as well as the monarchy's Islamic foundation. The first Saudi state under the al-Saud dynasty was founded in 1744. Right from the beginning, it was based on an alliance between a tribal leader, Mohammed bin Saud, and a religious leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulwahab, after whom the strict Saudi fundamentalist brand of Salafism known as Wahhabism is named. The Saudi argument runs that no other Arab nation enjoys such Islamic legitimacy or uses the Koran as its constitution. The most recent iteration of this Saudi narrative came while I was visiting the kingdom in March in a speech given by Prince Salman,

the governor of Riyadh. Speaking at Islamic University in the holy city of Medina, Salman made the claim that the 18<sup>th</sup> century Saudi kingdom was basically a revival of the original Islamic state founded by the Prophet Mohammed. The present Saudi state was thus a direct descendant of the Prophet's.

The elements of Saudi exceptionalism do not stop with its special religious heritage but extend to its amazing natural resources. Allah has blessed the kingdom with the world's largest oil reservoir, one quarter of the world total, with proven reserves of 260 billion barrels, even after four decades of exploiting them at levels reaching ten million barrels a day. Thanks to its God-given oil wealth, Saudi Arabia has become *the* Arab financial powerhouse—the only Arab state included in the elite Group of Twenty nations formulating international financial reforms today. Its foreign reserves in March stood at more than \$500 billion, the world's fourth largest hoard after those of China, Japan, and Russia.

In the Saudi mind, both religion and oil have made the kingdom exceptional.

There are other elements to the al-Saud notion of exceptionalism, namely the fact that the kingdom was never colonized by a European power as other Arab countries were. Modern-day Saudi Arabia was not an invention of Western powers fighting over the spoils of their Arab conquests, but the

result of conquests by an indigenous tribal leader, Abdulaziz bin Saud. This special history allowed the kingdom to escape the penetration of Western culture and values and preserve its Arab and Islamic purity. Not only did Western influences fail to penetrate, but so did all secular ideologies roiling the Arab world since the 1952 Egyptian Revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser, including Arab nationalism and Arab socialism. Subsequently, the Saudis defeated multiple attempts by Iran's Shiite religious clerics to export their 1979 Islamic Revolution into the kingdom. More recently, they crushed Al-Qaeda's terrorist campaign to topple the monarchy. So, the Saudi royal family is convinced that if it holds steadfast, the monar-

chy can withstand as well the current gale-force democratic winds blowing across the Arab world.

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### Visit to Jeddah—Middle Class Discontent

Sprawled out along the Red Sea coast, Jeddah is the kingdom's second largest metropolis and the most Westernized, with a population of at least three million. A relaxed resort-like atmosphere softens the strict social dictates of Wahhabism. The city boasts palm-shaded parks for recreation and restaurants and cafes that stay open most of the night. Modernistic sculptures of sea life and abstract figures dot the parks, circles, and boulevards. A visitor at times is hard put to remember that the most prudish brand of Islam rules Saudi society. Among the advertisements on lighted signs along one main



boulevard was one posting the address and phone number for a “Laser Vaginal Rejuvenation Clinic.”

Jeddah has recently been at the center of national controversy, its reputation for progressive governance besmirched by two 100-year rains that flooded its poorer districts, left 10,000 homeless, and resulted in 133 deaths. The floods in November 2009 and again in January 2011 saw a spontaneous mobilization of Saudi youth and women volunteering to deliver emergency aid—a phenomenon the kingdom had never seen before. The slow response of Jeddah authorities to the two crises provoked wide-scale media criticism and even a few street protests. Making matters worse was the discovery of serious corruption and shoddy work in projects launched after the first flood to build a storm-water drainage system for the city.

As many as 200 local officials and businessmen now face charges of corruption and embezzlement of public funds. Suddenly the issue of corruption has become very public, and one projected onto the national scene with implications for the royal family as well. The Jeddah floods may well mark a turning point in the Saudi public’s willingness to put up silently any longer either with government corruption or poor governance, perhaps a sign of things to come.

The economic and social challenges to the Saudi notion of exceptionalism were on full display during the annual Jeddah Economic Forum, a Saudi version of the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. This year, the focus fell on the Saudi private sector’s likely inability to generate enough jobs to stave off the social unrest bubbling within the middle class. Recent media stories have depicted this class as “shrinking” or even “slowly disappearing” as inflation and the rising cost of living push more Saudis into dire straits.

Saudis have been learning a lot recently about the social and economic ills afflicting a kingdom that once prided itself on a cradle-to-grave welfare system supposedly assuring the well-being of all its subjects. The media has been highlighting not only the high frequency of child obesity, diabetes, and abuse of women but the shockingly high level of serious

poverty. While no official “poverty line” exists, Saudis living on less than \$530 per month are considered to be living at or below this level. Various press reports put their number anywhere from two million to more than three million out of the estimated 18 million to 20 million Saudi nationals in a total population of around 27 million. The government provides a monthly cash payment of \$240 to the poorest 1.5 million. Officially, the unemployment rate is 10.5 percent, but among women it stands at 28 percent, according to a recent Saudi study.

At the same time, the government distributes generous stipends to all 7,000 to 8,000 Saudi princes and their families. The extensive royal welfare system was detailed in U.S. embassy cables from the mid-1990s that Reuters news agency obtained in February 2011 from the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks. Cash subsidies were reported to range from \$270,000 each month for surviving sons of King Abdulaziz to \$8,000 for his great-great-grandchildren. The embassy estimated the total royal payout at \$2 billion a year. In

addition, some princes received bonus payments for marriages and building palaces. Others were allowed to expropriate land from commoners or to obtain state land and then resell it at exorbitant prices. King Abdullah, upon ascending to the throne in 2005, had curbed some of these practices. Still, the U.S. embassy had concluded that “getting a grip on royal family excesses is at the top” of priorities facing the government. The king himself was rated by *Forbes* as the world’s third wealthiest monarch in 2010, with an estimated fortune of \$18 billion.

Today, signs of discontent are coming mostly from the hard-pressed middle class over its own declining fortunes rather than royal corruption. Its sons and daughters are pouring forth in ever greater numbers from Saudi and foreign universities, filled with high expectations but low prospects for finding a job, building a house, or getting married. Each year, the 24 Saudi state universities alone churn out 80,000 to 90,000 graduates—not counting the graduates of myriad private colleges and training centers. Women comprise 58

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percent of Saudi graduates today. There are another 100,000 Saudis studying abroad, nearly 40,000 of them in the United States. Unemployed university grads make up close to one-third of the 43 percent of all youth aged 20 to 24 whom the Central Department of Statistics reported jobless in 2009.

