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In Search of Stability:
Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

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Saudi Arabia's reaction to the Arab Spring has been labeled by several academics and the majority of Western media as counterrevolutionary.[1] However, this characterization of Saudi policy is an incorrect generalization. It is true that Riyadh has been making significant efforts to safeguard the political status quo in the Kingdom and the remaining Arab monarchies, including in the Gulf. On the other hand, the Saudi regime supported both the Libyan rebels and the NATO military intervention against the Gaddafi regime; it has been supporting revolutionary factions in Syria, and, at least temporarily, has sought a rapprochement with the post-revolutionary leadership in Egypt. This ostensibly contradictory policy is the result of a pragmatic strategy that aims at safeguarding Saudi Arabia's main policy interests, namely regime security and regional stability. Another important motive behind Riyadh's policy is the containment, and ideally the rollback, of Iranian regional influence. Saudi reaction to protests, revolts, and revolutions in Arab states has reflected the regime's perception of the specific challenges to and opportunities for their policy interests arising from the dynamics in the individual states. In this

1. See, for example, Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 513-26; Alastair Crooke, "The Saudi Counter-Revolution," Huffington Post, March 31, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/the-saudi-counterrevoluti_b_843131.html, Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," *Orbis* 56, no. 196-104, Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia and the Illusory Counterrevolution," *Al-Monitor,* August 14, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/saudi-arabia-washington-disagree-threats-counter-revolution.html#.

context, the decisive factors are geographic proximity, the nature of the concerned state's political system, and the quality of the particular regime's relations with the Kingdom and Iran.

The Domestic Realm: Financial Generosity and Political Rigidity

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the wave-like spread of anti-government protests in other parts of the Arab world, including in fellow GCC states Bahrain and Oman, worried the Saudi government. The regime's top priority was to safeguard domestic and regime stability. To achieve this objective, Riyadh immediately adopted its "tried and tested strategy of buying social peace through co-optation of the population."[2] On February 22, 2011, right after his return to Saudi Arabia from a three-month medical absence, King Abdullah announced large-scale benefits particularly for Saudi citizens in the lower and middle income groups. The promised measures included a 15 percent increase in state employee incomes as well as the provision of unemployment benefits and housing loans.[3] The following month, the Saudi monarch promised more cash gifts and ordered the construction of 500,000 low-income housing units. For the housing construction program alone, the Saudi regime allocated SR250 billion ($66.7 billion).[4] Estimates of the total costs of the social welfare programs introduced since the outbreak of the Arab Spring differ. In mid-April 2013, Al-Arabiya put the number at $93 billion;[5] a year earlier, Kamrava claimed that the Kingdom had by then already spent $130 billion.[6] In any case, the Saudi regime invested heavily in the expansion of the country's social welfare system to prevent any economically motivated protests and demonstrations. In addition, the Saudi government increased the funding for the establishment ulama, which has always been the royal family's main source of legitimacy; roughly SR200 million ($53 million) was allocated for organizations which assist people to learn the Quran and an additional SR100 million ($26.7) was pledged for Islamic studies institutions.[7]

2. Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar in a Time of Revolution," *Gulf Analysis Paper,* CSIS, February 2013, 3.
3. "Saudi King Boosts Spending, Returns to Country," Voice of America, February 22, 2011, http://www.voanews.com/content/saudi-king-boosts-spending-returns-to-country-116739074/172738.html.
4. "First Batch of Saudi Low-Cost Housing Plan Breaks Ground," *Saudi Gazette,* September 5, 2012, http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20120905135048.
5. "Saudi King Tells Ministries to Facilitate Huge Housing Program," Al-Arabiya, April 16, 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/2013/04/16/Saudi-king-tells-ministries-to-facilitate-huge-housing-program.html.
6. Kamrava, "The Arab Spring," 98.
7. "Activists Disappointed by Saudi King's Reforms," CNN, March 18, 2011, http://edition.cnn.

Although the Saudi regime did not introduce or promise any significant political reforms, some political changes have been implemented since the beginning of the Arab Spring. Firstly, in mid-March 2011, the regime announced a new date for the second municipal elections, which had been delayed since 2009.[8] The timing of this announcement was hardly a coincidence. A week earlier, Saudi Arabia together with other GCC states had sent military units to Bahrain to support the Al-Khalifa regime at a time of escalating popular protests. The Saudi engagement provoked the largest demonstrations in the Saudi Eastern Province since the beginning of the Arab Spring.

In late September 2011, shortly before the municipal elections were eventually held, after having been postponed again, King Abdullah announced that women would be allowed to vote and run in the next polls scheduled for 2015.[9] In mid-February 2013, for the first time, women were sworn in on the consulting Shura Council. Currently, 30 out of 150 council members are women.[10] A long overdue step in the minds of Westerners, the decision to include women in the political process is a revolutionary one for Saudi Arabia, where the (public) perception of the role of women is different from the rest of the world. It is difficult to say whether the regime's decision to allow women to get involved in the political process was influenced by the Arab Spring. In the years preceding the revolutionary upheavals in the Arab world, the strict gender segregation had already been slowly relaxed in the Kingdom. The opening in 2009 of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), the first mixed-gender university in Saudi Arabia, is likely the best example of this change. On the campus of KAUST, women are not only allowed to drive, they can even remove their veil in coeducational classes.[11] It therefore stands to reason that the changes in women's political rights introduced in the past two years are not so much a reaction by the Saudi regime to the Arab Spring as further steps in a development that had already set in during the pre-Arab Spring era.

In contrast, the timing of King Abdullah's decree on March 13, 2011 to establish the National Anti-Corruption Commission was certainly influenced by the

com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/18/saudi.arabia.reforms/index.html.

