



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and “the Day of Rage” that Wasn’t

by Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 135, April 4, 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: *While unrest has rattled the Middle East in recent months, Saudi Arabia has taken all necessary measures to maintain stability within its own borders. Its success in doing so stems from two factors: oil wealth and tradition. The royal family has appeased its citizens by pumping more money into the economy and into their pockets. At the same time, religious inclinations as well as a lack of tradition of mass political activity have ingrained in most of the Saudi people a sense of loyalty toward its leadership.*

Even though opposition groups of various stripes had called for a “Day of Rage” on March 11, 2011, the Saudi royal family made sure that it would not happen. Using a combination of tribal connections, an appeal to religious legitimacy, and an overwhelming deployment of force on the streets, the regime let it be known that no protests would be tolerated. In the end, journalists could find only one protester to talk to – and he was soon hauled-off for questioning. The local Saudi press – all government-authorized – praised the Saudi people for their loyalty to the leadership. Prince Nayif bin Abd al-Aziz, Minister of the Interior and third in line for the throne, stressed that the Saudi people followed Islam and the religious leadership. The Saudi royal family, he emphasized, wished “to provide means of a decent living for all citizens and mobilize their countries’ resources for this purpose.”

Across the board, senior princes weighed in with statements highlighting the connection between the state and the people. As summed up by Prince Sultan bin Salman, chairman of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities and son of the governor of Riyadh: "Every citizen of this country is a responsible person. Here the state is the citizen and the citizen is the state. There is no division between the leadership and the citizens."

Although one might be tempted to dismiss this self-congratulatory rhetoric, the failure of the Day of Rage could also be attributed to a deep sense of foreboding. While many types of oppositionists wished for quicker reforms, less corruption, and more equitable distribution of wealth, very few Saudis were ready to part with the monarchy and the stability it had provided for many decades. This, combined with the lack of a tradition of mass political activity, turned the planned Day of Rage into the "Day of the Silent Pledge of Fealty," or *bay'a*, as *al-Sharq al-Awsat* editor Tariq al-Humayd called it.

Saudi-Led Forces Deploy to Bahrain

When the Shiite majority in Bahrain engaged in mass protests beginning in mid-February, the Saudi leadership expressed support for the ruling Al Khalifa family and even offered financial aid. It was clear that the ruling Al Saud family would not be able to stand idly by while the rule of a fellow Gulf royal family was being threatened. If the Al Khalifa fell, it would surely encourage the Saudis' own minority Shiite population, just across the 25-kilometer King Fahd Causeway, to rise up. Furthermore, should the Shiites win in Bahrain, Iran stood to gain tremendously in its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia.

Although the Shiites of Bahrain had significant and legitimate grievances, the repercussions of a Shiite victory were simply too grim for the Saudi leadership. Even some liberal Saudis, who at first sympathized with the Bahraini protests, patriotically fell in line behind the royal family once it and the press began to paint the picture in purely Sunni vs. Shiite terms, and in Saudi vs. Iran terms. The lines were clearly drawn. A new Facebook page, "We are all the Saudi Royal Family" (*Kullna Al Sa'ud*), received over 22,000 "Likes" just as Saudi troops poured over the causeway into Bahrain on March 14. Many Saudis feared that Bahrain would become like Lebanon, riven by sectarianism and controlled by radicals like Hizballah. There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia had legitimate security concerns in Bahrain.

The Saudi forces, mostly from the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), which King Abdullah had personally commanded since 1962, were invited into Bahrain by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. They were ostensibly subordinate to the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), created by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1984 to defend against Iran, a move that was a convenient form of political branding for an overwhelmingly Saudi force. The UAE, Qatar and Oman said that they would also send contingents.

For the Saudis, the GCC deployment to Bahrain was a clear case of self-defense. It was portrayed as answering the call of a sister Gulf nation in need. The Saudis left no doubt that Iran was responsible and had to be stopped, a message made clear in the GCC statement of March 10:

The [GCC] member states and their peoples... oppose any attempts at foreign intervention in their affairs. They declare that they will stand firmly and with determination against anyone who tries to ignite ethnic fanaticism or to spread sectarianism among them and among their peoples, or against anyone who dares to threaten their security and their interests. Any harm to the security of one member country will be considered as harm to all member countries, and will be dealt with immediately and without hesitation.

The shaky state of neighboring Bahrain and the contagion it represented was a shock to the Al Saud, and it was clear that they were reassessing their security posture as a result. Speaking in Abu Dhabi, former head of Saudi intelligence and former ambassador to the US and Britain, Prince Turki Al Faysal, called for a united Gulf army, questioned the reliance on the US for security, and ominously warned that Saudi Arabia might consider nuclear arms to face Israel and Iran, should the international community fail to prevent Iran from going nuclear. Turki's statements and the Saudi deployment to Bahrain gave a clear signal that the Al Saud were displeased with the wobbly US response to recent events in the Middle East and would act according to what they perceived as their interests.

