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### **Political Insight – Saudi Arabia**

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Saudi Arabia matters. As the world's largest oil exporter and home to the world's second largest oil reserves, after Venezuela, it plays a crucial role in shaping the price of oil and supporting global economic growth. In the Middle East, the Arab Spring has seen the country re-emerge as a crucial actor. But this global and regional relevance masks a set of mounting domestic challenges which the country's ruling family has yet to fully address.

In 2011, Saudi Arabia was widely seen as the country most negatively affected by the Arab Spring. Having lost long-term allies in Egypt and Yemen, facing unrest in neighbouring Bahrain and Jordan and increasing demands for political and social reform from its own citizens, the ruling Al Sa'ud family looked out of step with the democratic optimism sweeping the region. The apparent speed with which President Obama, against King Abdullah's repeated advice, came to the conclusion that Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had to step aside made many Saudi royals question whether the US government would reach a similar conclusion should disenchantment with the political, social, and economic status quo spill over from the virtual world onto 'the street'.

A first example of the resulting new assertiveness was King Abdullah's decision to ignore President Obama's repeated pleas and to send the Saudi National Guard, led by his son Mutaib bin Abdullah, into Bahrain to shore up the authoritarian rule of the Sunni Al Khalifa family. The message to Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority, with a share of ten percent of the total population one of the smallest communities in the region, was clear: political activism over well entrenched discrimination and marginalization would not be tolerated. For many in Riyadh, Shiite political emancipation is likely to be the first step down the slippery path toward the nightmare scenario of the oil-rich Eastern province, where most of the country's

Shia live, breaking away from the resource-poor conservative Sunni heartland. As one Shiite commentator once put it to the author: ‘What would the Wahhabis do without us? Eat Sand?’

Apart from this obvious domestic concern, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy elites also viewed political unrest in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria through the prism of its long-standing competition with Iran for regional hegemony. President Obama’s willingness to seek a negotiated end to the crisis over Iran’s nuclear weapons programme is clearly at odds with the view among Saudi foreign policy elites that Tehran cannot be trusted. To some extent this scepticism is in line with the prevalence of Realist assumptions about international security among many political elites across the wider region (including Israel) whereby the anarchical order of the international system forces any country interested in survival to constantly prepare for the worst and remain deeply sceptical about the motives of other regional actors. President Obama’s cautious approach to the Syrian civil war is thus seen as missing an opportunity to roll back Iranian advances by removing Bashar al-Assad and his clan, a very personal issue for many Saudi politicians, and installing an authoritarian, Sunni –dominated political order capable of blocking Iranian force projection capabilities.

In pursuit of their geo-strategic interests, Riyadh’s political elites do not shy away from utilizing the anti-Shiite stereotypes prevalent among their allies within the Wahhabi religious establishment. From a Western perspective, the tendency to frame conflicts with clear political roots in religious terms not only makes their solution more difficult to achieve. It also feeds into the narrative of religious war which, in the case of Syria, attracts recruits from Muslim communities all over the world and so rejuvenates the radical Sunni Islamist movement commonly labelled al-Qaeda which was significantly weakened after a decade of Western counterterrorism efforts and the early, but perhaps misplaced, democratic enthusiasm of the Arab Spring.

King Abdullah’s staunch support for the military coup in Egypt in July 2013 constitutes another example where the Al Sa’uds foreign policy is clearly shaped by domestic concerns. The post-Mubarak political participation of the moderate Islamist Muslim Brotherhood whose founder Hassan al-Banna had rejected monarchical rule as ‘un-Islamic’ and lamented the political apathy of religious scholars as practiced in Saudi Arabia, threatened to undermine the narrative of the Saudi monarchy as the epitome of a perfect Islamic system. King Abdullah’s pledge of \$5 billion in aid to Egypt’s military government threatens to undermine the post-9/11 rapprochement between the Saudi regime and its Islamist

movement. Imprisoned during the 1990s for their public criticisms of the regime and its reliance on U.S. protection against the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, so-called 'Awakening Sheikhs' like Salman al-Awda had offered crucial support to the regime in the face of violent Islamist attacks from 2003 to 2005. Now, Al-Awda made it clear: 'Whoever helps a murderer - whether by word, deed, financial support, or even a gesture of approval - is an accomplice. Whoever remains silent in the face of murder to safeguard his personal interests is an accessory to the crime.' While widespread Islamist protest (peaceful and violent) appears currently highly unlikely, Islamist attacks on the religious legitimacy of the Saudi regime are likely to become more relevant in the context of renewed social and economic crisis.

The Al Sa'ud's concern about the model set forth by Tunisia and Egypt also explains the aggressive response to the free exchange of ideas taking place among a very active online community which features the largest group of Twitter users and the second-largest group of Facebook users (after Egypt) in the MENA region. Just this year, Raif Badawi, founder of the website 'Free Saudi Liberals' and considered a 'prisoner of conscience' by Amnesty International was sentenced to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for 'violating Islamic value'. His 'crime'? Allowing the posting of criticisms of the religious police and a system of religious education whose hostile depictions of Christians, Jews, and Shia Muslims and glorification of martyrdom are easily manipulated by terrorist recruiters.

