

## FPC Briefing: Saudi Arabia, 'New Media' and UK Relations with the Kingdom

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With the continued passage of time following the Arab Spring, it is pertinent not only to explore British relations with states that experience political upheaval, but also with those states that did not experience serious change. While the Arab Spring has empowered pro-democracy Islamic movements, Saudi Arabia has sought to prevent the emergence of opposition groups across the region, often employing the use of force to crush threats. This use of force is most commonly seen within Shi'a areas, namely the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and within Bahrain. This article explores the aftermath of the Arab Spring within Saudi Arabia, with particular focus upon how the Al Saud was able to circumvent unrest and the implications for human rights within the Kingdom.

### Anti-Terror Legislation and Online Space

Developments in technology have empowered agency across the Middle East, best demonstrated by the successes of the various Arab Spring protest groups. One state that did not feature serious protests was Saudi Arabia, but this is not to suggest that technological developments do not pose a threat to the Kingdom. Rather, developments necessitated an overview of the Saudi legal system, which is based upon an uncodified version of the Shari'a.<sup>2</sup>

New legislation fell under the guise of anti-terror legislation, which coupled with an increase in the use of force by government forces prevented the emergence of protest groups. Under this new legislation, acts of peaceful dissent can be understood as terrorist crimes,<sup>3</sup> with three articles in particular of note.

Article 1 considers actions that damage the reputation of the state, which are thus defined as terrorism:

[U]nder Article 1 an action which is deemed by the authorities as "harming the reputation of the state" may be considered as 'terrorism'. Since under the same article it is also considered 'terrorism' to 'publish material or information that incites or leads to the implementation of a terrorist activity', it appears to follow that publication of criticism of the authorities may be deemed to be an act of 'terrorism'.<sup>4</sup>

Under Article 29, the act of questioning the integrity of the King or Crown Prince carries a punishment of a minimum of 10 years in prison. Furthermore, Article 45 states that:

anyone who intentionally broadcasts – for the purpose of committing a terrorist crime by any means – a news item, a statement or a false or tendentious rumour likely to stir up people or spread panic among them or shake the confidence of citizens in the state or the King or the Crown Prince [shall be] punished with a prison term of no less than three years.<sup>5</sup>

These developments to legislation further restrict freedom of speech and expression within a state that is notorious for its lack of either. Broad interpretations of terms such as 'terrorism' and 'terrorist crimes' and the inability to discuss the nature of the regime for fear of 'shaking the

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia, Repression in the name of Security*, (London: Amnesty International, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> [http://amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_22174.pdf](http://amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_22174.pdf)[http://amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc\\_22174.pdf](http://amnesty.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_22174.pdf), p7

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p4.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p10.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p11.

confidence of citizens' only add to the restrictive political climate within the Kingdom. This restriction has resulted in jail time for those responsible for praising terrorist crime, which given the broad definition of terrorist crime can also be understood as praising political dissent.

Furthermore, the Al Saud's concern at the uncensored level of online debate resulted in a move to increase censorship within the kingdom. Attempts to manage electronic content have seen a requirement of all bloggers to have a license, with applications limited to those individuals over the age of 20 who possess a college degree.<sup>6</sup> Blogging then fell under the purview of the Saudi Press and Publications Law, which underwent an amendment in April 2011 to include bans on insulting members of government and the religious establishment. Legislation also seeks to restrict access to online space, with the 22 internet service providers in Saudi Arabia all routed through a state server.<sup>7</sup> Routing all 22 ISPs through a state controlled server allows the regime to stress how it "bars access to nearly 400,000 sites with the aim of protecting citizens from content that is deemed morally or politically inappropriate".<sup>8</sup>

### The Role of Women in the Kingdom

On the Facebook page for the Saudi 'Day of Rage' the following demands were listed:

- Calls for an elected *Shura* council to replace the consultative body appointed by the King;
- An independent judiciary;
- The release of all political prisoners;
- The right to exercise freedom of expression and assembly;
- The abolition of all duties and taxes;
- The implementation of a minimum wage.<sup>9</sup>

These demands for reform also include calls for the increased women's rights in the Kingdom. Although women are largely absent from the public sphere, this is an embarrassment to many in Saudi Arabia. Reflecting this embarrassment are moves towards the greater inclusion of women within the Kingdom. This is demonstrated by the Ministry of Labour enforcing a royal decree stating that sales personnel, working in shops that sell lingerie, cosmetics and other goods only for women, must be women.<sup>10</sup> While this decree permitted women to join the work force for the first time, it also reflects the pressures facing the Saudi economy, coupled with an increasingly educated female population.

While there are several other recent examples of increasingly liberal attitudes towards women, it is pertinent to note that women are not currently allowed to participate in council elections, or to drive. However, it is worth noting that a woman was appointed to the post of deputy minister for education in 2009, the first woman to be appointed to a ministerial position.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, at the flagship university in Saudi Arabia, the King Abdulaziz University for Science and Technology, men and women can now study together.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Georgina Enzer, *Saudi Arabia forces all bloggers to get a license*, (ITP.net, 13.01.11) Available from: <http://www.itp.net/583551-saudi-arabia-forces-all-bloggers-to-get-a-license?tab=article> [Accessed 14.02.11].