For the first time, the kingdom has begun witnessing demonstrations by jobless male university grads, teachers in particular. They have not taken to the streets in any sizeable number yet, but they are venting their unhappiness on blogs, Facebook, and the like—the same way pro-democracy activists started their movement in Egypt. Two economists from the U.S. consulting firm McKinsey & Company warned the Jeddah Economic Forum that the kingdom's bulging youth population—55 percent of Saudis are under 25 years of age—was about to produce a “tsunami of job seekers.” One of them, Gassan al-Kibsi, calculated that the kingdom would have to cope with six million more job seekers over the next 20 years, arguing that the private sector would be called upon to absorb most of them.

The prospect for this sector ever generating a prosperous middle class was slim, according to al-Kibsi's calculations. Jobs in private companies, on average, paid far lower wages than those in the public sector—\$410 compared to \$1,040 per month. Al-Kibsi predicted that three-fifths of Saudis going into the private sector would earn less than public sector employees. (King Abdullah had just decreed an \$800 minimum monthly wage for public sector employees.) Al-Kibsi's grim prediction: by 2030, the average middle class Saudi family would see its standard of living cut in half, compared to that of today. Meanwhile, the growth of the private sector had slowed to below four percent over the past three years, while it had to reach 6.5 percent to generate enough jobs for Saudi youth, according to the Banque Saudi Fransi's latest “Saudi Arabia Economics” report.

Saudi and foreign economists alike point to the increasing flow of foreign workers onto the Saudi labor market as one of the main causes of Saudi unemployment. Their number has

grown steadily from six million in the 1990s to 8.4 million today, while the official figure of Saudi job seekers in 2010 stood at only 448,547. Ever since I have been coming to the kingdom, the government has highlighted the need for “Saudization” of the economy, periodically pressuring private companies to meet new quotas for hiring Saudi nationals. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief and ambassador to Washington, voiced incomprehension at the government's chronic inability to solve a seemingly simple problem of replacing a small fraction of foreign workers with


jobless Saudis. Despite multiple five-year Saudization campaigns, “we still don't have the right answer. I cannot understand this.” In June, the government launched yet another effort to force companies to hire more Saudis, limiting foreign worker visa to six years for those that failed to meet government-dictated quotas.

The root cause for the failure of all these campaigns has remained the same. Saudi business tycoons, royal and non-royal alike, have a common interest in maintaining the flow of foreign workers because they cost less, are far more industrious and disciplined, and are easily replaceable if they complain. Saudis simply

refuse to work ten hours a day, six days a week as millions of Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, Filipinos, and Yemenis do. Making Saudi workers even less competitive is the fact that most Saudis graduate with a Bachelor of Arts rather than a Bachelor of Science degree, or worse yet steeped only in Wahhabi religious education.

It also matters that the private sector, which accounted for 67 percent of non-oil gross domestic product in 2010, is dominated by powerful construction and financial conglomerates in the hands of a score of non-royal billionaires, including the bin Laden and Olayan families, Nasser Al-Rashid, Sulaiman Al-Rajhi, and Mohammed Al Amoudi. They all have partners within the royal family, which counts a few business billionaires of its own. The best known by far is Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who was ranked by *Forbes* in 2010 as the world's 19<sup>th</sup> richest person, having a net worth just under \$20 billion. Some princes profit handsomely from the

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traffic in foreign labor. The WikiLeaks cables published by Reuters said princes were among those making a fortune by acting as sponsors and importing “a hundred or more” foreign workers at a time. Once in the kingdom, these workers were then required to pay back to their sponsors a monthly fee of \$30 to \$150.

Jeddah Economic Forum speakers seemed to concur that the answer to the job crisis for Saudi nationals lay in launching thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). But with the private sector dominated by huge conglomerates, launching an SME is no easy task. The government has, however, started to work on it. In 2004, the king established the Centennial Fund that is providing loans and advice to new entrepreneurs. The latest available figures indicated that as of 2008 the fund had given loans to 1,500 out of the 21,000 Saudis who had applied. Saudi and U.S. businessmen report that the pressure on fledgling enterprises to keep down labor costs by hiring foreigners is even greater than for the big conglomerates. Ironically, the king has made it even more difficult for SMEs by decreeing a minimum monthly wage of \$800 for state employees, while SMEs commonly offer half that amount. Within days of the royal decrees, Saudis were abandoning the private sector by the hundreds in search of higher paying jobs in the government and state sector.

### **Women’s Travails in the Workplace and Car**

The Wahhabi religious establishment is also partly responsible for the kingdom’s massive dependence on foreign labor. It has long fought tooth and nail all “mingling” of unrelated men and women in public or the work place. The *mutaween*, the special religious police, enforce this sex segregation rigidly, particularly most recently to prevent women from driving. As

a result, family drivers cannot be Saudis, and an estimated 800,000 to one million foreign chauffeurs “mingle” on a daily basis with Saudi women. In the workplace, Wahhabi hardliners have convinced the government to reverse a decree allowing Saudi women to serve as check-out clerks and put an end to Saudi women working even in lingerie stores, leaving foreign males to serve Saudi women. The clerics have also blocked public transportation in major cities for fear of men

and women mingling. The absurdity of the no-mingling policy was brought home to foreigners attending the Jeddah Economic Forum. Women attendees were cordoned off from men on one side of the Hilton Hotel conference hall by a reflecting glass partition. They were separated as well for meals. But men and women were free to mix at coffee breaks in the lobby of both the hotel and conference center.

Debate over women driving has raged on for decades within the government, royal family, media, and consultative Shura Council alike. The absurdity of the controversy is made even clearer when Saudi Arabia is compared to its neighboring gulf monarchies, all of which have long since allowed women to drive. One council member, Mohammed al-Zulfa, has put together a 1,000-page book

chronicling what Saudis on all sides of the issue have argued. His was a labor for posterity, he said, to remind Saudis what an incredibly divisive issue women driving had been in their history. Samar Fatany, who runs two English-language shows on Jeddah state radio called “Generation Next” and “Islam and Current Challenges” cannot understand why women behind the wheel should be so controversial. “Just allow it. Those who don’t want to drive, okay. There’s nothing anti-Islamic about it.” She noted that on the campus of the new King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, located north of Jeddah, women are permitted not only to attend classes with men but to drive cars as well.

