

## *Brezhnev in the Hejaz*

*By Bruce Riedel*

**T**he Saudi royal family is afraid. Very, very afraid. A crisis of leadership is brewing. The king is ailing and his successor, Crown Prince Sultan, is in even worse health. Their hard-line brother, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, is set to take the throne. One of the last absolute monarchies, the Saudi family seems to represent all that the Arab Spring is fighting against: closed societies with unequal wealth distribution; repressed minorities living within manufactured boundaries; strong Islamist sympathies across its lands; a latent Sunni-Shia power struggle embedded in the country's fabric—not to mention a string of surrounding states struggling to stave off revolutions that could easily have a contagion effect.

We should be careful not to count the al-Sauds out. They are among the world's most proven survivors. Their first kingdom lasted from 1744—when they made their alliance with the founder of Wahhabism, Muhammad ibn-Abdul Wahhab—until 1818, when an Ottoman-Egyptian army crushed it. A second kingdom controlled the Nejd, located in the center of the Arabian Peninsula, from 1824 to 1891. The current kingdom began with Ibn Saud's taking of Riyadh in 1902 and was consolidated

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in the 1930s after a war with Yemen. The al-Sauds are comeback kids.

They also outlasted the Arab revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. The monarchies in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Yemen all collapsed, but the Kingdom fought back, ultimately bogging down Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt in a bloody insurgency in Yemen. They outlived Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi threat in the 1990s. The Saudi royals are skilled at playing inter-Arab civil wars.

As the end-of-an-era grim reaper approaches Saudi Arabia's door, Riyadh is prepared for battle. Whether the U.S.-Saudi alliance can survive the clash of American values and sympathy for the Arab Spring with the monarchy's ambitions is another question entirely.

**R**iyadh has become the de facto leader of the counterrevolution in the Middle East. It is shoring up its borders and tamping down neighboring unrest. And to prevent rebellion inside Saudi Arabia, Riyadh is creating an alliance whose sole purpose is to quell any revolutionary movement in the six Arabian Peninsula monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia's mettle has already been tested; its commitment to stifling any protests in surrounding countries can no longer be in question. In early spring, Bahrain was facing a crisis. It looked as though the majority-Shia population on the tiny island

was on the verge of forcing the Sunni Khalifa dynasty to accept a transition to a constitutional monarchy. For Saudi royals, who do not differentiate between Shia and Iran, that meant an Iranian-dominated challenge to absolutism just across the causeway from their own restive Shia. Worse, the United States was actively encouraging a political process in Manama that the palace in Riyadh judged to be an existential threat.

To preempt a deal, over one thousand Saudi troops with a contingent of police from the UAE publicly and visibly crossed the causeway in armored vehicles to help the Khalifa hard-liners crush the rebellion on March 14. The Saudis have been practicing this maneuver for years (one of the key reasons the causeway was built was to provide an emergency invasion corridor), but never before had the Kingdom actually used its own forces to help crush a popular rebellion in a Gulf Cooperation Council state. The Saudi press dismissed American and European criticism of the operation, including President Obama's May speech on the Arab Spring, as "drivel." And as a further bond between the two royal families, King Hamad of Bahrain's son is now engaged to King Abdullah's daughter.

With the Saudis making it clear they also will stand behind the Hashemite king in Jordan as his regime resists reform, a club of royals under the al-Sauds' protection is now a reality. Amman has even been invited to turn its informal alliance into formal membership in the GCC (along with Morocco) and probably will—it needs GCC money. The Saudis are also pushing the council to expand the size of its expeditionary force based at King Khalid Military City in northeast Saudi Arabia from its current forty-thousand-man outfit on paper to a larger presence—size to be determined.

In effect, Saudi Arabia has proclaimed a twenty-first-century equivalent of the old Soviet Brezhnev Doctrine for its own back-

yard. No uprising will be tolerated in a neighboring kingdom. The rest of the GCC monarchs have saluted the ambition—at least in principle. And like Russia in 1848, Saudi Arabia has become the guarantor of the counterrevolution.

