



TOBY C. JONES

E-mail: tobycjones@yahoo.com

Phone: 570.994.2870

Counterrevolution in the Gulf

Summary

- Saudi Arabia is pursuing a combination of domestic and regional policies that risk destabilizing the Persian Gulf and that risk undermining the United States interests there.
- Amid calls for political change, Saudi Arabia is failing to address pressing concerns about its political system and the need for political reform. Instead of responding favorably to calls for more political openness, the Kingdom is pursuing a risky domestic agenda, which ignores the social, economic, and political grievances that might fuel popular mobilization.
- Saudi Arabia's military intervention into Bahrain has escalated sectarian tensions in the Gulf. The crackdown in Bahrain is not only provoking Iran and creating the conditions for a regional crisis, but it is also creating new opportunities for Iran to expand its sphere of influence.
- The United States has reasons to maintain a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia. It also has the leverage to encourage the Kingdom to refrain from escalating tensions in the Gulf and further inflaming sectarian anxieties.

Unnerved by changes taking place across the Middle East and North Africa, Saudi Arabia has sought to undertake drastic measures to ensure its security at home and in the region. However, its measures are in fact achieving the opposite. Rather than dealing with the political aspirations of its own citizens or those in neighboring Bahrain, where Riyadh has intervened militarily to help crush pro-democracy protests, Saudi Arabia is turning back the clock at home and provoking a potential crisis with Iran.

Recent tactics used by this key American ally may be exacerbating security risks and creating an environment that will make it more difficult for the United States to secure its interests. Whether Washington is prepared to accept Saudi Arabia's strategy in the Gulf is a critical question. On one hand, the United States needs the kingdom, not least for their oil. On the other, the price of that alliance has increased significantly in recent weeks.

Saudi Arabia's current strategy and the potential risks it entails is partly the result of its fears over Iran's growing hegemony in the region. But it is also partly the result of a shifting domestic balance of power, a renewed sectarian approach to politics and a continued reluctance to pursue political reform.

Evading Reform

In recent years, Saudi citizens have pressed to reform a system that they believe is subject to royal family abuse, rife with corruption, and one that encourages discrimination against religious minorities and women. When King Abdullah ascended to the throne in 2005 many believed he was

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a committed reformer, but he has demonstrated to be mostly committed to protecting the power of the royal family. But even though he has not proven interested in creating space for greater participation, Abdullah has ushered in significant changes. Most importantly, he has devoted considerable energy to marginalizing religious hardliners and checking the power of some of the Kingdom's most odious religious figures.

While it is widely believed that the Al Saud has always ruled with the close cooperation of the religious establishment, the relationship between the ruling family and the Kingdom's senior religious scholars has often been strained. Because prominent religious figures regularly clashed with the Kingdom's rulers on matters of domestic and foreign policy, Saudi elites struggled to minimize the role of the clergy over the course of the 20th century. As oil revenues skyrocketed in the 1970s, Riyadh found itself less dependent on the scholars for their support.

But at the end of the decade, domestic conflicts, including the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by religious rebels in 1979, changed the balance of power in the Kingdom. In exchange for a religious ruling allowing authorities to send security into the Grand Mosque to root out the rebels, Riyadh was compelled to promise renewed influence for the religious establishment. In the 1980s, the Kingdom pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into Islamic foundations, schools and causes, including the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's war against Shiite Iran. Over the last three decades, religious scholars have exercised considerable cultural and political power, often to the frustration and embarrassment of the Kingdom's rulers.

King Abdullah has taken significant steps to restore the pre-1979 balance of power by sacking controversial religious figures, seeking to centralize control over the judiciary, and challenging the clergy on matters of women's rights. The effect had been to rein in some of the Kingdom's most important religious institutions, including the notorious religious police.

Many Saudi citizens have respect for the king, but they remain frustrated with the glacial pace of reform. Recent events in the Middle East -- most importantly the popular uprisings that toppled governments in Tunisia and Egypt -- inspired some Saudi citizens to renew calls for change. So far, efforts to seize upon regional momentum have resulted not in reform, but in the strengthening of hardliners within the royal family.

