

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ARAB SPRING: FIVE YEARS OF INFLUENCE AND ACTION

Talal Al-Matter
Kuwait University, Kuwait
Email: talal.almatar@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was founded in 1981 by the six countries of the Gulf Region. The GCC aims to increase levels of collaboration, integration and interdependence between its members in various economic, social and legislative fields. It also seeks to establish a common foreign policy. With its members having much in common in political, socio-economic and demographic areas, the GCC has been able to achieve substantial cooperation. All Member States of the GCC are monarchies, governed by a King, Emir or Sultan and it should be noted that there are slight variations in the levels of freedom and political participation in each State. Economically, all GCC countries rely on natural energy resources such as gas and oil which have made them rich countries. Their economies have benefited from selling natural resources, enabling them to provide free public services to their citizens. Despite some demographic and sectarian diversity, Islam is the official religion in all GCC Member States.

Saudi Arabia plays a central role among GCC members, hosting the organization's Headquarters in Riyadh. Moreover, it has the largest population of GCC countries and the largest economy due to its size and the scale of resources, as well as the geopolitical importance of its location. The Saudi Kingdom is also the world's largest producer and exporter of oil, possessing one-quarter of the world's oil reserves, equivalent to more than 260 million barrels of crude oil.¹ Saudi Arabia has the fourth-largest military budget in the world, behind the USA, China and Russia.²

This is the backdrop to this study's focus on the Saudi Kingdom and its attitude toward, and essential influence over the 'Arab Spring'³. The uprising that emerged in a number of Arab countries five years ago has had a significant impact not only on the countries which underwent processes of revolutionary change, but on the entire Arab region. Despite the Gulf States enjoying greater economic wealth than other Arab countries, they were not immune from the influence of the revolutionary fervor sweeping the region. Massive public protests in the Gulf region showed that their citizens felt connected to events in other parts of the Arab world and wanted to share the sense of Arab pride as they sought to play a part in shaping their own future. Governments in the Gulf reacted not only by trying to impede public protests, but by blatantly intervening in those countries experiencing the Arab Spring.³ This intervention—which involved both support and opposition depending on each country's situation and relationship with the Gulf States—and the broader impact of the Arab Spring demonstrated that the GCC countries are an inseparable part of the Arab Region.

It is interesting to note, though, that the common slogan "Leave" or "Go" was first heard in Kuwait on 27 October 2009, ahead of it becoming a popular slogan in demonstrations in both

¹Available at: http://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/169.htm and <https://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/energy/oil.aspx>
Available at: <https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/saudi-arabian-defence-industry-placed-200000421.html>

³This is the most common expression to describe the political events and changes in the Arabic region since January 2011.

the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in 2011. Kuwaiti protesters, at the time, were demanding the removal of the Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Nasser Al-Mohamed Al-Subah, for alleged poor state administration and corruption.⁴

Espousing various causes, public protests continued from 2009 and reached a peak on 28 November 2011, when tens of thousands of people took to the streets demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister. Subah was arraigned for corruption. He had bribed the very parliamentarians who were empowered to monitor and oversee his executive authority. In the face of anger from protesters and opposition members of parliament, Subah and his cabinet resigned.⁵

All six members of GCC have reacted to the Arab Spring, though they have done so in different ways. They have shown both support and opposition; they have made changes themselves and resorted to oppression. While this study aims to illustrate in particular the Saudi attitude toward and influence over the Arab Spring, there will be general reference to the other five GCC States. In short, the study addresses two questions: How did the Arab Spring affect the Kingdom's domestic situation? And, How did Saudi Arabia perceive and react to the Arab Spring?

2. The Influence of the Arab Spring on Saudi Arabia

By comparison with the violent mass protests seen in those countries most affected by the Arab Spring, the GCC States might have at first appeared stable and somewhat distant from events in the rest of the Arab world. However, protests in the Gulf States, even though they were less impactful, "were considered of more threat to American dominance in the region than the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions; as GCC States have two-thirds of the world's oil reserves and one-third of its natural gas reserves. Also, the Gulf region is an area of many substantial US military bases."⁶ Any type of protest movement in the Gulf was, thus of great international interest.

