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Leading the counter-revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

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Guido Steinberg

Leading the Counter-Revolution

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

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Leading the Counter-Revolution Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has survived the revolutions in the Arab world largely unscathed and entrenched itself as the undisputed leader of both the Gulf monarchies and the wealthy oil- and gas-producing states. Its example and the support it provides shape the ways other still stable regimes deal with protest movements. In this context, the Saudi ruling family draws on significant historical and religious legitimacy and uses its considerable oil revenues to buy support.

It is, however, not only their relative stability that distinguishes the Arab states of the Persian Gulf from other countries in the region. Instead, in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states rulers' fears of restiveness meld with a conflict between Iran and its regional rivals that stimulates growing confessional tensions. Saudi Arabia and its allies see the Shiite protests in the Saudi Eastern Province and Bahrain not as movements against authoritarian regimes, but in the first place as an Iranian attempt to topple legitimate governments with the help of the Arab Shiites. Saudi Arabia has long suspected Iran of seeking predominance in the Gulf region and the Middle East, and has since 2005 pursued an increasingly resolute and sometimes aggressive regional policy vis-à-vis Tehran. Riyadh interprets the unrest observed among Saudi and Bahraini Shiites since 2011 first and foremost in that context.

The Arab Spring is therefore both a domestic and a foreign policy issue in Saudi Arabia. At home the Saudi leadership is pursuing a carrot-and-stick strategy. In spring 2011 it quickly announced enormous direct and indirect payments to the population, in order to avert protests. At the same time, unambiguous threats and a strengthened presence of security forces at potential meeting places and in traditionally restive areas sufficed to nip planned demonstrations in the bud in March 2011. In the Shiite-populated east of the country the government repeatedly ensured that nascent protests were suppressed before they could grow. Riyadh responded with particular hostility to any cooperation between Shiite and liberal reformers.

Responding to the events of spring 2011, Saudi Arabia also followed a twin-track regional policy. Firstly, it attempted to stabilise the Jordanian and Moroccan monarchies and backed the army in Egypt,

making it the most important proponent of the authoritarian status quo (ante) in the region. Secondly, Riyadh countered Iranian hegemonic strivings more vigorously than before. In March 2011 Saudi Arabia led the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Qatar to the aid of the Bahraini leadership when protests by local Shiites threatened to spiral out of control. Saudi Arabia is also acting assertively in Syria, where especially since September 2013 it has been supporting the opposition and rebel insurgents with money and arms in order to hasten the fall of the Iran-allied Assad regime.

Despite its sometimes aggressive foreign policy, Saudi Arabia remains an important partner for Germany and Europe. But the relationship has become less easy than it used to be. The question of where the limits of cooperation lie will always have to be asked, and debates will flare up over security-related matters such as arms sales. Germany has an interest in Saudi stability, so the construction of a border security system by Airbus Defence (formerly Cassidian) makes sense from a political perspective, too, and should continue to be supported by the German federal police training mission. It is also understandable that Saudi Arabia sees Iran as a threat and would like to strengthen its armed forces by purchasing warplanes such as the Eurofighter Typhoon. On the other hand, arms deals become questionable where there are grounds to suspect that the supplied systems would be used to suppress domestic opposition. The intervention in Bahrain in March 2011 demonstrated all too clearly the Saudi leadership's willingness to take military action against Shiite unrest both in neighbouring Bahrain and in its own Eastern Province. It was therefore correct to refuse to supply the Boxer armoured personnel carrier, because such vehicles are often used to suppress unrest. Germany would have had to reckon with seeing the personnel carriers used in the Shiite areas, to the detriment of Berlin's credibility in the Arab world. In the conventional version ordered by Riyadh, the Leopard tank is less problematic because it is largely unsuited for internal deployment. But if the Saudi leadership were to revive its earlier request for the 2A7+ version developed specifically for counter-insurgency, Berlin should decline.

