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Middle East Brief

Repression and Protest in Saudi Arabia

Pascal Menoret

A few months after 9/11, a Saudi prince working in government declared during an interview: “We, who studied in the West, are of course in favor of democracy. As a matter of fact, we are the only true democrats in this country. But if we give people the right to vote, who do you think they’ll elect? The Islamists. It is not that we don’t want to introduce democracy in Arabia—but would it be reasonable?”¹ Underlying this position is the assumption that Islamists are enemies of democracy, even if they use democratic means to come to power. Perhaps unwittingly, however, the prince was also acknowledging the Islamists’ legitimacy, as well as the unpopularity of the royal family. The fear of Islamists disrupting Saudi politics has prompted very high levels of repression since the 1979 Iranian revolution and the occupation of the Mecca Grand Mosque by an armed Salafi group.² In the past decades, dozens of thousands have been jailed and thousands killed in the name of regime continuity.³ Yet there are a number of social movements in Saudi Arabia that, partly inspired by Islamism in its various forms, have attempted to organize and protest in this highly repressive environment.

This Brief focuses on six such movements: the Sunni Islamist movement, the Association for Political and Civil Rights, the Shiite Islamist movement, the anti-corruption movement, the anti-repression movement, and the labor movement. These movements do not have much in the way of institutional

resources, as political parties were banned in 1932 and trade unions in 1947; demonstrations and strikes were outlawed in 1956; and since 2014, collective action has been identified with terrorism and cracked down upon accordingly. Yet these movements, often grounded in Islamism, put bodies on the street and voters in voting booths to challenge specific state policies. They struggle to bring about political reforms, to protest abuses of power, to call for a constitutional monarchy, and to demand respect for human rights. This Brief explains why some mobilizations were successful while others failed, and assesses the contribution of these movements to the future of Saudi politics.

Six Social Movements

The Sunni Islamist Movement, or “Islamic Awakening”

The Islamic Awakening or Sahwa (*al-sahwa al-islamiyya*) is one of the oldest social movements in Saudi Arabia. It is the Saudi expression of transnational networks of Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Indian, and Yemeni as well as Saudi activists with diverse political backgrounds, some of whom immigrated to Saudi Arabia from the 1950s onwards. The Al Saud royal family historically welcomed exiled Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brothers but banned the creation of an official Saudi Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Muslim Brothers are therefore fragmented into four informal groups: two in the central region of the country, one in the Eastern Province, and one in the Hejaz. From the 1970s on, the Muslim Brothers were active in the Saudi educational system and the media. They promoted an Islamic culture that was more inclusive and more modern than official Saudi religious teachings. They also criticized the influence exerted by foreign experts in state institutions.

Salafi groups emerged along with Muslim Brotherhood groups as part of the Sahwa in the 1960s and 1970s. Initially intent on reinterpreting the very religious texts from which the state derives legitimacy, they too fragmented into several groups. Their interpretations of dogma range from quietist to revolutionary. Some Salafis support the state and its religious politics; some criticize the official religious institutions; some call for political reforms; and some issue calls to arms against the state and its Western backers. What unites Salafis is their tendency to reject the imperative of organized political action, calling instead on individuals to change themselves first and become born-again Muslims. The Muslim Brothers, by contrast, believe in political organization, and in a bottom-up effort to reform society and the state. The Sahwa is composed of both Muslim Brothers and Salafis.

How can Islamists oppose a state that itself derives some legitimacy from its vocal embrace of a strict Sunni orthodoxy? Both Salafis and Muslim Brothers argue that the Al Saud have abused religion by turning it into a tool of power. Against this subjection of religion to politics, they wish to use the capacity of religious networks to serve as potential ramparts against authoritarianism. Islamists believe that mobilizing religious networks in such a fashion would contrast the law of God to the ways of the Al Saud, including the regime’s cooperation with the United States and Europe, which they see as an attempt to recolonize the Middle East.⁴

Sahwa activists participated in the protest movement that emerged during the 1990-1991 Gulf War, as Saudi Arabia served as a launching ground for Western armies. Saudi Islamists called for the severing of military ties with the United

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States and Europe, as well as for the independence of the judiciary, respect for human rights, freedom of expression, a ban on torture, a stronger welfare state, and an end to corruption.⁵ In response, the Al Saud strengthened their power through the adoption of a Fundamental Law in 1992, and repressed the Islamist movement after 1993. After their release from prison in the late 1990s, Sahwa activists were allowed to take part in a politics of very incremental reforms. They again called for political change during the short-lived “Saudi Spring” of 2003, when they supported a constitutional monarchy and, again, advocated respect for human rights.⁶ Anti-Western bombings in 2000–2005 prompted massive arrests, and repression put a lid on this reform project.

