

The Saudi Arab Spring Nobody Noticed

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [ARAB PROTEST
MOVEMENT](#)



Hear the one about the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia that nobody noticed?

No, this is not a joke. It is a real situation—and a cautionary example of what happens when Western governments and their media are more favorable to some “revolutions” than others.

With the Syrian regime, long out of favor with the West, we heard about the uprising from the beginning. The drumbeat has grown dramatically, along with Western condemnations and moves to isolate the regime for its crackdown on dissent.

In the case of Libya, run by the fiercely independent and eccentric Qaddafi, much of the world’s press credulously rushed to print every rumor about regime excesses, many of them never verified and seemingly untrue. (For more on that, see [this](#) and [this](#) and [this](#).) The press portrayed the rebels as heroes, and featured almost daily coverage. As NATO launched a creeping intervention which ended with wall to wall bombing, the media accepted its claim that the intervention was to stop Qaddafi from harming or further oppressing his people.

The media quickly took to—and stayed with— the uprising in Egypt, one of the poorest countries in the region, where the West lost an ally but quickly found a new collaborator in a similarly-inclined military junta.

In the case of the mother of all petro-allies, Saudi Arabia, however, protests have been met with near silence by the media and no expressions of sympathy for the dissenters by Western governments.

THE SAUDI STRUGGLE

Here’s the background: On November 21, government troops opened fire on demonstrators in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, killing at least four and injuring more. Given the general paucity of demonstrations in a country where dissent is dealt with fiercely, the unrest and violence seemed a highly newsworthy development.

The next day, the Middle-East-based Al Jazeera English, the “best” Western source of news from the region, punted. Instead of getting direct eyewitness accounts that might anger the Saudi leadership (close allies of the Emir of Qatar, who owns Al Jazeera), the network used an old trick. It quoted a Western news agency, the French outfit Agence France Press, which merely [reported](#) the Saudi government’s version of events. (For more on blatant inconsistencies in how Al Jazeera covers different uprisings in the region, see [this](#))

WhoWhatWhy [article](#))

Two days after Al Jazeera, the Associated Press had its own [report](#), also based on the Saudi spokesman. The article did note “a series of clashes between police and protesters in the country’s Shiite-dominated eastern region, starting in the spring.” It noted:

The Interior Ministry previously blamed what it described as “seditious” residents, saying they attacked security forces with guns and firebombs with the backing of a foreign enemy — an apparent reference to Shiite power Iran.

The ministry statement Thursday said the deaths in the new unrest were the result of exchanges of fire since Monday with “unknown criminals,” who it said fired on security checkpoints and vehicles from houses and alleyways.

The purported context comes in the final paragraph:

There is a long history of discord between the kingdom’s Sunni rulers and the Shiite minority concentrated in the east, Saudi Arabia’s key oil-producing region. Shiites make up 10 percent of the kingdom’s 23 million citizens and complain of discrimination, saying they are barred from key positions in the military and government and are not given a proportionate share of the country’s wealth.

The salient point in Saudi Arabia, however, is not really ethnic discrimination, which exists throughout the world. It is the story of the avarice and brutality through which one extended family dominates a country.

In Libya, the uprising was dominated by a distinct tribal opposition, yet it was quickly characterized as representing broad national sentiment, with a kind of nobility and inevitability. Not so (up to now) with reporting on the Saudi protests. In truth, dissatisfaction with the Saudi royal family is hardly limited to the Shiites, and the levels of anger are probably as great and perhaps greater than that felt by the average Libyan toward Qaddafi.

ANOTHER VIEW

Those wanting a closer look at what is going on in Saudi Arabia can go to the site Liveleak, where there’s highly disturbing [video](#) accompanied by this text: “Qatif—Firing live bullets at the demonstrators November 21, 2011: Video shows the brutal style Saudi security forces in dealing with the demonstrators by firing live bullets.” Another source is a [blog](#) called “Angry Arab News Service,” which features video in which a large and vocal group in Qatif are apparently chanting “Death to the House of Saud”:

That kind of material seems to warrant worldwide attention. And with that, we might reasonably expect the protests to grow. But the coverage has not come, nor the greater uprising.

New York Times

Who’s to blame? Everyone, really. But based on its claim to be the gold standard, we focus on the *New York Times*. According to a search of the database Nexis-Lexis, the *Times* ran

nothing at all on Qatif until Sunday November 27, when it featured a survey of turmoil throughout the region. A reference to Qatif was buried deep toward the end of the [piece](#), where it would go almost unnoticed.

Yet the *Times* should have realizing that it was looking at a pattern. After all, the paper did [cover](#) a previous incident in Qatif—back in *March*. It was a single article, with a Beirut dateline.

Saudi police officers opened fire at a protest march in a restive, oil-rich province on Thursday, wounding at least three people, according to witnesses and a Saudi government official.

[Snip]

Witnesses described the small protest march in the eastern city of Qatif as peaceful, but an Interior Ministry spokesman said demonstrators had attacked the police before the officers began firing, Reuters reported.

[Snip]

The clash with protesters in Qatif, located in a heavily Shiite region, underscored longstanding tensions in Saudi society: there is a sense among the Shiite minority that it is discriminated against by a government practicing a zealous form of Sunni orthodoxy.