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Fatany reported that the Shura Council has already debated ways to introduce the practice slowly to reduce opposition. Only women above the age of 30 would be licensed, and they would have a 10 p.m. curfew. There would be special police stations staffed by women only and a hot line they could use if their cars broke down or they were being harassed by male drivers. However, she said that religious conservatives had so far succeeded in blocking a vote on the proposal. Fatany had been hoping King Abdullah would issue a decree authorizing female driving in his March 18 speech. To her chagrin, he said not a word. She also revealed that a move was underway among feminists to challenge the ban openly. Shortly after I left, they launched a “women2drive” campaign calling for a mass show of defiance on June 17, attracting 12,000 supporters on the Facebook page. One woman, Manal al-Sharif, had decided to jump the gun. She was arrested May 22 while driving in the Eastern Province city of Khobar after she posted a video of herself behind the wheel on YouTube.

The government sought to quell the campaign by locking up al-Sharif for 10 days. It may have worked, at least in the short term. Only 40 to 50 women took to the wheel on June 17. None was arrested that day, but the ever-vigilant *mutaween* arrested five in Jeddah later that month. Still, the campaign quickly gained international attention. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton raised the issue with her Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal, and let it be known publicly through her spokeswoman that “what these women are doing is brave and what they are seeking is right.” Catherine Ashton, the European Union’s foreign minister, made a similar pronouncement, noting that Saudi women were only demanding equal treatment “wherever they are.” In late June, Saudi women turned their ire on Subaru, the Japanese manufacturer that markets its cars as being particularly female friendly. They demanded Subaru pull out of the Saudi market until women were given the right to drive.

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Not all Saudi women favor driving. A Saudi woman blogger, Eman al-Nafjan, pointed out that 1,000 women had sent a petition to the Shura Council declaring “we don’t want to drive.” More women had signed that petition than another in favor of driving. The English-language Arab News aired the views of women opposed to driving in its April 13 edition. They argued having a driver relieved them of the hassle of parking while shopping as well from harassment from male drivers and zealous *mutaween*. One housewife resigned to seeing women drive eventually predicted a lot of resistance. “When that happens, people will not accept it, and fathers

will forbid their daughters from driving.” After the driving campaign fizzled, some women interviewed in the local press did indeed blame their fathers and husbands for stopping them from participating on the pretext that it was not safe.


So Saudis continue to employ one million foreigners to drive their wives about town.

### **Visit to Riyadh—The King and his Critics**

The kingdom’s capital lies in the austere Najd desert heartland not far from the ruins of Diriyah, where in 1744 the al-Saud royals sealed their

enduring alliance with the religious ascetic Abdul Wahhab, whose descendants in the al-Sheikh family still dominate the powerful religious establishment. From a dusty desert backwater, Riyadh has grown into a sprawling, modern-day metropolis of five to six million people, endless super highways, and myriad American-style shopping malls. Two competing skyscrapers dominate the skyline, the Kingdom Center, owned by billionaire Prince Al-Waleed, and the al-Faisaliah Center belonging to the politically influential al-Faisal family. (Among its most distinguished members are the late King Faisal, the present-day Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, and the former ambassador to London and Washington, Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud.) These days, pictures of King Abdullah adorn in profusion the buildings





and streets of the city, part of a government campaign to fete his recovery from back surgery in the United States.

Riyadh is where the religious rule of the humorless *mutaween* is most strictly enforced, except strikingly on Tahliya Street at the city's dead center. Only a few blocks in length, Tahliya looks and feels out of place. It is lined from one end to the other with cafes, restaurants and boutiques and boasts the only broad, tree-dotted sidewalks for strolling in the city. On weekend nights, Saudi teenagers perform endless wheelies on their motorcycles down the street packed with cars filled with gawking men only. The youth also drive ATVs recklessly down the sidewalks filled with pedestrians, while both civilian and religious policemen stand by watching disapprovingly but making no attempt to curb the mayhem.

Riyadh is where King Abdullah both reigns and rules from, though this down-to-earth monarch clearly prefers his desert Janadriyah Arabian horse farm an hour's drive outside the city. This is where he spends more and more of his time, and where he entertains world figures like Presidents Bush and Obama. Viewed as a liberal within the fractious royal family, King Abdullah has managed to remain both popular with reformers and respected by fundamentalist Wahhabi clerics. Still, Saudi liberals were deeply disappointed by his much-awaited March 18 "speech to the kingdom" in which he promulgated 21 royal decrees outlining plans for \$100 billion in new government outlay aimed primarily at heading off social unrest. They included a monthly \$533 payment to unemployed Saudis, a two-month bonus for all government employees and Saudi students abroad, and a monthly \$800 minimum salary in the public sector. He ordered the promotion by one rank of all "deserving" military and security personnel and the hiring of 60,000 more Saudis by the Interior Ministry.

Addressing the problems of the suffering middle class, the king announced the construction of 500,000 housing units and an increase in bank loan limits for home building from

\$80,000 to \$130,000. He also acknowledged the bona fides of public outrage at both government and royal misbehavior, establishing a national commission to investigate corruption and promising "no exceptions for anybody." At the same time, he went to great lengths to appease the Wahhabi establishment by ordering the media to stop criticizing its leaders and doling out hundreds of millions for new mosques and various other religious activities. The one group conspicuously ignored in his extraordinary display of largesse: reformers.

Mohammed al-Qahtani, a 44-year-old American-educated economics professor at the Institute for Diplomatic Studies in Riyadh, summed up the general liberal disappointment with the king's speech. He heads the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, which has no official license to operate but has so far escaped closure anyway. "He could have announced at least partial elections for the Shura Council," he vented, sitting in his downtown office overlooking King Fahd Street in a building adorned on the outside with a bigger-than-life picture of King Abdullah. "Instead, he empowered the religious establishment more. This is the era of Islamic rule 2.0." Al-Qahtani saw the

speech as a wake-up call for reformers to the need for adopting new tactics other than endless petitions to the king.

