

IS IT ALWAYS GOOD TO BE KING?

SAUDI REGIME RESILIENCE AFTER THE
2011 ARAB POPULAR UPRISINGS

MADAWI AL-RASHEED

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About the Author

Madawi Al-Rasheed is Visiting Professor at the LSE Middle East Centre and Research Fellow at the Open Society Foundation. She is the author of several books on Saudi Arabia, including *A Most Masculine State* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Contesting the Saudi State* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). She has also edited several volumes including *Dying for Faith* (I.B. Tauris, 2009), *Kingdom without Borders* (Hurst, 2009), and *Demystifying the Caliphate* (Hurst, 2012). Since joining the MEC, Madawi Al-Rasheed has been conducting research on mutations among Saudi Islamists after the 2011 Arab uprisings. This research focuses on the new reinterpretations of Islamic texts prevalent among a small minority of Saudi reformers and the activism in the pursuit of democratic governance and civil society. The result of this project has appeared in a monograph entitled *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (Hurst & Oxford University Press, 2015).

Abstract¹

Although all Arab monarchies (Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Jordan and Morocco) witnessed varying degrees of mass protest during the Arab uprisings of 2011, none of the kings and princes has thus far been deposed. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia saw pockets of sporadic protest in many cities in the early months of 2011, but those failed to evolve into a mass protest movement across the country. This paper analyses the conditions that helped maintain Saudi stability, attributing it to a combination of domestic and regional factors. This paper highlights how the conditions that led to monarchical resilience over the last five years may result in unexpected upheavals in the future.

¹ I am indebted to John Chalcraft at the London School of Economics and Political Science and Marc Lynch at George Washington University for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper. Michael Hudson gave me the opportunity to present my thoughts on the resilience of monarchy at the seminar series on the Arab state in 2015 at Harvard Kennedy School, the Belfer Center. His comments and insights in addition to those of the audience have been most valuable in refining my arguments in this paper.

Introduction

The resilience of the Saudi monarchy during the Arab uprisings astonished many observers. Like other countries in the Arab region, Saudi Arabia saw sporadic outbreaks of protest among different domestic actors in the early months of 2011, but these failed to develop into a mass movement calling for the downfall of the regime. This was interpreted at the time as a function of the redistributive power of an oil-rich regime, the satisfaction of Saudis with their leadership, and the external support that the regime is guaranteed among its Western allies, especially the United States. Equally, the smooth succession of King Salman on 23 January 2015 assured both the country's citizens and its allies that no power struggles or challenges are on the horizon. The recent resilience of the monarchy has been the subject of analysis, especially at a time when some Arab republics have witnessed mass mobilisation since 2010 on a scale never experienced before.

The most comprehensive analysis of monarchical resilience remains the recent contribution of Gause, in which he refines the original rentier state framework.² He emphasises that Gulf monarchies remain vulnerable to exogenous shock, for example the fluctuation of oil prices, but their stability stems from historical choices and physical resources. The old model of rentierism is anchored in simple political economy, namely the role of oil rent in pacifying the population through the redistributive state capacities and institutions of welfare, thus neutralising dissent, or at least making it less likely. The state deploys resources to curtail demands for political participation. The stability of dynastic monarchies is attributed to oil wealth that requires further strengthening by strategic coalitions, or ruling bargains, cemented by this wealth. In further elaboration on the topic, Yom and Gause provide a more nuanced refinement of the model as they focus on the impact of cross-cutting coalitions, hydrocarbon rent and foreign patronage. Oil and mobilisation become interlinked in the pursuit of monarchical resilience.³

Other scholars highlight the role in monarchical resilience of new repressive measures, both legal and coercive, that have been deployed by royals to ward off mass protest and sustain authoritarian rule.⁴ Yet the advanced means of coercion that oil wealth allowed

² F. Gregory Gause III, *Kings for all Seasons: How the Middle East's Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring* (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, 2013). For the debate on the monarchy, see also Mark Lynch, 'Does Arab Monarchy Matter?', in *Arab Uprisings: The Arab Monarchy Debate: Project on Middle East Political Science Briefings* (POMEPS, 2012). Available at http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/POMEPS_BriefBooklet16_Monarchies_web.pdf (accessed 10 April 2012).

³ F. Gregory Gause III, 'Oil and Mobilization in Saudi Arabia', in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix (eds), *Saudi Arabia in Transition: Insights on Social, Political, Economic and Religious Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 13–30. See also Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause III, 'Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On', *Journal of Democracy* 23/4 (2012), pp. 74–88.

⁴ Eva Bellin, 'Coercive Institutions and Coercive Leaders', in Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (eds), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 21–42. Eva Bellin, 'Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring', *Comparative Politics* 44/2 (2012), pp. 127–49.

were also available to the republics, without repression being a plausible deterrent to the eruption of mass protest in both republics and monarchies, although not of the same scale and intensity. One factor that is often overlooked here is the fact that all monarchies, from Morocco to Oman, witnessed mass protest, yet what was lacking was the sustainability of the protest, which was contained either by the promise of reform (Morocco, Jordan) or by utter repression (Bahrain).