Islamist candidates nonetheless managed to win the 2005 municipal elections (the first to be held since the early 1960s) in the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Mecca, Taef, and Tabuk.⁷ They managed to overcome draconian electoral rules, which banned coalitions of candidates and platforms explicitly based on religion. In response, Islamists—including Salafis, who won several seats in Dammam and Jeddah—formed underground alliances and used existing activist networks. These elections did not signal any political opening, however. Voters elected only half the members of municipal councils (the other half being appointed by the government), and those councils are only toothless advisory bodies. Low turnout (around 11 percent in Riyadh) revealed a widespread lack of interest in what was seen as meaningless elections. The victory of the Islamists came as a surprise, however, and was never officially acknowledged by the state.⁸ In subsequent elections, the state modified the electoral code to prevent another Islamist victory, while intensifying the repression of organized political action.

In 2011, on the eve of the Arab uprisings, Sahwa activists published several petitions to King Abdullah, including “Toward a State of Rights and Institutions,” which argued for elections, and the more Salafi-oriented “Call for Reform.” They also supported deposed Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi.⁹ In February 2011, several Salafi activists created the Umma Party (*hizb al-umma*) despite the ban on all political parties, and called for elections and the separation of powers. The founding members were all arrested, and once again, repression silenced the reformists.¹⁰

The Association for Political and Civil Rights, or “HASM”
The most important political movement that emerged from Sunni Islamism is the Association for Political and Civil Rights (*jam'iyya al-huquq al-siyasiyya wa-l-madaniyya*), or HASM (an acronym which means “determination”). Created in 2009 by senior Sahwa activists, human rights

advocates, and civil society activists, HASM “reinvented Islamism as civil society activism” and outlined “a vision for political reform.”¹¹ The movement demanded an end to repression, defended the rights of all political prisoners, and called for the creation of a constitutional monarchy.

HASM activists have made nonviolent direct action the core of their strategy. According to Islamist activist Abdullah al-Hamid, the “struggle by words” (*jihad al-kalima*), or “peaceful struggle” (*jihad selmi*), should be the primary means of opposing state injustice. HASM members criticize both the tradition of private advice to the ruler (*nasiha*), advocated by the religious establishment, and the crackdown on political activism, which religious figures condoned. To them, state repression and the ban on peaceful protest are the main factors behind the escalation of political violence in 2003–4, when al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched a series of attacks against Western military and security experts inside Saudi Arabia.

The public trials of HASM activists in 2011–12 became opportunities for collective action and advocacy, as activists used them as a platform to criticize repression and voice their opinions on political reform. All the movement’s founders received long prison sentences from the Riyadh Specialized Criminal Court, created in 2008 to adjudicate terrorism cases. The Court dissolved HASM in 2013.¹²

The Shiite Islamist Movement

A majority of the country’s Shiites live in the oil-rich Eastern Province. Even though Saudi state elites often portray Shiite Islamism as an Iranian proxy, the movement actually originated in the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala in the 1950s and 1960s and in Kuwait in the 1970s. Saudi Shiite Islamists are linked to the transnational Shirazi movement; its figurehead is Iraqi cleric Mohamed al-Shirazi, who spent the last thirty years of his life in Lebanon, Kuwait, and Iran. The Saudi Shirazis protested against repression and marginalization in 1979 and created the Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (*munazhzhama al-thawra al-islamiyya fi-l-jazira al-'arabiyya*), which was renamed the “Saudi Reformist Movement” (*al-haraka al-islamiyya fi-l-sa'udiyya*) in 1991 and reached a rapprochement with both the Sahwa and the royal family. The only Shiite Islamist group with any link to Tehran is the much smaller Saudi Hezbollah (*hizb allah al-hijaz*). Created in 1987, it carried out violent operations inside Saudi Arabia in the late 1980s and mid-1990s.¹³

Activists of the Saudi Reformist Movement signed the nationwide calls for political reform during the 2003 “Saudi Spring” referred to above, and published their own

petition, “Partners in the Nation,” which called for official recognition of Shiite Islamic jurisprudence, for equality of all citizens, and for a better representation of Shiites in the administration and the courts. During the 2005 municipal elections, Shiite Islamists gained a majority of elected seats in the city of Qatif and half the elected seats in the city of Hofuf.¹⁴

