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Edited by Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix

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Introduction

Bernard Haykel, Thomas Hegghammer, and Stéphane Lacroix

March 11, 2011, was declared on Facebook a “Day of Rage” in Saudi Arabia, in imitation of the various popular uprisings that were taking place throughout the Arab world in the spring of that year. By this time two Arab dictators had fallen in Tunisia and Egypt and unrest was spreading to Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen. Several online petitions also were urging political reform, and some Shiite demonstrations were taking place in the Eastern Province. Many predicted that Saudi Arabia was not immune to revolution and that the regime would succumb to the same forces that had effected change elsewhere. However, no mass protests or mobilizations occurred, and over the following months the Saudi government was able to contain and ward off any significant opposition.

This is not the first time that observers had wrongly predicted the demise of the Al Saud, the royal family that has ruled all or parts of the country since the eighteenth century. In the 1960s, Arab nationalism under the leadership of President Nasser of Egypt was expected to sweep the royals away. Later in 1979, with the Iranian revolution and the uprisings in Mecca and those of the Shiites in the Eastern Province, the Saudis were again given a short lease on life. In the early 1990s, an indigenous Islamist movement called the Sahwa was again challenging the regime. And in the early 2000s al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula stoked fears of instability through a series of violent attacks and muscular propaganda. In each of these cases, the Saudi regime weathered the storm through a complex set of policies and tactics that today are being deployed again.

Why have so many observers been wrong in their assessment of the politics of Saudi Arabia? One reason is that Saudi Arabia is a particularly opaque society because its politics are not institutionalized but highly personal in nature. Another is the set of stereotypes that has impeded nuanced analysis, for example, that the kingdom is constituted of a combustible mixture of religious zealots, rebellious Bedouins, and rich oil sheikhs. In one common portrait,

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Saudi Arabia is the West's petrol station while also being a factory of "Wahhabi terrorists."¹ But the main reason is that Saudi Arabia has been understudied and, until relatively recently, was not open for fieldwork to outside scholars.

This book offers a number of studies by scholars who have an intimate understanding of Saudi Arabia, many of whom have conducted extensive fieldwork on the ground. Their chapters look carefully at key constituent elements of Saudi society: women, Islamic scholars and activists, economic actors, tribes, royals, and technocrats among others. They provide a nuanced reading of the grammar of Saudi political and social life, allowing also for a better understanding of the country's present situation and future prospects.

Making sense of Saudi Arabia is today crucially important. The kingdom's western provinces contain the heart of Islam, its two holiest mosques in Mecca and Medina. Saudi Arabia has 25 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and is the unquestioned leader of OPEC. It is also one of the dominant countries in the Arab world and the self-declared leader of Sunni Islam. In addition, Saudi Arabia has been an important site for Islamist ideology and activism, both locally and internationally. Last but not least, Saudi Arabia is arguably the United States' closest Arab ally and a pillar in the American security architecture of the region.

Saudi Arabia faces several major challenges in the near future. First, a series of successions in rule is going to take place very soon because the king and his designated successor are in their eighties and therefore quite literally octogenarians. Second, a major youth bulge in the population is about to enter the labor market, and the country must produce several million new jobs in the coming decade if social tensions are not to explode into the open. Third is managing the new expectations for popular participation, transparency, and accountability in governance that have been raised by the recent uprisings in the Arab world. Fourth, Saudi Arabia faces external challenges in the form of a nuclear Iran, a turbulent Bahrain, a potentially failed state in Yemen, the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and uncertainty in both Iraq and Egypt.

As the chapters of this book will show, Saudi Arabia has significant resources, both material and symbolic, to confront these challenges. A beneficiary of massive oil revenues, the kingdom has in the last decade amassed over half a trillion U.S. dollars in cash assets. It produces on average around 10 million barrels of oil per day and is expected to do so for many years to come. This wealth has long allowed the state to dominate the economy and to create public sector jobs so that a majority of Saudis work for the government. It has

¹ Cf. Dore Gold, *Hatred's Kingdom: How Saudi Arabia Supports the New Global Terrorism* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003).