Cultural arguments are often cited as frameworks to explain the durability of monarchies by reference to social contracts between rulers and ruled, invocation of dynastic and sheikhly authority, and recent reformist agendas that pacified the population. In managing demands for reform, monarchies often rely on the manipulation of symbols.⁵ Additionally, the reformist agendas of authoritarian regimes are cited as a means of upgrading authoritarian rule and prolonging the lifespans of both republics and monarchies. Co-opting civil society, economic liberalisation, expansion of political spaces, diversification of international networks and integration into global economies have all prolonged authoritarian rule,⁶ but in 2011 such statecraft measures were exhausted and mass protest began. This leaves one wondering whether there is a real difference between monarchies and republics, given that they were all engaged in implementing these upgrading strategies. As early as 1991, Anderson identified the external factor as a support network sustaining authoritarian rule. Absolutism was directly linked to British imperial policy, inherited by the United States, that allowed the sustainability of the monarchy.⁷ But in 2011 the same external support was enjoyed by all republican and monarchical authoritarian regimes, even those republics that had been sworn enemies of the West, such as Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria. They were both enjoying a rehabilitation period that did not last for long: just before the Arab uprisings, the international community gave them both recognition.

Analysis that seeks to highlight the exceptionalism or resilience of monarchies must focus on each case study. Equally, as Yom and Gause suggest, there are no inherent qualities of Arab monarchism that act as safeguards against deposition.⁸ It is impossible to isolate the monarchy as a genre and attribute to it eternal survival qualities and statecraft strategies without discussing the specific conditions that foster its resilience, which might equally be noticeable in republics that have not witnessed serious upheaval or demands for democratic representative governments – for example, Algeria and Sudan.

⁵ Mary Ann Tetreault, 'Political Activism in Kuwait: Reform in Fits and States', in Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (eds), *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 268–97.

⁶ Steven Heydemann, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', *Analysis Paper 13*, Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, October 2007.

⁷ Lisa Anderson, 'Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East', *Political Science Quarterly* 105/1 (1991), pp. 1–15.

⁸ Yom and Gause, 'Resilient Royals'.

By way of complementing Yom and Gause's approach, which focuses on regime strategies, resources and external relations, I propose to add further conditions that contributed to the resilience of the Saudi monarchy at the specific historical moment of the Arab uprisings. Here my focus is on domestic religious, political and social factors that mitigated serious challenges. Instead of focusing on international support, I highlight the regional dimension that contributed to the stabilisation of the Saudi regime. My approach involves identifying conditions that thwarted serious mass protest against the monarchy.

The conditions of regime stability are anchored in the nature of a divided society that is incapable of developing broad, grassroots solidarities to demand political reform. The dividing lines are well entrenched, and tend to manifest themselves along regional, tribal and sectarian divides. These divisions are at the heart of the interaction between state and society, rather than simply a reflection of a primordial Saudi characteristic.

The divisions are enhanced by the regime's promotion of an all-encompassing religious nationalism, anchored in Wahhabi teachings, which tend to be intolerant of religious diversity, thus excluding important constituencies that do not fit in with or conform to the ideal of the pure and pious nation. This religious nationalism also serves to criminalise all peaceful dissent, from demonstrations to strikes, thus contributing to a climate of fear and apprehension. Religious *fatwas* combine promoting loyalty to the regime with criminalisation of dissident opinions. State repression for violations of the basic Wahhabi theology of obedience to rulers adds an important dimension to silencing criticism and intimidating dissenters.

A second condition relates to the regional context and Saudi interventions in this context immediately after the Arab uprisings. The turmoil of the Arab region in fact bolstered the stability of the Saudi regime, which became inversely proportionate to the level of violence around Saudi Arabia. While many observers predicted that the domino effect of the Arab uprisings would reach Saudi Arabia, this simply did not happen. Saudi engagement in the Arab region in the wake of the uprisings took the shape of diplomacy, counter-revolutionary tactics in support of ancient regimes and outright military interventions – survival strategies that were above all meant to ward off that domino effect. The result was the intimidation of Saudis, who abhorred the high price of political change. Many Saudis began to reconsider their early enthusiasm for the Arab uprisings and eventually suspended their own demands for reform.

The conditions maintaining stability just described proved to be important in the short term. In the long term, however, the Saudi monarchy needs to deal with the dividing lines that prevent Saudi citizens from developing a national political reform agenda. The combination of domestic divisions and regional turmoil may prove to be too volatile in the future if they remain unresolved. Social and ideological divisions are too dangerous in a region where political and economic grievances are increasingly articulated in violent sectarianism, disintegration of sovereign states and the further fragmentation of the territorial integrity of nations.

The Saudi Case

The resilience of the Saudi monarchy is attributed here to, first, the fragmented nature of groups within Saudi society, which fractured and segmented protest when it started in 2011. This fragmentation prevented the development of national coalition opposition politics and mass mobilisation. The segmentation was expressed along primordial fault lines and ideological divides; both inhibited the articulation of a quest for national demands for political change and real mobilisation on the ground.

