

Saudi Arabia: House of Saud, Falling House of Cards

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Saudi rulers are struggling to contain a new wave of public protests that has erupted across the Arabian kingdom as security forces open fire on unarmed civilians.

The big question: is the House of Saud finally beginning to collapse like the fragile house of cards that this creaking, ruling monarchy represents?

The irony is rich indeed. For the past year, the Saudi rulers have done their utmost to crush the slightest dissent in their country, while at the same time they have backed Western interference, aggression and regime change in Libya and Syria – under the guise, wait for it, of advocating democratic freedom and human rights.

At least two people have been reported dead from Saudi police violence against an outpouring of crowds who have taken to the streets in the kingdom – a female student and a man, described as a well-known human rights activist, are the latest victims. Many others have been injured or arrested as state security forces mobilise in what appears to be a desperate bid by the rulers to contain spreading protests.

The irony is that Saudi Arabia is one of the most vocal members of the Arab League to denounce Syria for alleged human rights violations against protesters in that country. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has even called on Syria's President Bashar Al Assad to step down and give way to greater democratic reforms.

The irony comes in at least two parts: Saudi's King Abdullah presides over an absolute monarchy that is brutally suppressing all and any peaceful dissent in his country calling for democracy; and, two, Saudi Arabia is funding and arming subversive groups in Syria who are accused of committing assassinations, kidnappings and many other terrorisms to bring down the secular Assad government.

For the past year, Saudi Arabia – the world's biggest oil producer and a key Western ally – has witnessed persistent protests against the ruling House of Saud.

Up to now, the demonstrations calling for democratic freedoms have been mainly located in Saudi's oil-rich Eastern Province, principally in the city of Qatif.

But, most worryingly for US-backed King Abdullah and his entourage of brothers and half-brothers, there is this week growing public dissent in all quarters of the kingdom.

Major street demonstrations are reported in the capital, Riyadh, in the Central Province. Protests are also taking off in the north, such as the city of Ar'ar, the western port of Jeddah and in the southern university city of Abha.

When other Arab countries saw mass protests last year against their dictatorial rulers, Saudi Arabia was also embroiled in the regional ferment. However, Saudi Arabia appeared peripheral to the momentous changes sweeping the Arab region with few media reports of any substantive popular uprising.

This can be explained partly by the ruthlessness of the Saudi authorities in crushing any incipient sign of protest in the kingdom. At least 10 people have been killed over the past year from Saudi state forces attacking peaceful demonstrations. Another explanation for the apparent low-key public protests in Saudi Arabia is the under-reporting of such events by the Western mainstream media.

The popular dissent in Saudi Arabia against its rulers is to be sure there; it is just not being reported by the Western corporate media. That is because Saudi Arabia is a major strategic ally of Western governments, for example in supplying oil, buying huge amounts of weapons, and advancing geopolitical agenda in support of the garrison state of Israel or facilitating the NATO conquest of Libya, hammering Syria, and trying to destabilise Iran.

The so-called free press and media in the West take tacit orders from their governments. The corporate media also take, depend on, lucrative advertising money from Saudi and Gulf Arab super rich entrepreneurs and state Sovereign Wealth Funds. Reporting on protests in Saudi Arabia and more especially reporting on state brutality is for the more accurately termed unfree media tantamount to cutting off the hand that feeds.

But, despite the suppression of protests and information, the people of Saudi Arabia are on the move against their Western-backed despotic rulers. And the grievances are as abundant as the oil in that country.

For a start, the Eastern Province has a large Shia Muslim population – perhaps 50 per cent compared with 10 per cent overall in Saudi Arabia. The Shia have been grossly discriminated against by the Wahhabi rulers of the House of Saud. Despite possessing the vast oil wealth of the Arabian Peninsula, poverty is rampant among the Eastern Province Shia.

Secondly, the Shia of Eastern Saudi Arabia are inflamed by the House of Saud's invasion of neighbouring Bahrain and the ongoing brutal crackdown against the mainly Shia-led pro-democracy movement on that island. Recall that before the relatively recent imposition of European colonial boundaries, the people of Bahrain had close kinship with those of Eastern Saudi Arabia. It is not uncommon for families to have members in both territories until this day.

But the issue is much bigger than that. Right across Saudi Arabia, there are deep, seething grievances in the populace against the House of Saud, grievances that unite Shia, Sunni and non-religionists alike.

Despite Saudi Arabia's vast oil wealth and official GDP per capita, unemployment and poverty are rampant. As with the other Gulf Arab countries, Saudi Arabia's rulers rely on a slave labour economy recruited from South Asia and Africa. This means that many young Saudis have to endure a life of unemployment.

Other grievances include no elections and negligible freedom of expression – all forms of public protest are strictly banned; the state is run on an extreme Wahhabist application of

Sharia law, where limbs are amputated for petty crimes and women are forbidden from driving cars because the kingdom's religious police view that particular activity as being "unchaste".

Nevertheless, the winds of change that have swept the region seem now to be assailing Saudi Arabia with increasing force.

While analysts have been focusing on the implications of a weakened Syria and Iran, the other side of coin has not received much attention. The fallout from a determined pro-democracy movement succeeding to overthrow the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia could be the surprise to rock the region, akin to the seismic event of the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Such an outcome would not be hard to contemplate. After all, Saudi Arabia as a state is a very recent and fragile construct. It was only formed in 1932 when imperialist Britain shoe-horned Ibn Saud into power against the Ottoman Empire and after the violent ouster of several tribal rivals.

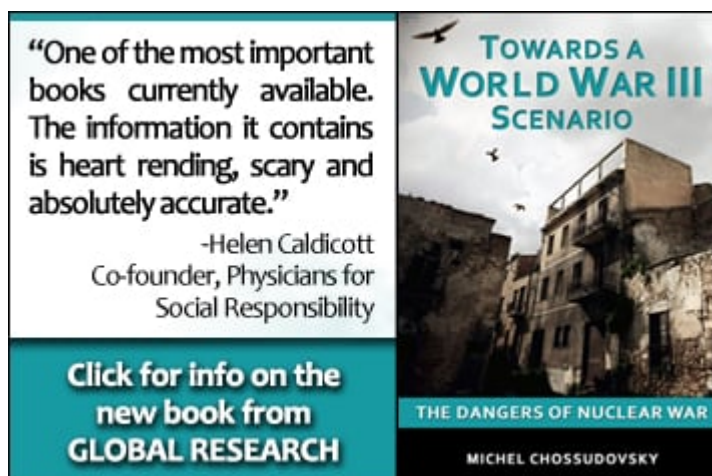
Ever since, the House of Saud has ruled with fragile control over a fissile territory with deep, enduring tribal animosities. The present ailing and 87-year-old King Abdullah is one of 37 reputed sons of Ibn Saud. Rifts within the House of Saud and rivalries as to the successor of King Abdullah are constantly boiling. But even more explosive than these House of Saud tensions are those of the general population who are weary of dynastic, despotic rule.

A collapse of the House of Saud would have explosive consequences. How would the US-led warmongering towards Syria and Iran be conducted/blunted? How would that especial affront to international law and human rights, Israel, continue to survive? The price of oil would hit record levels beyond \$150 a barrel and that would surely spell a coup de grace to the death-gasping capitalist world economy.

Bring it on.

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