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also permitted Saudi Arabia to make enormous investments in infrastructure development and education, changing both the physical and social landscape of the country. Most recently, during the “Arab Spring” of 2011, oil wealth allowed the government to allocate \$130 billion in domestic subsidies (salary increases, housing, and other benefits) to stem the unrest of the kind that swept Ben Ali and Mubarak out of power. The financial resources at the state’s disposal also enable it to co-opt dissenters and neutralize potential opposition forces.

Another key material resource is the country’s coercive apparatus. There are multiple military and security services, including the regular armed forces, the National Guard, the police, and the notorious *mabahith* (domestic intelligence). These have been used to control and contain opposition elements and were effective in repelling al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s armed threat in the early and mid-2000s. Moreover, the fight against al-Qaeda made Saudi security services even more powerful, because they benefited from Western intelligence expertise and massive hardware investments. Most recently, the security services have been out in force to quell Shiite protests in the east and to prevent popular demonstrations elsewhere, notably on the so-called Day of Rage on March 11.

A third material resource is the media and the communications infrastructure. Members of the royal family control two of the three international pan-Arab daily newspapers: *al-Sharq al-awsat* and *al-Hayat*. They also have significant influence over online sites such as Elaph.com as well as the Al-Arabiyya satellite television network. In addition, some of the most watched religious television channels are sponsored by the kingdom, such as Iqra’ and al-Majd. Domestically, the government has effective editorial control over all print and television news media. Equally important is the government’s ownership of the physical telecommunications infrastructure, such as the centralized internet node, known as the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology. The government’s control of the telecommunications infrastructure proved to be a vital asset in its fight against al-Qaeda in 2003–4. In the days before March 11, 2011, the Saudi media outlets inundated the public with articles and editorials discrediting the call for revolt and emphasizing the need for loyalty. And when no uprising took place on that day, the media celebrated this as a victory for Saudi Arabia and a defeat for the kingdom’s enemies. Finally, even when the government or the royal family are not owners of the media asset, they still might enjoy a degree of influence as appeared to have been the case in Al-Jazeera’s timid coverage of the unrest in Bahrain and the Eastern Province.

At least as important as the material resources of the Saudi state are the symbolic ones. The most obvious is religion. Saudi Arabia unabashedly bases

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its legitimacy on Islamic norms. Despite having a basic law, it claims that the Qur'an is its constitution. Since the mid-twentieth century the government developed a vast institutionalized religious sector, which includes missionary, educational, and legal activities. The state employs a large religious bureaucracy, which spans a range of functions from the great mufti and eminent jurists down to the local religious enforcers (*mutawwi'a*) and school teachers. This religious sector is headed by the Committee of Senior Scholars, one of whose functions is to issue fatwas, including those that support the government and its policies. For example, prior to the so-called Day of Rage on March 11, this council issued an edict that declared street demonstrations to be un-Islamic and therefore forbidden in the kingdom.

The state has also grounded its legitimacy on more secular bases, namely, that it is the purveyor of the country's modernization and development. Its infrastructural and industrialization projects are branded as milestones on the path to inexorable progress. More recently, King Abdallah has advanced the idea that for Saudi Arabia to thrive it must develop the human capital of its citizens. Following up on this he has founded a new university, the King Abdallah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which is held up as a flagship of technological and social advancement. King Abdallah's commitment to this vision was such that he dismissed a senior religious scholar who had objected to its coeducational curriculum.

A third symbolic resource is the myth of the Saudi nation. Here the state promotes a discourse of exceptionalism in which Saudi Arabia is a blessed land, an island of stability and a harmonious family. In this paternalistic myth, the king is cast as the father of the nation and the royal family is the custodian of its well-being. In return the citizenry owe them obedience and gratitude. More recently the Saudi government has also promoted a distinctive Saudi nationalism through the media as well as educational and cultural institutions and practices. In the late 1990s it founded a national museum in Riyadh and introduced the subject of "national education" (*al-tarbiya al-wataniyya*) into the school curriculum. It also encouraged all media outlets to use nationalist language, especially during the campaign against al-Qaeda from 2003 onwards. This increased emphasis on indigenous culture may have played a role in the recent upsurge of interest in tribal culture and identity.

