

Saudi Arabia Versus the Arab Spring

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SAUDI ARABIA is determined to crush the Arab Spring. Both at home and throughout the region the kingdom's leaders have doggedly been pursuing the path of counterrevolution. Nowhere has Riyadh's determination to snuff out the forces of revolutionary ferment been more devastating than in Bahrain, where prodemocracy protesters first mobilized to press for political reform in mid-February. The rulers of the tiny island country, which sits just a few miles off of Saudi Arabia's eastern shore, have been longtime vassals of the Al Saud. As the ranks of protesters swelled in Manama's Pearl Roundabout in the early spring, official anxiety in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia spiraled. So soon after the fall of another friendly autocrat, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the specter of democracy in Bahrain proved too much for Riyadh to bear.

In mid-March, over fifteen hundred members of Saudi Arabia's National Guard poured over the causeway connecting the two countries. What followed their arrival was brutal. Armed security forces, including throngs of sword-wielding vigilantes loyal to the Bahraini and Saudi regimes, violently routed tens of thousands of peaceful protesters who had boldly pressed for relief from oppression. The bloodletting was merciless. While officials spoke of the need to restore law, order, and security, the underlying imperative seemed mostly to be a lust for vengeance. In the crackdown that followed, dozens of prodemocracy activists were killed, thousands were arrested, disappeared, and tortured. Saudi Arabia's anxieties extend beyond Bahrain as well. Riyadh attempted to get out in front of revolutionary movements in Yemen and Syria to preserve semblances of the political status quo in both places. It has also lent support to the beleaguered monarchies in Morocco and Jordan. Even in post-Mubarak Egypt, Riyadh has pledged billions of dollars of aid in an effort to shape the political outcome there.

The kingdom's rulers also moved decisively to co-opt and crush those inclined to mount a campaign of public dissent inside Saudi Arabia itself. King Abdullah, the octogenarian monarch who is often confused for a reformer, offered up over \$100 billion in domestic incentives to keep people from taking to the streets. Just in case the carrots were not inducement enough, he and his supporters in the royal family also ordered thousands of security forces to close off spaces for public assembly and to make clear that the penalties for unrest would be severe. So far (at least at the time of this writing), the gambit has worked. Saudi Arabia has yet to see the kinds of unrest that have shaken regimes in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. But the urgency of the Al Saud's response should leave little doubt that the forces of revolution simmer beneath the surface of the world's most powerful oil state.

The outcome of the Arab Spring still remains far from clear. Saudi Arabia's efforts to preserve the status quo should be cause for caution, however. Regional autocrats and their backers have long struggled to balance and preserve a system that combines authoritarianism and radicalism. Although they fear threats to their stability and security, in reality their regional system has historically thrived on crisis, war, and violence. The method Saudi Arabia is using to preserve this system—its approach to counterrevolution—is potentially perilous. We know this because Saudi Arabia has been here before. Indeed, the principles and tools of counterrevolution have long been part of the kingdom's political and military arsenal. And the consequences have often been brutal. Since the late twentieth century, Saudi politics has been based on outmaneuvering calls for political transformation, on preserving a system of political economic privilege, on high returns on the sale of oil, and on unleashing the forces of radicalism and sectarianism to insure the survival of the kingdom's ruling clique.

Power, of course, exhausts all means to protect itself. And potential democratic change threatens not only the dynastic power of the Al Saud, who have ruled in Arabia since 1902, but also the unbridled privilege and excess that comes along with it. Saudi counterrevolution

is not just about an oppressive regime being oppressive. Nor does it simply aim to rescue the authoritarian order and the close-knit family of tyrants that has long dominated the political status quo in the region. There is another imperative at work. It is the desperate urge to protect the kingdom's regional hegemony and, most important, the advantage it garners from an oil-dependent, global political economy.

Oil has been at the heart of Saudi power and influence since the middle of the twentieth century. The tremendous wealth generated by oil and Saudi Arabia's control of the largest petroleum reserves on the planet have helped shape a set of social, economic, and political relations that is dominated by Riyadh. This system rewards the kingdom's ruling family with almost unfathomable privilege and power. It is virtually impossible to measure the various levels of excess that have accrued to the Al Saud. Their staggering collective wealth and widespread political influence both flow from oil. From 2008 to 2010 the kingdom brought in over \$500 billion in oil revenue, all of which resides and compounds in a central treasury controlled by the royal family.

