

Saudi Arabia Plays Key Role in US Anti-Iranian Alliance

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Saudi Arabia's key role in seeking to destabilise the Ba'athist regime of Bashir Assad has become the centrepiece of an attempt by Washington to cobble together an anti-Iranian alliance, aimed more generally at suppressing the Middle Eastern masses.

Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil producer and exporter, has the largest known oil reserves in the world. This has brought untold wealth to the Saudi ruling family and its more than 20,000 princes. The House of Saud keeps power by a system of brutal repression that outlaws all public protests, strikes and expressions of dissent, combined with its championing of an extreme version of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism.

The 10 to 15 percent of the population who are Shi'ite are persecuted. This creates deep social tensions, especially as the Shi'ite live mainly in the Eastern Province, where 90 percent of Saudi's 260 billion barrels of proven oil reserves are found.

The majority of the population have derived little benefit from oil wealth. Unemployment among Saudi men is officially 11.6 percent, but is several times that figure. Large numbers of women are excluded from the labour market. Young people under 30, who make up two thirds of the 26-million-strong population, are badly affected; 40 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds are unemployed. Even well-educated graduates cannot find work, marry or set up a home.

Soaring oil prices have created 2.2 million new jobs in the private sector, but only 9 percent went to Saudi citizens. Nearly 6 million workers, or 80 percent of the workforce, are non-nationals, mainly migrant labourers from South or Southeast Asia, who work for a pittance, without rights or protection.

In January, following the mass social movements in Tunisia and Egypt, protests broke out demanding the release of the "forgotten political prisoners," who have been imprisoned for as long as 16 years without charges or trials. This prompted King Abdullah to return home early, after months of hospitalisation in the US.

A focus for protests was Qateef, a predominantly Shi'a area in the oil-producing eastern part of the country. Protests—all but ignored by the international media—have been ongoing for months, with demonstrators denouncing the Saudi military's intervention in neighbouring Bahrain, demanding the release of people detained during the protests, and denouncing the regime's suppression of women.

They were met with suppression and a massive US\$130 billion package of reforms, an amount equal to 36 percent of Saudi GDP. The package included a monthly minimum wage

of 3,000 riyals (US\$800), two months' extra pay for government workers, extra grants for university students, unemployment benefit of about US\$260 a month, 500,000 affordable homes, US\$4.3 billion investment in medical facilities, 60,000 jobs in the security forces, and an anti-corruption commission.

Such largesse is only sustainable, however if the price of oil—presently at more than US\$85 a barrel—remains high.

Increased social spending comes on top of a hefty defence bill taking nearly a third of the Saudi budget. This is set to rise in line with the Kingdom's increasingly bellicose attitude towards Iran, its involvement in Yemen and Pakistan, and covert funding of Sunni forces in Iraq and Syria. In addition, Saudi Arabia is committed to paying most of the US\$25 billion the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has pledged to buy off social discontent in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Oman. Riyadh also provides large sums to the Palestinians and Afghanistan.

The death last month of the 86-year-old Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz has raised concerns about the Kingdom's political future. The 88-year-old King Abdullah is in extremely poor health. Abdullah delayed Prince Sultan's funeral until he got the agreement of the Allegiance Council, made up of representatives of each of the families of Ibn Saud, the Kingdom's founder, to appoint Prince Nayif, the interior minister, as the new crown prince. But Nayif, 78, suffers poor health and there is no agreement among the next generation over succession.

Saudi Arabia has functioned as the linchpin of social reaction during the mass protests that have shaken the Middle East this year. Its overarching aim is crush all protests before they spread to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, all of which face dissent—including from their own restive Shi'ite populations.

Furious that Washington withdrew its support for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's former president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, whom it is sheltering, Saudi Arabia helped crush protests against neighbouring Bahrain's al-Khalifa dynasty.

Riyadh has also supported Jordan's King Abdullah, who faces ongoing protests led by the Muslim Brotherhood, with cash and an offer of GCC membership including military support.

In neighbouring Yemen, Riyadh has propped up the 30-year dictatorship of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, helping to suppress the local affiliate of Al Qaeda and Shi'ite rebels near the border with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi elite are concerned that prolonged protests in Yemen will spill over the border. Despite trying to get Saleh to resign via a GCC-brokered agreement, the Saudis allowed him to return to Yemen, after months during which he was held in Riyadh for treatment of his wounds following an assassination attempt. This is because they cannot rely upon any successor.

Saudi also collaborated in the US "targeted killing" of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born Muslim cleric, in Yemen, and later his son.

The Saudi dynasty vies for regional influence with Iran. It uses its guardianship of two of Islam's three holy sites, Mecca and Medina, to bolster its claim to defend the Muslim faith, asserting a religious conflict against "heretical" Shi'ites, with the support of the other Gulf monarchies.

For decades, Riyadh has used its enormous oil wealth to cultivate Sunni Islamic clerics and Salafist groups and finance campaigns of religious education and television programmes broadcast throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. It has whipped up hostility to the Shi'a minorities to divide any domestic dissent, prevent the growth of pro-Iranian Shi'ite political parties and counter Iranian influence. It routinely blames Iranian "interference" in Bahrain and the Yemen for the unrest there, without producing any evidence.

In Lebanon, the Saudis back the pro-Western faction of Saad Hariri—and Rafik Hariri, his father and former prime minister assassinated in 2005—as a bulwark against Syrian and Iranian influence. Hezbollah, the Shi'ite party backed by Syria and Iran, has broad popular appeal outside Lebanon for its opposition to Israel.

In 2002, then-King Fahd put forward his plan to normalise relations with Israel in return for a Palestinian state alongside Israel's 1967 borders to defuse the widespread anger throughout the region. President George W. Bush's Road Map, announced in 2002, was an attempt to counter the political impact of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which then-Crown Prince Abdullah had warned would strengthen Iran.

Saudi Arabia is implacably hostile to the Iraqi government, which is close to Iran. Riyadh has refused to send an ambassador to Baghdad and insists on the repayment of its US\$30 billion loan given to Saddam Hussein to prosecute the eight-year war against Iran in the 1980s.

According to US State Department documents published by WikiLeaks, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has accused Saudi Arabia of "fomenting sectarian conflict" and "funding a Sunni army." Its intervention in Iraq is likely to escalate after US troops withdraw at the end of this year.

Riyadh played a key role in the Arab League's March 13 announcement of support for a "no-fly" zone over Libya, which paved the way for the NATO war to remove Colonel Muammar Ghaddafi and the installation of the puppet National Transitional Council.

In recent years, Riyadh mended relations with Syria, as Damascus sought closer relations with Washington. Together, the two countries sought to prevent tensions in Lebanon from degenerating into armed conflict. But while Riyadh originally backed President Bashar al-Assad against the mainly Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist-led protest movement to maintain stability in the region, it has switched sides—seeing the unrest as an opportunity to reduce Iran's influence in the Middle East.

Last August, it withdrew its ambassador from Damascus. Some of the oppositionists, many armed, have support from Saudi Arabia and forces around former Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Lebanon. They are represented in the Syrian National Council, established with Turkey's support, in a bid to provide an embryonic Syrian government in exile and legitimise Turkish intervention on behalf of the Western powers.

In Pakistan, Riyadh has been one of Islamabad's major donors, second only to the US, and endorses its efforts towards reconciliation with the Taliban in Afghanistan at the expense of rival factions closer to Tehran. According to the Center for Global Development, Riyadh provided Pakistan with nearly US\$140 million a year between 2004 and 2009. Last year, it gave Islamabad US\$100 million in flood relief, and this year US\$114 million.

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