Although these resources are significant they also have important limitations. Oil prices, for example, fluctuate, and a sustained low price might constrain the government's ability to satisfy the country's fiscal needs and to co-opt forces of opposition. And even with relatively high prices, the uneven allocation of resources is a potential source of political tension. As for the coercive apparatus of the state, the use of excessive force always carries the

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risk of backfiring. Moreover, the Arab Spring appears to have introduced new norms of state conduct toward its citizens, somewhat constraining the coercive options available to the government. A related development is the increased transparency resulting from the rise of new media and communication technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and smartphone cameras. The government's media control has been eroding slowly since the late 1990s, first with the arrival of Al-Jazeera and the Internet, and more recently with the emergence of online citizen journalism (blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube videos).

Symbolic resources also have limitations. The state's monopoly on Islam is contested by a plethora of actors, including the Islamists of the Sahwa movement and the jihadis. In this contest, the state's position has been vitiated by the death, around the turn of the millennium, of the most charismatic figures of the official religious establishment (e.g., Shaykhs 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Baz and Muhammad Ibn 'Uthaymin). They have been replaced by less respected scholars, such as the current mufti 'Abd al-'Aziz Al al-Shaykh, whose legitimacy in the religious field rests on his being a descendant of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab more than on his own scholarly achievements. This weak position has given him no choice but to act as a servile ally of the monarchy, thus undermining the credibility of the establishment that he represents and heads.

As for the discourse on progress and development, its efficacy is contingent on the ability of the state to deliver the promised goods and services. This in turn is dependent on the financial resources of the state and their effective deployment and administration. Corruption and mismanagement can jeopardize delivery and frustrate expectations, leading to potential dissent. For instance, the repeated destruction caused by the floods in Jeddah in 2009 and 2011 has fueled public anger against the government. Last, the nationalist project of the state faces certain challenges that are rooted in the country's regional, tribal, and sectarian diversity. To be sure, all nations are constructs, but in the Saudi case the nationalism is arguably shallow because it is a recent development, one that is centered on the royal family and superimposed on a society with particularly deep cleavages. Moreover, like other nationalist projects, the Saudi one faces the challenge of centrifugal forces of globalization.

The future of the country is shaped not only by the government's policies and resources, but also by deeper changes occurring in society more broadly. And despite its reputation for being conservative and static, Saudi Arabia is in fact a dynamic and rapidly evolving society. The youth bulge it faces has not only economic effects, but also deep social and cultural consequences. Many

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of these young people have preferences, expectations, and communication habits that differ from those of their parents. At least 100,000 young Saudis are currently studying abroad, most of them on full scholarships from the Saudi government. As for women, who started being educated only in the early 1960s, they now represent more than half of all university students in the kingdom. The obstacles they face in finding employment and restrictions on their mobility, since they are not allowed to drive, are bound to generate increasingly vociferous demands for more rights. Acknowledging this, the government has taken small but symbolically important steps such as the appointment of a woman, Nora al-Fayiz, as Deputy Minister of Education for girls.

Yet another important set of changes are those associated with rapid urbanization (today above 85 percent). Families are increasingly nuclear, and individuals are more atomized. This has led to the disruption of traditional social structures and identities. In this respect, new social solidarities are being created, some based on the reinvention of traditional elements such as tribal genealogies, others on alternative forms of socialization linked to contemporary urban lifestyles. A café and street culture are, for instance, developing quickly in Riyadh and Jeddah. More extreme practices such as *taffit* (car drifting) have also started to attract young urban Saudis.

The pace of those developments in the last few decades means that today's young Saudis live in a wholly different world from that of their parents. Depending on how the regime handles the situation, they can represent either a formidable challenge or a key asset for the future of the country.

COMPLEXITY AND CHANGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

This volume presents a collection of chapters that focus on different sectors of Saudi society and examine how the changes of the last few decades have affected each sector. Many of the authors have conducted archival and field-work research in Saudi Arabia, benefiting from the relative opening of the country to foreign researchers since 2000. As such, its chapters reflect new insights from the field and provide the most up-to-date research on the country's social and political dynamics.

