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Saudi Arabia's Race Against Time

David B. Ottaway,
*Senior Scholar,
Woodrow Wilson International
Center for Scholars and former Bureau
Chief, Washington Post, Cairo*



The Saudi official from the Ministry of Interior's "ideological security" department was relaxed and confident. The government had uprooted scores of secret al-Qaeda cells, rounded up 5,700 of its followers, and deafened Saudi society to its siren call to *jihad* to overthrow the ruling al-Saud royal family. For the kingdom, the threat from Islamic terrorists had become manageable. So, what is the main security concern of the Saudi government today? The answer came as something of a surprise: the return of 150,000 Saudis who have been sent abroad to study, nearly one half of whom are now in the United States.

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The overwhelming impression from a two-week visit to the kingdom is that the House of Saud finds itself in a tight race against time to head off a social explosion, made more likely by the current Arab Awakening, that could undermine its legitimacy and stability. Ironically, the threat stems partly from King Abdullah's deliberate policy to stimulate reform by sending a new generation of Saudis abroad for training in the sciences, technology, and critical thinking—skills that his kingdom's own educational system, dominated by ultra-conservative Wahhabi religious clerics, has failed to provide.

Thousands of beneficiaries from the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, underway since 2005, have returned from U.S. colleges and universities to face bleak prospects for a job, house, or marriage. Those in charge of the kingdom's "ideological security," a

About the Middle East Program

Director

Dr. Haleh Esfandiari

Assistants

Kendra Heideman

Mona Youssef

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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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The following paper is part of a Middle East Program Occasional Paper Series featuring the work of our scholars and fellows. The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

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euphemism for acceptance of its ultra-conservative Wahhabi theology and al-Saud rule, fear these foreign-educated Saudis will fuel an already growing challenge from political and human rights activists.

Though still small in number, these activists are becoming steadily better organized and more assertive, particularly those belonging to the Shiite minority who have borne the brunt of a stepped-up security crackdown this past year in the Eastern Province, where the kingdom's 260 billion barrels of oil reserves are located. Young Shiite militants and Saudi anti-riot police have engaged in skirmishes that, for the first time, saw both sides resorting to firearms and resulted in the death of at least ten protesters. Also for the first time, Saudi activism has spread to include female university students; in early March, hundreds of women staged a campus protest at the King Khalid University in southwestern Saudi Arabia that involved demonstrations, physical clashes with police, and injuries.

The outburst of student activism on Saudi campuses this past spring suggests the problem for the House of Saud lies less in whether students are educated at home or abroad than in the rapid development of a critical mass of educated and tech-savvy Saudi youth, discontent with their current lot and prospects. Close to one million students are now enrolled in Saudi colleges and universities. Clearly, some have decided to become more assertive in making their demands known.

The Arab Awakening has seen youth-led uprisings oust or seriously challenge half a dozen Arab rulers, both secular and royal, over the past 18 months. So far, it has not posed a serious threat to the al-Sauds, but there is a kind of Saudi-style "awakening" taking place, whose import and impact is clearly of growing concern. Even with a booming economy and at least \$500 billion in foreign reserves, the kingdom's rulers ooze a sense of nervousness as the so-called "youth bulge," led by the 150,000 Saudis turning 18 years old every year, crashes up against the limitations of a state-dominated economy. As never before, the government is pressing private companies to replace some of their six million foreign workers with Saudis. It is also scrambling to create more jobs by launching thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises and various programs to provide marketable skills for job-seeking university graduates steeped mostly in religious education.

The sense of Saudi jitters over developments at home comes as the kingdom deals simultaneously with mounting challenges from a nuclear ambitious Iran and an unending

rebellion by the Shiite majority against the ruling Sunni minority in neighboring Bahrain. The rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran is now focused on the fate of two shaky minority regimes: the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain, strongly supported by the Saudis, and the Alawite regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, just as firmly backed by the Iranians. The Saudis are pushing for unity among its closest Arab allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to protect Bahrain from falling into the Iranian sphere of influence, while the Iranians are aiding al-Assad's regime to prevent its overthrow by a Sunni-dominated government aligned with Saudi Arabia.

Comforting the House of Saud, as political turmoil engulfs its neighbors, was a publication in January 2012 of a survey of 1,400 Saudis, conducted by a Saudi researcher at Exeter University in England. Taken in early 2011, in the midst of pro-democracy uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the poll found Saudis a lot more concerned about economic than political reform. Nearly half the respondents said, "the most important challenge" facing the kingdom was the economic situation (poverty, unemployment, and price increases), while only two percent chose "enhancing or strengthening democracy." A surprisingly high 59 percent expressed confidence the state was undertaking "far reaching and radical reforms," and more than 54 percent expressed confidence in the performance of the government and armed forces. Still, respondents seemed seriously conflicted in their attitudes toward democracy. Fifty-one percent agreed "a political system that is governed by Islamic law without elections or political parties" was appropriate or very appropriate. But 54 percent also agreed that "a democratic system may have problems, yet it is better than other systems."¹

No question was asked on whether Saudis had confidence in the House of Saud's ability to handle the transition from a very old and health-plagued leadership to a younger generation of princes. The issue has taken on greater prominence with the death of Crown Prince Nayef at age 79 on June 16, just eight months after the passing of his predecessor, Prince Sultan. The new crown prince, Defense Minister Salman, is 77 and, like the king, afflicted with back problems. Foreign and Saudi analysts have begun assessing the prospect for a power struggle among junior princes, already jockeying for power and position, which could divide the House of Saud into rival factions.