What might these "new tactics" entail? Al-Qahtani began talking about political prisoners. Their plight, he argued, had the potential to mobilize tens of thousands of Saudis, Sunni and Shia alike. Suggesting that a figure of 30,000 prisoners was "an under-estimate," he nonetheless used it to calculate a possible turnout of 150,000 to 180,000 protesters just from their extended families. (The Ministry of Interior stated in April that the government had arrested nearly 11,000 people since the start of its anti-terrorism campaign in 2003 and was holding 5,080 on terrorism-related crimes. The U.S. State Department's 2010 Human Right Report cited a 2008 U.N. figure of "approximately 29,000 prisoners and detainees.")

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Al-Qahtani was already directing his efforts toward organizing prisoner families. He said his Civil and Political Rights Association represented 246 families, and that its recent petition calling upon the government to free all political prisoners had been signed by 1,450 people. The association had also established a Facebook page, “Prisoners Until When.” The families they were helping to defend were “mostly Sunnis, but we are ready to add Shia members, too.”

Al-Qahtani took me to a weekly meeting of prisoner families held on the distant outskirts of Riyadh inside a cinderblock and brick shed decorated inside to resemble a Bedouin tent. Twenty relatives, all men, listened intently to the testimony of a former prisoner. They then discussed how best to cope with intense police interrogation methods, even torture, which the former prisoner had just described. Was it better to confess and apologize in order to get out quickly or hold out for as long as possible? One old-time activist advised them not to declare the regime illegitimate so as not to antagonize their jailers needlessly. Other participants described their efforts during February and March protests to meet Assistant Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, spending entire days waiting in front of, or inside, his ministry. On one Sunday, 250 family members had assembled outside the ministry and been promised a meeting, only to be duped into getting on buses and taken to jail. “We should go every Sunday until all the prisoners are released,” shouted one. “We should send people with a clean record to try to see Prince Nayef or Prince Mohammed,” interjected another, referring to the interior minister and his son.

One 26-year-old university student, Saleh al-Ashwan, recounted how family members had organized the petition to the king with 1,450 signatures. His mother had gone to the Interior Ministry first, and then he had followed her. His brother had been in prison for six years, he said, and his brother-in-law for six and a half years. While he was waiting inside the ministry on one occasion, he had begun collecting

the names of others there with him. The first time he registered 146 people. He then used SMS to contact others who might be willing to sign on. On March 20, he finally sent the petition by express mail to the king—no address needed, just “The King.” He had received a receipt back, convincing him it had at least gotten as far as the royal court. By the end of March, they had gathered 2,300 names for another petition. The government finally closed down their Facebook page featuring the petition after it had attracted 4,000 supporters.


The meeting turned to a new idea, setting up another page listing the names of all known political prisoners and details of their arrest. In the end, the group decided to form a 20-person permanent committee to register and track all imprisoned protesters and then publicize their plight at home and abroad. Within half an hour, they had signed up ten volunteers, including two women contacted by telephone.

Al-Qahtani shared the widely-held liberal Saudi view that political pressures are building up steadily on the royal family from social groups that had not previously been a factor in Saudi politics. He pointed to the youth bulge that he said was generating hundreds of thousands

of young unemployed and alienated Saudis. Unrest was also rising in the middle class, particularly over the housing shortage, with only 22 percent of Saudis currently able to own their own homes. This was largely because of high land costs, a problem al-Qahtani attributed to the practice of royal family members obtaining vast tracts from the government and then selling plots off at exorbitant prices. The average cost of buying a plot and building a home in the outskirts of Riyadh, where the meeting of prisoner families had taken place, stood at around \$270,000. The king had increased the limit on home bank loans, but, he argued, “the land ownership issue has not been addressed.”

An increasing number of labor strikes was another indicator of mounting social unrest, according to al-Qahtani. They had taken place at the state water company, the King Fahd Printing Company in Medina and on the construction site

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for the new King Abdullah Financial Center outside Riyadh. “Banks are now factoring in strikes as a risk of doing business here,” he claimed.

Typical of Saudi reformers, al-Qahtani argued that the Saudi ruling family could extricate itself from its present predicament by offering a new vision for the kingdom’s future. “It could declare that in five or ten years, we will have a constitutional monarchy,” he said. “Why wait until the last moment when it turns out to be not enough. They should reform before the pressure gets too great.” He applauded the example of Oman’s ruler, Sultan Qaboos, whom he felt was responding to public protests by introducing meaningful reforms that would eventually usher in a constitutional monarchy there.

### **The Explosion in Social Networking**

One of the most striking developments in Saudi Arabia as in other Arab countries today is the explosion in social networking to air and share grievances as well as to try to mobilize for protests like the March 11 “Day of Rage.” The number of Saudis using Facebook has exploded, growing from 150,000 in 2008 to two million in 2011. Sunni Islamists, Shiite activists, and Western-educated liberals have all become extremely tech-savvy. Several well-known radical Wahhabi clerics, like Sheikh Salman al-Oudah, have long operated their own websites, like his “Islamtoday.net.” The Islamists relied heavily on social networking to trounce liberals in the 2005 municipal elections. The Royal Court has also taken to using Facebook. In February, the court’s chief, Khaled al-Tuwaijri, set up a page to take complaints, suggestions, and requests from the public, promising to pass them on to the relevant government offices. Meanwhile, Saudi security services monitor blogs and Facebook for other reasons—to track down terrorists, gauge public opinion and gain intelligence on forthcoming protests. They also have tech-savvy agents who pose as Islamists

and liberals to join in the cyberspace chatter to defend the government.

Bloggers say they realize there are “red lines” as to what they can post and discuss but are never quite sure where the government has drawn them. In December, Saudi security agents arrested university professor Mohammed al-Abdulkarim after he posted an article discussing the succession

issue within the royal family. (He was released in April.) The same month it blocked the London-based news website Elaph when it published a WikiLeaks document embarrassing to the government. There are about a dozen English-language Saudi blogs with names like “Saudijanas,” “Saudiwoman,” and “Susiesbigadventure.” The English-language ones seem to enjoy more freedom, presumably because Saudi authorities believe their audience is limited. Still, these bloggers, too, now face new regulations that could land them behind bars. As of January 1, bloggers and electronic news sites have been told to apply for a license and provide the names of the hosting company and editor who will be held accountable for all content. Basically, the government is

imposing the same laws and regulations already applicable to the rest of the tightly state-controlled media.