Protests in the Eastern Province started in 2006, in reaction to Israel’s Lebanon War and in support of Hezbollah; several dozen protesters were arrested. In 2009, clashes between Shiite and Sunni pilgrims in Medina prompted large demonstrations in the Eastern Province. During the Bahrain uprising of 2011, Saudi Shiites took to the streets in solidarity with protesters in the neighboring nation. A Shirazi dissident, Nimr al-Nimr, led several protests in the town of ‘Awwamiyya, which extended to Qatif, Safwa, and Hofuf. Street protests and police repression continued through 2014, with dozens of activists shot in the streets or executed, including Nimr al-Nimr, executed in early 2016.¹⁵ Between 2011 and 2014, the uprising in the Eastern Province was the most tangible manifestation of a Saudi version of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The Anti-Corruption Movement

The anti-corruption movement coalesced during and after intense floods that hit the port city of Jeddah in 2009, 2011, and 2015. On November 25, 2009 (“Black Wednesday”), strong rains provoked unprecedented floods that swept the city, killing between one hundred and four hundred residents and destroying housing and infrastructure, especially in low-income areas. Local activists and residents organized to provide aid to the affected areas, since the region’s civil defense workers and firefighters were mobilized for the pilgrimage to Mecca. In Jeddah, pro-Palestinian activist networks,¹⁶ architectural conservation activists, and Sunni Islamists sustained the mobilization for flood victims.

The scope of the disaster prompted a collective search for answers among residents of Jeddah. Activists soon pointed the finger at the municipality, which they accused of haphazardly granting building permits and of failing to update stormwater systems. They argued that the floods were a manmade natural disaster. Because of municipal corruption, they said, floodplains developed, drainage channels were not maintained, and sewers served only 8 percent of the city. On November 28, 2009, lawyer and human rights activist Waleed Abu al-Khair, along with families of victims, sued the city of Jeddah.¹⁷ Collective outrage prompted King Abdullah to create a commission of inquiry, and dozens of municipal officials were sentenced to jail.¹⁸

The Anti-Repression Movement

After 9/11, Riyadh collaborated in the U.S.-led War on Terror, notably by inviting FBI agents to Saudi Arabia to collect evidence and participate in interrogations of terror suspects.¹⁹ After al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched a campaign of anti-Western bombings in 2000–2005, thousands were “disappeared” by the security services. As of 2010 there were anywhere between twelve thousand and thirty thousand political prisoners in the country.²⁰ Torture, physical punishments, rape, and forced confessions were—and still are—common.²¹ Repression and state violence raised general awareness of political conditions and triggered the mobilization of families of prisoners, a movement that was fueled by repression rather than slowed down by it. The more prisoners there were, the more family members became potential activists.

The movement was launched in October 2003 when a large demonstration circled the site of the first Riyadh Human Rights Conference, which was organized, ironically, by the Interior Ministry. Relatives of political prisoners held regular demonstrations and sit-ins in Riyadh’s mosques, in front of the Interior Ministry, and in several cities, especially in the central region, where “the Advocates” (*al-munasirun*) held dozens of protests and regularly confronted the police. Protests continued through the 2011 Arab uprisings. Early in 2011 for instance, dozens of women marched to the Interior Ministry to demand fair trials for their relatives. They chanted, among other slogans, “Release the innocents,” and “Where are our children?”²²

The Al Saud stepped up repression after the Arab uprisings. A 2014 royal decree defined terrorism as “any action . . . aimed at harming public order, or disturbing the security of society or the continuity of the state, . . . or insulting the reputation and standing of the state.”²³ The same year, an Interior Ministry regulation specified as constituting terrorism “propagating atheism” and “doubting the principles of Islam on which this country is based” (Article 1); “swearing allegiance to any political party, organization, movement, group, or individual” (Article 2); “supporting or belonging to or sympathizing with or advertising or meeting with organizations, groups, movements, gatherings, or political parties,” including on social media (Article 3); “calling for or participating in or advertising or inciting sit-ins, demonstrations, meetings, or communiqués” (Article 8); and “attending conferences, reunions, or meetings . . . that would sow . . . discord in society” (Article 9).²⁴ According to these broad definitions, any form of organized action, even peaceful, is labeled as terrorism, and cracked down upon. The Muslim Brotherhood itself is labeled as a terror organization.²⁵