Second, local salafi Wahhabi *'ulama* (religious scholars) resurrected classical Sunni religious opinion relating to *fiqh al-ta'a* (the jurisprudence of obedience to rulers), and stretched their interpretations beyond the original foundational texts. These scholars used their new interpretations of these texts in sermons, and relied on both traditional and new media to reach a wide audience at the time of the Arab uprisings. While not all religious opinions, even those issued by the highest religious authorities in the kingdom, are always heeded by Saudis, religion and repression were combined to ensure that religious opinions against mass protest assumed the status of law. This explains the hesitation of most Saudis to challenge the leadership, even peacefully, because obedience to rulers was represented as divinely sanctioned and dissent was outlawed by reference to God's commands.

Third, an additional regional condition must be listed as a contributing factor to the resilience of the Saudi monarchy. Regional turmoil, mostly fuelled by the interventions of the GCC states and other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran after the Arab uprisings, strengthened rather than weakened the Saudi regime, and eventually demonstrated to Saudis the high cost of political change. Internal Saudi stability increased as the surrounding region spiralled into turmoil. Unprecedented internal violence in neighbouring countries, coupled with Arab military interventions and air strikes by international powers, and since 2015 by the Saudi regime itself in Yemen, were enough to intimidate Saudi constituencies and further inhibit the development of the kind of mass protest witnessed elsewhere in the Arab world.

The apparent stability of the Saudi monarchy five years after the Arab uprisings and its immunity from mass politics and protest do not necessarily indicate that it is always good to be king. I argue that, in the long term, the above-mentioned stabilising conditions may in fact lead to serious fragmentation of the Saudi polity itself. The domestic and regional conditions that currently contribute to the resilience and apparent stability of the Saudi regime carry the seeds of eventual disintegration of royal authority. The domestic and regional societal sources identified are themselves cause for serious future concerns.

While this is not the first time the Saudi monarchy has found itself surrounded by domestic problems and regional turmoil, the Arab uprisings have presented a new threat, namely the regional mass protest that erupted and spread across the region. This was a moment of mass politics rather than an age of coups masquerading as

revolutions, such as those in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ At the domestic level, Saudi publics have become more aware of regional protest, thanks to a high level of education and engagement with new communication technology.¹⁰ Like other Arabs, Saudis expressed a desire for political change and a more general improvement in their condition as citizens in a wealthy, oil-rich country. Weeks after the Arab uprisings in 2011, repression, worsening welfare services, unemployment and housing shortages prompted Saudis to articulate reformist demands in four petitions, all calling for a constitutional monarchy, an elected national assembly, the separation of powers, freedom of speech, civil society and the release of political prisoners.¹¹ However, mass mobilisation was a different matter.

Fragmented Saudi Publics

The most relevant domestic condition for the stability of the regime is the fragmented Saudi publics, which remain divided despite great regime efforts to develop a kind of Saudi religious nationalism, entangled with loyalty to the ruling group and abiding by the religious script of the dominant Wahhabi tradition, which was founded in the eighteenth century. Religious nationalism stipulates that the kingdom was founded to return Muslims to the right path of Islam as defined by the Wahhabi clerics. It promises to homogenise Saudis and mould them into following the teachings of this religious tradition.

On the eve of the Arab uprisings Saudi Arabia was fragmented and segmented, along tribal, sectarian and regional lines. Here I dismiss an inherent predisposition of Saudis in particular and Arabs in general to cling to primordial identities (sect, gender, tribe and region), and seek a sociological analysis rather than flawed historical arguments imposed on contemporary political realities. The precarious fragmentation is a function of the regime deliberately fostering divisions within society despite all the rhetoric of constructing and celebrating unity and Saudi national identity. The fragmentation arises out of the spaces of interaction between state and society. Furthermore, Wahhabi religious nationalism, while intended to unify people under the rule of Islamic law, *shari'a*, has always been a major source of division and contestation among the population.

⁹ In the 1950s and 1960s Arab nationalists and leftists who took control of Egypt, Syria and Iraq challenged Saudi Arabia. While the leftists had limited success there, mainly among Aramco workers led by Nasir al-Said, the ideology of Arab nationalism had more appeal among activists in the country. In particular, the charisma of Gamal Abdel Nasser affected Saudi Arabia during the reign of King Saud, who saw him as representing a real challenge to the monarchy. Even Saudi princes, such as Talal ibn Abd al-Aziz, fell under Nasser's spell and formed the Free Princes, who demanded a constitutional monarchy. But Saudi Arabia managed to avert the threat despite the appeal of Arab nationalist ideologies among this small Saudi minority of intellectuals, activists and princes.

¹⁰ Social networking media are very popular among Saudis. For the latest statistics on the use of Twitter, YouTube and Facebook see <http://www.statista.com/statistics/284451/saudi-arabia-social-network-penetration> (accessed 18 March 2015).

¹¹ For full details of this round of reformist petitions see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists: The Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (London: Hurst, 2015).