Though limited in scope, the protests in the Gulf were important as they represented a reaction to, among other things, corruption and the lack of political participation. "Saudi Arabia, unlike the minor Gulf States, has been severely exposed to the new air of change and reform in the Arab Region because of its internal critical situation. The Kingdom displays high levels of corruption, unemployment, poverty, an increasing population, a restricted judicial system, a monopoly of authority, an lack of political participation, limited female empowerment, a deteriorated political leadership and conflict within the Royal family."⁷

Although some of the causes espoused by the crowds might have seemed sufficient to advocate outright revolution, the protests were, in fact, surprisingly limited and minor. The first public protest was seen in Bahrain on the 14th February, 2011 and spread to the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia within a few days. Here, the population is mostly Shia, with about 2 million Shia Muslims living around the Al-Ehsa'a and Al-Qateef oases.⁸ The Saudi authorities see the Shia as

Al-Materi, T., 2016. *Leave*, 1st edn. Beirut: Bridges for Translation and Publishing, p. 66.

5 Available at: <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE7AR0OA20111128>

6 Mattheisen, T., 2014. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't*, 1st edn, p. 14. Translation of Amin Al-Ayoubi. Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing.

7 Abdullah, A. K., 2012. *A Study: The Reflections of the Arab Spring on the GCC States*. Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies. Doha. p.13.

8 Mattheisen, T., 2014. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't*, 1st edn, p. 27. Translation of Amin Al-Ayoubi. Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing.

a threat and so increased security on Shia communities. In response, protests that began on the 17th of February continued for several weeks.

In order to marginalize the protesters and discourage participation, the Council of Senior Scholars—appointed by the King and responsible for enforcing religious regulations—issued a Fatwa ruling on the 6th of March describing the public demonstrations as “deviant intellectual and partisan connections not allowed in Islamic Law”. In contrast, Human Rights Watch called on Saudi Arabia to end oppression against civil demonstrators and to release more than 20 protesters who had been arrested on the 3rd of March, 2011 in the east of the country at Al-Qateef.⁹

Saudi security agencies were alarmed when more than 10,000 Saudi users of Facebook pledged to support the so-called “Day of Rage” in Saudi Arabia on the 11th of March, 2011. In response, the Ministry of Interior Affairs put into force a ban on demonstrations as of the 10th of March. The demonstrations, limited to those areas with majority Shia populations in the east, failed to spread to other parts of the Kingdom. “In response to the Arab Spring protests, the royal families of the Gulf region, particularly, in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia enlivened and deepened Sunni–Shia estrangements in order to block the formation of an opposing multi-sectarian front.”¹⁰

The agenda of the public demonstrations was manipulated to appear predominantly sectarian in nature to make it less likely that Sunni and Shia populations might unite under a common set of demands. Moreover, by being presented as largely Shia-oriented, the protests lost legitimacy as they did not represent the majority of citizens.

In January 2016, the Al-Jazeera Studies Center conducted a significant poll, asking for the views of Arab elites about the Iranian role in the region, and the future of the Arab–Iranian relations. Surprisingly, the poll showed that 98% of people believed that the Arab–Iranian conflict in turn had a negative impact on the Sunni–Shia conflict.¹¹ Clearly, the majority of those polled had a negative view of Iran, seeing its policy toward its Arab neighbors as aggressive.¹² However, most of those interviewed remained resolute on the fact that the most serious threat to Arabs was the Jewish State of Israel. Having not been seen as a threat for some years, Iran had become the second most serious threat to the region, ahead of the US. Moreover, there was considerable variation between the numbers of those who put the Israeli threat first and those who prioritized Iranian threats.¹³

Although the poll was conducted across the Arab world, the views that emerged of the Saudi–Iranian conflict reflected the views of the dominant Saudi media in region. Although some Saudi religious scholars took a dim view of the domestic demonstrations, a crucial number of elite religious figures, including Pr. Salman Al Odeh, signed a petition entitled “Toward a state of rights and institutions,”¹⁴ calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Specifically,

9 Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2011/03/08/242200>

10 Matthiesen, T., 2014. *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't*, 1st edn, p.15. Translation of Amin Al-Ayoubi. Beirut: Arab Institute for Research and Publishing.