The Labor Movement

Trade unions were prohibited in Saudi Arabia in 1947 and strikes were banned in 1956, after the U.S. oil company Aramco was paralyzed by successive labor actions in 1945, 1953, and 1956. Despite this longstanding crackdown, labor unrest has recently revived on account of the country's worsening social situation and declining oil prices, especially among unqualified workers and university graduates. Since the late 2000s, jobless graduates, school and hospital employees, utility company workers, and even employees of the Mecca Grand Mosque have staged collective actions and strikes to protest unemployment, low wages, unpaid wages, or the privatization of state companies.²⁶

Public sector employees, mostly Saudis but sometimes foreigners, have been followed by employees in the private sector. Economic restructuring and privatization created more opportunities for labor protest, as private businesses are more sensitive than state companies to the loss of workdays and to anything that could threaten the bottom line. Employees of the Etihad Etisalat private phone operator, for example, went on strike in 2011 to protest stagnating wages. The movement spread over several regions and forced the company to reevaluate wages.²⁷

Workers in the construction sector, which hires mostly foreign migrants, have also started protesting. Employees of the Saudi Binladen group, one of the leading construction companies in the country, have repeatedly gone on strike since the late 2000s to protest low wages, delayed wages, and mass terminations. Thousands of Binladen workers have staged protests and strikes in 2016.²⁸

Successes and Failures

Four social movements—the Sunni and Shiite reform movements, the anti-corruption movement, and the labor movement—have succeeded in inducing change in Saudi Arabia over the past ten years, albeit on a small scale. They have won the 2005 municipal elections in several cities, brought corrupt state employees to court, and compelled institutions and businesses to consider the demands of their workers.

Islamists threw themselves in the 2005 electoral battle, in spite of the crackdown on Islamist movements and notwithstanding the limited importance of the municipal councils. Their victory was evidence of their mobilization potential, and of the citizenry's relative disaffection both with the royal family and with state elites. It also showed that, rather than boycotting imperfect elections, Islamists embraced electoral procedures while working around

complex voting rules. The prince quoted at the beginning of this Brief was both right and wrong: Elections were convened and Islamists won, but those elections showed that the Al Saud and the state-supported elites were not the only ones willing to engage in electoral politics. The Islamists' participation in the elections and their long-standing support for a constitutional monarchy are evidence that they believe in electoral politics as a legitimate tool for reform.

The state did not acknowledge that the victors were Islamists: Official media claimed that the elections were merely technical, not political, and that the elected council members were technocrats without an organized following.²⁹ State officials postponed the first meetings of the municipal councils for more than a year, thereby underscoring their insignificance. As a result, turnout, which was low in 2005, was reportedly lower in both the 2011 and 2015 elections. Meanwhile, the state increased its crackdown on organized political action, which it had identified with terrorism since 2014.

The anti-corruption movement led to a public investigation into the causes of the Jeddah floods and to the conviction of some state officials. Its success was partial, since major decision-makers—including Al Saud princes—were not indicted. The scandal triggered by the high casualty figures does not alone explain the outcomes of the mobilization, however. Municipal infrastructure and real estate development, at stake during the floods, are two of the main channels of oil rent distribution into the economy. Land and infrastructure are crucial to the Saudi system of government. Donated by princes in exchange for allegiance, land is the basis for the enrichment of a large chunk of the business community. Developers, realtors, and homeowners all benefit from free public loans and are linked to the state by way of debt as well as by their financial hopes. (Private mortgages were not introduced until 2012.³⁰)

Moreover, by developing cities and turning them into vast suburbs, the state has not only provided the business community with investment opportunities, but has also made mobilization and protest harder because of population dispersal. Once gathered in dense settlements, Saudis are now atomized in individual houses strewn all over a huge landscape of freeways, cloverleaf interchanges, and desolate suburbs. Land is quintessentially political: It is at the heart of Al Saud's system of power, which King Abdullah's intervention in Jeddah was aimed at saving.

Labor successes in Saudi Arabia have been real but extremely limited. Strikes that have forced companies to negotiations are rare, and create a perilous situation for

workers. The ban on trade unions and the crackdown on collective action, including strikes and demonstrations, make low-wage workers, who are overwhelmingly South Asian and Arab immigrants, a particularly vulnerable constituency.