This concern may be premature. There are still three prominent sons of King Abdulaziz bin Saud, founder of the current Saudi kingdom in 1932, young enough to extend the older generation's rule for another decade: Minister of Interior Ahmed bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 70; Riyadh Governor Sattam bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 71; and Muqrin bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 66. The prospect of the latter becoming king decreased considerably, however, after the king fired him as chief of Saudi intelligence on July 19 and named Prince Bandar bin Sultan, former Saudi ambassador to Washington, in his place.

Jobless University Graduates

King Abdullah's idea to send tens of thousands of students to the United States stems from his meeting in April 2005 with former President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas. The two leaders were hatching projects to revive the U.S.-Saudi relationship badly damaged by the fallout from the involvement of 15 Saudis in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Most Saudi students left in the wake of this wrenching event, and the U.S. government reacted by suspending its fast-track processing of visas for Saudi students. Both leaders worried the two countries were drifting apart in acrimonious dispute over whether the kingdom was birthing Islamic terrorism, and both wanted to revive people-to-people ties.

One outcome was the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program under which the Saudi government pays all the costs of sending students to the United States for bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. degrees, while the U.S. State Department reinstated its fast-track multiple-entry, five-year visa program. Saudi students were also sent to 33 other countries including China, India, Britain and Australia, but the United States quickly proved to be the most popular choice.

As of the fall of 2012, nearly 68,000 Saudis (28 percent of them females) will be attending 1,200 American colleges and universities, the largest contingents in Florida and California. Right after September 11, the number had fallen to around 4,000. Mody Alkhalif, director of cultural affairs at the Saudi embassy in Washington—herself the daughter of a U.S.-educated father—said she expected the number to continue growing since the program has been extended at least until 2015. The Oxford Business Group's latest report on Saudi Arabia calculates that as of May 2011, the Abdullah Scholarship Program had sent abroad not 150,000 students, the number usually cited, but actually 192,592 students.

The wave of returnees has begun, and its size is growing yearly. From just a few hundred graduates from U.S. institutions in 2006, their number reached 6,000 in 2012, a 50 percent increase over 2011. Alkhalif said, "very, very few" graduates were electing not to return home. Another embassy official quoted in March by the English-language *Arab News* said that so far "only 13 students applied for citizenship in the United States."

What impact will several hundred thousand foreign-educated students have on Saudi society or on the snail's pace of reform? "If they don't change Saudi Arabia," Alkhalif opined, "nothing will." One member from the earlier generation is Abdullah al-Alami. A management consultant with a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1984, he predicted confidently the new wave of U.S.-educated returnees would change "the face of the kingdom."

But will they become a pressure group for political reform? Will they prove more rebellious, or more liberal, than those sent abroad in the 1970s and 1980s? Al-Alami's generation was welcomed back with open arms by the Saudi government, which quickly absorbed them into its ever-expanding bureaucracy. Their energies were channeled into building a modern Saudi state. They numbered only 16,000 but ended up providing 80 percent of cabinet ministers today. Yet there is scant evidence they had much impact on promoting political reform.

The current generation faces widely different prospects upon returning home: an already bloated bureaucracy and a private sector highly reluctant to take on high-wage Saudis when they can hire low-earning Pakistanis, Indians, Egyptians, and Yemenis. "All these students sent overseas is a gamble...The question is what happens when they come back? What jobs?" remarked one Western diplomat stationed in Riyadh. The employment crisis for women university students is particularly acute. The government recently discovered that 85 percent of those applying this past year for unemployment allowances were female, the vast majority with university-level degrees.

The king's foreign scholarship program has not been without controversy at home. Conservative Wahhabi clerics and educators fear it will import liberal Western values, corrupting Saudi society. Some have called for a halt. In April, Higher Education Minister Khaled al-Anqari, himself a Ph.D. holder from the University of Florida, denied rumors the program



was being shut down. It might be either expanded or reduced in size, he said, but not canceled.

Addressing the latest group of 6,000 students leaving for America in late May, the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, James B. Smith, said he hoped they would come back with “new ideas and perhaps new ways of looking at the world.” Many Saudis surmise that King Abdullah’s secret objective is to create a critical mass of reform-minded Saudis who will indeed form a pressure group, sufficiently powerful to loosen the grip of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi religious establishment over Saudi society and the pace of change.

The Growth of Student Activism

The potential for local students to become activists was made clear this spring in a most unexpected manner. At King Khalid University in Abha, the capital of Asir Province, hundreds of women from the College of Arts and Humanities staged a campus demonstration on March 6, 2012 demanding better conditions. Their complaints ranged from the quality of professors, to filthy living conditions, to corruption at the top of the university administration. They demanded that the university’s president, Abdullah al-Rashid, be fired.² The protest entered a second day and turned violent when female security guards began seizing some of the protesters who had allegedly thrown water bottles and shoes at them. Accounts of the incident were quickly flashed around the world via Facebook and Twitter, including pictures and reports that 53 female students had been injured in the melee—the first female casualties and mass protest in the kingdom’s history. Male students, segregated on a separate campus, then held their own protest in support of their female colleagues.