Yet the al-Sauds' external strategy is flawed. The new alliance is one of convenience. The seven monarchies have decades, even centuries, of rivalry. The Hashemites and the al-Sauds have been enemies since the eighteenth century; cooperation is tactical not emotional. The Qataris chafe at Saudi leadership, the Omanis look east to South Asia not west to the Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates is more disunited than united, more South Asian than Arab.

Then there is the Achilles' heel of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, which is beyond Saudi control. Riyadh was never fond of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who backed Iraq in 1990 and whom it tried to overthrow in the Yemeni civil war of 1994. Needless to say, the regime isn't shedding any tears post—the bombing of the presidential palace, which severely wounded Saleh and forced him to flee. But more than half of the Arabian Peninsula's population resides in its poverty-stricken southern tip; Riyadh is very worried about what may come next. For chaos and anarchy in Yemen would fuel the Saudis' worst enemy—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

**T**he Saudis are right to worry. Bin Laden or no, al-Qaeda continues to play a major role in the Kingdom's internal politics. The group's extreme views resonate both with a constituency in the Wahhabi heartland and in poorer parts of the Kingdom, like the Asir region bordering Yemen. If the princes do not enforce unrelenting counterterrorism pressure, the risk of a renewed al-Qaeda challenge remains very real—especially as the AQAP base in Yemen has only grown stronger with cen-

tral authority collapsing outside of Sanaa. AQAP has exploited the Yemeni civil war to strengthen its safe havens and sanctuaries in the southern and eastern parts of the country, allegedly even taking temporary control of small cities outside Aden.

Al-Qaeda's leading propagandist in Yemen, the New Mexico-born Anwar al-Awlaki, has called the Arab Spring a revolutionary "tsunami" that is destroying al-Qaeda's enemies—like Mubarak—and will inevitably lead to revolution in all of the Arab monarchies.

The Kingdom fought a vicious and violent struggle against al-Qaeda inside its own borders between 2003 and 2006. It was the most sustained and serious internal threat to the monarchy since the formation of the modern Saudi state in the wake of World War I. Gunfights and bombings wracked every major Saudi city as al-Qaeda supporters tried to fulfill the call of Osama bin Laden to overthrow Abdullah and his brothers. It was a frightening and defining moment for this elderly generation of royal leaders and for the generation-in-waiting.

The leader of the repression of al-Qaeda in the Kingdom, Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, son of the interior minister, Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, was almost assassinated by AQAP in 2009. MBN, as he is known, is the epitome of the next generation of Saudi princes: smart, savvy, sophisticated and determined not to have the family lose control of its birthright. With his father now the spirit of the age if not yet king, old guard and new guard are aligned on strategy: repress at all costs—inside the country and out.

**T**he many-tentacled threats emanating from around the Kingdom's borders are clearly reaching inside the House of Saud, stoking deep-seated resentments. And the unrest is being met with the anticipated ruthlessness—with only partial success. On



Facebook, Saudi reformist activists called for a "day of rage" to copy the Tahrir Square model; the regime responded with a massive show of police and security forces across the country to preempt any demonstrations. The Wahhabi clerical establishment then preached against reform and protests in the mosques to further intimidate the potential demonstrators. It worked. The day of rage passed with little in the way of anger.

But in the traditionally restive Shia communities of the Eastern Province (home to most of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves), demonstrations have erupted. This is no surprise—the Shia have often expressed their discontentment with their status as second-class citizens in a state founded on that mid-eighteenth-century alliance between the Saudi royal family and the extreme Sunni Wahhabi clerical establishment. Indeed, Saudi and Wahhabi animosity toward the Shia goes back to the early 1800s when Saudi warriors pillaged the holy cities in Iraq during the first great expansion out of their base in the Nejd.

King Abdullah has tried to accommodate Shia demands for greater autonomy in the past, but the unrest this year shows tensions remain high. The Shia may be far too small in number to threaten the Kingdom's stability, but they can engage in terror attacks, like the bombing of the U.S. air base in Khobar in 1996, which American and Saudi officials blamed on Saudi Hezbollah (a pro-Iranian terror group that has been largely dormant since the 1990s).

