

**Four More Weeks of Winter:  
The Arab Spring that never came in Saudi Arabia**

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The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in December of 2010 sparked a huge wave of pro-democracy protests across the Arab world. Protests toppled authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and later Egypt, with similar attempts erupting in other Middle Eastern nations. However, if the toppling of these authoritarian regimes ushered in a warm spring for Tunisians and Egyptians, a cold, dark winter would remain in Saudi Arabia. While attempts to oust the authoritarian regime in places like Syria were crushed, in Saudi Arabia the attempts never even began. Saudi Arabia's vast oil wealth and control over religion eroded popular support for protests and prevented nationalist sentiment from taking hold. These factors led to the Arab Spring becoming a non-starter in the Gulf nation.

Inspired by the Arab Spring in places like Tunisia, small groups of Saudis, mainly Shiites launched protests calling for general freedom, constitutional monarchy, and the release of political prisoners. However, the biggest organized protest would be scheduled for March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011, ominously titled the "Day of Rage."<sup>1</sup> The protest was designed to be the culmination of their grievances and their final push for reform. Saudi Arabia was preparing for what they had witnessed in other Arab nations, violent protests and clashes with police and security forces. The capital, Riyadh, was heavily garrisoned with police, armed checkpoints, and the sky patrolled by helicopters.<sup>2</sup> But, the city was quiet, few, if any, protestors demonstrated in Riyadh, with scarcely any Saudis out besides the police. Small protests erupted in Eastern province cities like Qatif, but these were quickly quelled.<sup>3</sup> The "Day of Rage" came and went quietly, and the most significant protest amounted to nothing, with mass demonstrations being uneventful.

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<sup>1</sup> Neela Banerjee, "Saudi Arabia 'day of rage' protest fizzles," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2011-mar-12-la-fg-saudi-unrest-20110312-story.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Banerjee, "Saudi Arabia 'day of rage' protest fizzles."

<sup>3</sup> Banerjee, "Saudi Arabia 'day of rage' protest fizzles."

While protests did erupt in the Eastern province, these centered on issues of discrimination against the Shia minority and did not gain much traction nationally. Rather than muster an armed response, the Saudis opened their wallet. Before the ill-fated “Day of Rage” King ‘Abdallah bin ‘Abdul ‘Aziz signed a massive benefits package totaling 36 billion dollars (USD), with funding allocated to housing among other projects.<sup>4</sup> After the non-starter of a protest came and went, the spending continued. This encompassed a 93-billion-dollar (USD) grant package, spurring of home construction, and the creation of over 60,000 security jobs. Followed by increases and bonuses to unemployment and public servant salaries.<sup>4</sup> These reforms helped to placate those who could be tempted to protest, the logic being a Saudi wouldn’t want this generous spending to stop with the potential ousting of the regime. This eventually led to promises of further socio-economic reforms, such as the release nearly a decade later of Vision 2030.

The ability of the Saudi regime to respond with cash instead of bullets results from their massive oil wealth. Saudi Arabia has a rentier economy, one that is derived from the revenue of a single sector: in the Saudi’s case, oil production. Theories of rentier economics posit that economies with a single stream of revenue are less likely to democratize versus a highly diverse economy.<sup>5</sup> Because elites, such as the Saudi royal family, can control and distribute the wealth to citizens as they choose, they wield unrivaled political power. The Kingdom can use this wealth to provide social services and investments while avoiding accountability from citizens.<sup>6</sup> This vast wealth can also placate their citizens, as seen in the wake of the Arab Spring, and quell

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph A. Kéchichian, “Saudi Arabia after the Arab Spring,” in *Politics of Change in Middle East and North Africa since Arab Spring: A Lost Decade?* (London: Routledge, 2022), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Steve A. Yetiv, “How Saudi Arabia Has Dodged the Arab Spring,” in *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprisings* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Yetiv, *The Arab Spring*, 117.

dissension.<sup>6</sup> Control over the distribution of wealth, and industry can allow the government to prevent the formation of independent organizations. The organizations may advocate for democratic reform. The control of the Saudi royal family extends beyond wealth into the religious institutions of the highly conservative society.

King Abdullah, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, made reforms to the clergy, increasing the royal family's influence over the religious authorities. Most assertively, the King removed religious leaders, restructured legal and religious institutions, and enacted censorship over *fatwas*, or Islamic legal rulings.<sup>7</sup> Immediately following the announcement of the "Day of Rage" and the organization efforts, the Islamic clergy of Saudi Arabia responded with condemnation. The clergy declared the protests un-Islamic and religious police joined with security forces in preparation to repress protestors.<sup>8</sup> The senior religious authority issued a *fatwa* against the protests and circulated these at mosques and religious services.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, religious leaders painted the protest movements as part of a wider Iranian-backed Shia conspiracy.<sup>10</sup>

This condemnation of the protests and its organizers as Shiite agents of Iran, allowed the population to be split along religious lines and fragmented.<sup>11</sup> The state and religious propaganda was able to convince the Sunni majority that participating in protest would lead to the fragmentation and destruction of the Saudi State.<sup>11</sup> This eroded popular support for protestors, and most demonstrations stayed regional within Shiite majority areas.<sup>12</sup> The clerics reminded the

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<sup>7</sup> Toby Craig Jones, "Saudi Arabia Versus the Arab Spring." *Raritan* 31, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 53. <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=3df40f25-b471-3560-b450-523027391de3>.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, "Saudi Arabia Versus the Arab Spring," 54.