The Asir Province governor, Prince Faisal bin Khalid, acted swiftly to calm the situation, meeting with a delegation of 20 female protesters to discuss their grievances and promising an investigation and reforms. Word of the Abha protests set off others at half a dozen universities around the kingdom in the ensuing weeks. The outburst of student protests shook the government. Its only comfort was that student demands did not go beyond campus issues to include political reforms.

It remains to be seen whether these student protests herald the birth of a permanent new center of activism. The potential is manifestly there, even if formal student organizations are strictly forbidden. One Saudi news executive and commentator, Jamal Khashoggi, described the Abha demonstra-

tions as a “turning point” in the fledgling Saudi protest movement. “This is different because it’s happening in the age of the Arab Spring,” he noted. “It’s an example of what could set off an explosion.”

The government has undertaken a massive expansion of the higher education system, building a dozen new colleges and universities and committing 26 percent of its annual budget to coping with education for the youth bulge. There are now 24 government universities, 8 private universities, and 540 colleges. In 2009-10, the number of students enrolled was 903,000, an increase of 28 percent in just one year. Women accounted for 52 percent of the total.

Most male and female graduates face a common problem: they are strong in Wahhabi religious fundamentals and weak in the sciences and technology. According to Abdullah Dahlan, a Saudi educator who runs a vocational college in Jeddah, “82 percent of university students major in theoretical education unrelated to the economy.” This is the root cause, he told the Jeddah Economic Forum in March, of the job crisis they face upon graduation.

“Jobs, Jobs, Jobs”

The Saudi government seems to have adopted the U.S. Republican political mantra, “jobs, jobs, jobs.” It is pressing the private sector as never before to solve a problem it cannot: jobs for 250,000 to 300,000 Saudi university graduates and other youth entering the labor market every year. Right now, private companies employ on average just one Saudi for every nine foreigners. Labor Minister Adel Fakieh, a former businessman and onetime mayor of Jeddah, is the point man for the government’s latest campaign to radically change hiring practices. He laid out the dimensions of the problem and the government’s proposed solutions in a PowerPoint presentation at his Riyadh office.

Fakieh began by taking issue with the Central Department of Statistics estimate that the number of unemployed Saudis was only 448,000. He reported that more than two million Saudis had applied for the \$533 monthly unemployment allowance under the government’s new social security Hafiz Program launched last year. Those who would finally meet the necessary criteria would probably total slightly more than one million, he said, disclosing that his ministry had discovered that 85 percent of those applying were women. “Hundreds of thousands” of housewives had applied, but he

claimed they were not “real job seekers.” Many were well off financially, did not really want to work, or would only accept certain kinds of jobs, according to their applications. This explained why the government intended to accept only about half of the two million applicants. Those accepted would have to prove they were really looking for employment and be ready to accept training and take offered jobs. If not, they would be dropped from the program after one year.

The official unemployment rate in 2009 stood at 10.5 percent, but if Fakieh’s numbers are right, it would more than double that figure. In any case, even the official unemployment rate among youth between the ages of 20 and 24 stood at just under 40 percent in 2009.

The dimensions of the job crisis clearly pose a major challenge to the private sector, but the government has launched a full-court press on it to solve the problem. It has introduced a complicated rating system that sets forth the percentage of each company’s labor force that must be Saudi in order for it to continue hiring low-paid foreign workers. The Nitaqat (“zones”) Program, as it is called, establishes different colored categories—red, yellow, and green—into which all companies have been grouped according to their size, sector, and number of employees. Each is then told the percentage of Saudis it must employ. The initial goal of the Nitaqat Program is to increase the percentage of Saudis to a modest 10 to 36 percent, depending on the category into which a company falls. Only if a company makes it into the “green zone” is it then permitted to continue hiring foreigners.

Fakieh maintained that if the government succeeded in pushing even 50 percent of private Saudi companies into the green zone, “after three to five years, we will run out of real Saudi job seekers.” However, many companies are already reportedly cheating by hiring scores of Saudi “ghost employees” who are on the payroll but do little or no work. Meanwhile, many Saudis continue to seek jobs in the government bureaucracy or state enterprises because of assured tenure, higher wages, and better benefits.

Al-Alami, the U.S.-educated management consultant, said the new Nitaqat Program was part of a 25-year plan drawn up in the mid-2000s to gradually wean the economy off dependence on foreign labor mainly by training a skilled Saudi work force to replace it. To succeed, he said, it required increasing the cost of hiring foreign workers and offering higher wages to Saudis. He was dubious either would happen. The government had so far avoided setting a minimum

wage for private companies, and few were prepared to pay the \$1,300 to \$1,600 per month wages he estimated the average married Saudi worker needed as a minimum to make a decent living. “The business community wants to continue the old way,” he said. “If they employ Saudis, their profit margins will go down. Many will go bankrupt.” His proposed solution: squeeze the eight million foreign workers out of the labor market (two million are domestic workers) by imposing a strict time limit on their employment contracts.