Even more serious is the unrest among Saudi women that could open up generational, gender and regional fault lines both in the Wahhabi Nejd heartland and in the restive, more progressive western province, the Hejaz, conquered by the Saudis in the 1920s. Saudi women cannot vote in the limited political process allowed by the monarchy, and they cannot drive. An online movement called *Baladi* (My Country) has pushed for the female right to vote in municipal elections. A few Saudi women challenged the law against driving this year in Riyadh and Jidda and were arrested. Efforts to organize social protests on the issue via Facebook and Twitter were immediately repressed by the authorities. Meanwhile, the ban inflicts a major economic cost on the Kingdom—some eight hundred thousand foreign taxi drivers, usually South Asians, are employed in transporting Saudi women. The average middle-class family spends \$350 a month to get the girls around. But the power of the Sunni clerical establishment continues.

The biggest unknown is how the Kingdom's youth will act. They have watched the drama in Tahrir Square, Benghazi, Sanaa and Dara'a on Al Jazeera just like everyone else. And the Kingdom has the same demographics as its Arab brothers: a large youth bulge that is chasing too few jobs. With 80 percent of Saudis under thirty years of age and 47 percent under eighteen, unemployment is officially at 10

percent but could be as high as 25 percent (only men are counted since few women seek jobs outside the home). The underemployed young Saudi man may have more money in his pocket than his Egyptian counterpart, but he too is frustrated by a system that is completely opaque and closed to the nonelite.

While the Kingdom can and does appease many of their demands—Abdullah announced over \$100 billion in new bonuses, mosque building and other payoffs—it offers them little or nothing in the way of political change. Absolute monarchies are not usually accommodating to transparency and devolution of authority; by definition absolutists do not compromise with nonroyals.

If the Egyptian experiment in governance looks to be a winner and Cairo produces a more transparent, accountable and democratic Arab government, it could be very attractive, especially in the Hejaz.

In fact the Hejaz, with its young, urbane, religiously varied population, has never fully accommodated to Saudi and Wahhabi rule. It has always seen itself as more cosmopolitan than the Nejd, looking across the Red Sea to Egypt and north to Syria rather than to the harsh interior. For centuries it was part of the broader Islamic world, a part of the great empires of Islam from the Umayyads to the Ottomans. The Nejd, in contrast—remote and barren as it is—stayed outside of those empires. Moreover, the Hejaz is home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the center for the hajj every year, visited by Muslims from all corners of the *ummah*, thus exposing Hejazis to views and peoples of all caste and creed. Many of them are critical of the ugly remodeling of the holy cities to allow for plush apartment blocks and designer stores, and a few even long for the return of the Hashemites.

The Arab Spring in other countries has flourished along old fault lines like the one between the Hejaz and the Nejd, most no-

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tably in Libya where the rebellion has revived the differences between Tripolitania in the northwest and Cyrenaica in the east. The Saudis must be concerned it could happen in the Kingdom too. Its current borders are less than a hundred years old.

Change has come in Saudi Arabia very slowly. The United States began raising the issue of slavery in the Kingdom shortly after the historic meeting between King Ibn Saud and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that initiated the American-Saudi alliance—on a cruiser in the Suez Canal in 1945. John F. Kennedy finally persuaded the family to abolish slavery in 1962. This historical pattern is unlikely to morph in America's favor. Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz has long held suspicions that America is more threat than friend. And aside from jawboning, the United States has no way to leverage the Kingdom. The Saudis are on track to purchase over \$60 billion in new arms from America, critical to jobs in many states, and they are the swing producer in the global oil market, with the unique power to set oil prices. In short, Americans need Saudi Arabia not just for strategic reasons but also for the health of our economy at a time when we are broke.

Despite President Obama's efforts to build ties with the Saudis (his first visit to an Arab capital as president was to Riyadh), the family has soured on him. The al-Sauds believe he has promised but not delivered on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and done too little to counter Iran, especially in Bahrain. They were shocked that Obama did not stand by Mubarak until the bitter

end. While the Saudis know they cannot ignore Washington, they are looking for alternatives to the east.