But German policies towards Saudi Arabia must be about more than conducting trade and avoiding mistakes. The greatest threat to Germany's interest in long-term stability is the Saudi leadership's mistaken policies towards the Shiites. Riyadh's regional policy is governed by its fear that Iran might mobilise the

Shiites in the Arab world and ultimately even within Saudi Arabia. That interpretation owes more to the paranoia of the ruling family than any sober assessment of the situation on the ground. Iranian influence on the Shiites in Saudi Arabia (and in Bahrain) is minimal and there is no evidence that Tehran could persuade them to rise against Riyadh. In fact it is Saudi repression in the Eastern Province and in Bahrain that threatens to drive the Shiites into the arms of Iran, Hizbullah or Iraqi Shiite groups. Rather than coercion, a political solution including full civil rights for the Shiites in Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain is required. That would also be an important precondition for reducing confessional tensions – which have been growing again since 2011 – across the entire region. Although Germany's influence here is very limited, it has grown through the intensified contacts of recent years. The German government should continue to foster these ties and give them a political dimension. Concretely, Berlin should always push for Saudi Arabia to accept the Shiites' demands for full equality and an end to discrimination. For only through slow but directed change can the Kingdom remain stable.

Protests in Saudi Arabia

The events in Tunisia and Egypt in February and March 2011 also encouraged many Saudis to protest against their own government. At the first sign of unrest the government responded with detentions, an increased presence of security forces, and warnings to the population. At the same time King Abdallah announced direct and indirect payments to the people, intended to ameliorate the economic causes of dissatisfaction in the country. In February and March 2011 he promised to spend a total of \$130 billion on causes including tackling widespread unemployment and housing shortages.¹ After this the west and centre of the country remained largely calm, while the Shiites living mostly in the east repeatedly took to the streets nonetheless. Although the security forces always had the situation under control, Riyadh remained concerned, as the protests in the east endured and parts of the movement became increasingly militant and uncompromising.

The Islamist and Liberal Oppositions

Sporadic protests in February 2011 led to calls for a “day of rage” on 11 March, where Saudis were summoned to join demonstrations on the streets of the capital Riyadh following the model of the Tunisians and Egyptians. Anonymous activists set up a Facebook group entitled “The people want to bring down the regime” (al-sha‘b yurid isqat al-nizam), expressing demands including an elected parliament, an independent judiciary and the release of all political prisoners.² The day after the call was published, a representative of the Interior Ministry went on state-run television to emphasise that all protests were prohibited and that the security forces would prevent any demonstrations. Another day later, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars (Hay‘at kibar al-‘ulama), as the country’s supreme religious institution, announced that demonstrations or any other insurrec-

tion against the ruler were incompatible with Islam. According to media reports the Saudi leadership mobilised thousands of troops to prevent protests.³ These measures were enough to keep the “day of rage” from occurring. Just one demonstrator appeared at the appointed place, where he was arrested shortly after giving an interview to the BBC.⁴ Only in the east of the country were larger demonstrations reported on and around 11 March.

Since early 2011 the government has repeatedly taken action against Islamist and liberal critics. The reasons behind the arrests and other measures were not always clear. Open criticism of prominent princes or the ruling family as a whole and overt challenges to the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam predominant in the country drew particularly harsh responses. While this had been Saudi policy since the 1980s, the government appears to have interpreted the permitted bounds of these two types of criticism somewhat more loosely than in previous decades. That was probably largely due to a change in threat perception: What the Saudi leadership fears most, since the beginning of the Arab Spring, is street protests by the youth. Those who refrained from calling demonstrations or directly criticising the ruling family could reckon with rather more tolerance than just a few years ago.⁵

Although this new line created a certain space for expressions of alternate opinion, the government still clamped down hard on liberal and Islamist intellectuals. Among the Islamists this primarily affected groups and individuals strongly influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. The government’s position hardened after it backed the Egyptian military coup against the Brotherhood’s President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013. In Saudi Arabia this was also understood as a message to the Islamists at home, who are not formally organised but have many supporters. In early March 2014 the Saudi Arabian Interior Ministry placed the Muslim Brotherhood on a list of terrorist organisa-

1 James Gavin, “Riyadh Spends to Curb Unrest”, *Middle East Economic Digest*, (15–21 April 2011): 30–32 (30).

2 Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia. Repression in the Name of Security* (London, 2011), 43.