One of the most audacious bloggers is Eman al-Nafjan, an English-language teacher working on her Ph.D. thesis in linguistics at Riyadh’s King Saud University. The mother of three young children, Nafjan still finds time to publish a fiery blog on Wordpress called “Saudiwoman.” Prior to the March 11 would-be “Day of Rage,” she was predicting the kingdom was “on the train heading to revolution town.” Subsequent to the abortive protest, Nafjan explained to readers of the London *Guardian* newspaper the reasons for its failure. Not only had the government mobilized all its resources to head off the street demonstration. Liberals themselves had begun questioning who was behind the campaign after a Saudi Islamic exile in London, Saad al-Faqih, had begun

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calling the “Day of Rage” instead the “Hunain Revolution” after a famous battle at the birth of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. What had started as a call for freedom, respect for human rights, and a constitutional monarchy had become a religious *jihad* in the hands of Islamic militants. Liberals were not at all interested.

Nafjan talked about her life as a Saudi blogger over coffee in the lobby of the al-Khozama Hotel, a foreign media watering hole in downtown Riyadh the *mutaween* generally leave alone. She was dressed in a traditional all-black *abaya* and scarf, but did not wear a *niqab* face veil. Three years ago, she had started by commenting on women’s issues in a way that caught the attention of the *mutaween*, who pressured her to desist. Otherwise, they warned, when Judgment Day comes, “you will be in big trouble.” Nafjan had not only persevered, she had turned to politics because she found a lot of Saudis were debating the kingdom’s political and social problems online. Two unexpected discoveries: more conservatives than liberals were using the Internet, and a lot of women opposed feminism. Instead, women wanted the government to pay them for staying at home and having children. They wanted public buses for women but only because drivers were becoming too expensive.

Saudi bloggers had no network among themselves to communicate and promote their causes partly, Nafjan explained, because they were all suspicious about who was authentic and who was a government agent seeking to infiltrate their blogs. “People don’t trust each other,” she said. Bloggers rarely met one another, though they did sometimes talk on the phone once they had figured out who they thought they could trust. She believed those participating in online debates were pretty representative of the variety of views found throughout Saudi society. She had also come to the conclusion that “liberals are more liberal online than the way they live their own lives.”

## The Kingdom Strikes Back


In mid-March, as the Saudi government was cracking down on dissent at home, it adopted an equally aggressive line in its normally cautious foreign policy to pre-empt the kingdom’s chief regional enemy, Iran. The Saudis rushed troops to the neighboring island of Bahrain to save the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa family there from falling to what they viewed as an Iranian-instigated uprising by its Shiite majority. As the decision marked a major turning point in Saudi muscle-flexing, it was not taken lightly. For the first time since its inception in 2006, the National Security Council was convoked by King Abdullah with much fanfare. The council had languished under the hawkish Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former long-serving Saudi ambassador to Washington. Suddenly, it was being revived to bring together all senior Saudi princes dealing with security issues to forge a family consensus.

The island kingdom of Bahrain, connected to the Saudi mainland by a 16-mile, four-lane causeway, had become the scene of escalating street demonstrations by mostly Shia, who constitute 65 to 70 percent of its native population of only half a million. Protesters had gone from calling

for democratic reforms to swarming the financial district of the capital and then marching on the palace to demand an end to the al-Khalifa monarchy. In the mind of both Bahraini and Saudi royals, the uprising was being manipulated by Tehran using its agents and *Alalam* Arabic-language state television to egg on the protesters in Manama’s Pearl Square to take an ever more radical stand.

On Monday morning, March 14, at least 1,000 Saudi troops poured across the causeway into Manama to take up positions around the al-Khalifa palace and other key government facilities. Two other members of the Saudi-dominated club of six Arab monarchs bonded by the Gulf Cooperation Council joined in the rescue operation. The United Arab

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Emirates added 500 policemen, and Kuwait sent ships to patrol Bahraini waters. For the first time in Saudi foreign policy, the House of Saud had drawn a “red line” against Iranian encroachment on the Arab side of the Persian Gulf and made manifest its determination to use force to defend it.

The mood in Riyadh in the wake of the Bahrain decision was one of righteous self-assertion not only against Iran, a sworn enemy, but even against the United States, the kingdom’s main protector. This was because of Washington’s perceived support for the Bahraini protesters’ reform demands. Uncertain of American fidelity any longer, the Saudis were buckling down and bulking up militarily for a long-haul struggle. They had become fed up with what they regarded as U.S. coddling of pro-democracy activists across the Arab world and American naiveté about Iranian machinations. From the Saudi perspective, the main outcome of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein had been the establishment of a pro-Iranian Shiite government in Baghdad, provoking a major shift in the balance of power in the Gulf in favor of Tehran. Now the Americans were urging democratic reforms in Bahrain, which risked ending in another pro-Iranian Shiite government, this time just off the shore from the kingdom’s oil heartland in the Eastern Province where the vast majority of Saudi Shia lived.

Between March 12 and 15, a U.S.-Saudi diplomatic tug-of-war took place that few outsiders were aware of. The Obama administration had been pressing Bahrain rulers to take more than “baby steps” toward reform, the public advice delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates while visiting Bahrain just two days before the Saudi troop deployment. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman had made several trips to push for talks between Bahraini royals and Shiite opposition leaders; he was still at his mission even as Saudi forces began taking up positions around Manama.

But the al-Khalifa family, now beholden to the Saudis, was no longer taking Feltman’s phone calls, figuratively and even literally. Nor were either the Saudis or the Bahrainis interested in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s comment in reaction to the Saudi intervention that “there is no security answer to the aspirations and demands of the demonstrators.” The chill in U.S.-Saudi relations had set in after Obama had ignored Abdullah’s entreaties and sided with hundreds of thousands of protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square demanding that President Hosni Mubarak leave “now.” King Abdullah had made clear his displeasure by refusing to see either Secretary of State Clinton or Defense Secretary Gates. (Gates finally saw the king on April 6.)

The U.S.-Saudi falling out over Bahrain exposed as never before the sharply differing assessment in Riyadh and Washington over how to deal with the democratic winds set loose by the Arab Spring and Iran’s attempts to expand its influence. Obama, like his predecessor George W. Bush, believed the monarchies’ salvation lay in more democracy at home and in integration of their respective defense forces to establish a more credible deterrent to Iran. The monarchs, however, viewed democratic reform as the principal threat to

their power, even survival, at only Iran’s gain. They were pursuing closer cooperation not so much among their military forces as their security and intelligence services convinced that Iranian subversion constituted the most immediate threat. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in particular held this view because they both had large Shiite populations Iran might use as a fifth column. Clearly, the Arab Spring was not a good time to be a Bahraini or Saudi Shiite.