Not all Saudis are tribal people, but those who are tend to be incorporated into the state as tribal fragments. Members of tribes relate to the state as part of a group, and the regime prefers to deal with them through the mediation of appointed individuals, known as tribal sheikhs, who receive monthly salaries from the government as heads of an imagined, closed primordial group in which kinship and descent dictate membership. During the 23 January 2015 *bay'a* (oath of allegiance) ceremony for King Salman, Crown Prince Muqrin and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Nayif, people came to the royal court to pledge allegiance in groups rather than as individuals, accompanied by their tribal sheikhs. The imagined tribe is expected to give the oath of allegiance through its government-appointed representative or representatives. It is also expected that tribes disown their sons for political transgressions. Muhammad al-Wadani, who called for demonstrations early in 2011, was put in prison, and his Dawasir tribe was expected to disown him in the Saudi media.¹² Similarly, during the Shi'i protests of 2011–12 in the Eastern Province, Shi'i notables and religious scholars were expected to disown their 'unruly sons and agitators'.¹³ The state holds the whole tribe or, in the Shi'i case, the notables and clerics of the sect responsible for the transgressions of their younger members.

Since the foundation of the Saudi state in 1932, institutions into which tribes are incorporated as groups rather than as individual citizens have been created. For example, the Saudi National Guard consists of several *fawj*, tribal battalions and levies scattered around the country. The battalions are tribal military units under the authority of a prince, King Abdullah from 1962 and now his son Mithab, whose function is to balance the various branches of the royal family, protect vital oil installations and support the royal household in the event of dissent in other military units.¹⁴ A tribal battalion often has a military head belonging to another tribe or recruited from among the non-tribal population of the cities and towns, who are known for their historical loyalty to the Saudi ruling family. The boundaries of the tribe are enforced and institutionalised in the National Guard, in which families from tribal groups continue to serve for several generations. Members receive regular salaries and welfare. The practices of the regime, in particular its tribal recruitment policy in the National Guard, recreate and reproduce tribal affiliations, strengthening rather than dissolving them. The persistence of tribalism and its ability to segment the population is, therefore, not necessarily a survival from a distant tribal age but a modern phenomenon enforced by state policy, especially in the military sector. The policies impose an imagined solidarity on the tribes that they did not previously possess.

¹² Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'No Saudi Spring: Anatomy of a Failed Revolution', *Boston Review*, 1 March 2012. Available at <http://www.bostonreview.net/madawi-al-rasheed-arab-spring-saudi-arabia> (accessed 12 March 2015).

¹³ Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ On the history of the Saudi National Guard see Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985). For an update see 'Saudi Arabian National Guard' (n.d.). Available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/sang.htm> (accessed 17 March 2015).

Uneven development and the marginalisation of certain regions, especially the north, the southwest (Asir, where most of the Saudi 9/11 hijackers came from) and the eastern Shi'i provinces, result in serious inequality and resentment of the centre and the other regions that are considered better endowed with state welfare, infrastructure and facilities.¹⁵ With the concentration of major development projects in big cities, the peripheral rural areas of Saudi Arabia are underdeveloped and represent an embarrassment in an oil-based economy. Dissident voices in these regions highlight the inequality between their areas and the affluent cities, where most of the population lives.¹⁶ This creates favourable conditions for regionalism, namely the crystallisation of an alternative identity anchored in territoriality and making separate regional claims on the basis of the region's relative deprivation, local culture, and sect in areas where this is prominent (for example, among the Shi'a of the Eastern Province and the Ismailis of the south). In the Saudi official administrative divisions, the north and south are both designated border security zones: there is now a serious security threat in the former from Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and the Shi'a in southern Iraq, and in the latter from unstable Yemen and the Shi'i Zaydi Houthis, whose stronghold is on the other side of the southern border of Saudi Arabia. In addition to the north and south, there remains the troubled area of the Eastern Province, where the Shi'i minority lives near the oilfields and industry.¹⁷ The loyalty of those marginalised areas and populations is always disputed. Their population has transnational tribal and kin solidarities across the border in Jordan, Iraq and Syria in the north and Yemen in the south, not to mention Shi'i transnational religious connections with Iraq and Iran.

In addition to segmentation across tribal and regional lines, there is the added division emanating from sects and sectarianism. Saudi religious nationalism, which combines loyalty to the al-Saud and endorsement of Wahhabi religious interpretations and practices, excludes the Shi'a, Zaydis, Ismailis and Sufis.¹⁸ Such exclusion encourages such groups to retreat into the comfort zone of their own sects as a reaction to the Saudi–Wahhabi discourse that demonises them and excludes them from the national and even the religious narrative, amplifying their difference from the rest of the population.¹⁹ The premise of this religious nationalism is to impose homogeneity rather than to acknowledge and nourish diversity and pluralism. Intolerance of diversity prevents

¹⁵ Steffen Hertog, 'National Cohesion and the Political Economy of Regions in Post-World War II Saudi Arabia', in Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix (eds), *Saudi Arabia in Transition*, pp. 97–124.