3 Robert Fisk, “Saudis Mobilise Thousands of Troops to Quell Growing Revolt”, *Independent*, 5 March 2011.

4 Amnesty International, *Saudi Arabia* (see note 2), 44f.

5 Interview with Saudi Arabian blogger, Kuwait, 4 March 2013.

tions, even though no terrorist attacks have been attributed to it.⁶

First affected was the group of Islamist intellectuals who founded the Islamic Umma Party (Hizb al-Umma al-Islami) on 9 February 2011. That was in itself a provocation, given that political parties are banned as un-Islamic in Saudi Arabia. The Umma Party has existed since 2005 in Kuwait, where it originated in an initiative by the Salafist activist Hakim al-Mutairi, who is a leading theorist of a sub-group of the Kuwaiti Salafist mainstream that blends Salafist thinking with the political orientation of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷ In that respect the teachings of the Umma Party resemble those of other parties in the Gulf that have since the 1960s melded aspects of Saudi Wahhabism with the ideas of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Mutairi, who seeks to reconcile Salafism with democratic principles, is sometimes described as a “liberal Salafist”.⁸ While this may sound very moderate in theory, it is extremely threatening to regimes in the Gulf. According to Mutairi, the Kuwaiti Umma Party seeks to end the rule of the regimes in all Gulf states by peaceful means, terminate the region’s fragmentation into smaller states (duwailat) and force the Americans to withdraw from the region.⁹ Although the Kuwaiti Umma Party is only a splinter group, its establishment in 2005 caused a great stir. Mutairi is a well-known figure in the Gulf, and the Saudi leadership must have followed the developments in its smaller neighbour with consternation. The political scene in Kuwait is very liberal and pluralist by regional standards, and is regarded as a nuisance, if not indeed outright dangerous, in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular.

6 The Muslim Brotherhood was the only non-militant organization on the list, alongside jihadist groups such as the Syrian Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

7 The theorist of “scientific Salafism” is the scholar Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq (born 1939), who expounded these ideas in his main work *The Path: Basics of the Method of the Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama’a in doctrine and practice* (Al-Sirat: Usul man-haj ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama’a fi l-i’tiqad wa-l’amal) of 2000. Interview with Hakim al-Mutairi and Sajid al-Abdali, Kuwait, 19 April 2007.

8 Stéphane Lacroix, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: Is Saudi Arabia Immune?” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (October 2011): 48–59 (50).

9 Mutairi said this in the presence of the author at a presentation of the goals of his party to young Saudi Muslim Brothers. Interview with Hakim al-Mutairi and Sajid al-Abdali, Kuwait, 19 April 2007.

Experience with the Kuwaiti Umma Party also shaped Riyadh’s approach to its Saudi Arabian offshoot. Although the two groups appear to cooperate only informally, the Saudi Umma Party likewise draws on the thinking of Hakim al-Mutairi, and made this clear in its choice of name. Its founding document calls for democratic reforms, including parliamentary elections and a division of powers, but also the enforcement of Islamic values in domestic and foreign policy. The founders were religious scholars, university professors and businessmen with Salafist leanings.¹⁰ Despite its initially moderate demands, the Saudi ruling family had to assume that the nine founding members – like Mutairi and the Kuwaiti Umma Party – were ultimately seeking to topple their regime, and their response was correspondingly rapid and rigorous. The founders were arrested within days, but released in the course of 2011 after promising to refrain from political activities in future. Only the religious scholar and lawyer Abd al-Aziz al-Wuhaibi refused to renounce political activity, and was sentenced to seven years imprisonment in September 2011.¹¹

Even Islamists who made less provocative demands found themselves facing heightened state repression. The case of Salman al-Auda (born 1956) was especially prominent. He was one of the leaders of the Islamist opposition after the Kuwait war of 1990/91 and spent the years 1994–1999 in prison. After his release he toned down his positions and became one of the country’s best-known scholars with his own television programmes and a professionally managed internet and social network presence.¹² The regime stopped two of his television programmes after he repeatedly spoke approvingly of the revolutions in the region, and he was also subjected to a travel ban in 2012.¹³ These measures did not, however, prevent Auda from publishing his thoughts on the Arab Spring in a book entitled “Questions on the revolution” (*Masa’il al-thaura*).¹⁴ While the official response to Auda’s statements was reserved, it sent a clear message to the Saudi Islamists.

10 The founding declaration and a list of founding members were placed on the Party’s website, <http://islamicommaparty.com/Portals/Content/?info=TkRnNEpsTjFZbEJoWjJVbU1TWmhjbUk9K3U=.jsp> (accessed 5 September 2013). In spring 2014 the website was no longer functional.

11 Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2012: The State of the World’s Human Rights* (London, 2012), 287f.