The country's rulers sit atop a closed political system: subjects and citizens enjoy few political rights and exert little influence. Because the ruling elites have a small base for their power, and because they understand that political marginalization creates the possibility of resistance, they have historically redistributed oil wealth as a way to assimilate potential dissidents. Indeed, patronage and the provision of cradle-to-grave services are the lifeblood of the domestic political economy. Doling out favor has been at the heart of the political and social contract that has bound ruler and ruled in Saudi Arabia for over fifty years. These are not relations born of mutual affection, but are the result of shared dependency and the pursuit of access to oil wealth. Oil wealth is passed along in myriad social welfare programs that include free education, free health care, sweeping employment support, subsidies for industry and business, and even the provision of copious amounts of water. The latter has been particularly important, considering the kingdom is one of the most arid places in the world. Patronage is also at the heart of Saudi Arabia's

regional power. In a part of the world dominated by poverty and economic inequality, the Saudis have successfully secured their influence by plying the region with cash.

The ability to sustain the privilege and the social and political relations enabled by oil wealth is dependent on the ability to generate high revenues—rents—from oil. High oil prices are necessary to sustain the domestic political system and the patronage that fuels it, as well as the kingdom's hegemony in the region. Power and privilege are expensive: buying them requires a steady and profitable source of revenue. The problem, as the political scientists Timothy Mitchell and Robert Vitalis have pointed out, is that oil is the second most abundant liquid on the planet. As an engine of wealth, oil can only produce the necessary revenue if its production is carefully limited, if its scarcity is manufactured. Since the middle of the twentieth century, oil companies and oil-producing countries have struggled to keep too much oil from making it to global markets. There is a conventional wisdom that oil producers, oil companies, and political leaders in places like the United States are primarily concerned with ensuring that enough oil is supplied to global markets to preserve stable prices. In a world of seemingly tight supply and demand, protecting supply has been a point of emphasis rhetorically. But in practice the opposite has been true: since the 1970s, oil producers and oil companies have been decidedly antimarket, concerned principally with generating the highest profits possible and manipulating production to achieve them. Given the logic of global capitalism, it would be shocking if countries like Saudi Arabia acted any other way.

Yet the pursuit of profits does require a delicate balancing act. Leaders in oil states have struggled to judge, and periodically to control, the fine line between producing maximum profits and provoking customers to seek alternative energy solutions. As prices soared over one hundred dollars a barrel in May 2011, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest men, stated publicly that the kingdom preferred slightly lower prices in order to ensure that Western consumers, and the United States in particular, remained oil dependent. He remarked to the American cable television news

network CNN, “We don’t want the West to go and find alternatives, because, clearly, the higher the price of oil goes, the more they have incentives to go and find alternatives.” Saudi Arabia’s goal, then, is to preserve some semblance of market stability, to underwrite the delicate balance between maximum profit and consumer dependence. And the kingdom is well positioned to achieve this balance. Because it is home to the largest reserves in the world, Saudi Arabia plays the role of the global “swing producer”—for every day in 2011 they have kept a spare capacity of around three million barrels of oil in the ground, a fact that gives the Saudis tremendous power to shape global supply and prices. The country’s leaders argue that they use their power to produce excess oil in order to stabilize production and prices, but it is notable that prices have edged consistently upward over the last decade. Just a few years ago, Saudi officials argued that a fair price of oil was around forty dollars a barrel, enough for them to service their domestic budget. In 2011, they have argued, that figure is closer to eighty dollars. The doubling of the so-called fair price is a reflection of two interrelated circumstances. First, it indicates a considerable rise in domestic spending and, in particular, the expansion of the patronage networks that are designed to keep dissent on the margins, something that in the midst of the Arab Spring is becoming considerably more expensive. Second, it also suggests that Riyadh perceives that the consumers’ appetite for oil is so great that it can be sold at a consistently higher price. So far, they have judged correctly that the consumers’ breaking point, the moment when the cost of oil dependency is unsustainable, remains distant. For all the talk of stability, swing capacity, and the fair price of oil—rhetoric that seems to speak to the managerial logic of the global market—the reality is that Riyadh understands its real power stems directly from the simple perception that oil is scarce.

