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Inspired by the "Arab Spring": Saudi Arabia's Volatile Shiite Minority

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The eastern province of Saudi Arabia, home to the kingdom's Shiite minority, has recently been revisited by violence. The latest wave of protests that began in July 2012 in Awamiyah, a radical Shiite town, was sparked by the arrest and injury of Nemer al-Nemer, a popular Shiite cleric. Nemer, a key figure in the protest movement in the province, was known for his outspoken anti-royal family remarks. Particularly popular among the young, Nemer had called for toppling the House of Saud and for independence for the eastern province; he apparently also instructed his followers to celebrate the death of Crown Prince Nayef in June 2012. In late September 2012, the attempt to arrest some "wanted" individuals resulted in shootings, fatalities, and injuries.

The longstanding domestic background to the unrest is that Islam's Wahhabi sect questions the Shiites' Muslim legitimacy and Arab ancestry, to the point that Saudi Arabia instituted severe restrictions on Shiites in the kingdom as a way to isolate them and keep them from gaining political representation and religious freedom. The Islamic Revolution in Iran seemed to the Shiites to offer an alternative to the oppression they felt at the hand of the Wahhabi establishment. Thus between 1979 and 1981, for the first time in the history of the modern kingdom, the Shiite province experienced rioting among the Shiites. The conflict receded upon Khomeini's death, when the revolutionary fervor in Iran also died out. In addition, the Shiites, recognizing the power of the Wahhabi establishment, worked steadily with the rulers to improve their situation.

However, Saudi Arabia has more than once accused Iran of supporting the Saudi Shiite minority. In the Saudi view, the Iranian threat is serious not only because of its ramifications for the balance of power in the Gulf, but also because of the implications for the kingdom's stability: should Iran succeed in its hegemonic ambitions, the Shiites are liable to challenge the legitimacy of the royal house. Moreover, the Shiites remain a security problem for Saudi Arabia not only because of their geographical proximity and ideological affinity to Iran but also – perhaps especially – because of their presence near the largest oil reserves in the world. While still crown prince, King Abdullah took steps to defuse tensions with the Shiite minority, including the announcement of a “national

dialogue”; he even allowed a few Shiites to become members of the Shura Council, a prestigious institution but lacking any real authority. However, the House of Saud did not go so far as to recognize the Shia as a central stream of Islam, and it refused to extend Shiites equal rights as citizens. The basic oppression of the Shiite population in the kingdom remains firmly in place, and at times rises to the surface. Key figures in the royal house, chiefly former Crown Prince and Interior Minister Nayef, fiercely opposed what they viewed as King Abdullah’s conciliatory approach. They view Shiites as Iran’s lackeys and support a zero-tolerance policy towards them. Nayef apparently also pushed for Saudi troops to enter Bahrain in order to suppress the Shiite protest, aware that the protest would spill over into the oases of Hasa and Qatif.

The Shiites gained a tailwind in the "Arab Spring," and the eastern province has been unsettled for the last eighteen months, despite the royal house’s efforts, including the use of force and economic incentives, to quell the unrest. In February 2011 a violent incident occurred in Medina between Shiite pilgrims and the Saudi religious police, and protests intensified with the entry of Saudi forces into Bahrain the following month. The protest movement, comprising almost entirely young people, has held mass demonstration that to date have left 15 people killed. Many have been arrested and jailed, most of them without due process. The funerals of those killed became a demonstration of force unseen in the province since the Islamic Revolution. Moreover, at least according to the Saudi Interior Ministry, the Shiites have started to make greater use of firearms against the security forces.

The Saudi authorities have announced that they will crush the protest with an iron fist and have accused “foreigners” – a code word for Iran – of fanning the flames. The narrative of the Shiites being a fifth column helps the royal house close ranks and prevent criticism at home. However, it may be that other Saudi sectors – women and students, for example – will draw encouragement from the Shiites’ struggle and increase their criticism of the royal house, a scenario that would play directly into Iran’s hands. Thus it is possible that improving the Shiites’ conditions and establishing a social contract with them would be Saudi Arabia’s best bet for distancing them from Iran’s open arms.

There are internal explanations for the wave of arrests, including Prince Ahmed’s stepping into the job of interior minister and his attempt to fortify his standing at home by adopting an aggressive stance against any threat to the kingdom’s stability. However, the timing of the arrests may be linked to the royal house’s effort to take preparatory steps before a possible confrontation with Iran. The tensions on both sides of the Gulf are rising, and there have been reports of alerts and reinforcements of the Saudi security forces. As any confrontation with Iran is liable to enflame the entire eastern province, a charismatic radical preacher such as Nemer could easily become an element igniting more extensive protests. Mansour Turki, spokesman for the Saudi Interior Ministry,

asserted that the security forces would not tolerate inciters “who serve as pawns for the nation’s enemies,” a clear reference to Iran.

The fact that al-Alam, Iran’s Arabic-language TV station – highly popular among Saudi Shiites – repeatedly calls for demonstrations only underscores the Saudi fear about Iran’s intent to upset the kingdom’s stability. Perhaps the royal house assumes that removing key inciters from the scene will nip the protest in the bud; it will certainly be helpful in any future conflict with Iran, given the clerics’ ability to sweep many followers in their wake. But in the short term, the arrests are liable to inflame the region, resulting in growing unrest. And in fact, after the funerals of those killed in the demonstrations, thousands of Shiites took to the streets to call for toppling the House of Saud, chanting “Qatif and Bahrain are one people.”

In Riyadh’s view, the Shiite protest is linked to Iranian activity to foment unrest among the Shiite minority. This unrest, Riyadh assumes, is meant to demonstrate the cost of harming Iranian interests in the Gulf or, farther away, in Syria. Should the events escalate, the Saudi dilemma will only grow: how will it justify identifying with the Syrian masses who are taking to the streets to protest longstanding oppression but maintain its own oppressive political situation at home? From the perspective of the aging royal house, there is no contradiction as long as the situation serves to restrain Iran.

In reality, the Shiites in Saudi Arabia, numbering about 2 million (close to 10 percent of the general population), were never close to threatening the kingdom’s stability, and most are far from identifying ideologically with the Iranian religious establishment. But continued unrest is liable to lead to a more active and violent pattern of protests, at least among the younger generation, which resists the traditional call for calm. An increase in violence will provide an opportunity for Iran – if it hasn’t done so already – to try to exploit the unrest for its own ends.