8. Angus McDowall, "Saudi Arabia to Hold Municipal Elections," *The Wall Street Journal,* March 21, 2011, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703362904576217992584554636.html.
9. "Women in Saudi Arabia to Vote and Run in Elections," BBC, September 25, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15052030.
10. "Saudi Arabia King Swears in First Women on Shura Council," BBC, February 20, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21516955.
11. "Saudis Open Hi-Tech Science Oasis," BBC, September 23, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/ 8270601.stm.

Arab Spring as well as by the growing popular displeasure about the widespread corruption in the Kingdom. The 2007 National Strategy for Maintaining Integrity and Combating Corruption had already provided for the setting up of a national anticorruption body. However, after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, King Abdullah decreed the establishment of the commission, referred to as *Nazaha.*[12] Whether or the not the commission will contribute in any meaningful way to the reduction of the widespread corruption in the Kingdom remains to be seen.[13]

With the exception of the Eastern Province, there were no large-scale protests or demonstrations in the Kingdom. An exception was a demonstration in Buraida, in Qassim Province, in early March 2013, in the course of which Saudi security forces arrested 161 protestors who had called for the release of prisoners.[14] In June 2011 and again in October 2013, the women to drive movement caught much international attention when several of its sympathizers repeatedly defied the ban on local women driving. It is, however, important to note that the women to drive movement was calling only for a lift of the ban on women driving and did not call for larger political reforms or even regime change.

The country's largest and most frequent protests have been occurring in the Eastern Province. In this strategically important region holding the Kingdom's vast oil reserves resides the majority of Saudi Arabia's largely disaffected and discriminated Shiite minority. When on February 14, 2011, demonstrations critical of the government started in Bahrain and quickly grew into a massive and increasingly anti-government protest movement, the Saudi regime became greatly concerned about a spillover to the Eastern Province. This concern was reinforced by the fact that many Saudi Shiites identify with their fellow Shiite brethren in Bahrain who have also been suffering under sectarian discrimination by their government. In order to prevent a spillover of the Bahraini protests to Saudi territory, Riyadh closed the

12. http://www.pogar.org/publications/ac/2012/The%20Statue%20%20the%20Strategy%20of%20the%20 National%20Anti-Corruption%20Commission%20in%20English.pdf.
13. In August 2013, a *Nazaha* spokesman informed the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* that the commission would launch an investigation into allegations of financial and administrative corruption by members of the *Haia.* "Saudi Religious Police to be Investigated for Corruption Allegations," Al Arabiya, August 28, 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/08/28/Saudi-religious-police-to-be-investigated-for -corruption-allegations.html. In late 2013, *Nazaha* released details on the roughly 10,500 corruption reports and complaints it had received since its inception. Time will tell whether or not the commission will seriously investigate cases of alleged corruption and whether those guilty of corruption will face any meaningful consequences.
14. Mohammed Jamjoom, "161 Arrested in Saudi Arabia Protest over Detentions," CNN, March 2, 2013, http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/01/world/meast/saudi-arabia-protest.

King Fahd Causeway, which connects Bahrain to the Saudi Eastern Province; the causeway remained closed until mid-April 2011.[15]

The Saudi Eastern Province saw the first small-scale protests in the second half of February 2011 with Shiite demonstrators calling for the release of political prisoners. In the subsequent weeks, protests increased in size and were additionally fueled by the dispatch of Saudi troops to Bahrain in mid-March. Since then, Shiites in several cities in the Eastern Province have regularly taken to the streets. The protestors' calls have mainly centered on the release of political prisoners, democratic reforms, and the termination of both Riyadh's backing of the Bahraini Al-Khalifa regime and anti-Shiite discrimination by the Saudi regime. On numerous occasions, demonstrators have clashed with the security forces tasked to enforce the governmental ban on demonstrations. Repeatedly, the Saudi regime dispatched riot police units to quell protests. In mid-March 2013, the Adala Center for Human Rights, a human rights group based in the Eastern Province, alleged that the regime was responsible for the death of fifteen, injuries to sixty, and the continued detention of 179 individuals, including teenagers.[16]

In the domestic realm, the Saudi regime reacted to the Arab Spring with a carrot and stick policy. On the one hand, the administration invested heavily in the expansion of the social welfare system, distributing larger shares of the huge rents from the export of oil products among the lower and middle income citizens. On the other hand, the Saudi regime made clear that it would not tolerate public expressions of protest and repeatedly took forceful action against illegal demonstrations. Although the Saudi government showed much more restraint than regimes in other Arab states, several demonstrators died and suffered injuries in clashes with security forces. In addition, a large number of protesters have been arrested on charges of instigating unrest. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the regime has not introduced any meaningful political reforms and there is no reason to believe that this is going to change in the foreseeable future. Hence, the Saudi regime's domestic reaction to the Arab Spring can be characterized as financially generous and politically rigid. As even the majority of Shiite protestors in the Eastern Province is calling for reforms within the existing monarchical system rather than an outright regime change, one can hardly speak of a revolutionary movement in Saudi Arabia. Consequently, calling Saudi domestic policy counterrevolutionary is an incorrect characterization as it exaggerates the scope of change called for and desired by the Saudi populace.

15. "Causeway to Bahrain Reopens," *Saudi Gazette,* April 15, 2011, http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/ index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2011041598318.
16. Reese Erlich, "In Saudi Arabia, Shiite Muslims Challenge Ban on Protests," *NPR,* March 23, 2013.

The Arab Spring in Bahrain: A Prime Example of Saudi Counterrevolution

Saudi Arabia's reaction to the uprising in Bahrain has been the prime example of the counterrevolutionary element in the Kingdom's policy. As mentioned previously, the close geographical proximity to the island state and the identification of large parts of the Shiites residing in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province with their protesting sectarian brothers in Bahrain led the Saudi regime to worry about a massive spillover of the protests into the Kingdom. In addition, with a potential overthrow of an Arab monarchical regime, particularly in its immediate neighborhood, the domestic legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy itself could have been increasingly challenged. A further factor affecting the Saudi government's reaction has been its concern that its archrival Iran would gain influence in Bahrain should the Al-Khalifa regime fall or give in to popular calls for far-reaching political reforms, granting the Shiite majority influence in the country's political system.