No emphasis on the self-dealing, greed and barbarity that characterize the Saudi dictatorship. Ironically, that was when demonstrations in Libya were *all over the news*, with constant emphasis on Qaddafi's infamy. Here are some *New York Times* headlines from Libya in the Spring:

[Photographs Offer Graphic Evidence of Abuses Under Qaddafi](#)

[Time's Up, Qaddafi](#) (an opinion piece)

[Libyan Rebels Complain of Deadly Delays Under NATO's Command](#)

[Rape Victim Describes Her Ordeal](#)

[Qaddafi Forces Said to Lay Land Mines at City](#)

THE REAL STORY

So, what's the real story in Saudi Arabia? December brought a report from the human rights group Amnesty International, covered as [follows](#) by BBC:

Saudi Arabia accused of repression after Arab Spring

Amnesty International has accused Saudi Arabia of reacting to the Arab Spring by launching a wave of repression. [In a report](#), the human rights group said hundreds of people had been arrested, many of them without charge or trial.

Prominent reformists had been given long sentences following trials Amnesty called “grossly unfair”. So far unrest has largely been confined to the Shia minority in the east of the country.

....In its 73-page report published on Thursday, Amnesty accuses the Saudi authorities of arresting hundreds of people for demanding political and social reforms or for calling for the release of relatives detained without charge or trial.

The report says that since February, when sporadic demonstrations began – in defiance of a permanent national ban on protests – the Saudi government has carried out a crackdown....

Since March, more than 300 people who took part in peaceful protests in Qatif, Ahsa and Awwamiya in the east have been detained, Amnesty says. Most have been released, often after promising not to protest again. Many face travel bans.

Last week 16 men, including nine prominent reformists, were given sentences ranging from five to 30 years in prison. Amnesty said they were blindfolded and handcuffed during their trial, while their lawyer was not allowed to enter the court for the first three sessions.

“Peaceful protesters and supporters of political reform in the country have been targeted for arrest in an attempt to stamp out the kinds of call for reform that have echoed across the region,” said Amnesty’s Middle East and North Africa director, Philip Luther.

[Snip]

Amnesty says that the government continues to detain thousands of people on terrorism-related grounds. Torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread, it says – an allegation Saudi Arabia has always denied.

[snip]

Amnesty says the government has drafted an anti-terror law that would effectively criminalise dissent as a “terrorist crime” and allow extended detention without charge or trial.

Questioning the integrity of the king would carry a minimum prison sentence of 10 years, according to Amnesty.

[snip]

“Rather than deal with legitimate demands, the government is taking the easy route and blaming everything on a conspiracy by the Iranians,” said the activist, who asked not to be named for fear of repercussions.

The takeaway from the *Amnesty* report is that demonstrators have been active in Saudi Arabia just as long as in Libya and elsewhere, and as consistently—and, as elsewhere, have been dealt with harshly by their government. Somehow, though, this is not deemed a sufficiently important story to cover.

Could it have something to do with Saudi Arabia’s indispensability as an ally and supplier of oil? In which case, traditional news reporting standards do not apply?

And did anyone ask the US government, so quick to condemn Qaddafi for his crackdown on

demonstrators, if it had any reaction to the Saudi crackdown on demonstrators? Doesn't look like it.

Meanwhile, what of this scapegoating of Iran for what seems to be authentic Saudi dissent? How does this dovetail with the overall western effort to characterize Iran as behind every nefarious act, even the [ludicrous-sounding plot](#) announced months ago by the White House, in which the Iranians were purportedly trying to recruit Mexican drug gangs to kill the Saudi ambassador to the US?

What of the buildup to an attack on Iran, through the rightwing government of Israeli prime minister Netanyahu— decried even by the heads of Israel's own intelligence agencies as unjustified and dangerous?

How much of this larger play is about keeping the Saudi royal family in power, and taking care of the Western oil industry, and the "western way of life"?

Consider Libya vs Saudi Arabia. Two oil producers, one unpredictable and unreliable, one tight with the West. Heavy coverage of dissent in one, almost none in the other.

SAUDIS AREN'T WAITING

Saudis know better than to wait for the establishment media to get into the act. One outlier that tends to be ahead of the pack, McClatchy Newspapers, just ran a [piece](#) on how Saudi dissidents are turning to YouTube to get their message out. Though Saudi Arabia's high standard of living is a chestnut in media coverage, the dissidents highlight the disparities in the Kingdom in a homemade video:

One Saudi man he interviews has 11 children to feed and a net monthly income of \$1,200, half of which goes to rent. The family has enough money left over only for flour and one meal a day. The imam at the local mosque reveals that in order to raise money for the household, the parents are sending out young sons to sell drugs, and the women engage in prostitution.

[snip]

While the film doesn't explicitly explain the "Monopoly" of its title, a leading Saudi human rights activist said in an interview that it comes down to one thing: "All the land is owned de facto and de jure by the royal family."

The article notes that uprising hasn't begun yet—in part because of apathy.

But how much is apathy, and how much is Saudis realizing that no one will come to their aid if they risk throwing off their shackles? They cannot count on the handy boost the West gave to revolutions in nearby countries. Nor can they count on the Western media, which brays about its independence and initiative, but, increasingly, shows neither where the West's precious oil supplies are involved.

<http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2011/11/chants-death-to-house-of-saud-in-qatif.html>

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