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## Qatif — The Shiite Heartland

Qatif, with a population of 475,000, is the Shiite core of the Sunni kingdom. Rich in history stretching back 3,500 years, the port city in the Eastern Province also serves as the crucible of Shiite political ferment and protests. Saudi Shia number around two million, half of them living in this province, where, if foreign workers are included, they make up 30 percent of the total. What goes on here is of riveting concern to Riyadh because the kingdom's vast oil fields are all located nearby. Just to the north of Qatif lies the heavily-guarded Ras Tanura terminal complex—by far the world's biggest—handling the export of six million barrels of oil a day. Qatif and neighboring villages have witnessed periodic Shiite uprisings ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, in protest against restrictions on job opportunities, Shiite religious practices, and the building of mosques and social centers.

Many foreign oil and political analysts look upon the Eastern Province as something of a ticking time bomb capable of shattering the kingdom's stability if it goes off. Several attempts have been made to do just that. In 1996, a group of local Shia terrorists bombed a housing complex in al-Khobar, south of Qatif, where U.S. Air Force personnel were living, killing 19 Americans and wounding 372 others of various nationalities. Both U.S. and Saudi security officials concluded the terrorists had been sent by Iran after being trained in Lebanon by the Iranian-backed Hizbollah faction. Al-Qaeda also tried to attack facilities here to provoke chaos in the international oil market. The Saudi government has harbored a longstanding fear that any Shiite uprising in Bahrain could spread to the Shia community here, resulting in the possible disruption of oil exports and immediate skyrocketing of oil prices. These fears were only heightened when, in March, Shia here began holding weekly demonstrations to show their support for their brethren in Bahrain, and


oil prices did indeed witness a sudden spike. The demonstrators also demanded the release of Shiite prisoners, among them the nine implicated in the al-Khobar bombing 15 years ago but never put on trial.

The chairman of Qatif's partially-elected municipal council is Jafar Mohammad al-Shayeb, whose son commutes to work daily across the 16-mile causeway to Manama—a reminder of the close ties between the Shia communities in the Eastern Province and Bahrain. Al-Shayeb said there are many Shia on both sides of the waterway making the daily commute like his son. Al-Shayeb holds a B.S. degree in engineering from the University of Southern Colorado and an M.S. in economics from Middle Tennessee State University. He makes his views known on his own website ([www.alshayeb.org](http://www.alshayeb.org)) and is a frequent commentator on Shiite affairs for the BBC and Arab radio and television stations.

The soft-spoken, fluent English speaker was elected to the Qatif council in 2005, the first such elections in the kingdom ever. Al-Shayeb said he plans to run again when the next round of elections take place this September. He acknowledged that municipal council elections had been discredited kingdom-wide because real power remained in the hands of the government-appointed mayor and also because the councils are dependent on funding from Riyadh. Still, al-Shayeb believes Saudi authorities intend soon to expand their powers, holding out the prospect for Shia to have a greater say in local affairs.

On a weekend morning in late March, al-Shayeb took several American visitors to the Horizon Cultural and Research Center in downtown Qatif to meet other Shiite dignitaries, including Tawfiq Alsaif, a leading scholar. He has been promoting the idea that the Saudi royal family needs to abandon the Wahhabi religion as the basis for its legitimacy, separate mosque and state, and establish the monarchy as a "civil state." In the Shiite lexicon, "civil" is a code word for "non-religious," what Westerners would call "secular." In such a

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state, the Shiites believe they could gain equal rights with Sunnis and a bigger stake in the kingdom's politics. The main advantage to the royal family of a civil state, Alsaif argued, would be the widening of its base of legitimacy, since the Shia would support the monarchy too. "More elements of Saudi society will become engaged."

Both al-Shayeb and Alsaif vehemently rejected the government's view of the Shia community as an Iranian fifth column. They said the vast majority of Saudi Shia looked to Iraq's Shiite religious leaders in Najaf and Karbala for spiritual guidance. Many Saudi Shiite leaders once belonged, or still did, to the Dawa Party led by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. They also pointed out that the kingdom's Shia were first and foremost Arabs, not Persians as are most Iranians, providing another barrier to Iranian penetration of their community. Still, hundreds of Saudi Shiite protesters have made clear their solidarity with Bahraini Shiites, whose uprising had been brutally crushed with Saudi military help. "With what's happening in the Arab world, the tensions are greater," explained al-Shayeb. "We feel the discrimination more."

The strong Saudi backing for the crackdown in Bahrain had clearly been taken by al-Shayeb and his colleagues as a warning of things to come if their own protests persisted. Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, the Eastern Province governor, had been meeting regularly with them "to plead for calm." But al-Shayeb and his friends were not happy because Prince Mohammed had "not offered anything in return to the Shia" for their cooperation. Meanwhile, the Shia youth were criticizing their elders as sell-outs. "The moderates are being challenged by those who say protests in the street work better," al-Shayeb remarked.

Qatif's more moderate Shiite leaders felt that after several decades of negotiations to establish better relations with the Saudi government, they had little to show for their efforts. In 1993, they had reached an agreement with the late King Fahd, ending their open rebellion in return for the government allowing exiled Shia to come back home and participate

in the consultative Shura Council. (Only five of its 150 members are currently Shia.) Conditions for religious worship had improved somewhat, but Shia still remained sidelined in Saudi society. In 2003, they had produced a document signed by 450 Shiite dignitaries entitled "Partners in One Nation" calling for equal treatment in the offer of jobs in the government, public sector, and security forces. Alsaif described the government response as "very slow, very little," adding, "it's not relieving the tension."

Then in February 2009, an ugly incident occurred in Medina involving Shiite pilgrims and the *mutaween* religious police. The pilgrims had been visiting a cemetery where Shiite holy men were buried when the police had videotaped their ceremony and tried to break it up, attacking women and children. Al-Shayeb considered the incident a turning point in Shia relations with the government. Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, a religious leader in al-Awamiya, outside Qatif, went so far as to call for Shia secession. "If we don't get our dignity, then we will have to consider seceding from this country," he warned.