This perfect storm of domestic and international turbulences builds up in the context of a Soviet-style succession crisis. King Abdullah is 90 years old. Crown Prince Salman is 76, but afflicted with dementia. Until now, succession only moved from one son of King Abdul-Aziz Al Sa'ud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, to the other, taking into account seniority and capacity to rule. This was not a problem as long as there was a sufficient number from among Abdul-Aziz's 36 adult sons still alive. Now, the question of how to choose a king from the next generations looms large. The problem for the ruling family, and outside observers trying to make predictions about the identity of the next king, is that the 35-person 'allegiance council' which King Abdullah set up in December 2007 to codify the selection of a new Crown Prince once the current one ascends to the throne is still unproven. In the two instances, when a new Crown Prince had to be chosen under his reign, King Abdullah is reported to have largely ignored the council in his decisions to appoint Crown Prince Nayef in October 2011 and, following Nayef's death, the current Crown Prince Salman in June 2012. There is a real danger that any future king will ignore the council and try to pass on the

crown through his family line and thereby set up a family dispute with uncertain consequences.

At this stage, the Al Sa'ud might still count on the country's resource wealth as a guarantee for long-term stability. In 2011, this wealth allowed King Abdullah to shield the regime from the most immediate regional demonstration effect of the jubilant masses on Cairo's Tahrir Square with a \$140 billion public spending package. While this reminded the 80% of the country's workforce who are on the government's payroll about the benefits of the rentier system of 'no taxation and no representation', the investment in an inefficient public sector will not serve the country's long-term interest in private sector job creation as the only sustainable means of addressing depressingly high levels of unemployment and economic inactivity among the younger generations (see fact box).

The status and treatment of Saudi women, half of whom have university degrees, thus becomes both a human rights and development issue (see fact box). Some cautious, often symbolic, changes already occurred, which saw a greater public profile for women particularly within some business and commerce association. King Abdullah himself caused quite a stir when he allowed himself to be pictured with a group of businesswomen and by setting up, in 2009, the country's first co-educational university, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUS), where the general restrictions on the mixing of men and women and women's dress do not apply. Conservative Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Al ash-Sheikh, the country's highest ranking religious authority, had previously made clear his unease with the idea of men and women freely mixing, describing it 'the root of all evil'. While any movement on the question of the right to drive seems unlikely at this stage, King Abdullah, or his successor, will be measured against their ability to follow through with the promise of allowing women the right to stand as candidates and vote in municipal elections scheduled for 2015.

All of this will have to occur in the context of developments that threaten to undermine the utility of Saudi Arabia's resource wealth as a quick fix for domestic challenges. First, the country uses its energy very inefficiently, ranking sixth globally with a daily consumption of 2.9 million barrels per day, ahead of much bigger or more industrialized countries such as Brazil (2.8 million) and Germany (2.4 million). The resulting drain on government resources will further increase if projections are correct and domestic demand reaches 8 million barrels

per day by 2030. This would equate to two thirds of its current maximum production capacity of 12 million barrels.

This means that Saudi Arabia's days as a 'dove' in the global energy market, which is willing to react to Western political pressure and inject more oil into the market in an attempt to dampen or reverse price rises, are long over. Instead, the regime's inability to develop broad based legitimacy outside of the framework of the rentier-state has made the country more and more dependent on a high price for oil. That is why Saudi Arabia's long-running Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources, Ali al-Naimi, declared a price of 100 Dollar to be in the country's interest. Worryingly, the country is fast moving toward a situation where even a stable market price would not suffice. The growing demands of a population which the United Nations projects to increase from the current 28 million (see fact box) to a maximum of 62 million by 2085 will force Riyadh, according to Saudi Jadwa Investment group, to realise a market price of at least 91 Dollar in 2015, 119 Dollar in 2020, 175 Dollar in 2025, and 322 Dollar in 2030 to balance its budget. Saudi Arabia's budgetary situation could deteriorate even quicker, if as some predict, a glut of new supply reduces global energy prices. Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal, who gained prominence in the Western world through high-profile investments in Citicorp, News Corp., and Euro Disney, took the highly unusual step to warn via Twitter that the shale gas expansion in the United States posed a direct threat to the stability of the Kingdom by threatening to undercut the demand for and thus the price of the country's energy resources.

At the level of foreign policy, a decision by Saudi policy makers to restrict the use of the country's enormous, but potentially shrinking, financial resources as a tool of foreign policy would have profound implications for regional politics and Western interests. On the one hand, a potential cut-back in the funds available for spreading the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam across Africa and Europe could allow more moderate local discourses to regain the initiative. On the other hand, Western governments will have to be prepared to invest themselves more heavily in areas such as Egypt, Jordan and other recipients of so-called 'strategic rent' to make up for any shortfall in the grants, cash and subsidized energy which these governments are currently receiving from Riyadh.

Domestically, a potential deterioration in the country's finances would, in the shape of a very public social science experiment, help settle the academic debate about whether domestic stability in Saudi Arabia is a result of its rentier system which enables the regime to buy off

political opposition and invest in effective state repression or whether it has more to do with the royal family's ability to maintain personal links with crucial constituencies among the tribes, economic and religious elites. In either case, the regime's or even the country's future existence might thus depend on the male-dominated elite recognizing the need to reach out to the country's women and young people.

#### Further Readings:

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