11 AlJazeera Studies Center. 2016. *A Poll: Iran in the Measurements of Arab Elites*. Doha. p. 44.

12 AlJazeera Studies Center. 2016. *A Poll: Iran in the Measurements of Arab Elites*. Doha. p.46.

13 AlJazeera Studies Center. 2016. *A Poll: Iran in the Measurements of Arab Elites*. Doha. p.44.

14 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/191724777528779/>

the petition—issued on the 23rd of February, 2011 and handed to the Saudi King at the time, Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz—demanded a number of national reforms including:

- 1- the establishment of an elected Consultative Council with full authority to pass new laws and oversee the government;
- 2- a separation of the authority of the Prime Minister from that of the King;
- 3- reform of the judicial system;
- 4- efforts to combat financial and administrative corruption;
- 5- urgent solutions for homelessness and unemployment;
- 6- encouragement for the establishment of NGOs;
- 7- a broader acknowledgment of the freedom of expression;
- 8- the release of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience.

As a precaution, on the 18th of February, 2011, the Royal Diwan (the primary executive office of the King) announced a number of grants by the King, costing US\$ 130 billion including:

- 1- a salary increase for workers in the public sector;
- 2- a one-off payment equivalent to two months' salary to all governmental, civilian and military employees;
- 3- a payment for two months of a financial reward to all students in public educational institutions for two months;
- 4- the establishment of monthly payments to the unemployed;
- 5- the establishment of a minimum wage for Saudi workers in the public sector;
- 6- the creation of 60,000 new military jobs in the Ministry of Interior Affairs;
- 7- the construction of 500 thousand new housing units around the Kingdom;
- 8- an increase in the upper limit for housing loans to US\$ 133,000.¹⁵

As a result, Saudi society started to regain its self-confidence. This carrot and stick approach—tough with one hand, generous with the other—led to the protests being contained. In addition, the system played on religious and sectarian divisions, igniting fears of external threats. The creation of 60,000 new security-related jobs in the Ministry of Interior Affairs stood out from the package of measures. This huge number sparked concern among Saudis about the growth of the security services and the accompanying cost—money which could have gone to more productive jobs or social development.

3. Saudi Arabia's Impact on the Arab Spring:

Democracy as a ruling system, when practiced fully and effectively, is the exact opposite of a traditional monarchy such as that found in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia shared an extremely negative perspective of the Arab Spring. Two crucially entangled aspects determined their attitude: First, the notion of change, especially revolutionary change; as they are stable fixed monarchies in which terms such as reform, change and revolution are not well received. Secondly, both regimes have aggressive attitudes toward Political Islamist movements, The Muslim Brotherhood in particular, which initially appeared to be the upcoming regimes in all of the Arab Spring countries."¹⁶ Even the fact that the newly elected President of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, chose Saudi Arabia for his first overseas visit, did little to console the Saudi Monarchy.

15 Khaliq Abdullah, A., 2012. *A Study: The Reflections of the Arab Spring on the GCC States*. Doha: Arabic Center for Research and Policy Studies. p.13.

16 Othman, T., 2014. *Revolutions and Counter-Revolutions: Transfers in the Regional Arabic System*. Doha: Al Jazeera Studies Center. p.4.

The reality of a new political Islamic leadership in an Arab country set an example of a moderate Sunni Islamic government, in contrast to the rigid Salafist regime in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi leadership worried that this competing image would embolden Saudi citizens to provoke social chaos that, if it spread, could create serious social conflict and threaten the very structure of Saudi's society.