¹⁶ Saudi veteran reformer and activist Professor Matruk al-Falih has always pointed to uneven development and warned against its implications for social harmony, especially in the northern provinces. His activism and defence of human rights ended in several prison sentences between 2000 and 2008. See Matruk al-Falih, *Sikaka al-Jawf fi nihayat al-qarn al-ishrin* [Sikaka al-Jawf at the End of the Twentieth Century] (Beirut: Bissan, 2000).

¹⁷ Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis*.

¹⁸ On Saudi religious nationalism see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 8–22.

¹⁹ On Wahhabi fatwas that demonise the Shi'a and others see Jonathan Schanzer and Steven Miller, *Facebook Fatwa: Saudi Clerics, Wahhabi Islam and Social Media* (Washington, DC: Foundation for Defense of Democracy, 2012).

minorities from feeling that they belong to the nation. Not only are the Shi'a excluded from many levels of employment, but Wahhabis depict them as moral misfits, blasphemous and impure. They are denied representation in certain state institutions, such as the Council of Higher Ulama, and in high-ranking jobs in educational and military institutions. Such pejorative treatment of minorities inhibits unity and common goals as far as political action is concerned. Dissidence, therefore, centres on narrow regional, tribal and sectarian issues. This was obvious during the Shi'i protest in the Eastern Province in 2011, which the regime described as an Iranian-backed sectarian uprising, which helped prevent it spreading beyond the Shi'i areas. Although Saudis have crossed the dividing lines by amassing significant numbers of signatures in support of national political petitions since 2004, Shi'i mass protest remained confined to Shi'i towns and among one group. Other minorities, for example the Ismailis in the southwest, did not take part in this protest.²⁰

The Shi'a protested in support of their own political prisoners in 2011 in their region, specifically in Awamiyya and Qatif, while in Buraydah in the central region of Qasim small-scale demonstrations took place in the streets demanding the release of local prisoners, mainly individuals held without trial on suspicion of terrorism. Cross-regional demonstrations were non-existent, simply because the rift between different areas had been enhanced by state propaganda claiming that the Shi'a are a fifth column loyal to Iran, and that the prisoners from the central region are terrorists, even before their convictions.²¹ This enhanced the fragmentation of the protest and prevented the development of cross-regional and cross-sectarian solidarities.

In addition, the ideological divides in Saudi Arabia between liberals and Islamists are more profound than in other Arab countries. This is because of the dominance of the dogmatic Saudi–Wahhabi politico-religious context and the systematically divisive role of the regime, which plays on each camp's weaknesses. The liberals are loose groups of state-sponsored intelligentsia, bureaucrats, technocrats and commercial elites. They follow the state's agenda, and do not have a political movement of their own to seek reform. The Islamists, on the other hand, tend to be internally diverse, belonging to well-known trends such as both loyal and dissident salafis, jihadi salafis, Ikhwanis (the Muslim Brotherhood) and Sururis (a fusion between the Muslim Brotherhood and the salafis).²² The well-known Islamist trends, however, operate within or on the margins of the dominant official salafi–Wahhabi tradition, whereas in other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq, Islamism has grown in more secular and diverse social and political contexts since the 1960s.

²⁰ The Ismailis staged demonstrations against their own local governor in Najran early in 2000, demanding greater inclusion and amelioration of their local conditions, but they do not seem to have mobilised after the Arab uprisings.

²¹ On the detention of human rights activists in Saudi Arabia see Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia's ACPR: How the Kingdom Silences its Human Rights Activists* (London: Amnesty International, 2014).

²² On Saudi Islamism see Madawi Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The Saudi state supports its own loyal official salafi–Wahhabi Islamism, but also pursues a policy of patronising several other activist groups, both Islamist and non-Islamist. In general, it sets them against each other. Its support also varies, depending on the interest of the regime and the threats it faces.²³ These fluctuating policies inhibit the development of common ground among dissident activists who might otherwise seek cooperation, a common national reform agenda or middle-ground platforms for debate and mobilisation. Instead, the regime deliberately enhances the divisions between these groups by creating separate platforms for them, selectively sponsoring them and fuelling an ideological war among their adherents.

Islamists and liberals have their own favourite causes, and disagree on almost everything from human rights to women driving and the inclusion of the latter in state institutions, for example the Consultative Council.²⁴ All competing dissident groups automatically interpret any state concessions to any other group as their own loss.

The ideological divides are therefore not simply a reflection of the insurmountable differences in vision between the Islamists and liberals, but are in fact enhanced and promoted by multiple state actors who create separate spaces for competing groups and patronise multiple, often diametrically opposed and politicised, non-state actors. Often princes who engage in this kind of contradictory patronage are themselves seeking client constituencies among the Saudi population that will swear allegiance to them and can be mobilised to defend them in speeches, articles and other fields of activism. Saudis give the princes legitimacy, while the princes use Saudis to enhance their popularity among subsections of the population and other rival princes.