Shutting Down the Day of Rage

Pro-reform activists launched calls to hold a Day of Rage on March 11, in which they hoped citizens would turn out for demonstrations in cities across the country. Alarmed by Hosni Mubarak's fall from power in Egypt, Saudi authorities responded anxiously and harshly to stave off a similar outcome at home. They sought various ways to outmaneuver their critics and crush any potential popular uprising before it got started. To do so Riyadh dusted off a familiar playbook. In late February, King Abdullah promised a multibillion dollar financial aid program in an effort to co-opt dissenters. The regime also threatened would-be protesters. In early March, Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister, warned that authorities would "cut off any finger" raised against the government in protest. Authorities also threatened fines and imprisonment for demonstrators. Riyadh also enlisted the religious establishment for support. On March 7, the Senior Council of Ulama, Saudi Arabia's highest ranking religious authority, issued a statement declaring protests to be un-Islamic. Considering Abdullah's past efforts to curtail the power of the clergy, their renewed support for the monarchy was a significant development.

On March 11, a heavy police presence made it virtually impossible for Saudi citizens to organize publicly. Less than a week later the Saudi government announced a second sweeping package of financial inducements, including housing subsidies, a jobs creation program, and unemployment

assistance. Flush with cash from high oil prices, Riyadh can afford to throw money at its deeply rooted problems. It is a familiar strategy. While buying favor will likely quell dissent in the short term, its longer-term effectiveness is uncertain.

A New Balance of Power

One of the most important outcomes of the result struggle to fend off public pressure appears to be the reconfiguration of the Kingdom's balance of power and the emergence of hardliners within the royal family, most notably the controversial Minister of the Interior Prince Nayef, third in line to the throne. As minister of the Interior and commander of Saudi Arabia's domestic security forces, Nayef was responsible for dispatching thousands of police to prevent demonstrations.

The decision to enlist the support of religious scholars indicates a reversal of Abdullah's efforts to marginalize the clerical establishment's influence. Recent moves to support the clergy—and side-line moderates—reinforce this conclusion. On March 18, alongside the announcement of material support for Saudi citizens, the government also announced significant new levels of spending on religious schools and institutions and expanded powers for the country's religious police. On April 2, the government sacked Ahmad al-Ghamdi, the head of the Mecca's branch of the religious police who last year claimed that Islam does not mandate gender segregation.

The potential renewal of clerical power in Saudi Arabia, particularly its most conservative elements, is cause for concern. It is worth recalling that the ascendance in the 1980s of a generation of politically motivated clergy helped radicalize some Saudi citizens and contributed to the globalization of violent extremism in subsequent decades.

Stoking Sectarian Tensions

There has also been a sectarian element to Saudi Arabia's handling of its domestic crisis. In the week leading up to the March 11 Day of Rage, small protests took place in Shiite neighborhoods across the Eastern Province. Shiite demonstrators called for minor concessions, such as the end of discrimination and the release of political prisoners. Saudi rulers seized on these small demonstrations to cast the entire opposition as beholden to Iran and pursuing a sectarian agenda. Prince al-Faisal remarked that the regime would "not tolerate any interference in our internal affairs by any foreign party . . . and if we find any foreign interference, we will deal with this decisively." It is hard to tell if the regime's attempt to portray their critics as agents of Iran succeeded in dissuading protesters from taking to the streets. Anti-Shiism is deeply rooted in Saudi Arabian society and may have convinced some not to throw their lot in with the Kingdom's most despised religious minority.

More importantly, the pretense of foreign meddling and the sectarian gambit allowed the Kingdom's rulers to justify their heavy-handed approach more generally as an effort to protect national security rather than as an attempt to ignore the substance of the reformers' agenda.

Regional Implications

The domestic anxieties on display in Riyadh have shaped the regime's decision making in neighboring Bahrain, another close American ally in the Gulf, as well. On March 14, in response to mounting pressure on the Bahraini regime by tens of thousands of opposition protesters, Saudi Arabia sent a contingent of around 1,000 military personnel (along with a small force from the United Arab Emirates) into Manama to support efforts to crush the popular uprising there. The resulting crackdown has been violent and brutal.

The Saudis have many reasons for not wanting to see the ruling al-Khalifa toppled from power in Bahrain. The most important has to do with the possibility of a Shiite government taking over in Manama. While Bahrain's opposition is largely committed to democratic reform, it is true that the vast majority of those protesting against the government come from the country's majority Shiite community. For the most part, however, Bahrain's opposition has carefully avoided framing their demands in sectarian terms. Whatever the actual substance of their opposition's platform, the governments in Riyadh and Manama have used religious affiliation and regional sectarian anxieties as an excuse to crackdown violently.