As a result, in the light of previous Shiite protests in the past decades, Riyadh backed the Al Khalifa regime as they had done earlier. This was most visible when on March 14, 2011 about 1,200 Saudi soldiers equipped with armored cars crossed the King Fahd Causeway and entered Manama. Together with roughly 800 UAE federal police officers, the Saudi troops protected government facilities and royal palaces, allowing the Bahraini security forces to focus on putting down the unrest in the country.[17] Two weeks earlier, Egyptian newspaper Egypt Independent had reported that tank carriers had transported approximately thirty Saudi tanks to Bahrain.[18] The Bahraini regime had denied these reports, claiming that the spotted tanks were of Bahraini origin, returning from national day celebrations in Kuwait.[19] An eyewitness confirmed to this author the presence of several Saudi battle tanks in Manama in the second half of March 2011. Reportedly, the Saudi insignia had been covered on the tanks. This was likely meant to mask the scope of Saudi Arabia's military support for the Al-Khalifa regime in order to contain the anti-Saudi mood among Bahraini demonstrators, antigovernment protests in the Saudi Eastern Province, and international news coverage critical of Saudi Arabia.

17. Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest," *The New York Times,* March 14, 2011.
18. "Eyewitnesses: 30 Tanks Spotted en Route to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia," *Egypt Independent,* February 28, 2011, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/eyewitnesses-30-tanks-spotted-en-route-bahrain-saudi-arabia.
19. "Bahrain Gov't Says No Saudi Tanks in Country," Xinhua News, March 2, 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/ english2010/world/2011-03/02/c_13756282.htm.

Officially, Saudi military forces were sent to Bahrain as part of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force upon the request of the Bahraini government. However, there is reason to believe that Bahrain's request for Saudi military support was not entirely voluntarily. In December 2011, BBC journalist Bill Law reported that "a source close to [then Saudi Minister of the Interior] Prince Nayef" had told him that "two weeks before the troops arrived […] the Bahrainis [had been] on notice that if they did not deal with the demonstrations, the Saudis would do it for them."[20] If correct, this would underline the Saudi government's concerns about the repercussions the popular protests in Bahrain could have on Saudi domestic security and the expansion of Iranian power in the Gulf. Mustafa Al-Labbad, director of the Cairo-based Al Sharq Center for Regional and Strategic Studies, argued along the same lines when he stated on March 14, 2011 that "the [Saudi regime's] decision to move troops into Bahrain [was] not to help the monarchy of Bahrain, but to help Saudi Arabia itself."[21]

In addition to military support, the Saudi regime continues to be Bahrain's largest financial supporter. The motive behind Riyadh's massive subsidies is to strengthen the Bahraini rentier state in an attempt to reduce popular pressure for political reforms or even regime change in the island state. This is the context in which one has to see the $20 billion fund for Bahrain and Oman that the GCC foreign ministers set up on March 10, 2011. Manama and Muscat are to receive $10 billion each over a period of ten years to build housing and upgrade infrastructure, thereby creating much needed new jobs.[22] The Al-Khalifa regime and the Sultanate have far less financial means to buy regime stability through large-scale spending programs than do the other GCC states. Saudi Arabia, which will likely contribute the lion's share of the intra-GCC financial aid program, is more than ready to invest large sums to guarantee the regime stability of its fellow GCC states.

Saudi Arabia's repeated call for the development of the GCC into a Gulf Union can also be seen as an attempt by Riyadh to stabilize the monarchical governments in the GCC states. Riyadh is particularly interested in entering into closer cooperation with Bahrain, the politically most unstable of all Arab Gulf monarchies. Saudi Arabia's call for a political union with Bahrain has also to be seen as a clear message in the direction of Iran: the Arabian Peninsula is and remains Saudi Arabia's sphere of influence. However, while the Bahraini government appears eager to increase its stability by entering into a closer alliance with Saudi Arabia, the remaining GCC

20. Bill Law, "Saudi Crackdown Takes on Sectarian Character," BBC, December 14, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/ news/world-middle-east-16052343.
21. Cited in Bronner and Slackman, "Saudi Troops."
22. Caryle Murphy, "GCC to Set Up $20bn Bailout Fund for Bahrain and Oman," *The National,* March 11, 2011, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/gcc-to-set-up-20bn-bail-out-fund-for-bahrain-and-oman.

states are reluctant. The clearest rejection of a Gulf union has come from Oman. Following Oman's initial negative response to the Saudi plan in 2012, the Omani foreign minister publicly rejected the creation of a Gulf union in December 2013, shortly before the yearly GCC Heads of State Summit.[23] This clearly shows the limits of the Kingdom's influence on the smaller Arab Gulf monarchies.

The Arab Spring in Egypt: From Counterrevolution, Temporary Modus Vivendi with the Muslim Brotherhood to Strong Support of the July 2013 Military Coup

Saudi Arabia's stance towards the unfolding political crisis in Egypt in late January and early February 2011 can be characterized as counterrevolutionary. Riyadh granted the Egyptian regime diplomatic, political, and financial support right up to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11. In addition, the Saudi regime tried its best to convince the US government to continue its political support for the Mubarak regime. Riyadh was alarmed when the Obama administration turned its back on its long-time ally and urged Mubarak to give up power. It came as a shock to the Saudi government that the US abandoned a loyal ally of decades after only days of popular protests. The Al-Saud regime began to wonder whether the same fate might befall them if large-scale protests were to arise in the Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's backing of the Mubarak regime until the end was based on two main reasons. First, Riyadh was concerned that the popular overthrow of the authoritarian regime in the most populous Arab state would create a precedent, motivating the people of other Arab states, in the worst case in the GCC states, to rise up against their regimes too. Second, under the Mubarak regime Egypt had pursued a moderate and stabilizing regional policy. The regimes in Cairo and Riyadh had shared a close alliance with the United States and cooperated in containing Iran's influence in the Middle East. The fall of the Mubarak regime bore the risk of an alteration in both Egyptian policy and the regional balance of power to Saudi Arabia's disadvantage. In particular, the potential loss of the Saudi-Egyptian axis, which had served as a counterweight to Tehran's radical regional ambitions, caused grave concern in Riyadh.

