



Reading Riyadh

SAUDI ARABIA'S RECENT initiative to transform the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council into a more binding "union" has now been essentially shelved until the end of the year. At the very least, however, it has demonstrated Riyadh's ongoing concern over the multiple danger zones surrounding it.

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, which toppled long-ruling allies of Saudi Arabia, deeply disturbed its leadership. Indeed, throughout the tumultuous 18 months of regional unrest, Saudi Arabia has frequently been said to be leading a counter-revolution. This was essentially true in Bahrain, where a Saudi-led GCC intervention to save the beleaguered Sunni monarchy brought an end to the pro-democracy protest movement. However, when it came to Libya, and Syria, the Saudis weighed in on the side of regime change, while in Yemen, Riyadh shepherded the replacement of President Ali Abdallah Salah.

Saudi actions and policies have been underpinned by two principles: an overriding concern with preventing the regional tsunami of protests from sweeping across the kingdom; and the geopolitical, ideological and sectarian need to counter Iran's regional ambitions. An additional threat is posed by the activities of al-Qaeda's Arabian peninsula branch, now operating assertively in neighboring Yemen. Given the extended absence of Egypt from regional politics, the Saudis have had little choice but to carve out a leadership role.

Domestically, Saudi Arabia resembles other Arab societies that have experienced major unrest in at least one important way: it has a large youth bulge (66 percent of its 19 million citizens are under the age of 30), with corresponding disproportionately high rates of unemployment (27 percent between the ages of 22-29) and high levels of frustrations among those not connected to wealthy elites. Moreover, Saudi youth, both men and women, are, like their counterparts elsewhere, techno-savvy, and make wide use of social media to bypass traditional authoritarian structures and challenge conventional norms and institutions.



Of course, Saudi Arabia, which is now producing nearly 10 million barrels a day at \$120 a barrel, is awash in wealth. This has enabled 88-year old King Abdullah to accompany a complete ban on protests with a \$130 billion plan to create jobs, build

intervened there. Without it, the Saudis believed that a serious spillover in the adjoining Eastern Province would only be a matter of time. It was that same concern with Iran which underpinned its Gulf union scheme. Iran's subversive hand is also deemed present in the Houthi Shiite rebellion in Yemen's northern province adjacent to the Saudi-Yemeni border.

Finally, there is Syria. The Syrian-Iranian alliance, now more than three decades old, has long disturbed the Saudis. The fall of the Assad regime in favor of a Sunni-led state and the resulting impact on Lebanon's internal balance of forces would constitute a significant strategic blow to Iran. But while supporting the arming of the Syrian opposition, the Saudis are not capable of doing the heavy lifting themselves, and are disappointed with both the UN efforts and Turkey's reluctance to do more to help the fractured Syrian opposition.

Riyadh must also be concerned that a post-Assad Syria will be anything but stable, and could deteriorate into chaos with an al-Qaeda component, as happened in Iraq. Similarly, the Saudis are strongly supportive of tough US-led sanctions on Iran, while fearing the untold effects of any American and/or Israeli military strikes. ●

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subsidized housing, and pay generous and lengthy unemployment payments while offering retraining to those on the dole. However, the goal of achieving a 30 percent Saudization of the work force remains far from being realized. Nearly nine million foreigners do the bulk of the country's manual labor.

The main focus of unrest has been the Eastern Province, among Saudi Arabia's alienated Shiite minority. Not surprisingly, Riyadh sees the hand of Shiite Iran at work – part of its efforts to destabilize the Gulf monarchies and the Sunni Arab world in general. Indeed, given Iran's historical claim to Bahrain, and the demands by Bahrain's Shiite majority for genuine democratization, it was hardly surprising that the Saudis

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