12 See Salman al-Auda’s website, <http://www.islamtoday.net>.

13 Monika Bolliger, “Islamische Kritik an der saudischen Regierung”, *Neuer Zürcher Zeitung*, 17 April 2012.

14 Salman al-Auda, *Masa’il al-thaura* (Questions on the revolution) (Beirut, 2012).

Auda, namely, is regarded as a protagonist of a current named Islamic Awakening (*al-Sahwa al-Islamiya*) that arose in the 1960s and 1970s and, like the Umma Party, combined aspects of Saudi Wahhabism with elements of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood thinking.¹⁵ This current led the Islamist opposition during the 1990s, which is one of the reasons for the Saudi regime's hostile attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole. Its disciplining of the popular Auda was an unmistakable sign that the government rejected the revolutions in the region, regarded the assumption of power by the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere as a danger, and would not tolerate its activities in Saudi Arabia (where it is banned anyway). When the government sharpened its stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, this was also understood as a message to the *Sahwa al-Islamiya*. But as of early summer 2014 no more concrete action had been taken.

The liberal opposition also found itself facing repression, although in its case this was nothing new. However, the example of the reformers Muhammad al-Qahtani and Abdallah al-Hamid in 2012 and 2013 drew great attention. Whereas Hamid has been one of the country's leading liberals since the 1990s, the younger Qahtani had only become known to a broader public in recent years. Qahtani drew attention for his unusually strong criticism of the political system and prominent members of the ruling family. While not calling directly for the fall of the regime, he did predict that that would be the outcome unless it was prepared to undergo fundamental reforms. He called the powerful Interior Minister Naif bin Abd al-Aziz a criminal on account of the mistreatment of thousands of political prisoners and called on the king to sack and prosecute him.¹⁶ In 2009 Hamid and Qahtani were among the founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (*Jam'iyat al-huquq al-madaniya wa-l-siyasiya fi al-Su'udiya*), which principally campaigned for the release of political prisoners and political reforms to expand participation and the rule of law. In March 2013 both were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment – Qahtani ten years and Hamid five –

by a special court originally set up for terrorism cases, on charges including rebellion against the king.¹⁷

Another case demonstrates how the government responded especially testily to joint activities by liberal and Shiite oppositionists. Its ire was drawn by Muhammad Said Tayyib (born 1939), who has long been one of the country's best-known liberal reformers, alongside Hamid, Matruk al-Falih and Ali al-Dumayni, but less often the target of state persecution. In 2003 he was one of the most prominent signatories of the "In Defence of the Fatherland" petition (*Difa'an 'an al-watan*), calling for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.¹⁸ The demand crossed one of the regime's red lines and it had some of the leaders arrested, including Tayyib, who was however only briefly detained. In December 2011 Tayyib presented another petition together with liberal and Shiite reformers, criticising the sentencing of sixteen liberal intellectuals in Jeddah to long prison sentences and condemning the brutality of the security forces against Shiite protests in the east of the country.¹⁹ Shortly after publication of the document, the government forced Tayyib to withdraw his signature and apologise on state-run television. For several months he was prohibited from leaving the country. This reaction revealed what danger the government saw in the Shiite street protests, such that it was unable to ignore the demands of Tayyib and his collaborators for the right to free speech, freedom of association and freedom of assembly. It also wanted to prevent at all costs any alliance between the (Sunni) liberal and Shiite oppositions. The petitioners' open accusation that the government was stoking confessional strife (*ta'ifiya*) by permanently emphasising supposed Iranian influence on Shiite demonstrators must have appeared an unbearable provocation to Riyadh, which places the blame for growing religious polarisation firmly at the door of Iran and the region's Shiites.

¹⁵ For detail on this current see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), *passim*. Alongside Auda its most important figure is Safar al-Hawali (born 1950).

¹⁶ Thomas Lippman, "Saudi Professor Faces Charges after Fighting for Free Speech", *Al-Monitor*, 29 June 2012.

¹⁷ Hamid also had to serve an older six-year sentence. Jürg Bischoff, "Gefängnis für Dissidenten: Hohe Strafen in Saudi-arabien", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11 March 2013.

¹⁸ *Difa'an 'an al-watan* (In defence of the fatherland), September 2003. The text can be found on Muhammad Said Tayyib's website: http://www.mstayeb.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=146:deafa3aanwatan&catid=20:isla7&Itemid=5.

¹⁹ *Bayan haul muhakamat al-islahiyyin bi-jidda wa-ahdath al-Qatif al-mu'sifa* (Declaration on the prosecution of the reformers in Jeddah and the sad events of Qatif), 5 December 2011, http://www.mstayeb.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=259:bayan&catid=20:isla7&Itemid=5.