<sup>9</sup> Madawi, Al-Rasheed, "No Saudi Spring," *Boston Review*, March 1, 2012, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/madawi-al-rasheed-arab-spring-saudi-arabia/>.

<sup>10</sup> Madawi, "No Saudi Spring."

<sup>11</sup> Madawi, Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 520. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01129.x>

<sup>12</sup> Madawi, "Sectarianism as Counter Revolution," 520.

population of *Ijma*, the need for consensus around Saudi Arabia's pious rulers.<sup>13</sup> The success of the Saudi regime in convincing Sunnis that the protests were a Shiite conspiracy, led to the majority of the population renewing their allegiance to the regime and eroding popular support for the protests. This led to Saudi Arabia being mostly quiet during the Arab Spring, with only a small number of arrests made and relatively minor repression compared to other Middle Eastern nations.

However, when presented with a grave enough threat, the Kingdom would respond heavy-handedly, as they did in Bahrain. In February of 2011, Bahrain saw its own "Day of Rage" as the Arab Spring attempted to shine in the tiny island nation. Protestors, mainly Shiites, flooded the streets of Manama, demanding political reforms, including devolution of power from the royal family to an elected parliament.<sup>14</sup> Bahrain is a small archipelago nation in the Arabian Gulf, a mere sixteen miles from Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> While small, Bahrain is an exceptionally important country. It is a major banking hub and possesses one of the largest oil refineries in the world.<sup>16</sup> Saudi Arabia also held fears that Shiite protests in Bahrain were encouraging similar movements in their own Eastern Province and wanted them snuffed out.<sup>17</sup>

Bahrain had responded with swift, and harsh repression, resulting in numerous deaths and increasing the intensity of protests against the regime.<sup>18</sup> Due to the response of the Bahraini

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<sup>13</sup> Madawi, "Sectarianism as Counter Revolution," 521.

<sup>14</sup> Simon, Maban, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 2012): 89. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00537.x>.

<sup>15</sup> Mohammad, Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics and Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 2 (2013): 367. doi:10.1080/00472336.2012.759406.

<sup>16</sup> Nuruzzaman, "Politics, Economics," 367-368.

<sup>17</sup> Nick, Amies. "Bahrain Escalation," *Deutsche Welle*, March 16, 2011, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-intervention-in-bahrain-increases-gulf-instability/a-14912216>.

<sup>18</sup> Maban, "The Battle for Bahrain," 89.

government, and the high Shiite population in the country, Iran began to assist the protestors.<sup>19</sup> The combination of protestors presenting a real threat to the status quo in Bahrain, and the involvement of Iran crossed a red line set by Saudi Arabia, who promptly organized an intervention to suppress the protests.<sup>20</sup> Operation Peninsula Shield, a Saudi-led intervention, along with other nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), crushed the protestors and ensured the survival of the Bahraini regime.<sup>21</sup> Saudi Arabia's fear of losing a critical ally as well as fears of Shiite protests spreading to their territory prompted this harsh crackdown. This show of force demonstrates that if the Saudi regime feels threatened it will not hesitate to resort to extreme repression to ensure its survival.

Saudi Arabia was an interesting case in the era of the Arab Spring. While some of the regimes in nations such as Tunisia and Egypt were overthrown, and others like Syria embroiled in a civil war, the Saudis came out of it relatively unscathed. When minor protests were organized, particularly in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia expended great wealth to placate the citizenry and prevent their participation. The Kingdom's influence over the Islamic clergy resulted in the majority Sunni population abstaining from the protests and rallying around the regime. Furthermore, the Saudi intervention in neighboring Bahrain signified the Saudi resolve to quell protests by force if they felt threatened directly or indirectly. Saudi Arabia's unique economic situation, and the royal family's control over the clergy, and the military of Saudi Arabia, made the Arab Spring unable to bloom and resulted in the status quo being maintained.

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<sup>19</sup> Ronen A. Cohen and Gradi Hitman, "Iran and Saudi Arabia Civilio-Theo-Zation Clash: Reformulating Regional Strategies Following The Arab Spring," *Trames Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 2 (2021): 268, <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2021.2.06>.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, and Hitman, "Iran and Saudi Arabia," 269.

<sup>21</sup> Cohen and Hitman, "Iran and Saudi Arabia", 269.

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