Because of such worries, Saudi Arabia supported UAE's violent policy toward human rights activists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the case of the so-called "secret cell" attached to the Muslim Brotherhood, the Supreme Federal Court of the State Security District in the UAE sentenced 30 people to prison.¹⁷ In a separate case, seven Emiratis were stripped of their citizenship as a result of their involvement in "actions threatening the national security of the UAE through suspicious relations and ties to suspicious regional and international figures and organizations."¹⁸ The UAE's violent reaction escalated, in particular after the distribution of the "Amendment Petition", calling on the Emirate's ruler to show a positive response toward regional and international changes. The petition presented citizens' demands for thorough constitutional amendments paving the way to a fully democratic parliamentary system, based on a parliament fully and freely elected by all Emirati citizens.¹⁹

The struggle continued up to the beginning of March 2014, when the Saudi government listed the Muslim Brotherhood as "a terrorist group" along with other groups and organizations. The Kingdom threatened punishment to anyone found to be a member of the group, to be providing any moral or material support to it, or to be sympathetic toward it.²⁰

The Saudi Kingdom sought to undermine the nascent Islamist upsurge and went as far as supporting the Egyptian General, Abdul Fattah Al Sisi, in taking over the Presidency in Egypt in a coup. Moreover, Gulf States—especially the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—provided billions of dollars as aid to strengthen the new Egyptian regime, the best example of which was the 'Egypt Economic Development Conference' in Sharma Al-Sheikh which pledged US\$12 billion of aid: US\$4 billion each from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.²¹

The US and Saudi Arabia had different approaches to the Arab Spring. For example, the Obama administration gave up on its Egyptian ally, Mubarak, and accepted the results of the Egyptian Elections, which brought the Muslim Brotherhood to the Presidency. The US also adopted a different stance in relation to the protests in Bahrain. In addition, the Americans have been reluctant to support the Syrian Revolution, the only revolution approved of and supported by the Saudi Kingdom (because of its direct impact on the Saudi-Iranian dispute and the struggle for power in the region). Therefore, "the principle cause of still air in the American-Saudi relations is the relapse of Saudi Arabia's trust in the feasibility of a complete reliance on US military guardianship."²²

In Bahrain, protesters calling for state reform and a transfer to a constitutional monarchy, belonged mostly to the small Kingdom's Shia majority. The possibility of the emergence of a

17Available at: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/01/19/egyptian-uae-trial>

18Available at: <http://www.alriyadh.com/783759>

19Available at: <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/uaepetition71/>

20Available at: <http://aljazeera.net/news/pages/3d992d9a-76de-41d5-b811-366c2b7bf72d>

21Available at: http://www.bbc.com/arabic/business/2015/03/150313_egypt_economic_conference

22Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. 2014. *Situation Assessment: Obama's Visit to Saudi Arabia and its Results*. Doha. p.1.

genuine democracy in the midst of the Gulf's traditional monarchies was a concern to the Saudis, compounded by fears that their interests and authority in Bahrain might be further jeopardized by possible intervention in the Gulf region by Iran on the pretext of protecting the Shia majority in Bahrain. This led to "the interference of over a thousand Saudi militants from (the Al-Jazeera Shield Forces) to regain security and discipline in favor of the Royal Family in Bahrain."²³

The Syrian Revolution was of crucial concern for the Saudi Kingdom, and the Saudis have shown great enthusiasm for attempts to influence the situation in Syria. Saudi Arabia wants to detach Syria from the Iranian axis, and prevent Iran from making Syria a center of Iranian authority in the region. In addition, Saudis see a need to re-establish order and security in the region to confront the expansion of the ISIS organization.