Various politicised groups among liberals and Islamists seek to displace the dominant official loyalist Wahhabis. The latter have proven themselves to be ‘swing producers of religious discourse’, who are dogmatic in interpreting some religious texts but also flexible enough to issue *fatwas* that justify the regime’s policies. They constantly seek to support the regime and its domestic and international position, function to control the population at social and political levels, educate Saudis in *fiqh al-ta’ā*, and coerce dissidents in courts when they face vague charges of disobedience. The dominant loyal Wahhabis seek to eliminate those who have sprung from their own rank and file, especially dissident *‘ulama* and activists who fall short of calling for jihad against the Saudi rulers but call upon the leadership to honour the original eighteenth-century pact with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. These dominant Wahhabis are also sworn enemies of those clerics and intellectuals who seek reinterpretations of Islamic texts that go beyond the traditional insistence on total obedience to rulers, such as the founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association.²⁵

²³ In the 1960s and 1970s the regime adopted Islamism to counter the threat of Arab nationalism. See Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Take, for example, the different positions Saudis adopted when the liberal blogger Raif Badawi was sentenced to 1,000 lashes. Liberals opposed the sentence while Wahhabis rejoiced. See Madawi Al-Rasheed, ‘A Thousand Lashes for Raif Badawi, while the West Stays Silent on Saudi Human Rights’, *The Conversation*, 16 January 2015. Available at <https://theconversation.com/a-thousand-lashes-for-raif-badawi-while-the-west-stays-silent-on-saudi-human-rights-36329> (accessed 9 March 2015).

²⁵ This civil society movement was founded in 2009, and its founding members are serving long prison sentences. See Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists*.

Saudi Selfies

Beyond these ideological divides, the majority of Saudis, especially the young, are disenchanted with all the ideologies discussed above, and seek an alternative focus to improve themselves. This is the generation of what I call ‘Saudi Selfies’, young men and women who strive to focus on their own individual projects to promote themselves in education and the job market. They are ideologically uncommitted and are happy to benefit from times of prosperity and opportunity. They seek government scholarships to study abroad and acquire valuable skills to find jobs. They are less likely to engage in any dissident activities or challenge the regime, hoping that the promise of development will bring material benefits. They prefer tight security to political freedom, although they may support the relaxation of the many restrictions on personal freedoms. This is a large constituency that benefits from the regime, or hopes to benefit in the future, and is not willing to challenge it openly or make unrealistic demands on it. They adopt a strategy of wait and see.

However, the apparent individualistic and non-ideological outlook of this new generation does not militate against involvement in low-key activism that does not directly challenge the regime. This youth cohort knows the limits of activism in an authoritarian context like Saudi Arabia, follows news about the arrest of political and human rights activists, and avoids provoking the regime into more repression. Yet they are very active online supporting multiple causes, from domestic issues to regional and global affairs.

Domestically, they often pick issues related to welfare, health and education, focusing their criticism on the performance of the welfare state and civil servants. For example, one campaign that gathered momentum immediately after the Arab uprisings raised the issue of low salaries for state employees under the slogan ‘the salary is not enough’. The campaign started immediately after other Gulf countries announced substantial pay rises during the first months of the mass mobilisation that swept Arab countries in 2011. The Saudi campaign reached a wide audience of supporters, including employees and pensioners. Furthermore, the poor performance of Saudi medical care also attracted this cohort’s attention when they highlighted misconduct and shortage of competent medical staff in hospitals. During the various floods that Saudi cities witnessed in 2010–13, many online campaigns started to criticise corruption at local authority levels in Jeddah and Riyadh. On the ground, many young people volunteered to rescue victims of the floods and organise charitable donations and relief operations. More recently, the plight of prisoners of conscience, especially those detained after the Arab uprisings in 2011, was taken on board and several online campaigns started to gather momentum. The youth cohort usually assists detained known activists, lawyers and human rights defenders to launch such campaigns, the last of which at the time of writing coincided with Eid al-Fitr in July 2015.

These mostly online campaigns are seriously watched by the regime and occasionally a few online activists get arrested, following critical tweets that directly refer to the king or the princes. However, other campaigns usually remain alive for several days without

government intervention. As long as the young do not criticise princes in high government positions or call for mobilisation on the ground such as strikes and peaceful demonstrations, the authorities often ignore them.

This Selfie youth cohort may appear post-ideological in its orientation or as bridging the so-called liberal–Islamist divide that has characterised activism in general. There are young people who are seriously disenchanted by grand ideological positions, but there are also those who try to conceal their ideological affiliation, especially when such affiliation is suddenly criminalised by the regime. In a country like Saudi Arabia, it is very difficult to assess quantitatively the size of this emerging group of young people who are either disenchanted with ideology in general or momentarily conceal their political ideology. From monitoring their campaign since 2011, it is accurate to say that they are beginning to form a substantial majority among young Saudi men and women.

Divinely Sanctioned Obedience to Rulers

Unlike Egypt, where authoritarianism survived without substantial, sustained, religiously sanctioned support, especially that which renders obedience to rulers a sacred duty, Saudi Arabia relies on religious interpretations and practices that link political acquiescence to Islamic duty and obligations. Therefore specific political implications of religious discourse must be considered in the analysis of the resilience of the Saudi monarchy, given the divine nature of legitimacy and the sinful aspects of disobedience that are so prominent in religious discourse. In Saudi Arabia political dissidents are considered blasphemous actors who violate *fiqh al-ta'ā*, the jurisprudence of obedience to the legitimate rulers. The peaceful amongst them are charged with *iftiat 'ala wali al amr*, trespassing on the legitimacy and authority of the Muslim ruler. In the official depiction of dissent, dissidents are not only terrorists but also contemporary Kharijites, akin to those who treacherously defied the caliph Ali in the seventh century when they first accepted his authority but later rebelled against him, precipitating the first violent episode in Islamic history.