The manufacturing of oil scarcity has its roots in the early twentieth-century oil industry, when the large multinational oil conglomerates worried that excessive competition would drive down profits. Especially when it came to the Middle East, they collaborated to ensure cooperative production and maximal returns. The Arabian

American Oil Company (Aramco)—a conglomerate that included Chevron, Texaco, Exxon, and Mobil—operated in Saudi Arabia and, because it controlled the largest oil deposits in the world, was the single largest beneficiary of the twentieth-century petroleum order. The most significant source of friction in this arrangement came not from competitors, but rather from producing countries like Saudi Arabia that strained to secure a greater return on the oil pumped from underneath their lands. Over two decades passed after the discovery of oil before the kingdom began earning fifty percent of the revenues from oil sales. Corporate dominance passed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when producing countries systematically began nationalizing the domestic operations of the oil giants. Saudi Arabia nationalized Aramco more slowly than most, fully assuming total ownership in 1981.

Although ownership passed from Western corporations to producing governments in the 1970s and early 1980s, the system of manufacturing scarcity remained. Regional governments, now enjoying one hundred percent of the returns from oil sales, behaved like the oil companies before them—limiting production and driving up prices and profits. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) began flexing its muscles in the mid-1970s, most dramatically in the course of the 1973 Egypt-Israel October War, when the United States was unable to manage the contradictions in its pro-Israel and pro-oil policies. In response to US support for Israel during the war, Saudi Arabia and the American-owned Aramco imposed a temporary embargo of oil to the United States. During the 1970s the oil-producing countries shook global oil markets and drove the price of oil to unprecedented heights. But the era of high prices passed in the mid-1980s precisely because there was no shortage of oil. What became clear was that the global trade in oil and oil pricing, rather than reflecting the market fundamentals of supply and demand, was often driven by psychology, uncertainty, and the perception of insecurity.

Whatever the engine of higher prices, the oil embargo and the energy crisis might have been a moment when American officials

reconsidered their relationship with Arab oil producers and with the United States' dependence on oil more generally. But this did not happen. It was true in the 1970s, and at various moments since, that sudden price rises created domestic political pressure in the United States, but these have not been significant enough to generate a rethinking of the status quo. Instead, American officials have consistently worked to deepen ties with the oil producers—to protect the political economy of oil, the high revenues generated from its sale, and, in particular, the various ways that oil revenues get recycled through the American economy. Acting as landlords, Saudi rulers exert direct control over the profits of sales, and they spend the money in various ways. In addition to domestic patronage, Riyadh also uses its oil wealth to cultivate layers of foreign investment and support. The American weapons and security industries in particular have benefited most directly from higher oil prices. Since the early 1970s Gulf oil producers have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on American-manufactured weapons. In addition to military hardware, Saudi Arabia has also relied heavily on the US military and on so-called security contractors for training and for maintenance. The kingdom has regularly spent upward of ten percent of its annual oil revenues, often over \$10 billion a year, in the acquisition of arms and munitions. They have been used most effectively not in regional conflict, but rather in the oppression of domestic forces of opposition. Indeed, it has been the domestic security forces, the kingdom's counterrevolutionary authorities, that have been most clearly served by the American-Saudi military relationship.

Of course, the oil-for-arms relationship is not framed as a business relationship. Instead it is justified in the language of regional and national security. American officials have claimed, since the 1940s, that securing access to oil and, since the 1970s, that protecting oil are among the United States' most critical political objectives. Indeed, the depth of the American commitment to preserving the regional and global political economies of oil, recast in the language of preserving stability and security, is exemplified best by its frequent military interventions in the region over the last three decades. Since

1980, when President Jimmy Carter declared that he would “use any means necessary, including military force,” to protect America’s “vital interests” in the Persian Gulf, the United States either has been involved directly in war or has abetted it in the region. In effect, the United States has used its military-industrial complex to maintain mutual political-economic dependencies (oil for arms) and has provided the kingdom with the tools and training necessary for continued oppression and counterrevolution.