The Shiite Protest Movement

In Saudi Arabia the Arab Spring was felt most acutely among the Shiites of the Eastern Province. While the west and centre of the country remained largely calm, repeated demonstrations occurred in the Shiite-populated regions and continued beyond 2011. The Saudi leadership regards these protests as a threat to the country's stability, especially after the Shiites in neighbouring Bahrain demonstrated against the ruling House of Khalifa there. Riyadh fears that the ongoing unrest since spring 2011 in allied Bahrain could spread, regarding the situation as particularly dangerous because it sees the Shiites in the Eastern Province (and in Bahrain) as a potential fifth column of Iran. Riyadh accuses Tehran of stirring up the Shiite minorities in the Gulf states in order to destabilise them. Since 2011 the trouble in the Eastern Province has become chronic and many Shiite youths are turning increasingly militant because they no longer believe they can achieve equality by peaceful means. This has produced a generation conflict with the older representatives of the Shiite community, who made their peace with the regime at the beginning of the 1990s but see their influence evaporating in the course of today's youth radicalisation.

The Shiite minority in Saudi Arabia has always suffered political, economic and cultural discrimination and long rejected Saudi rule. Shiites represent up to 15 percent of the population, corresponding to a figure of between two and three million. Most of them live in the Eastern Province, where they represent about half the population. Because this region is also home to the oil industry and all the country's major oil fields, the "Shiite problem" acquires special strategic significance. The roots of anti-Shiite discrimination in Saudi Arabia lie in the role of Wahhabism as a kind of state religion and the deep influence of Wahhabi scholars on the country's religious and political culture. Wahhabism is a Sunni reform movement that refuses to recognise Shiites as Muslims.²⁰ The conflict heated up after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and has remained on the boil since, despite a period of relaxation in the 1990s.

Only after relations with Iran worsened again from 2005 did the Saudi authorities return to a more repres-

sive approach. Riyadh feared that an increasingly aggressive Iran could again seek to destabilise Saudi Arabia, with the assistance of Saudi Shiites. Such fears are only partially justified. Although it must be assumed that Iranian intelligence services are present in eastern Saudi Arabia and might even carry out terrorist attacks, there is no longer any militant pro-Iranian current among the Saudi Shiites. The policies of the Saudi leadership are driven more by its prejudice-based mischaracterisation of the domestic Shiites as Iran-loyal sectarians, and not by their actual political orientations. This has had fatal consequences, because tightening repression generated huge bitterness among many Saudi Shiites. Resentment exploded in February 2009, when Shiite pilgrims from the east of the country clashed with Saudi security forces in Medina. In the following weeks isolated incidents of unrest were also reported from the Shiite-populated east.²¹

The situation in the Shiite areas was thus already highly charged when news of the protests in other Arab countries began circulating from January 2011. After the government quickly reinforced its security forces in the eastern regions, that spring saw only isolated demonstrations by a few hundred Shiites. Only briefly, immediately following the Saudi intervention in Bahrain on 14 March, did the numbers swell to a few thousand. Alongside the heavy presence of security forces, the government's promise to improve their living conditions if the Shiites remained quiescent was probably also a factor that kept the Province a great deal calmer than neighbouring Bahrain during the subsequent months. But dissatisfaction persisted after the security forces arrested some of the leaders of the early protests. The detention of the Shiite scholar Taufiq al-Amir at the end of February 2011 for demanding a constitutional monarchy provoked particular resentment. The demand is rather moderate, but one to which the Saudi government has always reacted sensitively, especially when expressed by a Shiite.²² The next confrontation was more or less inevitable.

Shiite youths clashed with police in early October 2011 in the Shiite town of Awamiya in Eastern Province, leaving eleven police injured by gunshots and petrol bombs according to government reports. The

²⁰ Guido Steinberg, "The Wahhabiya and Shi'ism, from 1744/45 to 2008", in *The Sunna and Shi'a in History: Division and Ecumenism in History*, ed. Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 163–82.

²¹ Toby Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads", *Middle East Report Online*, 6 May 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero050609> (accessed 23 November 2013).
²² "Saudi Arabian Authorities Release Arrested Shiite Cleric", *arabianbusiness.com*, 7 March 2011.