The jurisprudence of obedience is not a Saudi or Wahhabi invention. It is based on a Sunni theological principle that prohibits challenging the authority of rulers except in specific limited cases, such as the ruler demonstrating clear blasphemous behaviour or policies. Anything other than *kufr bawāh* (outright blasphemy) does not warrant rebellion, or even peaceful dissent. However, Saudi Wahhabi scholars excelled in widening the meaning of both dissent and rebellion to include writing reformist petitions, exposing the princes' corruption in the media, criticising dysfunctional welfare services, and of course armed struggle, among a wide range of dissident activities. The Wahhabis adhere to the doctrine that rebellion is not just by the sword, but also applies to speech. Wahhabi theological treatises on this extend the meaning of rebellion to include modern forms of expression and protest such as demonstrations, hunger strikes, civil disobedience and sit-ins, all prominent features of the mass protest that swept Arab capitals in 2011. When these religious opinions are supported by repression, they become more effective and lead to intimidation.

Without serious repression, religiously sanctioned obedience to rulers would not have had an important impact and intimidated many Saudis. This is so because the religious establishment and its privileged elite that endorses obedience to rulers have been challenged not only by other religious interpretations but also by a wide range of activists and religious intellectuals, in addition to jihadi ideologues. Many Saudis are critical of this religious tradition for many reasons. Some want greater personal freedoms, denied under its teachings, while others seek greater political and civil rights, believed to be delayed because of the regime-sponsored loyalist Wahhabi political position. Yet repression ensures that the religious elite remains dominant as a group and their discourse remains hegemonic, constantly enforced in mosques, educational institutions and courts, especially during the trials of activists. As such, it cannot be ignored as a contributing factor to the resilience of the Saudi monarchy.

Strength in Regional Instability

With the expansion in traditional and new media, mainly Facebook and Twitter, Saudi publics immediately not only became spectators of the drama of mass protest across the Arab world but also contributed their own opinions on the course of change. Only the influential official constituency, mainly the traditional Wahhabi loyalists headed by the Saudi grand mufti Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Al-Sheikh, abhorred the change and warned Saudis against emulating the peaceful strategies of Arab protestors.²⁶ The mufti issued a *fatwa* stating that it is illegitimate from the Islamic perspective to 'rebel' against legitimate rulers even by deploying peaceful means such as demonstrations, sit-ins and hunger strikes. Denied the right to express themselves or organise their own protests without incurring serious repression, Saudi audiences, especially those active on social media, took up the causes of all Arab protest movements with the exception of that in Bahrain, where the regime succeeded in depicting the 14 February 2011 protest movement as a sectarian uprising supported by Iran. Many Saudi activists hoped that the winds of change would reach them, but they lacked the ability to mobilise the divided population. Many online calls for demonstrations failed to instigate mass protest, which remained confined to specific pockets of the country, and hostage to sectarian, regional and ideological divisions. The arrest of many demonstrators and activists was divisive, with one camp calling for their release and another supporting the regime's iron fist and calling upon it to increase its surveillance and punishment of agitators. This latter response was especially obvious in the cases of the Shi'i protest in the Eastern Province and the limited demonstrations in Qasim in support of political prisoners. The activists who took it upon themselves to defend the civil and political rights of prisoners from different ideological backgrounds were immediately rounded up and put in prison. Those who crossed these divides were charged with

²⁶ On this *fatwa* and official Saudi responses to the Arab uprisings see Madawi Al-Rasheed, 'Saudi Internal Dilemmas and Regional Responses to the Arab Uprisings', in Fawaz Gerges (ed.), *The New Middle East: Protest and Revolution in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 353–79.

causing chaos, undermining the leadership, and tarnishing the reputation of the country abroad by speaking to international human rights organisations and the media.

As the initial peaceful Arab protests gave way to violent struggles between protesters and the Arab regimes (Egypt and Bahrain), conflicts amounting to civil wars (Syria, Yemen and Libya) and counter-revolutions (Egypt), Saudi publics were intimidated by the images of death and displacement from North Africa to the Levant. Many early Saudi protest enthusiasts began to reconsider their initial euphoria and support for the historic and unprecedented peaceful protest movement in the Arab world. This enthusiasm eventually gave way to disappointment and apprehension. Saudi liberal constituencies were disappointed that Islamists won parliamentary majorities after the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, while Saudi Islamists abhorred their government's financial interventions in support of the old regimes and its success in reinstating them, especially in Egypt. The excessive violence in the whole of the Arab world prevented Saudis from seeking political change once its high cost became obvious, and weakened further the demands for political change as the immediate and short-term outcomes proved to be disastrous for the countries concerned. Those Saudis who watched them from afar were intimidated into submission to their existing regime under the pressure of maintaining security at the expense of liberty.