A first set of contributions deals with domestic politics. Greg Gause questions widespread assumptions about what he calls the "rentier exceptionalism" of Saudi Arabia. Most of the literature on rentier states assumes a negative relationship between oil prices and political mobilization; that is, when prices are high, political opposition will be low, and vice versa. This assumption, however, does not appear to hold in Saudi Arabia, where the most intense political mobilization occurred in times of high (1979–80) or rising (1990–4; 2001–5)

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oil prices, not in times of economic difficulty. In the kingdom's case, Cause argues, mobilization has tended to be triggered by regional and international crises rather than domestic economic downturns.

In the following chapter, Toby Jones asks whether Saudi Arabia is best understood as an Islamic state or a technostate. Jones considers the role of science, technology, nature, and expertise in the making of modern Saudi Arabia. While noting that religion continues to play an important role in the kingdom's political history, the chapter suggests that Saudi political authority as well as Saudi authoritarianism have other, more modern, origins.

The religious sector is explored in more depth by Nabil Mouline, whose chapter examines Saudi official Islam through an analysis of the Committee of Senior Scholars (*hay'at kibar al-'ulama'*). After examining the historical relationship between the political and religious spheres in the kingdom, Mouline puts into context the Saudi state's desire, in the 1960s and 1970s, to "bureaucratize the ulama" and establish official religious institutions, the most important of which being the Committee of Senior Scholars. Mouline describes the different religious, social, and political functions fulfilled by the committee, and argues that it has great powers but remains entirely dependent on the royal family.

The second set of chapters looks at the issue of oil. Giacomo Luciani examines the extent to which Saudi Arabia controls the price of oil. He argues that, contrary to common assumptions, Saudi Arabia is a price taker, not a price maker. The kingdom individually and OPEC collectively have only limited tools at their disposal to influence the price of oil. What is worse, their influence is significant only if world oil stocks are low, meaning that the market is in fragile equilibrium. He further argues that to stabilize significantly oil prices, it is necessary for Saudi Arabia and some of the other leading oil exporters to take a much more active role in global oil trading, shifting from their current position of price takers to the position of price makers.

Moving from the economics to the politics of oil, Bernard Haykel's chapter analyzes how oil has been invoked and discussed by various actors, official and dissident, in the highly contested politics of Saudi Arabia. The focus is various political and social actors, including in the final section al-Qaeda's ideological and strategic analysis of the unparalleled hydrocarbon reserves in Arabia. Two points are highlighted: (1) the continuities between al-Qaeda's discourse on oil and the means of its exploitation and older non-Islamist Saudi views and critiques on the same topic from at least the 1950s; and (2) the evolution of al-Qaeda's views on this matter and its increasing advocacy of the use of ever more violent means to damage the global economy through attacks on Saudi oil facilities. One conclusion of the chapter is to argue that

oil should be understood as one of the principal leitmotifs of Saudi political thought, contestation, and engagement.

Who gets what from the kingdom's oil income is further explored in Steffen Hertog's chapter on the political economy of Saudi regions. Hertog starts with the observation that Saudis maintain an elaborate mythology about how different regions of the kingdom have lost or gained in the course of Saudi Arabia's unification and the state's subsequent expansion. He then subjects the different claims to empirical scrutiny, adducing and analyzing available data about administrative, infrastructure, public service, public employment, and economic development since the early 1960s. The analysis shows that, contrary to widespread assumptions, the Hijaz has been doing relatively well on most accounts, although not as well as Najd, while the south has remained a thoroughly marginal player despite its substantial population.

A third set of chapters looks more specifically at the Islamic discourse and at how – and by whom – it is used in the kingdom. David Commins describes how the name "Salafism" was gradually adopted to designate what historians have usually called "Wahhabism." Going back to the late nineteenth century, he disentangles the different factors that interacted in this evolution, namely, the fact that Wahhabis developed contacts with proclaimed "Salafi" modernists of neighboring countries, and the Saudi desire to integrate into the wider Muslim world.

In his chapter, Stéphane Lacroix sheds light on another, more controversial actor in the Saudi religious sphere. He examines the Sahwa (from *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic Awakening), the mainstream Islamist movement that has developed in Saudi Arabia since the 1960s by taking inspiration from both Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood. He shows that the Sahwa constitutes the better-organized nonstate group in Saudi Arabia, and the only one capable of effectively challenging the government. However, because of the "incestuous" relationship it maintains with the Saudi state, it has – with one important exception – not been able to generate any genuine and sustainable opposition to the royal family.