The SME Craze

The other prong of the government’s jobs campaign consists of creating thousands of small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs as they are commonly known. The government has held a score of conferences in 2012 dedicated to popularizing SMEs, the kingdom’s new economic mantra. A number of Saudi universities and research centers are creating “incubators” to birth SMEs, like the Badir Program at King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology in Riyadh focused on launching information technology enterprises.

Prince Turki bin Saud, the City’s vice president, told the Jeddah Economic Forum that by 2015 the kingdom hoped to have 20 incubators functioning primarily at universities. He also listed the multiple difficulties would-be Saudi entrepreneurs face, noting that Saudi Arabia did not have “one single company” interested in venture capitalism and no interest among Saudi banks in risking their money on startups.

The government is expected to launch shortly a special state fund, TECHNIA, to provide financing and mentoring for new SMEs. It had already established the Centennial Fund, offering 20 different types of services to young entrepreneurs, including loan guarantees, back-office services, and mentors. So far, the fund has approved 2,444 SMEs ranging from coffee shops and spas to technology firms and has extended \$195 million in loans, according to its general manager, Abdulaziz al-Mutairy. Claiming a 96 percent success rate in launching 446 projects during 2011, al-Mutairy indicated that the interest in SMEs was huge—107,000 applicants since the fund opened in 2006. But he said the fund had chosen to help only the three percent it judged most likely to succeed.

Whether SMEs are the panacea to the jobs deficit or a mirage was the hot topic at the Jeddah Economic Forum. Dalia Mogahed, executive director of and senior analyst at the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies in Washington, D.C., startled the gathering by asserting it was “a myth that new



startups create a lot of jobs.” Another myth, she said, was that university graduates were the most likely to become successful entrepreneurs. In the United States, the failure rate for new SMEs was 90 percent. Those most likely to succeed, according to her, were well-established businessmen with five to 10 years of experience who then decide to strike out on their own. “Successful start-up entrepreneurs are extremely rare,” she cautioned. As for solving unemployment among women, she argued the best hope was overall economic development. “As male unemployment goes down, the more support you get for women to work. So focus on overall development.”

Stifling Dissent

On November 22, 2011, a court in Riyadh sentenced 16 activists to 10-30 years in prison on charges ranging from abetting terrorism to seeking to organize a political party and human rights association to inciting political discontent back in 2007. The alleged leader, Saud al-Mokhtar, a doctor, had been holding meetings, known as *diwanias*, at his home in Jeddah where political reforms and the war in Iraq had been the main topics. The so-called “Jeddah 16” had raised money for medical supplies and a field hospital for internal Iraqi refugees, advertising on state television for contributions—funds which the government alleged had been funneled instead to terrorists.

The stiff sentences shocked Saudi human rights and political activists who had been increasing their demands for reform ever since the popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. In February 2011, they had issued a nine-point declaration entitled “Towards a State of Rights and Institutions,” signed initially by 500 activists but eventually by over 1,500. “Our country is in desperate need for fast, serious, and root-based reform that promotes unity of this nation,” the statement read. It called for such measures as an elected parliament, the separation of the post of prime minister from the king, an independent judiciary, “speedy resolution of youth problems,” and the establishment of civil society institutions and labor unions. One defense lawyer for the 16 Jeddah activists, Bassem Alim, said the harsh sentences marked the government’s new, no-concessions approach toward reformers and demands of this kind. “The minister of interior doesn’t want any political reform—any,” he said, referring to late Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz, who had led the crackdown on liberal reformers. “It would indeed reduce the absolute power of the monarchy.”

The House of Saud’s principal response to the Arab Awakening’s reverberations on the kingdom continues to be a crackdown on all dissent, mainly Shiite and liberal human rights activists, but also excessively militant Wahhabi clerics. The government this year turned down registration requests from three independent human rights associations that would compete with either its own Human Rights Commission or the semi-official National Society for Human Rights.

I experienced first-hand government tactics for quashing dissent while attending a nighttime meeting called to discuss human rights issues. The host was Waleed Abu al-Khair, a lawyer. He had already had his lawyer’s license suspended in retaliation for his activities. His wife, Samar Badawi, was in Washington at the time to receive a “Women of Courage Award” from First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Badawi had gained international notoriety first for serving a seven-month jail sentence for defying her father’s opposition to her marriage to Abu al-Khair and then for suing the Ministry of Interior for denying her a driver’s license. She has challenged not only the legal requirement for Saudi women to obtain a father’s (or husband’s) approval to marry, work, or travel abroad, but also the prohibition on their driving based purely on a *fatwa*, or religious decree.

Abu al-Khair had been holding his *diwanias* which he calls “samood,” meaning struggling, in his modest, rented apartment in downtown Jeddah every Tuesday night. He regularly invited both friends and foes to attend. The previous session had seen several hardline Wahhabi fundamentalists show up to question the legitimacy of their discussion. As his *diwanिया* began on March 6, 2012, with perhaps 20 Saudis in attendance, all lights in the building suddenly went off. They went back on just as the session, held in the glow of iPhone lights, finished two hours later. The speaker that night was another human rights activist from Riyadh, Mohammed al-Qathani, who outlined the human rights of Saudis under existing laws.

After the meeting, the owner of the building told Abu al-Khair that he would not renew his apartment lease when the contract expired. There was more to come. When Abu al-Khair went to the airport in late March on his way to attend the U.S. State Department’s three-month “Leadership in Democracy” program, he was informed he was banned from traveling abroad until further notice.