The United States’ commitment to the preservation of the political status quo in the Persian Gulf has undermined the prospects for the Arab Spring and has strengthened the forces of counterrevolution. This has been most evident in Bahrain, where American officials refused to condemn or take measures to stop Saudi and Bahraini security forces from carrying out their brutal crackdown. And it is in the Gulf where the gap between US values and interests is most glaring. The decision to intervene militarily in Libya, justified as a humanitarian intervention, but not in Bahrain, where the violence and brutality are just as appalling, can only be understood as the result of the American commitment to the friendly Arab oil producers in the Gulf. In Bahrain, the United States condoned the sacrifice of Arab blood for oil.

While preserving the status quo in the Persian Gulf is a priority for the United States, it is an existential concern for Saudi Arabia. Saudi leaders in Riyadh view the Arab Spring and the popular pro-democracy movements sweeping the region as perhaps the greatest threat to their rule. The urgency of Saudi Arabia’s response, the resort to violence and the over \$100 billion of new spending, should leave little doubt that Riyadh was frightened from the outset by the prospect of political transformation. In addition to the immediate reaction, the kingdom’s leaders also undertook several other important measures designed to limit the potential power of protest movements and to shore up the political system. To do so they turned to a familiar partner, the country’s reactionary religious establishment. In the first few months of 2011, the Al Saud appealed to and then unleashed the forces of religious asceticism, including the puritanical

sect of religious zealots known commonly as Wahhabis, who share the Saudis' abiding investment in preserving the political status quo and in preventing the realization of democratic transformation. In March 2011 prominent members of the clergy officially denounced public dissent as un-Islamic. Scholars warned that protests would lead to chaos, threatening the unity of the Muslim community.

The official religious establishment has derived great advantages from the Saudi dynasty. In the modern era, since the early twentieth century, supportive clergy forged a religio-political alliance with the ruling elite. In exchange for dominion over the spiritual, social, and cultural affairs of their rulers' subjects, dutiful scholars bestowed upon the country's rulers the stamp of religious legitimacy. Although the relationship has been mutually beneficial, it has also often been contentious and a source of anxiety for the Al Saud. This has mostly been the result of notable religious figures and their allies periodically bristling at Saudi decision making. In the late 1920s, when the country's political rulers refused to destroy the Arabian Peninsula's Shiite population, a group that the official religious establishment has always viewed as infidels who should be forcibly converted or face death, tensions between the clergy and the Al Saud even led to civil war. Over the course of the century, in fact, the ruling elite struggled to balance their need for the clergy with a desire to limit their influence. By the 1970s, flush with billions of dollars in oil revenue, they had achieved some success in marginalizing the religious establishment. With skyrocketing oil revenues and new levels of spending, patronage and the redistribution of wealth seemed to replace religious authority as the source of legitimacy for the ruling family. No longer partners with the Al Saud, top religious scholars had been bureaucratized by the late 1970s, turned into just one more cog in a sprawling and growing administrative apparatus beholden entirely to secular leadership. The clergy quietly seethed at their political isolation.

Events at the end of the 1970s threatened to upset the primacy of the royal family in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf. The political and ideological consequences were profound when the clergy

returned to prominence. In November 1979, a band of religious radicals stormed the Mecca Mosque, the holiest site in Islam, and occupied it in protest for weeks. Saudi leaders were shocked and shaken. Desperate for support and seeking religious sanction to use force inside the holy sanctuary, they turned to the religious establishment for help. The scholars agreed to issue a ruling allowing violence in the mosque in exchange for the renewal of the original religio-political contract. The Al Saud conceded. Over the next decade and a half, the kingdom poured billions of new dollars into religious causes and institutions, including schools, universities, and the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. The religious establishment relished their newfound wealth and power, and used both to assert their authority. The religious police began to roam, as did members of the country's official Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice—an institution that operates in parallel with the regular police and that possesses the right to detain those suspected of breaching the country's so-called moral code. These monitors of morality scurried about the kingdom's highways and shopping malls, meting out abuse and intimidation, particularly against women. Imprisonment, torture, and corporal punishment were commonplace. Religious discrimination and persecution became systemic. New violent pathologies (including growing support for jihad) also took greater hold and were cynically manipulated by political elites.