Saud al-Sarhan also addresses Saudi Islamism, focusing on a crucial phase of the intellectual history of the movement, namely, the debates that took place between the so-called Salafi-Jihadi thinkers Hamud al-Shu'aybi, Nasir al-Fahd, and Ali al-Khudayr and their opponents in the religious sphere between 1997 and 2003. Al-Sarhan's chapter explains the origin, nature, and significance of those debates, which, the author argues, illustrate the weakening of official religious authority in Saudi Arabia at the turn of the millennium.

Also writing on the more radical Islamist fringe, Thomas Hegghammer explains the difference between Abdallah Azzam's "classical jihadism" and

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Usama bin Laden's "global jihadism," which advocate restricted and unrestricted private warfare for the defense of Muslim lands, respectively. Although existing literature on jihadism has distinguished between local and global jihad, the dual nature of transnational violent Islamic activism has been overlooked. Yet it is especially relevant in Saudi Arabia because the two doctrines generated two semidistinct militant communities, the relationship between which is crucial to understanding the evolution of jihadism in the kingdom. Most Saudi militants were classical, not global, jihadists. This helps explain why so many Saudis fought in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, and Iraq while al-Qaeda never thrived in the kingdom.

A last set of chapters addresses sociocultural change. Abdulaziz al-Fahad looks at the fate of Saudi Arabia's Bedouins through a study of the life and works of a Bedouin poet named Bandar ibn Surur, who was active during the period of intense modernization that spans from the 1950s to the 1980s. Al-Fahad shows how the Bedouins lost their political and social status relative to the sedentary population, thus detailing one of the most dramatic transformations undergone by Saudi society in the twentieth century. By stressing the profoundly anti-Bedouin ethos of the Saudi state, he challenges the classic "orientalist" perception of the Al Saud's rule. In a second chapter Abdulaziz al-Fahad investigates the phenomenon of producing family and tribal genealogies that has caught the interest of many contemporary Saudis. He locates this in a reaction to some of the manifestations of modern prosperity, urbanization, and an all-powerful state that has successfully undermined most traditional institutions and forms of solidarity. The genealogical reaction is therefore a practical attempt by families to organize their affairs so as to create a buffer between the state and the individual, and also produces a modicum of stability in an otherwise chaotic and anonymous urban landscape. In short, the production of genealogy performs important social functions, as it has done for many centuries past in Arabia, but in the contemporary context it has been repurposed for present-day needs.

Madawi al-Rasheed's contribution deals with the situation of Saudi women. Al-Rasheed's main contention is that, contrary to the common view, women's exclusion in Saudi society is a political, rather than simply a social or religious, fact. The subordination of women, she argues, is intimately linked to the project of the state and to the fabrication of its own legitimacy narrative, in which women occupy a central position. Since 9/11, however, the state has been oscillating between contradictory narratives – the state as both protector and emancipator of women. Yet, the ultimate objective remains the same: to achieve control and surveillance practiced under the guise of protecting the moral order.

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Looking at another understudied component of Saudi society, Amélie Le Renard examines recent changes in the women's sphere. She shows how the growing number of shopping malls in Riyadh over the past decade or so has transformed not only the city's landscape but also its female inhabitants' lifestyles. In a strictly segregated city, malls have been used by women as public spaces, which has contributed to the redefinition of Saudi Arabia's conservative social norms.

Saudi Arabia is on the cusp of a dramatic change and transformation, not least because its aging leadership is bound to give way soon to a younger generation of princes. Social change is also palpable because of a number of factors: a large number of young people with unsat expectations, a revolution in information sharing and delivery with the pervasive use of social media, the return of so many thousands of students from study abroad, and the Arab Spring uprisings and the policies that the state has pursued to quell its effects both domestically and abroad. Some will argue that the fate of the political system is intimately linked to the price and quantity of oil produced. The rule of thumb is that as long as the price is high (roughly over \$100 per barrel) and revenues are steady, the country will remain relatively stable. The government will simply buy social peace and people's consent. But as these chapters will show you, Saudi Arabia's reality is more complex and dynamic, and its past and present, let alone its future, cannot be explained by any single factor such as the price of oil.