After Mubarak's departure from power, the Saudi regime tried to influence the political developments in Egypt to its advantage. In mid-May 2011, Riyadh

23. Compare Habib Toumi, "Bahrain PM Reiterates Full Support to Gulf Union," *Gulf News,* December 12, 2014, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-pm-reitereates-full-support-to-gulf-union-1.1270442 and Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Omani Rejection of GCC Union Adds Insult to Injury for Saudi Arabia," *Al-Monitor,* http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/oman-rejects-gcc-union-insults-saudi-arabia.html.

announced that it would support Egypt's economy with "soft loans, deposits and grants" amounting to $4 billion.[24] This large-scale financial aid program was certainly motivated by Riyadh's interest in a political stabilization of Egypt. It can also be assumed that by bolstering the Egyptian economy, the Saudi regime attempted to reduce the Muslim Brotherhood's growing appeal to the Egyptian population: In the post-Mubarak era, the Muslim Brotherhood managed to enhance its approval rates among the economically unfortunate inter alia by providing food and social services free of charge. Following Mubarak's fall, the Saudi regime was worried about the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power. Riyadh's concern was based mainly in a deep-rooted ideological rivalry with the Brotherhood. Both the Al-Saud and the Muslim Brotherhood derive their legitimacy largely from the "claim to uphold a strict Islamic Sunni orthodoxy and to propagate the faith and its interests throughout the world." However, the Saudi regime and the Brotherhood are frequently at odds with one another over their "interpretation of the faith […] on matters of both principle and procedure." [25]

The Saudi regime was particularly concerned that, once in control over Egyptian foreign policy, the Muslim Brotherhood could a) enter into a rapprochement with Iran and its allies Syria and Hizbollah; b) start a propaganda war against Israel and the United States for their pro-Israeli policy; and/or c) go as far as to revoke the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. [26] All three scenarios would be contrary to Saudi Arabia's strategic interests. An Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement would massively strengthen Iran's relative power in the Middle East to the clear disadvantage of Saudi Arabia. Egyptian anti-Israeli and anti-US propaganda would likely meet the approval of significant parts of the Saudi population and put considerable pressure on the Saudi regime for its close strategic alliance with the US. Egyptian support of militant anti-Israeli non-state actors such as Hizbollah or Hamas, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Palestinian sister organization, would bear the risk of a new escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. An Egyptian revocation of its bilateral peace treaty with Israel would increase the risk of a new Arab-Israeli war even more. Ever since the end of the 1973 October War, the Saudi regime has sought to prevent military conflicts between Israel and the Arab states. More than that, Riyadh has taken considerable efforts to bring about a holistic resolution to the Arab-Israeli

24. Cited in Nayla Razzouk, "Egypt to Receive $4 Billion Economic Aid from Saudi Arabia, SPA Reports," Bloomberg, May 21, 2011, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-05-21/saudi-arabia-gives-4-billion-egyptian-economic-aid-spa-says.html.
25. Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar," 6.
26. Compare Saud Mousaed Al-Tamamy, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security," *Journal of Arabian Studies: Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea* 2, no. 2 (146-56, 149).

conflict. The two peace initiatives of 1981 (the Fahd Plan, adopted by the Arab League in 1982 as the First Arab Peace Initiative) and 2002 (the Abdullah Plan, which became the Second Arab Peace Initiative) are but the most prominent pieces of evidence for that. The Saudi regime has no interest whatsoever in a new escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as this could have serious repercussions on Saudi Arabia's domestic stability and foreign and economic security.

Another source of serious concern to the Saudi regime was that, once in power in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's appeal to the Saudi population would increase. As they, too, draw their political legitimacy from their claimed role as protector of Islamic values in accordance with the conservative Sunni interpretation, a democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt would have posed a direct challenge to the Saudi monarchy's legitimacy to rule. Due to these concerns, the Saudi regime had no interest whatsoever in seeing the Muslim Brotherhood gain political control in Egypt. In this context, the Saudi government's alleged support for the Salafi Hizb al-Nour during election campaigns for the 2011/12 Egyptian parliamentary elections could be explained not only by a wide-ranging congruence of religious and political worldviews but also as a strategy by the regime to strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood's rival among conservative Muslim voters.

However, following the Brotherhood's electoral victories in both the 2011/12 parliamentary election and the 2012 presidential election, Riyadh made efforts to enter into a working relationship with the new Egyptian government. In early July 2012, shortly after Muhammad Morsi's election, Saudi King Abdullah extended an invitation to the Muslim Brotherhood's victorious presidential candidate. This was a clear indication of the Saudi regime's willingness to mend fences with the new political leadership in Cairo. President Morsi's first foreign visit after his inauguration was to Saudi Arabia where he met with the Saudi leadership in Jeddah on June 11, 2012. Hussein Shobokshi, a Saudi newspaper columnist, commented on the Saudi regime's hosting of Morsi: "Through this visit Saudi Arabia has made it very clear and obvious that it is over the Mubarak era and that it has started a new chapter with the new leader of Egypt."[27]

Over the following months, Saudi concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood's policies were partially alleviated. For one thing, Egyptian-Iranian relations remained heavily strained; an important reason for this was Egypt's stance on the Syrian civil war. In addition, Egypt did not significantly change its policy towards either Israel or the United States. During this time, the Saudi government granted Egypt

27. Asma Alsharif, "Egypt's Mursi Visits Saudi Arabia to Mend Ties," Reuters, July 12, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/12/us-saudi-egypt-idUSBRE86B0RX20120712.