Pakistan, whose own relations with Washington are deteriorating, is a long-standing ally. Islamabad has been the largest recipient of Saudi foreign aid for decades, and Saudi and Pakistani intelligence connections are extremely close. Riyadh provided sanctuary in exile to former prime minister Nawaz Sharif after the Musharraf coup in 1999 and heavily funds his political party (Sharif is favored to win the country's next election). During the tumultuous years after the Iranian Revolution, Islamabad provided thousands of troops to defend the Kingdom, with its twenty-thousand-strong military presence deployed in Saudi Arabia as the ultimate Praetorian Guard until Saddam's invasion of Kuwait—when King Fahd found a bigger bodyguard in the U.S. Army. Now Abdullah has turned back to Islamabad for contingency support.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former ambassador to the United States and now Saudi national-security adviser, traveled to Islamabad in late March to raise the prospect of a return engagement for the Pakistani army. Islamabad was quick to say yes. Long before the Bandar trip, a Pakistani battalion was already in Bahrain to back up the Khalifas if needed. Other Pakistani advisers or retired officers man much of the armed forces of the UAE and Oman.

Bandar also traveled to China to offer lucrative contracts in return for political support. No friend of the Arab Spring, Beijing is eager for Saudi oil and investment. Bandar secretly negotiated the first big Saudi-

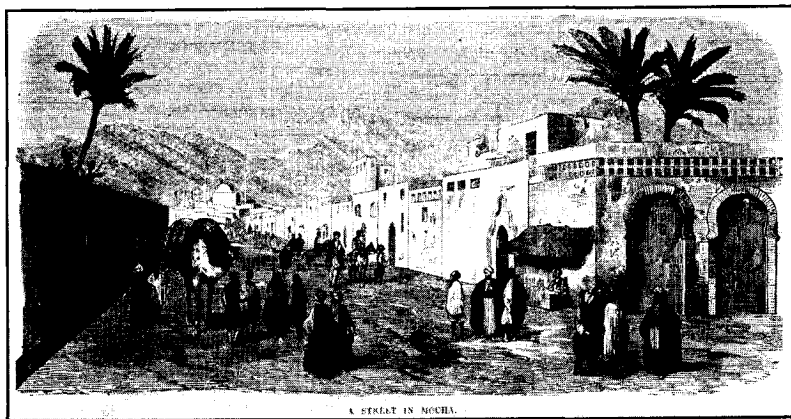
Chinese arms deal (for intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the 1980s) and is the Kingdom's premier China expert. Abdullah has long been a believer in the notion that China and India are the future markets for Arabian energy. He made his first trip as king to them.

Saudi foreign policy is always pragmatic and adaptive. Despite their disappointment at Mubarak's fall, the Saudis have reached out to the new power centers in Cairo as well. They have offered economic aid and debt relief to the transition government. The Kingdom has been a sanctuary for the Muslim Brotherhood for decades and doubtless will try to cash in on that connection in the new Egypt. Abdullah has long-standing ties to Brotherhood leaders across the Arab world.

In his speeches on the Arab Spring and U.S. Middle East policy this year, Obama

still the Kingdom's foremost supporter. We have provided tens of billions in arms over the decades and critical intelligence support to fight Nasserists, Baathists, Iranians and al-Qaeda. The continued American support in military and intelligence channels is vastly more important to the survival of the House of Saud than occasional mild rebukes from the secretary of state about women's driving. We need to face the fact that America is the counterrevolution's biggest backer as long as our military and intelligence establishment supports it. And there is no choice; al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also threatens America.

In private, Washington needs to talk quietly to the family about the long-term direction of Arabia, how the Kingdom plans to adapt to those changes, and how America and Saudi Arabia can maintain their alliance in the twenty-first century. Our chal-



implicitly recognized Saudi importance and American impotence: he just didn't mention Saudi Arabia outright. And he was correct to remain silent. This is the conundrum: There is little purpose served by American exhortations in public for reform in the Kingdom; they will alienate the royals and lead to unrealistic expectations among the masses. The truth is the United States is

allenge is to be the friend of the new revolutions in the Middle East while retaining the alliance with the counterrevolutionaries. Prince Nayef may be the key to it all. Focusing on common interests like Yemen and Iran could rein in his nastier instincts. If we fail, and the Saudi counterrevolution gets bloody, the U.S.-Saudi alliance could well come to an end. □