So far, firebrands like Sheikh Nimr have not been the predominant influence over the Shia community. Still, moderates like al-Shayeb and Alsaif are clearly having trouble maintaining any clout with the younger generation, as I witnessed during my visit. One day after recounting that they had reached an agreement to stop the protests, the youth in Qatif nonetheless took to the streets calling the release of prisoners and solidarity with the Shia in Bahrain. Saudi police stayed away, and the protest went off peacefully.

Clearly the government remains anxious to avoid any violence that might result in Shia victims serving as grist to the mill of the more militant Shia. In late April, 51 leading Shiite clerics and other opinion makers formally called for a halt to two months of protests, "to calm the streets for the sake of brotherly cooperation that will help achieve our demands." The same day, dozens of youth again displayed their defiance

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and took to the streets here in Qatif anyway. As of late April, Saudi security was reported to be holding 140 Shiite activists, including two bloggers, and to have established a pattern of continuing arrests and releases to contain simmering Shiite discontent.

### Revolution, Reform or Status Quo

On Sunday, April 24, the *Washington Post* published an unusually outspoken op-ed piece by a non-royal Saudi businessman, the only one bold enough to finance an independent think tank called the Gulf Research Center. The institute was recently expelled from the United Arab Emirates because of its occasional critiques of the Gulf Arab monarchies such as that appearing in the *Post*. Its director, Abdulaziz Sager warned all Arab gulf monarchies that time was fast running out on their regimes. He applauded their ruling families for successfully leading their countries through tumultuous social changes from Bedouin to modern societies. Then he put on his Cassandra hat.

It would be folly, Sager bluntly wrote, for these monarchies to believe they could remain immune from the Arab Spring. “The social contract that has long defined the relationship between rulers and citizens—the unspoken trade-off of economic wealth for political power—is coming to an end,” he opined. “If the ruling families of the gulf want to maintain their legitimacy, they need to adapt quickly to the changing times and enact substantive political reform.” Otherwise, “their rule cannot be assured.” They could no longer presume they enjoyed “a permanent American insurance policy” against popular demand for greater participation. They had to undertake more than cosmetic reforms and stop thinking economic handouts could serve as a substitute. “The fact is, the threat now is of

a people’s coup—not a military coup.” Sager mentioned no monarchy by name, but he didn’t exclude any either.

One of the monarchy’s non-royal defenders fired back in an op-ed piece published May 8 in the English-language Saudi Arab News. Hassan bin Youssef Yassin, a longtime aide to Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, wrote caustically that the Arab world’s republics had all failed miserably to deliver either democracy or economic well-being. Its monarchies from Morocco to Saudi Arabia, by contrast, had proven adept in handling change and improving the lot of their peoples. “The dream of a republic has more often than


not ended in a painful awakening, while Arab monarchies in comparison have provided greater stability and prosperity.” Whatever criticism might be leveled against the Saudi monarchy, it had achieved “an effective form of government that had been more successful than Arab republics in addressing the needs of our people.”

Which argument struck closer to the truth? While the Arab Spring was sweeping aside one republican dictator after another, the House of Saud seemed far from danger of a “people’s coup.” The first ever “Day of Rage” in the kingdom had fizzled. The rage, such as it was, had been confined to cyberspace and never made it down to the ground.

Even protests among the most discontented elements in the Shia community had remained relatively small. An old Saudi lawyer friend noted that while there might be signs of “disgruntlement” among Saudis, the vast majority still felt there was more to lose than to gain right now by taking to the streets. The turmoil in Libya, he felt, had given many Saudis pause to reconsider. They now had two contrasting “models” of emerging democracies before them, one in Egypt and the other in Libya. “If Egypt becomes a stable democratic country with a good economy, we’re going to go for it.” Even if the Egyptian economy was just “okay,” but the military stayed on to assure stability, “that would be a good model for Saudi Arabia.” He feared, however, that the “Libyan model” was more applicable to

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the kingdom, by which he meant civil war and division of the country. “We could have a sectarian war and Al-Qaeda could get involved,” he said. “Libya makes us think there is not just one model.” He was the second liberal Saudi I had interviewed who had raised the specter of the kingdom’s disintegration, a prospect I had never before considered in any likely scenario for its future.

My lawyer friend readily admitted “something qualitatively different” was happening in the Arab world that inevitably held implications for Saudi Arabia, even if the kingdom had escaped for now being bitten by the democracy “bug.” The royal family could not depend forever on financial handouts alone to solve the social and economic problems afflicting 20 million Saudis. Even the kingdom’s coffers had a bottom. He pointed to the vagaries of the oil market. “A big dip in the oil prices as happened in the 1980s and 1990s could trigger something.” He predicted another crash would come within the next five years, and then, he said, “all bets are off.”

What might possibly trigger an uprising other than an oil crash? Might the plight of political prisoners serve to mobilize protesters beyond the Shia? The State Department’s 2010 Human Rights Report on Saudi Arabia noted the following “significant” issues: torture, physical abuse, poor prison conditions, arbitrary arrest, secret detention, denial of fair and public trials, and the lack of due process. “Discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, sect and ethnicity were common,” and the lack of workers’ rights remained “a severe problem.” There had been no reports of politically motivated killings of Saudi nationals, however.

My Saudi lawyer friend conceded many prisoners held legitimate complaints. The government, he suggested, would be wise to release as many as possible to diffuse mounting public anger. “If they don’t handle the prisoner issue carefully, this could be the detonator.” He noted that in Syria a minor incident involving police abuse of children, who had written anti-government graffiti on public walls, triggered a

nationwide protest movement against the 40-year reign of the al-Assad family. He was worried that the al-Saud family was proving equally unresponsive to reform demands. This was because it had resisted U.S. pressure for reform over 50 years, “so they think they can ride this out, too.” Could they? “For now, maybe so,” he said. “It’s not a critical mass yet, or at the tipping point.” He admitted he had no clear idea where the tipping point was.

The tactic of using political prisoners as a rallying point seems questionable, or at least highly problematical. Most are Sunni Islamic extremists who have been discredited in Saudi society as “religious deviants.” There are few signs so far that

their mistreatment has upset Saudi society beyond their immediate families. A second obstacle resides in the intense religious animosity between any Wahhabi extremists and the Shia, since the former regard the latter as apostates worthy of the death sentence. So far, families of Shiite and Sunni prisoners have shown little inclination to work together. The Sunni-Shia sectarian divide in Saudi society remains a barrier to forging a common cause around political prisoners and human rights abuses.