significant economic and financial support. In the spring of 2013, the Egyptian government reported a 20% growth in bilateral trade and put Saudi investments in Egypt at $5.6 billion.[28] In mid-2012, the Saudi government granted Egypt a $1 billion loan for development projects, and as late as on June 24, 2013, the Egyptian Planning Minister announced that his government would sign a deal with the Saudi administration regarding a $500 million loan to reduce its budget deficit.[29]

However, unlike neighboring Qatar, which granted the new Egyptian administration significant political support, the Saudi regime continued to see the Muslim Brotherhood's political leadership role in Egypt as dangerous to its interests. Consequently, when, in early July 2013, the Egyptian military, following massively increasing popular protests against President Morsi, toppled the administration, suspended the constitution, placed the Egyptian President under house arrest, installed an interim government, and took strong action against protesting supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi regime became the Egyptian military's strongest foreign supporter. In a rare move, the Saudi administration publicly took a position that was in clear opposition to its European partners, its fellow GCC member state Qatar, and most importantly its crucial ally, the US. Only hours after the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces General Abdul Fattah El-Sisi ousted President Morsi, Saudi King Abdullah sent a congratulatory note to the newly appointed acting president, Adly Mansour.[30]

In the following weeks, the Saudi regime publicly praised the Egyptian military for its resolute and indeed very bloody actions against protesting supporters of ousted President Morsi, who the Saudi administration refers to as terrorists. In this context, King Abdullah stated on August 16 in unusually direct words

> "that the people and government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia stood and still stand today with our brothers in Egypt against terrorism, extremism and sedition, and against whomever is trying to interfere in Egypt's internal affairs."[31]

28. "Egypt-Saudi Arabia Trade up by 20%, Says Ambassador," *Egypt Independent,* April 15, 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/1653271.
29. "Egypt to Borrow US$500 million from Saudi Arabia," *Egypt Independent,* June 24, 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/1875341.
30. "King Abdullah Congratulates New Egyptian Leader," *Arab News,* July 4, 2013, http://www.arabnews.com/news/456958.
31. Cited in David Hearst, "Why Saudi Arabia is Taking a Risk by Backing the Egyptian Coup," *The Guardian,* August 20, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/20/saudi-arabia-coup-egypt.

The Saudi government's backing of the Egyptian military has, however, not been restricted to rhetoric and political support. Shortly after the military coup, the Saudi regime, along with its fellow Gulf neighbors Kuwait and the UAE, put together a massive $12 billion financial aid package for Egypt. In addition, when, in light of the Egyptian military's massive crackdown on demonstrating Morsi supporters, the US and the European Union considered the suspension of economic aid to the Egyptian government, the Saudi regime promptly vowed to compensate any potential loss of foreign aid.[32]

The July 3 military coup was in the clear interest of the Saudi regime as it removed the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt. The regime's staunch support for the Egyptian armed forces and the interim government they installed is clear evidence of how dangerous Riyadh considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be to its domestic and foreign policy interests. The Brotherhood's removal from power was so important to the Saudi leadership that it left its usual comfort zone of behind-closed-doors diplomacy and openly positioned itself in the intra-Egyptian conflict in opposition to its most crucial ally, the United States. It is difficult to categorize Saudi support for the July 3 coup as either purely revolutionary or counterrevolutionary. As a matter of fact, it has elements of both. On the one hand, the Saudi-backed coup greatly increased the political influence of the Egyptian armed forces, which had been President Mubarak's center of power until the revolution of 2011. On the other hand, many of those who, with their protests and demonstrations, had forced President Mubarak to step down two and a half years earlier have now supported the military coup against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government.

The Arab Spring in Libya: Saudi Support for the Revolution

Saudi Arabia's reaction to the popular unrest in Libya differed very significantly from the Kingdom's response to the developments related to the Arab Spring in Egypt or Bahrain. In the case of Libya, the Saudi regime did not back the regime. On the contrary, Riyadh supported the revolution against Gaddafi. On March 12, 2011, in the light of massive attacks by Gaddafi's troops on rebels in the country's east, an Arab League resolution requested the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Libya. Reportedly, Saudi Arabia played a crucial role in bringing about this landmark decision. It has been reported that only eleven out of twenty-two Arab League members were present when the resolution was adopted and that among the nine states that voted in favor were the six GCC states, which, in the regional organization, usually follow the Saudi lead.[33]

32. Ibid.
33. Pepe Escobar, "Exposed: The US-Saudi Libya Deal," Asia Times Online, April 2, 2011, http://

When the UN Security Council, in Resolution 1973 of March 17, 2011, authorized the limited use of force against the Gaddafi regime, Saudi Arabia did not join Qatar and the UAE in sending jets to enforce the no-fly zone. However, it seems certain that the Saudi regime sent weapons to the Libyan rebels. Unlike in the cases of Egypt or Bahrain, the civil unrest in Libya did present an opportunity rather than a challenge to the Saudi regime's interests. By supporting the rebellion through arms supplies and enabling the NATO Operation "Unified Protector," which gave the rebels much needed military support, Riyadh contributed to the fall of the Gaddafi regime, which, for four decades, had taken almost every opportunity to publicly embarrass the Al-Saud regime and call into question the latter's legitimacy. The Libyan attempts to assassinate then Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler Abdullah in 2003 irretrievably poisoned relations between the Al-Saud and Gaddafi. The latter's brutal suppression of the revolt inspired by the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia created an opportunity for the Saudi regime to contribute to the toppling of a longstanding adversary.