The wrath of the government has also fallen on al-Qathani, co-founder of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association

that had never gained official permission to operate. He, too, was banned from leaving the country on March 18, 2012, as the government opened an investigation of his activities. Then on June 18, a Riyadh court leveled 11 criminal charges against al-Qathani ranging from operating his unlicensed association and “breaking allegiance to the ruler” to “antagonizing international organizations against the kingdom.” The latter was apparently in reference to his numerous reports to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva about alleged abuses by Saudi security forces of detainees and political activists.

As of mid-July, Abu al-Khair appeared likely to receive the same treatment. He had also tried, without success, to register his Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, and finally did so in Canada, with its Facebook page quickly attracting 5,000 followers. In early June, Abu al-Khair was questioned by the same Saudi prosecutor handling al-Qathani’s case and accused of “disrespecting the judiciary system,” contacting foreign organizations, and signing a petition demanding the release of detainees. He was expected to face formal criminal charges at his next court appearance set for late August.

The government crackdown has also hit militant clerics outside the official Wahhabi establishment. In April, a court sentenced Sheikh Yusuf al-Ahmed to five years in prison after finding him guilty of violating public order, and using YouTube to criticize the king. The sheikh, a professor at Imam Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh, had been particularly critical of the detention without trial of thousands of mostly Shiite Saudis. He had already lost his government job in 2011 after criticizing the king for allowing women to study together with men at the new King Abdullah University for Science and Technology.

In May, the king also fired his religious adviser, Sheik Abdel Muhsin al-Obaikan, 81, after he criticized the justice ministry for “Westernizing” Saudi society and undermining clerical control of the courts and their rulings. The sheik had earlier opposed the king’s efforts to promote women in the workplace and even in the judiciary as court judges.

In late May, King Abdullah called in 20 non-establishment clerics to reprimand them for collecting donations without authorization to help the Syrian opposition, which the monarch himself has said should be armed to help overthrow President al-Assad. Several of these clerics had been chastised earlier for issuing their own *fatwas* and raising money in sup-

port of the Sunni rebellion against the Shiite government in Iraq.


Generally, however, the government has treated wayward Wahhabi clerics gingerly, even when they differ with the king, because of their impressive influence over Saudi society. Three of them, led by Sheik Mohammed al-Arefe, have over one million followers on their Twitter accounts. Another is Salman al-Odah, who was imprisoned in the 1990s for leading an Islamic “Awakening” but now supports the government even while showing his sympathies for some of the liberal reformers’ demands.

The Arab Awakening in Saudi Cyberspace

High above the vast desert expanse of the kingdom, a protest movement punctuated by a lively debate between Saudi liberals and Islamists is taking place on the Internet, mediated by YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Ten million Saudis—half of the total number of Saudi nationals—have access to the Internet, and 5.1 million of them have Facebook accounts. So far, Saudi security services have not followed China’s example to force electronic providers to censor the content of news or build a “wall” to isolate Saudis from outside criticism. Instead, they have taken to exploiting the vast social network connecting half the population to monitor the rise and fall of discontent and to ferret out terrorists in the making. Security agents also regularly tap into various websites, blogs, and Twitter accounts of likely extremists to engage them in religious dialogue in an effort to dissuade them from turning to terrorism.

Saudi security has, however, blocked some websites like the ones that carried “Toward a State of Rights and Institutions,” and the government has passed laws prohibiting either the print media or Internet sites from “damaging the country’s public affairs,” insulting senior clerics, or “inciting divisions between citizens.” As a result, newspapers seldom report any longer the misdeeds of over-zealous religious police as had become common before the Arab Spring.³ Even cyberspace critics operating within the kingdom are no longer immune after the arrest in mid-June of Ra’if Badawi on charges his Free Saudi Liberals website “infringes on religious values,” a reference to a posting attacking senior clerics.

The House of Saud’s ambiguous attitude toward social media constitutes a role reversal. In the past, it was ultra-conservative Wahhabi clerics who fought introduction of any new means of communication, starting with the telegraph and



then radio and television. Indeed, King Faisal's assassination in 1975 stemmed from their stiff opposition to television, which triggered his killing by an enraged nephew. Without a mention of his own father's fate, Mecca Governor Prince Khalid al-Faisal reminded the Jeddah Economic Forum of past Saudi history, first opposing and then warmly embracing every new communication tool. "We feel afraid and we love it at the same time" he said before going on to express a view doubtlessly shared by many other family members: "It's a two-edged sword. It could become a curse. Even the medicine we take can become a poison."

The IT "poison" most afflicting the ruling al-Saud family this year has been Twitter account @Mujtahidd. A seemingly well-informed anonymous Saudi has been dribbling out – 140 characters at a time – detailed information about various alleged incidents of royal corruption. By April, the account had nearly 300,000 followers and gained a degree of credibility by reporting accurately, and in some detail, on the worsening health problems of Crown Prince Nayef, who finally died in June. One French-language blogger, who claimed to have interviewed this would-be Julian Assange⁴ of Saudi Arabia, asked him to describe his objective. The answer: @Mujtahidd was engaged in an "aggressive fight against filthy corruption, a fight which starts with exposure of those who are corrupt and ends with their removal." Asked if his intent was to spark a popular uprising, the whistleblower replied that was up to Saudis to decide. "But if the regime can bow to demands for reform, that is a much better scenario." Did he think it would? No, he opined, "the current regime is immune to any reform." As of mid-July, the Saudi government had still not found a way to silence @Mujtahidd.