Even more intimidating to certain Saudi constituencies was the consolidation of a brutal jihadi state/caliphate in both Syria and Iraq by the name of Islamic State (IS). In June 2014 the Saudi regime joined an international alliance against IS, despite certain ideological affinities with this jihadi state, after sporadic militant attacks on the northern borders led to several deaths among Saudi security forces. In 2015, Shi'a were attacked outside their mosque, and several were killed.²⁷ Shi'i mosques saw the worst attacks as suicide bombers stormed into places of worship during Friday prayers and killed worshippers in Qatif and Dammam.²⁸ This sporadic terrorism further frightened the Shi'a, who seem to have suspended their mobilisation, possibly after reconsidering their opposition to the regime if the alternative is the likes of IS, who claimed responsibility for the attacks. Since these attacks, the Shi'a have called upon King Salman to introduce laws that 'criminalise hate speech', a reference to *fatwas* demonising them, often aired on religious television channels known to be owned by Saudis.

While regional explosive conditions continued to get worse, the new king, Salman, launched a war in Yemen in March 2015, at a time when competition from IS as the new defender of Sunni Muslims against the Iranian expansion in Arab territories reached a climax, with IS spreading across substantial land in both Syria and Iraq. The new Saudi war in Yemen promised Saudi constituencies to restore confidence in the regime and reinstate elected Yemeni president Abd Mansour Hadi to his seat in Sana'a, after the capital was taken by the Zaydi Houthis and their new ally, deposed

²⁷ Ian Black, 'Attack on Shias Fans Fears of Jihadi Blowback in Sunni Saudi Arabia', *The Guardian*, 4 November 2014. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/04/attack-shias-fears-jihadi-blowback-sunni-saudi-arabia> (accessed 10 March 2015).

²⁸ 'Saudi Arabia Attack: Islamic State Claims Attack on Shia Mosque', *BBC News*, 22 May 2015. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32843510> (accessed 15 September 2015).

president Ali Abdullah Salih. The Saudi air strikes immediately bridged the liberal-Islamist divide, as both saw in the war an opportunity to score a victory over predatory Iran. The previous ideological divides that plagued the two camps in Saudi Arabia were immediately overlooked and both pledged allegiance to the regime. The war unified those opposed camps, silenced Islamist critics of the regime, and fostered a new kind of hyper Saudi nationalism and loyalty to the regime. It seems that the new Saudi leadership needed this war in order to boost its legitimacy in the eyes of its many domestic critics.

Conclusion

The conditions that made a climate of turmoil in Saudi Arabia during the Arab uprisings are above all domestic and regional. Shifting the analysis to domestic fragmentation, ideological divides and regional deterrence offers a better understanding of the regime's apparent stability. Neither cultural factors, articulated in terms of legitimacy narratives and social contracts, nor oil resources and foreign unconditional support are plausible explanations for this situation at a time when the Arab region was experiencing major mass mobilisation and loud calls for political revolutionary change. In the short term, the fragmentation of Saudi publics and regional turmoil delayed mass mobilisation, although calls for reform continued to be voiced. These conditions helped maintain the status quo, i.e. regime stability at the expense of political change.

But these same conditions may prove devastating in the long term. Fragmentation, polarisation and divisions may serve the regime better than unity at the moment. However, the apparent conditions for regime strength may in fact carry the seeds of future turmoil. A fragmented public is conducive to the old policy of divide and rule, but at times of crisis it may give rise to dissident separatist movements, territorial fragmentation and partition. The historical divide-and-rule policy of the old imperial and colonial powers led to partitions, civil wars, ethnic cleansing and genocide, from Palestine, Cyprus and South Africa to India. Saudi Arabia seems to be copying these ill-fated old policies.

An unpredictable war on Yemen may heal these divisions for a short time but outright Saudi military victory in Yemen is unlikely. Several months after the beginning of air strikes, the war seems to have lost momentum, and as Saudi Arabia appears to have dragged itself into a long conflict, the euphoria that accompanied the launch of air strikes has subsided. The leadership will eventually be compelled to search for a diplomatic solution.

Healing the many rifts in Saudi society will involve allowing an independent national civil society that bridges entrenched divides; ending the marginalisation of substantial peripheral sections of the population in the north, southwest and east of the country; developing an inclusive national civic image to replace the predatory and divisive Wahhabi religious nationalism; and tempering its interference in the Arab region, in particular its interventions in North Africa, the Levant and Yemen.

While the declared intent of these interventions is to stabilise the countries concerned, it has had a mixed outcome, ranging from fuelling schisms in Egypt, and turning a peaceful Syrian revolution into a deadly militarised civil war, to suppressing calls for democracy in Bahrain, and continuing to interfere in Yemen. Saudi interventions are developed to counter other regional powers, especially Iran, but conflict with Iran should be resolved through direct negotiations rather than through Arab proxies, a situation that has dragged the region into further deadly conflicts. But for the moment, it seems that it is good to be king, albeit this may not continue to be taken for granted in the future.

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