It has also been suggested that Saudi Arabia's efforts to bring about the Arab League resolution, which called for military intervention in Libya, were connected to the simultaneous developments in Bahrain. In early April 2011, investigative journalist Pepe Escobar wrote

> "You invade Bahrain. We take out Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. This, in short, is the essence of a deal struck between the Barack Obama administration and the House of Saud. Two diplomatic sources at the United Nations independently confirmed that Washington, via Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, gave the go-ahead for Saudi Arabia to invade Bahrain and crush the pro-democracy movement in their neighbor in exchange for a "yes" vote by the Arab League for a no-fly zone over Libya - the main rationale that led to United Nations Security Council resolution 1973."[34]

The accuracy of this claim cannot be verified at this point. However, there certainly is little doubt that throwing Gaddafi under the proverbial bus was a price the Al-Saud would have been more than willing to pay to contribute to the stability of Bahrain.

www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MD02Ak01.html.

34. Ibid.

The Syrian Civil War: Saudi Pro-revolutionary Policy and the Proxy War with Iran

Since Bashar Al-Assad's accession to power in the year 2000, Saudi-Syrian relations have become increasingly conflictual. Syria's close ties with Iran and its strong backing of Hizbollah, in particular, have been detrimental to Saudi interests. Syria's likely involvement in the assassination in 2005 of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a strong Saudi ally, has caused further Saudi resentment against the Assad regime. In addition, the fact that Syria's Sunni majority is ruled over and discriminated against by an Alawite minority, to which the Assad clan belongs, has long been a thorn in the Al-Saud regime's side.

Nonetheless, for a long time, Riyadh had an interest in the stability of the Assad regime. The main reason was Saudi Arabia's concern about a border-transcending ethno-sectarian civil war that might follow Assad's overthrow. Syria's ethno-sectarian fault lines resemble those in Iraq. An escalating intra-Syrian conflict between Sunnis and Alawites and/or Arabs and Kurds was likely to affect Saudi Arabia's neighbor Iraq, a state that has been suffering under ethno-sectarian clashes ever since Saddam Hussein's ouster in 2003. Riyadh was also concerned that a Syrian civil war would fuel the precarious domestic situation in Lebanon. In addition, the Saudi government feared a new escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict following a regime change in Damascus. Although Assad had launched regular verbal attacks against Israel and given Hizbollah logistic support, the Syrian President was unlikely to start a new war with Israel. Due to all these aspects, the Saudi government considered Assad's political survival as the lesser of two evils.

Consequently, when the Arab Spring reached Syria and the first popular protests arose, King Abdullah issued a statement of support for President Assad.[35] Over the following months, in the light of escalating violence applied by Assad's troops against mostly peaceful demonstrators, Riyadh remained silent in public, neither backing nor openly criticizing the regime in Damascus. Behind closed doors, however, Saudi King Abdullah tried several times to convince Assad to discontinue the brutal actions against his population and meet the latter's demands.[36] Saudi Arabia's public silence to the evolving situation in Syria ended in the summer of 2011. In early August, King Abdullah issued unusually strong criticism of Syria and announced the recall of Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Damascus. The Saudi monarch was quoted as having said "Large numbers of martyrs have fallen, their blood has been shed, and many

35. Neil MacFarquhar, "Saudi Arabia Scrambles to Limit Region's Upheaval," *The New York Times,* May 27, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/28/world/middleeast/28saudi.html?_r=0.
36. Interviews with senior officials in the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2014.

others have been wounded…this is not in accord with religion, values and morals." The Saudi King further urged the Assad regime to "stop the killing machine and the bloodshed…before it is too late."[37]

The change in Saudi Arabia's position can be explained by the concurrence of several developments. In the weeks preceding Riyadh's decision, the state violence against Syrian protesters had further escalated, claiming many civilian victims. On July 29, one and a half weeks before King Abdullah's statement, defectors from the Syrian armed forces, who had refused to shoot civilian protestors, established the Free Syrian Army (FSA). By then, the Assad regime had passed the point of no return. Despite King Abdullah's suggestion that stopping the bloodshed might save the current Syrian regime, it seemed certain that no concessions, reforms, or apologies would regain Assad the obedience of his people. On the contrary, it was to be expected that the protestors, now supported by military professionals, would not give up until the regime had fallen. It appeared that it was only a matter of time before the Assad regime was replaced by a new political order. Therefore, from the Saudi perspective, it was strategically advisable to stop supporting the old regime and side with Assad's opponents.

Another aspect that affected the Saudi decision to turn against the Assad regime was the occurrence of the holy month of Ramadan, which began on August 1, 2011. As Gause points out,

> "[d]uring […] Ramadan religious feelings are heightened. The sectarian element of the Syrian confrontation, with an ostensibly secular and Alawite Shiite dominated regime brutally suppressing the Sunni Muslim majority, bec[ame] a more prominent element in how the overwhelmingly Sunni Saudis, population and leadership, view events.[38]

In siding with the protesters in the Syrian civil war, the Saudi regime followed the interests of large parts of its population and prevented popular criticism against its Syria policy. Personal disgust for the bloodshed ordered by Assad's government certainly had an influence on Saudi decision makers, too; this, however, was likely not the decisive element in the decision to turn publicly against Assad.

In the subsequent months, Saudi Arabia became one of the strongest and most active supporters of the Syrian opposition. The Kingdom supported a decision in

37. Cited in "Saudi Arabia Recalls Syria Envoy as Assad Defends Crackdown," *Dawn,* August 8, 2011, http://dawn.com/2011/08/08/saudi-arabia-recalls-syria-envoy-as-assad-defends-crack-down/.
38. F. Gregory Gause, III, "Is Saudi Arabia Really Counter-Revolutionary?" *Foreign Policy,* August 9, 2011,http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/09/is_saudi_arabia_really_counter_revolutionary.