The capability of Saudi Islamists to exploit the electronic media for their own causes, already on display during two rounds of municipal elections in 2005 and 2011, was again illustrated in February 2012. This time, the test case was provided by Hamza Kashgari, a young Saudi accused of apostasy because of his tweets describing his imaginary, and critical, dialogue with the Prophet. The Islamists' outrage was such that Kashgari fled the country only to be stopped by police in Kuala Lumpur and returned to the kingdom to await judgment. His liberal supporters launched an online petition demanding his release signed by 4,000 Saudis. His Islamic detractors, using Facebook to call for his execution, quickly rallied 21,000 supporters. As of July, Kashgari had neither been put on trial nor released from detention.

Saudi feminists have been among the most avid Internet users, particularly to promote their still-unrecognized right to drive a car. They have used the hash tag #Women2Drive on Twitter to rally support and YouTube to video themselves breaking the religious ban. On June 17, the first anniversary of their 2011 "drive-in" that saw 40 to 50 women take to the wheel, they presented King Abdullah with a petition signed by 800 supporters demanding the ban's annulment once again.

One campaign leader, Manal al-Sharif, was barred in May from leaving the country to attend the Oslo Freedom Forum, which posted her speech on YouTube and was watched by 315,000 people. Al-Sharif had served a 10-day jail sentence for breaking the ban in May 2011 and posting a video of herself driving on YouTube. Another powerful example of Saudi women harnessing social media for their defense was a YouTube video in early June of one feisty lady shouting down religious policemen at a mall; she was refusing to obey their order to leave because they did not like her painted fingernails.

Just how ubiquitous social networking has become was brought home to this visitor over an incident in early March, scarcely mentioned in the Saudi media—the suicide of an unemployed Saudi living in Arrar in northern Saudi Arabia. The incident quickly became the talk of the kingdom on Twitter and Facebook. Some Saudis were comparing the deceased Abdulrahman al-Rueili to Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor whose self-immolation over police harassment touched off the uprising that toppled President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011.

I asked one government official what he knew about the Arrar incident. Without a moment's hesitation, he turned to his Twitter to get the latest accounts. He reported that al-Rueili, 25, had graduated from a public health school four years ago but never found employment. He had told friends he would kill himself if he could not secure a job. After local health ministry officials turned him down yet again, he did just what he had threatened by hanging himself with a laundry line. As it happened, al-Rueili did not turn out to be another Bouazizi; no Saudis used his death to try to provoke street demonstrations. Nonetheless, the incident illustrated how Saudis now use Twitter and Facebook to inform themselves about events the government seeks to black out. Even two years ago, such an incident in a remote town like Arrar would have gone unknown to the Saudi public.

The Shiite Challenge Turns Violent

One of the most notable changes over the past year has been the hardening attitude of both Shiite activists and the Saudi government toward each other. Though constituting only ten percent of the population, the Shiites live mostly in the Eastern Province, the kingdom's oil heartland. The province is linked by a 16-mile causeway to Bahrain, where the majority Shiite population is in full rebellion against the ruling minority Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. Events there have served to stiffen the attitude of the al-Saud government toward the Shia. The two sides have diametrically opposed viewpoints as to the nature of a solution to their conflict, the former taking primarily a security approach, while the Shia look for greater religious freedom and political rights.

For years, King Abdullah has sponsored a "national dialogue" bringing together the kingdom's various Sunni and Shiite sects to promote mutual respect and understanding. But his own government has sabotaged this effort by holding conferences singing the praises of Wahhabi Salafism and warning of the dangers of Shiism. Last December, the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh held a symposium under the patronage of the late Crown Prince Nayef devoted to Salafism's importance to the kingdom.⁵

In mid-February, a three-day conference of Wahhabi academics and clerics held at the Al-Babtain Cultural Center in Riyadh devoted itself to "The Truth About Shiite Beliefs and their Danger to Sunni Communities." One of the panels focused on "Shiite Crimes in History" and another on "The Global Shiite Project," with subtitles like "Dangers of This Project to Islamic Countries" and "The Disastrous Effects of This Project." Shiite leaders were livid and convinced the conference had full official blessing. "It's building a basis to discriminate against us," said Sadek al-Ramadan, head of a new Shiite human rights group. "This could be very dangerous."


In the Eastern Province, Shiite-government relations indeed took a decided turn for the worse, starting early last October. It began with some Shiites protesting over what they thought was the death of one of their elders at a police station in Awamiyah, a dissident stronghold outside the main Shiite city of Qatif. As it turned out, the elder had not died, but demonstrations continued throughout October and November that saw significant changes in tactics by both sides. According to Saudi security officials, Shiite youth brazenly stormed a police station in Awamiyah, began using

motorbikes in hit-and-run attacks on police checkpoints, and fired guns at police for the first time. According to the Shiite version of events, the government brought in special anti-riot police who opened fire on protesters, even using sharpshooters. Security forces had also provoked the population by surrounding Qatif and Awamiyah with checkpoints.