“events of Awamiya” marked the start of a series of protests that escalated over the following three months, especially after the first young Shiites were shot dead on 20 November. Altogether twelve young Saudi protestors were to die in 2011 and 2012. The funerals of the young men turned into the largest demonstrations seen in Eastern Province since 1979–80.²³ The demonstrators demanded the release of the political prisoners and an end to the discrimination of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia. The events in neighbouring Bahrain were also widely referred to. The Saudi Shiites called for the Saudi army to withdraw from Bahrain and an end to the repression of the Bahraini Shiites. After demands to topple the powerful governor of Eastern Province and even the House of Saud as a whole, Riyadh cracked down hard.²⁴

The government accused Iran and the Lebanese Hizbullah of being behind the protests and “undermining national security and stability”.²⁵ At the same time it called on the Shiites to choose between loyalty to Saudi Arabia, or to Iran and the leading Shiite scholars there. If they chose the latter alternative, the ruling family threatened, it would crush the opposition with an “iron fist”.²⁶ In January 2012 the Interior Ministry published a list of twenty-three Shiite ring-leaders for whom arrest warrants had been issued. Some subsequently surrendered to the authorities, but others went underground. In the following months there were repeated incidents in connection with the hunt for the fugitives, sometimes involving the use of firearms.²⁷

Despite these countermeasures another wave of demonstrations took place in July 2012. Thousands of Shiites protested on the streets of the Shiite strongholds of Qatif and Awamiya, chanting anti-monarchy slogans like “Down with Al Saud” and “Death to Al Saud.” Two demonstrators died and about two dozen were injured when the security forces used live ammunition. The protests were sparked by the detention

of the religious scholar Nimr Baqir al-Nimr (born 1960), who had since 2011 become a popular leader of the Shiite anti-monarchy opposition. The Saudi Interior Ministry claimed that Nimr and his supporters had resisted arrest on 8 July and attempted to flee by car. During the chase through Awamiya the escape car had collided with a police vehicle and Nimr had been shot in the leg, it was asserted. According to the official accounts, Nimr’s supporters had shot at the police, who had only returned fire. Soon after the contested incident an image circulated on the internet showing Nimr on the back seat of a car covered by a bloodstained blanket. The protests re-erupted soon afterwards.

Nimr had already been detained in 2004 and 2006, but quickly released each time. Not until February 2009 did he become known to a broader public, when he responded to the events in Medina by threatening to establish a separate Shiite state in eastern Saudi Arabia if the government continued discriminating against the Shiites.²⁸ The speech spread like wildfire on the internet and the security authorities began a manhunt. Nimr succeeded in evading arrest during the ensuing years and by February 2011 had become an important figurehead of the Shiite opposition. In his Friday sermons, widely circulated on video, he sharply criticised the government and demanded political and religious reforms. But in June 2012 he overstepped the mark by calling for Shiites to celebrate the death of Crown Prince (and Interior Minister) Naif, whom he said bore the greatest blame for the repression of the Shiites.²⁹

This sermon and the subsequent intense manhunt were important reasons for his rapidly growing popularity. Nimr was in fact not one of the original leaders of the Eastern Province Shiites, but more a marginal figure who attracted attention above all for his exceptionally radical positions. His influence grew in the course of the 2011 and 2012 protests, as he provoked the established and moderate leaders of the Shiite communities in the Eastern Province with unambiguous demands for an end to the reign of the House of Saud. Many militant activists believed, like Nimr, that the regime would not voluntarily end anti-Shiite discrimination. From July 2012 young Shiites increasing-

²³ Toby Matthiesen, “A ‘Saudi Spring?’: The Shi’a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012”, *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (autumn 2012): 628–59 (650).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Saudi Arabia: Foreign Forces Support Unrest in Qatif, Leaders Must Decide Where Their Loyalties Lie” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 5 October 2013, 1, 6.

²⁶ Ibid.; “Beginnings of a Shii Intifada in Saudi Arabia – and Worries in the Gulf” (Arabic), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 5 October 2011.

²⁷ In March 2013 the security authorities also announced that they had detained eighteen people for spying for Iran. Nasir al-Haqbani, “Riyadh Confirms Spy Cell Worked for Iranian Intelligence Services” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 27 March 2013.

²⁸ Matthiesen “The Shi’a of Saudi Arabia” (see note 21).