So what other lessons might be applicable from the uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Syria? The clearest was that

autocrats who stay in power too long become lightning rods for protest. Another lesson has been that dependence on elaborate security services is not sufficient. The House of Saud’s core vulnerability in these regards seems different in nature, though it is indeed buttressed by a massive security network. Its main weakness, however, remains its ailing gerontocracy reminiscent of the Soviet Union’s last years.

Five senior princes—two of them in line to become king—are 75 years old or older and afflicted with various illnesses. King Abdullah, 87, is still recovering from his operation last fall. Crown Prince Sultan, 86, had gone for cancer treatment in New York in late 2008. He was away for two years struggling to recover and remains on part-time duty. More and more in charge of the kingdom’s daily affairs is

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Interior Minister Prince Nayef, 78, who is currently expected to follow Sultan to the throne. Nayef suffers from crippling osteoporosis, and some reports say diabetes as well. Another prince with good prospects of becoming king is Riyadh governor Prince Salman, who is 75 years old. He, too, went to New York last year for a back operation. Finally, Prince Saud al-Faisal, 70, the world's longest serving foreign minister after 36 years, suffers badly from Parkinson's disease.

Saudi royal succession moves by tradition from brother to brother, rather than from father to son, and has been restricted so far to the living sons of the late King Abdulaziz bin Saud, founder of the present-day kingdom in 1932. Abdullah established in 2006 an Allegiance Council, composed of 35 sons and grandsons of King Abdulaziz, as a potential alternative mechanism for choosing future kings, but it has never been tested. There is just as good a prospect that aging and ailing princes could end up ruling the kingdom for another decade before a somewhat younger generation of al-Sauds comes to the fore. The saving grace for the Saudi monarchy is that it enjoys a deep bench of qualified kingly aspirants among King Abdulaziz's grandchildren. Its possibly fatal flaw: old men born before World War II will be dealing with the problems of an Internet-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century world moving at Twitter speed.

Might political grievances with royal rule be sufficient to trigger a revolt? Hundreds of Saudis have signed petitions—online and in letter format—demanding elections for the national Shura Council, an expansion of its powers, the separation of the government from the ruling family, and a constitutional monarchy. The aborted March 11 “Day of Rage” illustrates, however, that few Saudis are ready to brave the combined pressure of the royal family, security forces, Wahhabi religious establishment, and their own families to take to the street. Besides, there are no pro-democracy civil society groups as there were in Egypt to help organize demonstrations, nor labor union activists as there were in Tunisia.

Interior Minister Prince Nayef is famously reported to have told a group of liberals agitating for constitutional monarchy in 2004: “We came to power by the sword. If we have to, we intend to stay in power by the sword.”


The Saudi government has to worry about three main potential sources of revolt: jobless youth, the Shia, and hard-line Wahhabi clerics. The most serious may well be the first. Shortly, there will be a mass of unemployed university

graduates who are also “netizens” connected through the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter. Just what kind of incident might drive jobless Saudi university graduates into protest en masse remains murky. Might the accidental killing by police of a protesting jobless university grad do it, like the mistreatment of a single, poor fruit vendor in Tunisia, Mohammed Bouazizi, had touched off an uprising in Tunisia? Or might a confrontation between the *mutaween* and Saudi teenagers recklessly driving their souped-up motorcycles and off-track vehicles down Riyadh's fashionable Tahliya Street ignite the flames of rebellion? The pretext for revolt is difficult to determine, as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria have shown.

The Shiites constitute the most rebellious element of Saudi society and have been so ever since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. They have shown themselves ready and willing to take their complaints into the street in defiance of Saudi security forces. They remain, however, a small minority, and the kingdom's Wahhabi-influenced majority has little sympathy for their causes. So far, periodic attempts by the Shia to build bridges to pro-democracy Sunnis have made little headway. The threat of a Shiite takeover in Bahrain seems likely to continue impeding bridge-building.

The constituency the government has been most concerned to keep happy is the Wahhabi establishment—the House of Saud's central pillar of support after its own 7,000 to 8,000 families. The most serious challenge to al-Saud authority has always come from Wahhabi extremists and militants, from the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in

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1979 to Al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks in the 2003-05 period. Currently, the religious establishment feels threatened by rising domestic criticism of its *mutaween*, demands from Saudi women for greater independence, pressures to reduce religious education in the school curriculum, and the secular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. King Abdullah sought to appease the Wahhabi clerics in his March 18 speech, clamping down on media criticism of them and showering their venerable institutions with hundreds of millions of dollars for their various activities. The king was clearly anxious to buttress the House of Saud's keystone alliance with the House of Wahhab, the better to deal with liberal reformers at home and the pro-democracy upheavals abroad.

So how safe is the Saudi royal family? Ironically, the "Libyan model" of democratic transition has helped to silence Saudi liberals and strengthen the Saudi monarchy—at least in the short term. So has the threat of sectarian warfare in Syria as well as the uncertainties hanging over the aspiring new democracies in Egypt and Tunisia. Nor has the political chaos generated by the pro-democracy uprisings in next-door Yemen and Bahrain done anything to make reform more appealing to the general public. Saudi rulers are counting on the chaos and confusion in all these countries to dampen the Saudi ardor for change.

Still, the Saudi royal family has yet to illustrate it can successfully handle the challenges threatening its mid- and long-term stability, starting with the transfer of power from

an ailing gerontocracy. So contentious has the succession issue become that King Abdullah was unable to name a new cabinet after his return in February because of squabbling among senior princes, and their competing sons, over control of key ministries. As of early July, there had been no announcement, a sign that the succession issue has become truly contentious. The status quo promised another decade of kings as concerned about their own health as that of the kingdom's well-being—hardly a reassuring prospect.

The paralysis at the top seems to have affected even the making of modest political reforms, like partial elections for the Shura Council or the right of women to vote, leaving the Saudi kingdom far behind its neighboring Arab gulf monarchies. Nor has it found ways to address successfully the issue most likely to detonate a social explosion within the House of Saud—the coming tsunami of jobless youth. The frustrations of hundreds of thousands of university graduates could well shortly become the wellspring of more social and political unrest than the House of Saud has ever

witnessed. Perhaps the most profound transformation that has already taken place in the kingdom is that in the dynamics for change. The royal argument that the initiative for reform has always come from the top is no longer valid. Instead, Saudi youth, women, and university graduates, agitating from the bottom, have taken over as the prime agents for change.

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