November 2011 to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League. In the spring of 2012, Saudi Arabia, together with Qatar, began to provide the Free Syrian Army with financial aid for the procurement of weapons.[39] In February 2013, it was reported that the Kingdom had financed the purchase of large quantities of Croatian infantry weapons and had funneled them to Syrian rebel forces through Jordan. Reportedly, the first weapon shipments had reached Syrian opposition forces in December 2012.[40] Reports indicate that Saudi Arabia significantly intensified its weapons deliveries to the Syrian rebels in late spring of 2013. From then on, Riyadh's arms shipments reportedly included anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons.[41]

Since the summer of 2011, the Syrian civil war has developed into a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While Riyadh has gradually increased its support for the rebels, Tehran remains Assad's staunchest ally and keeps supporting the Syrian leadership with weapons and fighting units. Assad's fall and his replacement by a Saudi-friendly (read: moderate, Sunni dominated) regime would drastically curtail Iran's regional power status. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's relative power status in the Middle East region would grow dramatically; hence, the strong Saudi interest to see Assad gone and with him the Damascus-Tehran axis.

However, while the developing situation in Syria provides the chance for a major political victory for the Saudi regime, it also bears considerable political and security risks for Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's apparent selective support of anti-government factions in Syria is clear evidence of its awareness of these risks. For one thing, due to politico-ideological differences with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudi government does not want the Syrian branch of the transnational political movement to be strengthened in the course of the Syrian civil war.[42] Not only did Riyadh refrain from supporting the Syrian Brotherhood, it also made sure to reduce its influence within the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces – an organization that has meanwhile been recognized by the Arab League and many Western states as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. In May 2013, upon Saudi pressure, the Syrian National Coalition accepted several new rebel groups as part of the official Syrian opposition, thus weakening the Muslim

39. Hugh Naylor, "Syria Rebels 'Buy Arms with Gulf and US Help'," *The National,* May 17, 2012, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/syria-rebels-buy-arms-with-gulf-and-us-help.
40. C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria With Croatian Arms," *The New York Times,* February 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
41. Ian Black, "Saudi Arabia: Syria Rebels Must be Armed," *The Guardian,* June 25, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/25/saudi-arabia-syria-rebels-armed?CMP=twt_gu.
42. Compare Haykel, "Saudi Arabia and Qatar," 5.

Brotherhood's influence in the organization. In addition, Saudi Arabia was successful in lobbying for the election of its favorite candidate, Ahmad Al-Jarba, as the National Coalition's President. In early July 2013, Al-Jarba won in a close election against Mustafa Al-Sabbagh, the desired candidate of Muslim Brotherhood-friendly Qatar.[43]

While it is highly likely that private Saudi money has been flowing to Al-Qaeda and its associates, the Saudi government does not seem to provide the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – the Iraqi Al-Qaeda branch, which has over the past months significantly increased its activities in Syria – or the Syrian Al Nusra Front with either financial support or arms supplies. In contrast, Riyadh at first preferred to support moderate and more secular factions among the Syrian rebels. The underlying reason for this selective aid policy has to be seen in the Saudi regime's historic memory of the negative long-term consequences of its substantial support for the Afghan mujahideen in the 1980s. By providing the Afghan mujahideen movement with political, logistic, financial, and arms support for their fight against the Soviet Union, Riyadh had unintentionally laid the basis for the Al-Qaeda network, which later turned into a significant threat to the Kingdom's internal security and its foreign policy interests. The Saudi regime is greatly concerned that Al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, whose interests conflict with Riyadh's own, might profit from the turmoil in Syria and expand their influence in post-Assad Syria and in the region as a whole. As a result, everything seems to suggest that the Saudi government initially tried to strengthen less radical and non-jihadist elements among Syrian rebel forces in an attempt to shape the post-Assad political order according to its interests.

However, in the fall of 2013, the Saudi government altered its previous strategy and began granting support to Syrian Salafi groups that ostensibly stand in opposition to Al-Qaeda. The reason for this change in strategy was the gradual loss in power and strike capacity of the Free Syrian Army. Formerly a strong rebel force that temporarily controlled significant parts of Syria, the FSA had for several months been in a process of disintegration with several splinter groups leaving the organization to join other rebel groups, a development the Saudi government partially blames on the US government's failure to provide adequate support for the FSA through weapons shipments and military actions against Assad's forces following the release of poison gas in August 2013. Simultaneously to the FSA's decline, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates had developed into a powerful force in the Syrian civil war fighting against both the Assad regime and other opposition forces and tyrannizing the Syrian population.

43. Compare Bassem Mroue, "Ex-Prisoner Chosen to Lead Syria Opposition Group," Associated Press, July 6, 2013, http://bigstory.ap.org/article/syrian-troops-advance-rebel-held-parts-homs and "Saudi-Backed Jarba Defeats Qatar's Point Man in Syria Opposition," Middle East Online, July 6, 2013, http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=59926.

Confronted with these two parallel civil wars in Syria – heterogeneous opposition against the Assad regime and radical Islamist factions against more secular rebel groups and civilian population – the Saudi government saw a need to adjust its Syria policy. With Saudi support, 43 rebel groups, operating in the Damascus area and ranging from more moderate to Islamic fundamentalist groups, formed the Army of Islam (Jaish al-Islam) on September 29, 2013.

The new rebel alliance is led by Zahran Alloush, the Saudi-backed previous head of Liwa al-Islam, Jaish al-Islam's main faction. The Saudi government's objective is to both induce the overthrow of the Assad regime and to rollback the influence of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Syria. However, this strategy harbors significant risks. For one thing, large parts of Jaish al-Islam are themselves radical Islamists guilty of sectarian war crimes.[44] Neither their current enmity with Al-Qaeda and its affiliates nor their embrace of Saudi financial and weapons support make them a reliable partner for the future. The fact that on a regular basis new Islamist splinter groups are founded, new alliances are forged, and former allies turn into deadly enemies is a clear indication of the dangers that follow Riyadh's support for Jaish al-Islam. In addition, Saudi support for the Army of Islam weakened the FSA even further and with it the more moderate elements of the anti-Assad opposition.