Accordingly, the Saudis announced an initiative in December 2015 to invite over 100 Syrian opposition representatives and activists to the Saudi Capital, Riyadh, to discuss the formation of a united approach to peace negotiations. Although the initiative was not strongly promoted after the event, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey continued to give resolute supported the demands made by the Syrian opposition, including the removal of Al-Assad and ongoing support and aid to moderate revolutionary factions fighting the Assad regime.²⁴

By contrast, the result of the Libyan revolution that led to the downfall of the Gadhafi regime, was just the start of Saudi efforts to undermine the emerging leadership of moderate Islamic figures. The Saudis thus provided full support to the anti-Islamist front until the situation in Libya deteriorated into a split in the post-revolution political structures between the General National Congress in Tripoli and the Libyan House of Representatives in Tobruk. The Tobruk Front, led by the retired Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, received full support from Saudi Arabia and others. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*, Haftar said that he "receives military aid from four Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Algeria."²⁵

In the case of the revolution in Yemen, in preference to military intervention, the Saudis favored a political solution with the least number of casualties. Thus, the GCC States set forth an initiative on 3 April 2011 for a political agreement which they hoped would dampen the ardor of the revolutionary youth with a minimum of consequences. Saudi Arabia decided to abandon its strategic ally in Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, in exchange for maintaining Yemen as a Saudi area of power and authority. These efforts resulted new presidential elections in February 2012. But the process was quickly jeopardized by Houthi rebels protesting against the new Yemeni President, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. The political situation deteriorated and Houthi rebels invaded the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. Four months later, in January 2015, they announced their take-over of the State. The Saudi Kingdom has, however, made clear it will stand firm against the threat of losing its hold over a country that has been a Saudi zone of power for many years.²⁶

23Available at: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/14/141506.html>

24Available at: http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/12/151209_syria_opposition_saudi

25Available at: http://www.corriere.it/esteri/14_novembre_28/combatto-terrorismo-anche-voi-se-vince-libia-arriva-italia-194b88bo-76c9-11e4-90d4-0eff89180b47.shtml

26Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/yemen/b045-yemen-at-war.aspx>

The reign of the Saudi King, Suleiman Bin Abdul-Aziz, who came to the throne on 23 January 2015, has not produced any actual domestic political reform, but has seen bold changes in the leadership and structure of State. Under this new regime, Saudi Arabia has shown its determination to confront Iranian influence in Yemen and Syria despite the dismal achievements of Al-Hazem (Firm) Operation that has been limited to air strikes since 26 March 2015.

Conclusion:

The ruling monarchy in Saudi Arabia has shown its ability to avoid the challenges set by the Arab Spring uprisings. It has done this by adopting a ‘carrot and stick’ approach to internal unrest rather than actually tackling corruption or achieving political reforms. At the same time, a range of other factors have bolstered the stability of the regime: high levels of income; rich oil revenues; the King’s Grants; and the security agencies’ ability to overpower an opposition enfeebled by a lack of activists and low levels of political participation and experience. Significant, also, is the culture of Wahhabism which has “submission and allegiance to the King” deeply rooted in Saudi society and fear among citizens about external threats and the Sunni–Shia divisions.

However, Saudi Arabia continues to face external challenges and needs, as it sees it, to maintain its centers of power and authority in Yemen and Syria. In this respect, and without clarifying the exact meaning of terrorism, the ‘Islamic Coalition against Terrorism’ was founded on the 15th of December, 2015 by Saudi Arabia and others, bringing together countries involved in the fight against terrorism.

There is a common conviction among the GCC States that they share the same future and destiny, and that change in any of the Gulf countries affects the others as they have common political, economic, social and cultural characteristics. Thus, the Saudis attach significant importance to preventing—and, if necessary, intervening to stop—attempts to bring changes to the region. With a mixture of oppression and lavish handouts of money, the GCC have succeeded in shoring up their internal stability during the past five years. Nevertheless, they still face a challenge posed by social and political issues that, if not addressed, could bring their citizens back onto the streets to demand change. Programs of political and juridical reforms, and the consolidation of civil rights and freedoms, based on citizenship, will be needed to keep the public happy and preserve genuine stability.