



Saudi Arabia's Fall on Our Radar?

by **Robert Maginnis** ([more by this author](#))

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Saudi Arabia controls the world's largest oil reserves, and if that spigot is shut off by Mideast chaos, the global economy could be devastated. That is why the West must encourage the Saudis to mitigate their vulnerabilities, but be prepared to respond if the kingdom falls.

The Saudi monarchy is preparing for the worst case. For the first time last week, a Saudi youth group connected with others by social media to plan a peaceful demonstration in Jeddah expressing solidarity with anti-government protesters in Libya. Fortunately for Riyadh, that demonstration and another among Shiite citizens in the Eastern province weren't violent like the protests in Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen.

But Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz's perception of the growing threat of social unrest prompted him to throw money at the problem. Last week he announced a \$37 billion benefits package to create 1,200 new jobs, raise cost-of-living allowances, grant interest-free home loans, and more.

The king should be concerned about the spreading unrest because Saudi Arabia has striking similarities with countries already racked by chaos. For example, the king runs Saudi Arabia with the same autocratic style that former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak used, and the Saudi monarchy bases its political system on family and tribal links, as in Yemen.

But these similarities are somewhat mitigated by Saudi differences. Much of the discontent expressed in neighboring countries is attributed to high unemployment and living costs, which the Saudis address by shoveling money at their difficulties.

Saudi Arabia is also different because it is a country of tribes connected by marriage, creating a land unified by family ties. Also, the House of Saud, the ruling family, is not the typical isolated monarchy. Rather, it has 30,000 members, including thousands of

princes who are integrated throughout society.

The House of Saud also has a very unique relationship with the country's religious leaders. The 18th century Saudi ruler Abdallah bin Muhammad bin Saud married his son Abdul Aziz to the daughter of Shaikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of the puritanical Wahhabi movement. That union created the First Saudi State and explains the royal family's advocacy for both Salafi Islam and unification of Saudi Arabia.

But these distinctives may not vaccinate the monarchy from four vulnerabilities.

First, the House of Saud is vulnerable because it hoards wealth and governing power. Saudi citizens are growing angry with their government as the population expands, per capita income drops, and young people lust for more liberty. That discontent is feeding a groundswell of calls for jihad against the royal family.

The rage and regional chaos may collide to form a tipping point for the kingdom. The monarch and his top princes are very old, and new blood must be installed. That reshuffling will remind anxious Saudis of Mubarak, who tried but failed to install his son as president. Saudis will ask themselves, too, why they must tolerate dictators.

Saudi citizens are also understandably impatient after having submitted petitions calling for a constitutional monarchy—a form of government in which the monarch acts as head of state within the parameters of a constitution. Calls for a constitutional monarchy and the kingdom's pending leadership shuffle could become the tipping point that ends the House of Saud's dynasty.

Second, the regime is vulnerable because it fails to treat political reform seriously. Last week Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, a grandson of the founding king of Saudi Arabia, wrote in the New York Times, "Unless many Arab governments adopt radically different policies, their countries will very likely experience more political and civil unrest."

He labeled Arab political systems "outmoded and brittle" and said, "Arab governments can no longer afford to take their populations for granted, or to assume that they will remain static and subdued." But Saudi Arabia's monarch is only half listening to reformers.

Saudi King Abdullah responded to calls for reform by instituting a “National Dialogue” process, which allegedly provides Saudi citizens the means to criticize their government. But some citizens who used the process to identify grievances were arrested and detained, creating doubt about the royal family’s reform commitment.

Similarly, in 2005 the Saudi monarchy hosted elections for municipal councils, which were granted nominal powers to oversee local governments and make recommendations to national leaders. But as with the National Dialogue process, the municipal councils were ignored or not sufficiently empowered to do their jobs.

Third, the regime is vulnerable because social reform could fracture the stabilizing monarchy-Wahhabi relationship. The Saudi monarchy maintains its legitimacy among conservative constituent groups by carefully managing changes that could affect established religious practices, even though the lack of change stifles democratic reform.

The Congressional Research Service’s 2010 report on Saudi Arabia states, “Since 2006, significant public debates have occurred on social issues such as the powers of religious police, education reform proposals, and the roles and rights of women and the integration of Shiites into Saudi Arabia’s predominantly Sunni society.” Wahhabi clerics oversee these issues, and any challenge to that authority could split the unique state-religion relationship, which might radicalize the Saudi clerics who allegedly support terror groups such as al-Qaeda

Finally, the rise of Iran and its Arab Shiite allies is a Saudi vulnerability. King Abdullah believes Iran stirs up Saudi’s Shia minority—15% of the population—much as it is said to be doing in next-door Bahrain.

Last week King Abdullah met with the king of Bahrain, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, to discuss the Shia political uprising there. These Sunni leaders accuse their Shiite populations of loyalty to Iran, a charge Shiites say is used to stoke sectarian tensions and justify opposition to democracy.

But Saudis feel threatened because they are encircled by Shia-leaning governments—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and possibly soon Bahrain. Alireza Nader, an expert in international affairs, told the New York Times, “They worry that the region is ripe for Iranian exploitation. Iran has shown that it is very capable of taking advantage of regional instability.”

There is a history of tensions among Saudi Shiites. Two years ago, Saudi police launched a search for Shiite preacher Nimr al-Nimr, who suggested in a sermon that Shiites could one day form their own separate state. That secessionist threat followed clashes between the Sunni religious police and Shiite pilgrims near the tomb of Prophet Muhammad in Medina.

The Saudi Shia last rose up in mass civil disobedience in the intifada of 1979, inspired by Iran's Islamic revolution. Recently, Tehran openly endorsed the "rightful demands" of the Arab protest movement, which supports the Saudi view that Iran is attempting to create a Mideast "Shia Crescent" to become the hegemonic force in global oil.

The Saudi royals can avoid collapse by mitigating vulnerabilities. But if the monarchy falls, the West must be prepared to step in, militarily and otherwise, to stabilize the country, keep Iran at bay, and sustain the oil flowing.

Mr. Maginnis is a retired Army lieutenant colonel, and a national security and foreign affairs analyst for radio and television.

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