Shiite human rights activists published details on the death by gunfire of four protesters, aged 19 to 26, between November 21 and November 23, and another three who died during demonstrations in January and February, most of them in Qatif. Shiite activist al-Ramadan said it was not clear to him how and why the confrontations with police had turned so bloody, but added "maybe there was some shooting at the police." In mid-March, the Eastern Province's governor, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, met four of the dead protesters' families, promising an investigation and \$27,000 in compensation for each death.

After several peaceful months, more clashes occurred on July 8 after police wounded the radical Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr while arresting him near Qatif on charges of "sedition." Otherwise conflicting versions of what happened next agree that shots were fired, two of al-Nimr's supporters were killed and two others wounded. On July 13, Saudi security forces shot and killed another Shiite in what an official Ministry of Interior spokesman described as a firebomb and gun attack on a police station in Awamiyah. The same day, gunmen riding motorbikes also reportedly fired on two police patrols in Saihat near Qatif, wounding four Saudi policemen.

While it is too early to declare a rupture has been reached in Shiite-government relations, there are several noticeable changes that do not bode well. The government in early January published a list of 23 "most wanted" Shiites, the same tactic it has used in dealing with al-Qaeda terrorists on the run. Interior Ministry spokesman Mansour al-Turki said those wanted had criminal records and were part of an unnamed organization having a "foreign agenda," a clear reference to Iran. Their activities, according to al-Turki, had no political justification. "Having grievances does not justify violence," he told the English-language *Arab News*. "There are bodies to look into those grievances and our mission is to maintain security." Shiite activists retort that various royal commissions have studied their grievances for years with no concessions made to their varied political and religious rights demands—namely more mosques and social centers, greater



representation in the national Shura Council, and the right to serve in the security forces.

A second noticeable change has been the improved organization by Shiite activists. Last December, they launched the Adala Center for Human Rights, which the government has so far refused to register. Its leaders have been publishing in ever great detail arrests of protesters and how they are treated, including allegations of torture. In May, Adala issued its first report entitled “Freedom in Shackles” that among other things makes the case for flagrant violation of the kingdom’s own human rights laws and international obligations. According to Adala, 560 persons, including 35 children, had been arrested between March 2011 and April 2012, and 124 remained in prison as of May, some having never been charged. The report also referred to “several allegations of torture” it said it had documented including the use of “electric shocks on sensitive areas” and of fire extinguishers to hit prisoners.

Al-Ramadan, an Adala founder, said Shiite activists felt they needed to become better organized both to document abuses and cope with the growing number of violent clashes with security authorities. They would continue to ask the government to recognize Adala after twice having its application rejected, which he attributed partly to the tense situation in nearby Bahrain. Another factor he cited was the failure of Shiite elders to achieve anything through petitions, commissions, and endless meetings with Saudi authorities. “The government is mobilizing the public against the Shia, and that forces the Shia to close in among themselves,” he said. “The government is afraid of a Shia revolt.”

A third change in the character of Shiite activism is the increased involvement of a new, younger generation of activists in rebellion, not only against the Saudi government but their own elders. Their frustration and anger overflowed during a late night meeting with 30 young activists in Qatif as they recounted how their established leaders had met repeatedly since March 2011 with the Eastern Province’s governor, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, with no results. “They study our demands, but there is no response. So we have no trust in the government now,” said one of them. Yes, indeed, they were inspired by the youth-led uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia but even more by the failure of past efforts to achieve reforms. “For a long time, we were listening to our elders,” said another. “We are not listening anymore.”

The Saudi Bid for Arab Leadership

In early March, a delegation of Shaalan tribal elders traveled from Syria to visit Riyadh on a mission to brief senior Saudi princes on the situation in their war-torn country. The Syrians were escorted by their brethren from northern Saudi Arabia. Among their first stops was at the office of Prince Talal bin Abdulaziz, father of billionaire Alwaleed bin Talal and, at 80 years of age, still a blazing liberal among Saudi princes. After listening intently to the delegation’s brief and appeals for help, Talal responded. “The Syrian people should demand their freedom and a role in their government,” he said, adding that President al-Assad should realize these demands were “an order from God” and that he was a mere earthly ruler who should obey.

One of the most striking aspects of Saudi foreign policy since the advent of the Arab Awakening is its unusual aggressiveness on full display in its dealings toward Syria. It seems totally out of character for the House of Saud, which abhors both democracy and political instability, to have become the most vocal Arab advocate for the arming of the Syrian opposition and ouster of al-Assad. There are numerous explanations, but one lies in the tribal ties linking Saudis and Syrians—as was so wonderfully illustrated by the vignette of Prince Talal talking with the Syrian Shaalan elders. King Abdullah himself is part of those ties. One of his wives is a Shaalan.

Saudi analysts doubt, however, that tribal ties constitute the primary explanation for King Abdullah’s unusual fervor to see al-Assad fall. Instead, they list a powerful combination of personal vendetta and reason of state. On the one hand, they see a settling of accounts between two leaders, alternatively allies and enemies for years. The king, they say, has never forgotten or forgiven what he holds to be the leading Syrian role in the assassination of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, who died in a massive car bomb explosion in Beirut in February 2005. Hariri was extremely close to King Abdullah, and he served as the main pillar of Saudi diplomacy in Lebanon. The overthrow of al-Assad would constitute payback for Hariri’s killing. Then there is payback for the personal insult al-Assad publicly delivered to the king, calling him a “half-man” for doing nothing to help Lebanon during the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006.