The main failure of Saudi protest movements stems from their inability to join forces across geographical and political boundaries. Sunni Islamist groups are fragmented, and so are Shiite Islamist groups. Anti-repression and anti-corruption movements are often locally based. In general, Saudi protest movements are ill-equipped to oppose state repression. The absence of any nationwide movement in 2011, during the uprisings that brought an end to the rule of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen is evidence of this fragmentation. There surely were protests in 2011: Hundreds of Saudis marched against corruption and demanded transparency. For several days in January 2011, protests were held in front of municipal buildings and key ministries; a few self-immolations occurred between 2011 and 2013 in response to the suicide of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi, which marked the beginning of the Tunisian revolution. The major demonstrations happened in the Shiite areas of the Eastern Province. But these protests did not coalesce into a nationwide uprising. Any possibility of a general mobilization was crushed by massive police presence in the capital and the main cities, by the detention of many activists (including the members of HASM and dozens of Shiite activists), and by the escalation of violence between Shiites and security forces in the Eastern Province.³¹

The Future of Saudi Politics

Saudi authoritarianism is particularly unsophisticated, and comprises a ban on political action, frequent resort to police violence, opacity, and disinformation. There are historical reasons for this situation. The Al Saud have consolidated their grip on power, against popular protest and unrest, with the aid of the U.S. oil company Aramco and of international security cooperation. In the past decades, the Saudi state has benefited from Jordanian, Egyptian, French, British, and U.S. input in the design of a brutal repression machine. Widespread repression does not mean that members of the Islamist elite have not, at times, been integrated into the education, media, and Islamic affairs ministries. But whenever Islamists speak up against authoritarianism and criticize the U.S.-Saudi alliance, the Al Saud resort to a more brutal approach.

The repression of the 1990s arguably contributed to the radicalization of a fringe of Islamists, to the creation of al-Qaeda, and to an escalation of violence in the region and in the world. The Saudi war on terror was accompanied in the 2000s by limited reforms, including the introduction of municipal elections. But these controlled openings did not fundamentally change the formula of power. And the 2014 terror laws extended the definition of terrorism to encompass peaceful protest, political speech, and organized action. The Saudi state now has full power to crush any protest or criticism, no matter how peaceful or constructive it may be.

The arrival of King Salman to power in early 2015 does not bode well for the future of Saudi politics, which seems bleaker than ever. His predecessor, King Abdullah, was behind the very limited openings of the 2000s (he was also the main architect of the Saudi war on terror); unlike him, King Salman has remained silent about political reforms. The Saudi Vision 2030 he introduced in 2016 prescribes austerity, economic diversification, and privatization of public services. It also promises more jobs and more entertainment. In the absence of political reforms and as state spending drops, police repression will remain the alpha and omega of the Saudi political system. The Al Saud can less than ever claim to be “the only true democrats in this country.”

The Saudi elites continue to fear the possibility of protest. The labor movement is now particularly active, and the planned privatizations and ongoing austerity policies may trigger more unrest in the future. As for Sunni and Shiite Islamism and the anti-corruption and anti-repression movements, they seem now to be held in check by the ongoing repression and by the possibility, now inscribed in the law, of more state violence. Their capacity for mobilization remains intact, however, and these movements are likely to reconstitute if political conditions become more favorable, or if the worsening social and economic situation triggers new protests.

Endnotes

- 1 Field note, Riyadh, June 2002.
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 - 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 40–42.
 - 11 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
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 - 13 Toby Matthiesen, *The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 133–134.
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 - 16 Saudi Islamists and other activists have repeatedly organized around a pro-Palestinian agenda, for example during the second Intifada in the early 2000s, to call for a boycott of Israeli and U.S. products, or to protest the Israel’s 2006 Lebanon War.
 - 17 Naill Momani and Ayman Fadil, “Changing Public Policy due to Saudi City of Jeddah Flood Disaster,” *Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2010), pp. 425, 427–28.
 - 18 Khalid al-Sibyani, “21 Jailed in Jeddah Floods Case,” *Arab News*, March 7, 2013, and “118 Years for Accused in Jeddah Flood Disaster,” *Arab News*, December 1, 2014.
 - 19 Testimony of Thomas J. Harrington, deputy assistant director of the FBI’s Counterterrorism Division, before the House Committee on International Relations, Washington, DC, March 24, 2004.
 - 20 Alsharif, “Detainees Disappear into Black Holes of Saudi Jails.”
 - 21 One can find an exposé in English of Saudi torture methods in the account written by a British-Canadian citizen arrested on a fake accusation of terrorism in 2000. See William Sampson, *Confessions of an Innocent Man: Torture and Survival in a Saudi Prison* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005).
 - 22 Al-Rasheed, *Muted Modernists*, p. 47.
 - 23 “Royal Decree about Crimes of Terrorism and Their Financing,” decree m/16, 24/2/1435 AH (December 27, 2013), published on 30/3/1435 AH (January 31, 2014), article one [in Arabic].
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