By the end of the 1980s, tens of thousands of Saudi men had passed through religious schools and were increasingly exposed to the most austere varieties of Sunni Islamic theology and philosophy. The post-1979 arrangement would yield a number of unintended but dangerous consequences. Some of the newly educated Saudi youth came out of the well-funded university system well versed in the principles of Islamic radicalism. Thousands of Saudis traveled to Central Asia—with the encouragement of their teachers and with the financial backing of the Saudi regime and the United States—where they fought or aided in the fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Battle-hardened, thousands of Arab men from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere also flocked to the emerging global jihadist

organizations like al-Qaeda. Neither the Saudis nor the Americans claim that they foresaw the potential for the rise of a generation of jihadist militants, though the militants were operating in plain sight and with more than a wink from Riyadh and Washington. To their American enablers, the allure of humiliating the Soviets and protecting the heartland of oil trumped concern over potentially catastrophic consequences. Two sets of terrorist attacks, the first on 11 September 2001 in the United States and the second in Saudi Arabia in 2003, made clear the considerable price for this shortsightedness.

The Saudis faced other domestic consequences as well. Religious figures at home once again grew emboldened in the 1980s and early 1990s. They pushed back against the royal family when it made unpopular decisions, such as agreeing to host over five hundred thousand American military personnel for the first Gulf War. Prominent preachers even directly challenged the fitness of the Saudis to rule.

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the clergy's power had become an irritant. When King Abdullah ascended the Saudi throne in 2005, it was clear that he had grown tired of the threatening and embarrassing actions of some of the country's most prominent religious figures. It was also clear that he was set on reversing the deal that the rulers had forged with the clergy in 1979. Abdullah began to restructure clerical authority. He fired prominent religious figures, overruled legal judgments (particularly harsh penalties handed down against women that embarrassed the country's rulers in the West), reined in the power of the religious police, opened up space in the press and the public sphere for citizens to criticize the clerics, and forbade scholars from issuing *fatwas* without having them vetted by a central authority. Abdullah also promised sweeping judicial reform, calling for the professionalization of the judiciary and training for judges. This decision was particularly important because it threatened to transform the heart of the country's criminal and civic legal system, the place where religious scholars enjoyed particular influence and power. By 2010 it appeared that the Saudis had all but restored the pre-1979 political order. This was not a sign

of progressive change. It was a reflection of the rulers' desire to resume their exclusive grip on political power. The bargain with the clergy, it seemed, had served its purpose and run its course.

Then came the Arab Spring. With the fall of tyrants in Tunisia and Egypt, and with unrest breaking out in Bahrain and Yemen in February, the Saudis began to feel asphyxiated. When calls for public dissent began to mount in Saudi Arabia in March, the regime did not hesitate to play a familiar hand. In addition to the other counterrevolutionary measures, Saudi Arabia's leaders once again sought support from the religious establishment. The clergy dutifully responded, declaring public protests un-Islamic and throwing their weight behind the ruling family. They were richly rewarded for their support. As part of a \$120 billion financial package announced by King Abdullah, the religious establishment, including mosques, schools, and the religious police, were among the biggest beneficiaries. In addition, the ruling family also worked quickly to restore some of the powers that Abdullah had begun to strip away in 2005. The country amended an already draconian press law with a number of new measures restricting free speech. The new law criminalized criticism of both the royal family and the official religious establishment. The religious police, which had seen its role eroded in recent years, began streaming into the streets. Scholars and clerics dominated the radio and television airwaves, pushing aside alternative voices and establishing a veritable monopoly on sanctioned public discourse. They not only demeaned democracy and its supporters, but also launched a malicious counterrevolutionary campaign of their own. They understood well, of course, that their privilege was directly tied to the fate of the ruling elites.