The realpolitik motivation, on the other hand, is rooted in the burning Saudi-Iranian competition for Arab world leadership. The Saudis calculate that the fall of al-Assad’s minority

Alawite regime will produce a Sunni-dominated government that will break its links to Tehran and turn toward Riyadh.⁶ In various ways, the Saudis are working to turn the Arab Awakening to their advantage to seize religious and political leadership, riding on the wave of Sunni Islamists coming to the political fore. In their view, the awakening has also temporarily enfeebled Egypt, the Arab world's other main Sunni political power, due to its myriad domestic political and economic problems. The Saudis do not expect Cairo to be able to compete with Riyadh for at least another five years.

With more than \$500 billion in foreign reserves and as the Arab world's leading oil producer, the Saudis would seem to have ample financial wherewithal to make a serious bid for leadership. Furthermore, the kingdom has remained unaffected by the world recession due to high oil prices that have fueled a spending boom producing a 6.8 percent GDP growth rate last year. However, Saudi efforts to establish leadership have so far been erratic, the results less than impressive. Even King Abdullah's two initiatives to exploit royal fears of the Arab Awakening — by rallying the eight monarchs of the GCC, Jordan, and Morocco under the Saudi umbrella—have stumbled.

In May 2011, Saudi Arabia convinced its skeptical allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman—to issue an invitation to Jordan and Morocco to join their club of kings and emirs. Jordan had long sought GCC membership. On the other hand, Morocco, located at the other end of the Arab world on the Atlantic Ocean, had never asked. Just how Morocco could be integrated into the distant GCC was never made clear. After the two monarch outliers attended their first GCC meeting last September 2011, the whole scheme seems to have been buried in study commissions.

Then, King Abdullah late last year came forth with another proposal: the immediate and total integration of all current GCC members. “I urge you all to move from a phase of cooperation to a phase of union within a single entity,” he told his fellow monarchs at a summit meeting in Riyadh on December 20, 2011. Apparently referring to the combined challenges from a nuclear-aspiring Iran and a tumultuous Arab Awakening, he warned them “not to stand still when faced with reality... Whoever remains a mere spectator will be lost.” The rationale for the unity proposal was made clear in their final communiqué: they demanded Iran stop interfering

in their internal affairs and that Syria “immediately halt its killing machine.”

The Saudi unity plan hit its own hard reality at the next GCC summit in May. The six monarchs formally postponed any decision at least until the end of 2012 but probably far beyond. Clearly, the Saudis had failed to lay the groundwork for such a momentous jump as none of the outstanding obstacles to GCC unity had been resolved. GCC members had been unable to agree on a common currency (like the euro), or on a common market (like the European Union), or on common tariffs and trade policies toward the outside world.⁷

Perhaps most indicative of the recalcitrant attitude of the smaller Gulf monarchs toward Saudi unity efforts—ever since the GCC's founding 31 years ago—has been their failure to put together an integrated, anti-missile defense system protecting them from Iranian missiles or, now nuclear, threats. They have yet to overcome fears of Saudi dominance and historic rivalries among their families, not to mention long-standing differing policies from Saudi Arabia toward Iran in Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait—each leery of direct confrontation for their own reasons.

The lone Saudi neighbor expressing public enthusiasm for GCC unity has been Bahrain's King Hamad al-Khalifa. Since Saudi and Emirati troops arrived on the small island kingdom in March 2011 to help him suppress a Shiite uprising, the al-Khalifa rulers have become steadily more dependent on Saudi protection and financial support for survival. Indeed, the sudden Saudi unity proposal seems to have been largely motivated by Bahrain's plight. A chastened Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, summed up the lesson learned from the Saudi unity drive at the end of the GCC's May summit: “The issue will take time... The aim is for all countries to join, not just two or three.” Clearly Saudi Arabia's drive for Arab leadership even in its “near abroad” was in serious need of better planning and more skillful diplomacy.



Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/saud-al-sarhan/saudi-survey-shows-confidence-in.html>
- 2 This demand was ultimately met on July 1, 2012 when the king fired the university's president.
- 3 One notable exception was an incident on July 8 in southwest Baha Province. Four religious policemen were arrested after a Saudi man was killed and his pregnant wife and two children seriously injured in a car crash while fleeing the police upset by music blaring from their vehicle.
- 4 Julian Assange is editor-in-chief and founder of WikiLeaks, a media website that publishes information from whistleblowers. WikiLeaks is an international, online, not-for-profit organization publishing submissions of private, secret, and classified media from anonymous news sources, news leaks, and whistleblowers: <http://wikileaks.org/About>
- 5 Salafism is the term preferred to Wahhabism, that stems from its 18th century founder, Mohammed bin Abd al-Wahhab.
- 6 The Sunnis make up 70 percent of Syria's population and the bulk of opposition forces.
- 7 Bahrain and Oman have negotiated a separate Free Trade Agreement with the United States.



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Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza, 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004-3027
(202) 691-4000
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