Leaders in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have warned against Iranian meddling and have cynically suggested that the uprising in Bahrain was orchestrated by Tehran. After Saudi Arabia's intervention and the resort to violence to clear Manama's streets, Bahrain's King Hamad declared that their coordinated efforts had succeeded in foiling a foreign plot against him and his Sunni supporters. Tensions with Iran have spread across the Gulf. On April 2, Kuwaiti authorities announced they would expel several Iranian diplomats for allegedly being involved in a spy-ring. Following a meeting of their foreign ministers in Riyadh on April 3, the Gulf Cooperation Council issued a statement that they were "deeply worried about continuing Iranian meddling" and accused Iran of plotting against the Arab monarchies. They condemned "Iran's interference in Bahrain's internal affairs, in violation of international conventions."

Iran has responded predictably to the crackdown in Bahrain and to the increasingly shrill anti-Iranian rhetoric. In mid-March, Iran withdrew its ambassador from Bahrain and blasted Manama for not accommodating the demands of its citizens. Iranian officials have also engaged in the escalating war of words.

Claims of Iranian meddling have been mostly unfounded until now. While some members of Bahrain's opposition have invoked the possibility of Iranian intervention, they have represented a marginal fringe. Instead, it is Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies that are inflaming sectarian enmity. By projecting their anxieties regionally, Saudi Arabia has raised the stakes and provoked a potential regional showdown with Iran. Fears of deepening sectarian tensions in the Gulf are now being realized.

One of the potential tragedies of the current situation in the Persian Gulf is that Saudi Arabia's and Bahrain's manipulation of sectarian anxieties may ultimately prove self-fulfilling. With nowhere else to turn and little support for their cause, it is likely just a matter of time before Bahrain's opposition does look to Tehran for guidance. And although Iran's leaders insist they will refrain from intervening in the internal affairs of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the current crisis has created an opening for Tehran to become more assertive and influential.

Implications for the United States

The evolving crisis in the Gulf represents a clear risk to regional security, one of the United States' most important global strategic priorities. The United States is understandably concerned about the prospect of greater Iranian influence and the threat it poses in the region, and yet it is two of the United States' closest regional allies that are leading the Gulf down the path of an enduring crisis in which Iran's power will almost certainly grow.

Washington should increase pressure on the governments in Riyadh and Manama to change their current posture and find a more constructive way forward. This means dealing seriously with the challenges of reform at home, putting an end to the violence against their own citizens, and refraining from further manipulating and exacerbating sectarian anxieties.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Toby C. Jones has lived and worked in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Formerly the Gulf Analyst with the International Crisis Group, he is assistant professor of Middle East history at Rutgers University. He is the author of "Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia" (Harvard University Press, 2010). The views expressed here are his own.

So far, American attempts to resolve the crisis in the Gulf have failed. Calls for restraint have been ignored. The situation is increasingly urgent, especially given the intensification of acrimony between Iran and its Arab neighbors. And it demands a greater American role, lest the United States get dragged into another military conflict. The United States possesses considerable leverage in the Gulf, particularly with Saudi Arabia.

The most significant source of U.S. leverage comes from its security relationship with the Kingdom and the other Arab states in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia has long been a vital strategic and economic partner. It has also long been dependent on the United States for security assurances. Those assurances should not include allowing the Kingdom to risk destabilizing the region. The United States should make clear to Riyadh that the American military presence in the region, and its policy of selling weapons to regional allies, is not a cover for the Kingdom's current reckless strategy. Hardliners in Riyadh and Bahrain not only take the American military commitment to the Gulf for granted, but have also turned that commitment into a source of leverage for themselves.

Should Riyadh continue on its current path, the U.S. should make clear that a reconsideration of U.S. military commitments may be necessary. The United States has in the past and can in the future monitor its interests in the Gulf from "over the horizon." While it seems counterintuitive, compelling regional actors to deal with one another on even ground will ultimately produce a more durable political outcome. The United States' impulse is to continue to play the balance of power game and to seek advantages for itself and its allies. This approach is not working. In fact it is creating new opportunities for Iran. While it may be desirable to maintain a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia going forward, the risks of doing so may quickly outweigh the benefits.



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