The kingdom's aging rulers seem to have arrived at the same conclusion. While they prefer to keep the Islamic clergy on the margins, they have come to believe that without religious support for the regime, the prospects for dissent are considerable. This belief assumes that Saudi Arabia's population, often cast as deeply conservative, will be inclined to heed the call of the clergy, but this is hard to know. What is certain is that many Arabs saw the unleashing of the

scholars as part of a broad campaign of intimidation and potential oppression. They recognized the Saudi regime's potential for violence, justified in religious dogma or not.

The clergy was also mobilized to mount a shrill anti-Shiite sectarian campaign in the spring of 2011, one that aimed to reinforce Saudi Arabia's regional ideological and political primacy. Since the early 1980s, Saudi leaders have feared their Iranian rival across the Persian Gulf. The origins of Saudi-Iranian geopolitical acrimony derive from the Iranian Revolution and the rise of political Shiism. Ayatollah Khomeini, a charismatic Shiite cleric who was instrumental in the fall of the Shah, called repeatedly for the overthrow of the Al Saud during the 1980s. Shiites constitute the majority of Iran's population. In the rest of the Persian Gulf they are a marginalized minority. In Saudi Arabia, they make up around ten percent of the population, fewer than two million people. In Bahrain, Shiites have historically counted as almost two-thirds of the island's indigenous subjects, fewer than five hundred thousand people. Still, although they outnumber Sunnis, they are a functional minority. In both places Shiites have been shut out of power, discriminated against by Sunni political elites, and subjected to the worst kinds of oppression and abuse. In Saudi Arabia, Shiites have mostly been forbidden from observing their religious rituals in public, from building mosques, and from openly declaring their faith. They are prevented from holding prominent government jobs and face other kinds of public scorn. Prominent Sunni clerics have also periodically called for violence against Shiites and the destruction of all outward indications that they exist in the country. In Bahrain, Shiites possess a few more political rights but endure similar kinds of structural discrimination. As a community, they have long suffered from chronic poverty and limited opportunities to work in the wealthy public sector. After the Iranian Revolution, Shiites in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain began to agitate against their rulers, sometimes violently. Over the next two decades, in addition to empowering Islamic radicals in Central Asia, Sunni leaders encouraged virulent forms of anti-Shiite sectarianism to counter Shiite empowerment.

The era of Shiite radicalism passed in the 1990s. But the region's Sunni Arab leaders continued periodically to exaggerate and exploit fears of Shiite political power. They manufactured false claims that Arab Shiites were a fifth column for Persian Iran. In Saudi Arabia, where anti-Shiism is endemic, state officials and religious figures have regularly stoked sectarian anxieties to deflect attention and criticism from themselves. A similar pattern has persisted in Bahrain. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 promoted the empowerment of Iraq's Shiite majority after they had endured decades of second-class citizenship and brutal treatment. This deepened concerns among the Persian Gulf's Sunni rulers that a crescent of Shiite political power was taking shape across the region.

When street demonstrations began in Bahrain in February 2011, the protesters came primarily from downtrodden Shiite villages. They were not motivated by sectarian sentiment or score settling. They called for more serious efforts at political reform and the creation of a true constitutional monarchy. Similar protests took place in Shiite majority villages and towns in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. In Saudi Arabia, in dozens of places, hundreds of protesters routinely assembled, calling for relatively minor concessions, including greater religious tolerance and the release of Shiite political prisoners. But confronted by the sweeping changes underway across the region, officials claimed that the protests at home and especially in Bahrain, if they were allowed to succeed, would lead to a catastrophe—a democratic state next door controlled by a Shiite majority, one they insisted would take marching orders from Tehran. Riyadh responded by intervening militarily, but also by justifying the occupation of Bahrain in mid-March as a response to Iranian meddling in the internal affairs of the kingdom's longtime Arab allies. Over the course of the spring, Saudi leaders declared publicly, and always without evidence, that Iran was directly responsible for the “destabilization” of its closest neighbor.

Though the charges lacked merit, they served several important political objectives. The accusations against Iran distracted attention from the democratic substance of the protesters' message and sought

to recast them as radicals who threatened to upend security and stability close to home. And by identifying prodemocracy activists as sectarian agents, the anti-Iranian rhetoric also undermined the potential for others to embrace calls for public dissent, lest they too be cast as agents of foreign influence. Anti-Iranian fear mongering also successfully played upon American—and Israeli—anxieties about Iran's potential power in the region. Because the United States has given first priority to protecting the petroleum-based political status quo in the Persian Gulf, it was always unlikely that the United States would intervene against Saudi Arabia or on behalf of any prodemocracy movement in the region. That the calls for political transformation came from within Saudi and Bahraini Shiite communities made it much easier and much more likely that the United States would ignore them.