²⁹ Toby Matthiesen, “Neu entfachte Unruhen im Osten Saudiarabiens”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23 July 2012. An abridged version of Nimr’s sermon can be found on MEMRI TV, 27 June 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSEG34wxgaY> (accessed 9 July 2012).

ly emulated their counterparts in Bahrain, attacking government buildings and police patrols with petrol bombs. At night they frequently set up roadblocks of burning car tyres.³⁰

By 2013 the Eastern Province was deep into a vicious circle of repression. Ongoing youth protests amplified the government's fear of broader unrest that could threaten the stability of the country. Older, established Shiite leaders like the traditional scholars and younger Islamists like Hasan al-Saffar repeatedly called on the youth to hold back, but their influence declined noticeably after 2011.³¹ The simple fact that the protests frequently occurred simultaneously with those in Bahrain and the Saudi Shiites plainly felt solidarity with their brethren next door gave the issue a regional policy edge. But it became especially significant because Riyadh suspected Iran of instigating the protests, which it claimed represented an Iranian attempt to destabilise the Arab Gulf states. This connection of domestic and regional threat perception drove Saudi policy during the Arab Spring and has had fatal consequences: Domestically it led the government to dismiss the Shiite opposition's demands for an end to discrimination, and to respond primarily with repression. Its sometimes brutal methods may in fact lead young protesters to look around for support and find it provided by Iranian entities. At the same time, relations with Iran deteriorated. For these reasons bilateral tensions have escalated, with the relationship looking increasingly like a regional "cold war".

³⁰ Matthiesen, "A 'Saudi Spring?'" (see note 23), 656.

³¹ When Saffar and his group returned from exile in 1993, they supplanted older Shiite scholars as discussion partners for the government. Today they face a similar fate themselves.

Iranian-Saudi Relations

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have worsened almost continuously since 2003, accelerating since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. Saudi Arabia and its allies saw the revolutions as dangerous precedents and feared their impact on the stability of the region's monarchies. The Saudi government suspected that Iran might exploit instability in the Arab states to expand its influence in the region, which from Riyadh's perspective had already increased greatly in recent years. The protests of the Shiites in Bahrain in particular were interpreted as a threat. Saudi Arabia understands events in the region first and foremost through the lens of its conflict with Iran and has since 2005 been responding more aggressively than before to real and perceived Iranian "incursions". When the Arab Spring began, the Saudis felt that an anti-Iranian line was even more important than before.

The trigger for a more active regional policy was the accession of a Shiite-dominated, Iran-friendly government in Baghdad in spring 2005. To this day Riyadh rejects what it regards as an Iran-sponsored Iraqi leadership under Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whom it regards as a fanatical sectarian. The second main reason for the escalating conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran was the Iranian nuclear programme, which Riyadh regards as an exclusively military affair. The Saudi leadership finds itself sandwiched between fear of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and becoming a much greater threat to its neighbours, and worries that the United States could be too conciliatory and might accept Iranian regional supremacy in return for concessions on its nuclear programme. That tough dilemma shapes Saudi Arabian policy.

The Saudi fear of Iran escalated in parallel with the revolutions of 2011. One reason for this lay in a covert conflict between the United States and Israel on one side and Iran on the other that also drew in the Saudis and played a decisive role in their subsequently acting so decisively in Bahrain, Egypt and Syria. Tehran appears to have responded to the assassination of Iranian scientists and the infiltration of the Stuxnet computer virus by attacking Saudi Arabia, presumably because it lacked the necessary means to hit the United States or Israel. Tehran launched its own cyber-attack, against the Saudi oil company Aramco, while

terrorist cells controlled by Iran attacked Saudi diplomats. Altogether these incidents led to a further escalation and are likely to continue in the absence of a resolution of the nuclear dispute acceptable to both the Iranians and the Saudis.

The most serious cyber-attack experienced by the Saudis occurred on 15 August 2012, when unidentified hackers crippled the computers of Saudi Aramco, the world's most influential oil company. This was likely the Iranian response to the Stuxnet virus with which the United States and Israel attacked Iran. Stuxnet first became known to a broader public in autumn 2010. It exploited several previously unknown security flaws in Windows and other software to modify the function of programmable logic controllers used in power stations, industrial manufacturing systems and heavy industry. The virus was able to take control of infected systems without the Iranian operators noticing. By this means, the US operators were able to cause the centrifuges in the uranium enrichment plant at Natanz to run at excessive speeds, causing irreparable damage and setting the Iranian enrichment programme back by one or two years.³² Even after problems occurred with the centrifuges, the Iranians failed to realise that the cause was a cyber-attack. Only when the virus appeared on computers outside Iran in spring 2010 did Western experts conclude that Natanz had been its target. In June 2012 it was confirmed that NSA and CIA specialists collaborated with Israeli agencies to conduct the operation, codenamed "Olympic Games".³³ Apparently lacking the ability to conduct a cyber-attack on American or Israeli targets, the Iranians chose Aramco as an alternative.