The fact that the Saudi administration is actively discouraging its citizens from joining Syrian rebel movements clearly indicates Riyadh's concerns about yet another fundamentalist blowback hitting the Kingdom; many of Saudi Arabia's domestic terrorists in the past two decades had either fought in Afghanistan themselves or been influenced by Afghanistan veterans. Riyadh wants to prevent a situation in which Saudi volunteers join the Syrian rebels and later return as radicalized threats to the Kingdom's domestic security.[45] There have, however, also been reports about a Saudi judge who encouraged 19 teenagers facing trial for participating in an anti-government demonstration in the northern Saudi city of Buraimah to fight against Shiites in Syria's civil war.[46] Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani, founder of the banned Saudi human rights organization Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association

44. Edward Dark, "Syrian FSA Fades in Shadow of Saudi-Backed Opposition Front," *Al-Monitor,* December 11, 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/syria-fsa-islamic-front-geneva-ii-jarba.html#.
45. Compare inter alia Asma Alsharif and Amena Bakr, "Saudi Steers Citizens Away from Syrian 'Jihad'," Reuters, September 12, 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/12/us-saudi-syria-jihad-idUSBRE88B0XY20120912 and "Saudis Fighting in Syria Face Arrest on Return," *Saudi Gazette,* March 26, 2013, http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid =20130326158478.
46. Reese Erlich, "With Official Wink and Nod, Young Saudis Join Syria's Rebels," NPR, March 13, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/03/13/174156172/with-official-wink-and-nod-young-saudis-join-syrias-rebels.

(ACPRA) and former professor of economics at the Saudi Institute of Diplomatic Studies – now serving a 10-year prison sentence – went so far as to accuse the Saudi regime of "diffus[ing] domestic pressure [for political reform] by recruiting young kids to join in another proxy war in the region."[47] The organization repeated its accusation in late January 2014.[48] At least publicly the Saudi government and the Kingdom's clergy have repeatedly warned Saudi citizens to not join Syrian rebel groups. On February 3, 2014, Saudi King Abdullah issued a royal decree ordering prison sentences of up to 20 years for Saudi citizens fighting in foreign conflicts and jail time of up to 30 years for Saudis who join or support extremist terrorist groups.[49] However, despite all these warnings, a significant number of Saudis are fighting alongside various Syrian rebel factions. This fact combined with the Saudi government's support of religious extremist groups – whether affiliated with Al-Qaeda or not – is likely to cause a significant problem in the future for the Kingdom's security and political stability. In this context, Yezid Sayigh is right when he warns, "Muhammad's Army may eventually come home to Mecca."[50]

Conclusion

The preceding analysis reveals that the widespread claim that Saudi Arabia's response to the developments of the Arab Spring has been a consistent counterrevolutionary policy is an incorrect generalization. Without a doubt, the Al-Saud regime's reaction to the protests, revolts, and revolutions in the Arab World has counterrevolutionary elements, most notably in the case of Riyadh's response to the developments in Bahrain. Besides providing the Al-Khalifa regime with financial support, Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to allow the Bahraini security forces to focus on quelling popular protests. In the case of Oman, Saudi Arabia has been providing financial support to alleviate the popular pressure on the regime of Sultan Qaboos. The Saudi government's diplomatic and political support for President Hosni Mubarak until his forced resignation on February 11, 2011 can also be characterized as counterrevolutionary.

However, the situation was different with respect to domestic protests in the Kingdom. The regime used its traditional strategy of buying domestic peace;

47. Ibid.
48. "Saudi King Orders Punishing Jihadi Fighters," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-king-orders-punishing-jihadi-fighters/2014/02/03/4469fc0c-8ce6-11e3-9ed8-259977a48789_story.html.
49. Ibid.
50. Yezid Sayigh, "Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 28, 2013, http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray/greh?reloadFlag=1.

however, it did not implement any meaningful political reforms and instead took tough action against protests in the Eastern Province. Nonetheless, as the majority of protesters have only been calling for reforms within the existing monarchical system rather than an outright regime change, the regime's reaction cannot be labeled counterrevolutionary.

In Egypt, the Kingdom first made efforts to influence the post-Mubarak political order according to its interests by supporting forces opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood. Following the latter's political victories in parliamentary and presidential elections, Riyadh entered into a temporary modus vivendi with a movement that had been banned and persecuted by the Mubarak regime. However, the Saudi regime remained concerned about the negative consequences the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership role in Egypt would have on its domestic and foreign policy interests. Hence, when the Egyptian military ousted President Morsi, installed an interim government, and took strong action against pro-Morsi protesters, the Saudi regime provided staunch political and economic support to the Egyptian armed forces. The July 2013 coup brought back to power the military, which had been the power base of the Mubarak regime. However, the majority of the protesters who had forced Mubarak's resignation two and a half years earlier now enthusiastically welcomed the military coup. Hence, the Saudi support for the military's actions has both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary elements. In the cases of Libya and Syria, the Saudi regime acted/has been acting as a pro-revolutionary force. As Gaddafi had for four decades conducted a policy that had regularly contradicted Saudi policy objectives, his ouster was in Riyadh's interest. With regard to Syria, the Saudi regime, after an initial phase of reluctance, became one of the most significant supporters of the anti-Assad rebellion.

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia's policy response to the developments of the Arab Spring cannot categorically be characterized as counterrevolutionary, pro-status quo, or supportive of autocratic regimes. The Saudi regime's policy has been much more a strategic response to the perceived challenges and opportunities the Arab Spring posed to its main policy interests: regime security, regional stability, and the containment, and ideally the rollback, of Iranian regional influence. To realize these objectives the Saudi regime supported the political status quo and regime stability in some states (GCC states, Egypt), while it backed the revolutions in others (Libya and Syria).

The claim that Saudi Arabia's reaction to the Arab Spring has been consistently counterrevolutionary seems to be based on an ideological blindness of predominantly Western observers, who argue that a policy that does not aim at cultural or political Westernization is by default counterrevolutionary.

GRM PAPER

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