

Saudi Arabia's Perfect Storm of Domestic Challenges

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Brief Analysis

Amid uncertain leadership and growing domestic criticism in Saudi Arabia, Washington should press Riyadh to tolerate greater political participation, accelerate the succession discussion, and prevent Iran from exploiting the situation.

On March 25, Saudi newspapers reported that encrypted social media messaging services such as Skype, Viber, and WhatsApp will be blocked in the kingdom unless the government is permitted to monitor them. The details of Riyadh's demand are unclear, but the companies involved were apparently given a week to respond. The move suggests that Saudi authorities are increasingly concerned about the population's use of the internet to circumvent the lack of political freedoms and undermine traditional societal reticence against questioning the kingdom's hierarchical structure. Stories criticizing the government -- which not so long ago would have circulated by word of mouth, if at all -- are now passed on almost instantly to a huge and seemingly avid domestic readership. These and other tensions at home and abroad could pose major problems for the kingdom's aging leaders if left unchecked.

CRITICISM

Despite Saudi Arabia's wealth and generous subsidies, tremendous economic disparities persist among the people. Since the eruption of protests throughout the Arab world in 2011, the government has increased subsidies and state salaries to dampen domestic discontent, but much resentment remains. At one extreme, parts of the majority Sunni population are suspected of al-Qaeda sympathies; at the other is a simmering revolt by minority Shiites, traditionally regarded by hardline Sunnis as second-class citizens and perhaps not even proper Muslims. Earlier this month, authorities announced the arrest of sixteen Shiites, accusing them of gathering information about important installations in the kingdom "for another country," a phrase assumed to mean Iran.

On March 15, influential Saudi cleric Sheikh Salman al-Awdah posted an open letter on his Facebook and Twitter

pages, where he reportedly has 2.4 million followers, warning the royal family about its oppression and corruption. The letter was apparently prompted by an incident the previous week, when two outspoken political activists were sentenced to prison after a seven-month trial for spreading "false" criticism of the government via social media. Despite a blackout on the story by the national media, the activists themselves tweeted details of the case. Meanwhile, the trial of another activist resumed last week, this time on charges of insulting the judiciary, talking to foreign media, and contacting international human rights watchdogs.

Awdah, who has previously been detained for criticizing the government, is considered a religious moderate compared to the Saudi clerical establishment, which for years has slavishly supported the House of Saud. His open letter also accused the royal family of being in denial, "ignoring the symbolism" of Saudis "burning down pictures of officials." This was an apparent reference to an incident last month, when Sunnis protesting the detention of their family members for security reasons burned photographs of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the interior minister.

CORRUPTION

For decades, members of the House of Saud have been subject to complaints about taking pecuniary advantage of their royal status and displaying high-handed behavior. The latest episode involves litigation in Britain -- this month, a London court rejected a claim of royal immunity by two prominent Saudis, Prince Mishal bin Abdulaziz (a half-brother of King Abdullah and head of the kingdom's Allegiance Council, the body that could help determine the next king) and his son Abdulaziz.

At the center of the legal wrangling is a commercial dispute between the princes and a former business partner, a Jordanian who claims that Abdulaziz urged Saudi authorities to make him the subject of an Interpol "red notice," an international arrest-and-extradition request. Many details of the case are still being withheld pending the outcome of an appeal; according to last week's forty-page judgment, the defense claimed that Abdulaziz and an associate risk "death and reprisals" if the specifics go public.

Even so, the British judge was highly critical of the Saudi royal family. The judgment noted that many of the kingdom's "5,000 princes" are given diplomatic passports and are allowed to avoid anything approaching normal immigration procedures upon arrival in Britain; the Saudi embassy collects their passports and deals with the British authorities, later returning the documents to the visiting royals at their homes or hotels. The judge also refuted part of a witness statement by the Saudi ambassador in London, Prince Muhammad bin Nawaf bin Abdulaziz, a nephew of King Abdullah. In response to Muhammad's claim that Prince Mishal was second in line to the throne by birthright, the judge noted "now shown to be inaccurate." Although Mishal is older than King Abdullah's nominated successor, Crown Prince Salman (age 77), he is not considered a potential king because his mother was an Armenian concubine rather than an Arab wife of Ibn Saud, the kingdom's founder.

POOR SERVICES

In the two years since uprisings swept the region, the Saudi government has announced an estimated \$110 billion for social programs and subsidies, though it is not clear how much of the money has actually been spent. Even in major towns and cities, services are often inadequate.

A March 27 report in the *Arab News*, an English-language paper published in Jeddah, the kingdom's commercial capital, is typical. Headlined "Water woes hit Jeddah anew," the story noted that several localities were suffering from a shortage of the tankers that deliver water to homes (many neighborhoods do not receive water by main pipe). Consignments that were previously delivered in an hour are now taking three days. Indeed, the city has a history of inadequate infrastructure: in early 2011, its drainage system was overwhelmed by heavy winter rains, causing several deaths and prompting fears that a sewage reservoir in nearby hills would overflow and devastate parts of the city.

U.S. POLICY CHALLENGES

Washington is habitually cautious about giving Saudi Arabia political advice, especially about domestic problems. As U.S. ambassador James Smith recently stated, the "three pillars" of the bilateral relationship are "oil security, stability, and counterterrorism; pressure on human rights and political change were unproductive." The kingdom is also crucial to two urgent regional issues: its increased oil exports make up for reductions in Iran's production caused by sanctions, and it is working with Jordan to support rebels in Syria, an effort backed by Washington. Moreover, U.S. officials will almost certainly ask the Saudis to play a key role in any revival of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

One glaring problem is the age and infirmity of Saudi Arabia's leaders. At this week's Arab summit in Qatar, King Abdullah (age 90) was absent, and Crown Prince Salman, who is widely believed to be afflicted with dementia, took his place.

An additional complication is Riyadh's sensitivity to embarrassing information. In 2008, London halted a criminal investigation into bribery allegations against Saudis after the British ambassador in Riyadh warned that counterterrorism cooperation could be damaged if the probe continued. And a looming parliamentary report on British relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain has already prompted the Saudi ambassador to declare that the kingdom felt "insulted" by the investigation.

To prevent the kingdom's domestic challenges from developing into a perfect storm that overwhelms the House of Saud, Washington should press Riyadh to tolerate greater political participation and accelerate the transition to new leadership within the royal family. Given the kingdom's preeminent energy role, Riyadh's current political paralysis endangers the global economy. It also diminishes the traditional Saudi role in the Arab and Muslim worlds, endangering U.S.-led efforts to stop Iran's drive toward nuclear weapons.

Simon Henderson, the Baker fellow and the director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute, is author of [After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-king-abdullah-succession-in-saudi-arabia>. ❖

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