<sup>7</sup> World Association of Newspapers, *Saudi Arabia Market Description*, Available from: <http://www.ihudaif.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/WORLD-ASSOCIATION-OF-NEWSPAPERS-%E2%80%93-WORLD-PRESS-TRENDS-2008.pdf> [Accessed 15.05.11].

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p43.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas W. Lippman, *Saudi Women Shatter the Lingerie Ceiling*, (The New York Times, 21.01.12) Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/opinion/sunday/saudi-women-break-a-barrier-the-right-to-sell-lingerie.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Julien Borger, *Saudi Arabia appoints first female minister*, (The Guardian, 16.02.09) Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/16/saudi-cabinet-woman-minister> [Accessed 16.02.09].

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Laipson, *Prince Nayef's Rise and Saudi Arabia's Step Backward*, (Foreign Affairs, 04.11.11) Available from: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136644/ellen-laipson/prince-nayefs-rise-and-saudi-arabias-step-backward> [Accessed 05.11.11].

### Reforming the Social Contract?

The pressures facing the Al Saud, coupled with having witnessed the potential consequences of not engaging in a process of reform, have resulted in the notion of reform being discussed. While the social contract within Saudi Arabia may appear to be fraying, King Abdullah and the ruling elites within Saudi Arabia have taken steps towards this reform, although it must be stressed that these have often been more symbolic than substantial.

This pressure appears to transcend the different groups operating in the Kingdom. Indeed, from the 2011 petitions, the clear sign is “that liberals, Shia, and *salafis*, though divided on many issues, are coalescing around a demand for an elected parliament should not be ignored”.<sup>13</sup>

The coalescing of these ideologically opposed groups under the desire for an elected parliament demonstrates the pressure facing the Al Saud for reform. Yet whilst there is a demand for reform within Saudi Arabia these voices are often drowned out by much louder voices vehemently opposed to the idea. A prime example of this can be seen when the education minister Prince Faisal Bin Abdullah Bin Muhammad Al-Saud advocated that it was time for children to attend mixed-sex primary schools. The response from one opponent was to claim that this would turn boys into transvestites.<sup>14</sup>

### UK Hypocrisy?

In light of the Arab Spring, UK policy towards Middle Eastern states has contained a strong level of hypocrisy. While the UK has possessed a pro-democracy stance, offering support for opposition movements across the region, the UK maintains ties with Saudi Arabia, wherein the suppression of opposition movements is a regular occurrence. If one considers the text of Mr Cameron’s speech to the UN General Assembly in 2011 a positive message of support emerges:

The people of the Arab world have made their aspirations clear. They want transparency and accountability of government. An end to corruption. The fair and consistent rule of law. The chance to get a job and to have a stake in how their country is run. The freedom to communicate and the chance to participate in shaping society as citizens with rights and responsibilities [...] Because the Arab Spring is a massive opportunity to spread peace, prosperity, democracy and vitally security but only if we really seize it.<sup>15</sup>

However, this speech is at odds when exploring the nature of the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UK. Bilateral trade accounts for around £15 billion per year and Saudi investment in the UK totals around £62 billion,<sup>16</sup> which explains Mr Cameron’s efforts earlier this year to “broaden and deepen” the strategic ties between the UK and Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup> Driving this bilateral trade is the arms industry, with Saudi Arabia possessing strong ties with the British defence firm BAE, which earlier this year agreed a deal worth £1.9 billion for the sale of Hawk trainer jets, complementing the sale of Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft for over £6 billion in 2006.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> F. Gregory Gause, *Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East*, (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2011) p13.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Buchanan, *Saudi Arabia shuns thought of Arab Spring*, (BBC 21.05.11) Available from: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/9492195.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/9492195.stm) [Accessed 26.05.11].

<sup>15</sup> *Prime Minister’s First Speech to the General Assembly* (Number 10: 22.09.11) Available from: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pm-speech-to-unga/>

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Wintour, *David Cameron Vows to Bolster Saudi Ties* (The Guardian: 13.01.12) Available from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/13/david-cameron-saudi-arabia-ties>

<sup>17</sup> *David Cameron visits Saudi Arabia for talks with Crown Prince Nayif* (The Telegraph: 13.01.12) Available from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9012322/David-Cameron-visits-Saudi-Arabia-for-talks-with-Crown-Prince-Nayif.html>

<sup>18</sup> *BAE Systems and Saudi Arabia sign £1.9bn Hawk jet deal* (BBC: 23.05.12) Available from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-18173779>

The (continued) sale of arms to Saudi Arabia thus appears contradictory to Mr Cameron's speech at the UN and demonstrates a degree of hypocrisy in the UK's response to the Arab Spring. This, in turn, hints at exceptionalism for the Al Saud, which has resulted in Saudi Arabia being ignored by narratives of popular protest in the Arab Spring. This has also been seen with regard to protests in Bahrain, where the UK (along with other Western powers) appeared complicit with the Saudi led GCC protection force that sought to end the protests, through recent arms deals. Yet this exceptionalism demonstrates a hypocrisy that will undeniably undermine efforts to promote human rights across the world and erode the UK's legitimacy. Perhaps in the future a more considered approach to ensuring that rhetoric and action are in harmony will increase the UK's perceived legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. This will also add weight to the argument that the UK is a proponent of human rights and democracy.

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