The cynical exploitation of reactionary Islam is at the heart of Saudi Arabia's counterrevolution. It is a dangerous strategy. Considering the kingdom's recent history, and the violent results of a secular-religious alliance, there are powerful reasons for unease. Particularly unnerving is the possibility for multiple kinds of radicalism. Saudi Arabia's religious establishment and particularly its most extreme elements have consistently supported jihadist militancy. Given its past inability to manage them, there is reason to be skeptical that Riyadh can do so this time. By late spring 2011 there were indications that private Saudi religious influence was already being felt in Egypt, where the postrevolutionary struggle for power was well underway. Rumors swept through Cairo that money from Saudi religious organizations was being used to finance emerging conservative religious political networks and that Saudi money was even behind Muslim attacks on Christian churches in Egypt in May 2011. Egyptian Salafis, who embrace an orthodoxy similar to that of the Saudi religious establishment, have embraced the Saudi national flag as their most important political symbol. In itself, this does not imply Saudi support for their political agenda. Tracing the Saudi money trail represents a considerable challenge. Connecting the kingdom to religious violence elsewhere in the region requires more than rumor. But, it is

certainly true that the kingdom desires to shape the political outcome in Egypt and especially to limit the potential power of the revolutionary forces that might prove inspirational closer to home. Although they are enjoying some political influence since the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's Salafis have rejected revolutionary political change. It is instructive that they have taken to waving the Saudi national flag as a way to represent their political agenda and antirevolutionary sentiment.

For their part, Arab Shiites face difficult circumstances. Oppressed at home and without support from the West, they can only find a sympathetic ear in Tehran, which would certainly seek to exploit any opening or advantage in the region. If the current patterns of counterrevolution and oppression continue, it seems likely that it is just a matter of time before Bahraini and Saudi Shiites turn to Iran for support.

Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Spring has been unremittingly hostile. The kingdom has mobilized both its tremendous wealth and its capacity for violence to crush democratic insurgencies at home and around the region. Its approach to counterrevolution has also been calculated and carefully orchestrated. And its principal aim has been to protect the various privileges made possible by the political economy of oil. A terrible and destructive set of forces—expansive capital, reactionary Islamism, and sectarian violence—have converged in the service of tyranny. The truth is that these forces have long been in place. The history of their exploitation is synonymous with the contemporary history of Saudi Arabia. So, too, is the history of what they have wrought. The forces of counterrevolution have long been central to the kingdom's domestic and regional statecraft, and its power and willingness to pursue a counterrevolutionary agenda is now on full display. While President Obama has publicly stated that the United States supports the prodemocracy movements sweeping the region, the opposite is true in the Gulf. There, the Americans and Saudis pursue the same agenda, and it has little to do with improved governance or political reform. Instead, it has everything to do with preserving a political-economic

system that serves the interests of a narrow set of elites in both countries.

American complicity in Saudi Arabia's counterrevolutionary agenda is also deeply connected with the United States' support for Israel and shared fears over Iranian power in the region. Here, too, the predominant language is about security. Tel Aviv, Washington, and Riyadh all agree that Iran represents the single greatest threat to regional security. Checking Iranian power and limiting its ability to upset the regional balance of power is an important part of the counterrevolutionary agenda. Yet the Saudi-Israeli-American axis against Iran does not merely work in parallel with the political-economic imperatives connected to oil. The demonization of Iran is a fundamental part of the larger regional policy. Oil, arms, and claims about the pursuit of security are all working together to preserve the Gulf's political status quo. The Arab Spring represents an existential threat to this order. If the forces of counterrevolution prevail, Saudi Arabia and its supporters will declare victory, talk confidently about the restoration of stability, and take comfort in short-term success. Yet the cost of victory will be high, since it requires permanent violence, autocracy, and alliance with religious radicals.