As expected, the Iranians were livid at the Saudi deployment. The National Security Commission of the Majles termed it an "invasion" and demanded that the force leave immediately. Majles Speaker Ali Larijani called the deployment an "aggression" and said that the region would hold the US accountable. Defense Minister Ahmed Vahidi condemned the action.

The King's Speech: \$91 Billion for My Subjects

In February 2011, while there were threats of protests in the kingdom and in celebration of his return to Riyadh, King Abdullah had announced a welfare package valued at \$36 billion. On March 18, he announced a further distribution of about \$91 billion. The handouts, detailed in a series of 21 royal decrees, included: a payment of two months' salary to all government employees; a two-month stipend to all students in institutes of higher education; a stipend of over \$500 per month to all job seekers; raising the amount of interest-free loans; upgrading health facilities; the promised construction of 500,000 housing units at a cost of \$66.7 billion; the establishment of an anti-corruption commission; and the creation of 60,000 law enforcement jobs at the Ministry of Interior. Co-opting more citizens into the security apparatus of the Ministry was a master stroke – now even more Saudis would have a stake in assuring stability.

The handouts represented more of the same Saudi style of placating discontent, but it seemed to have worked. It put the Saudi welfare system on a regular and established footing. The royal family-owned English-language daily, *Arab News*, might have been exaggerating when it wrote that the decrees had “opened a new chapter in the relationship between state and citizen.” They were a clear demonstration, however, that the royal family would use its oil wealth to retain power. According to John Sfakianakis of Banque Saudi Fransi in Riyadh, while not all the measures could be implemented immediately, with oil prices comfortably over \$100 per barrel, and with \$444.5 billion in foreign assets, the government could comfortably sustain the measures.

The handouts also had another intended effect. With millions of Saudis invested in the Saudi stock exchange, the decrees caused the market to spike, reaching a five-week high by the end of the month. Saudis poured into the streets, screaming, “I love you my King Abdullah!”

A few days later, the Saudi government announced that the long-delayed municipal elections would be held on April 23. The move was widely seen as a concession toward liberal activists, but it was essentially a minor step and would not placate them, particularly since – despite expectations to the contrary – women would not be permitted to participate. Although municipal elections of a sort had been held in the Eastern Province in the 1960s, nationwide elections were held for the first time in 2005. They had been scheduled again for 2009, but the Saudi rulers had delayed them indefinitely in order to mollify the conservatives during the years of the al-Qaeda insurgency. While the elections

were only for half the seats in the councils – the other half were appointed to members of the royal family – they represented an opportunity for some real politicking. Still, the move fell far short of reformist expectations.

Rocky Relations with Washington

Already indignant at the way Washington had washed its hands of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the Saudis were further disappointed in the Obama administration's handling of the Bahrain crisis. For Riyadh, Washington's lack of resolve toward what the Al Saud perceived as a real Iranian threat was not easy to accept.

Contacts between the two countries were already tense just before the Saudi deployment. Both US Defense Secretary Robert Gates and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were forced to cancel visits to the kingdom as a result. "They're just not in a mode for listening," said a senior American official. When Gates visited Bahrain on March 11, he was not informed of the pending Saudi deployment, according to the Pentagon. While the administration wanted the Saudis to counsel the Bahrainis to open up their system, the Saudis would have preferred that the US mount a serious defense of the Al Khalifa. But all the US did was urge "restraint." Secretary Clinton was not helpful in the Saudi view. "We find what's happening in Bahrain alarming," said Clinton. "We think that there is no security answer to the aspirations and demands of the demonstrators."

The tension between the US and Saudi Arabia did not mean that the two were about to part ways. There were still deeply entrenched defense and training ties, and Iran was still a common enemy. Yet, relations were shaken. US officials were probably looking closely at Crown Prince Sultan and third-in-line Prince Nayif to assess the next step, as Abdullah did not seem to be recovering well from an operation the previous year.

Conclusion

The Saudi leadership is certainly questioning its next steps. The last thing it needs is contagion from the rest of the Arab world. It was therefore no accident that although there was no love lost between the Al Saud and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, who had most recently tussled over Lebanon, the unrest in Syria prompted messages of support from Riyadh to Damascus.

The Saudi regime has faced crises before, whether it be the threat of Nasserism and pan-Arabism or radical Islamic fundamentalism. It has a long history of successfully dealing with multi-faceted challenges. Oil wealth certainly helps to take the edge off popular dissent, as does the lack of a tradition of mass demonstration. Still the royal family is most certainly taking stock of the current situation. While we cannot know for sure what is actually discussed during internal royal family consultations, it is reasonable to assume that the princes are burning the midnight oil, trying to figure out if the time is ripe for a royal transition to the next in line for the throne.

Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, principal research associate at the IDC's GLORIA Center, and a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University. He is also a visiting fellow and contributor to the Task Force on Islamism and the International Order at Stanford's Hoover Institution. His latest book is Saudi Arabia and the New Strategic Landscape (Stanford: Hoover Press).

BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family