Saudi Aramco is one of the world's largest oil companies and the most important for the global oil markets.³⁴ In August 2012 a virus, named "Shamoon"

³² Christopher Bronk and Eneken Tikk-Ringas, "The Cyber Attack on Saudi Aramco", *Survival* 55, no. 2 (April–May 2013): 81–96 (82).

³³ The best description is found in David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York, 2012), 188–235.

³⁴ Guido Steinberg, "Saudi-Arabien: Öl für Sicherheit", in *Petrostaaten: Außenpolitik im Zeichen von Öl*, ed. Enno Harks and Friedemann Müller (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), 54–76.

after a word appearing in its source code, disabled almost 30,000 of Aramco's computers and also affected the hardware of other energy firms including RasGas of Qatar. It deleted most of the data from the affected drives and displayed instead the image of a burning American flag. Shamoon was significantly less sophisticated than Stuxnet, infecting only computers used for internal communication and general business, and not those that control production, pipelines and processing. The harm consequently remained limited, even if Aramco did need almost two weeks to repair all the damage. Although conclusive evidence is lacking, the virus probably originated from within the Iranian state, as the only entity possessing both a strong motive and the considerable resources required to pull off such an operation.³⁵ Tehran was primarily retaliating for Stuxnet, but Saudi oil policy may also have played a significant role. During the course of 2012, namely, Aramco had stepped up its production in order to make up a shortfall caused by Iranian exports declining after the tightening of sanctions. Moreover, Saudi Arabia had approached important Iranian customers in Asia to persuade them to buy their oil from Aramco rather than Iran.³⁶

In its covert conflict with Saudi Arabia, Iran also deployed more conventional methods that have been part of the repertoire of the Iranian intelligence services since the 1980s. In this case, Tehran was responding to attacks on Iranian nuclear experts that are generally attributed to the Israeli Mossad. Between January 2007 and January 2012 five Iranian scientists, all of whom were working for the Iranian nuclear programme, were killed by unknown assailants.³⁷ The Iranians struck back in 2011 by attacking Israeli and Saudi diplomats. In May a member of the Saudi embassy in Karachi was shot dead in his car. In October Saudi media reported that the life of the ambassador in Cairo, Ahmad Qattan, had been saved in hospital after a poisoning. But the highpoint of the campaign was a failed assassination attempt of which Washington informed the public in October 2011. The target was Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador in Washington.

According to the US Department of Justice, Manssor Arbabsiar, an Iranian-born second-hand car

dealer living in Texas, had been asked to carry out the plot by two officers from the Quds Brigade of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard he met during a trip to Iran. One of the two, a high-ranking officer not named in the indictment, is reported to have been a cousin of Arbabsiar's. The plan was for Arbabsiar to pay members of a Mexican drug cartel \$1.5 million to murder Jubeir by placing a bomb in a restaurant he regularly frequented in Washington's Georgetown district. Arbabsiar did indeed travel to Mexico, but the drug smuggler he met with was a DEA source and he was subsequently arrested in the United States.³⁸ The case provoked great astonishment, with many observers reluctant to believe that the powerful Quds Brigade would rely on the services of a drug cartel and such an obviously incompetent figure as Arbabsiar to conduct an attack in Washington. The Quds Brigade commanded by Qasem Soleimani is, after all, known as a particularly important and effective military, intelligence and political instrument of Iranian policy in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon. Yet Washington appears to have no doubts as to its version of events, and Arbabsiar pleaded guilty. All that remains obscure is whether the top state leadership was in the know, or militant circles within the Revolutionary Guard acted on their own initiative. Despite the uncertainty of the facts, tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia grew after the assassination attempt became known. One clear sign of this was that the Saudi leadership, in the person of Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, broke with custom to explicitly blame Iran.³⁹

³⁵ Nicole Perlroth, "In Cyberattack on Saudi Firm, U.S. Sees Iran Firing Back", *New York Times*, 23 October 2012.

³⁶ Samuel Ciszuk, "Oil Strike: Saudi Arabia Wields its Energy Weapon", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 2013, 56f.

³⁷ Dieter Bednarz et al., "Die rote Linie", *Spiegel*, 2012, no. 10, 81-90 (87).

³⁸ On the sequence of events see Peter Finn, "Iranian Militant Linked to Murder Plot", *Washington Post*, 15 October 2011. A detailed description can be found in the Complaint United States vs. Manssor Arbabsiar and Gholam Shakuri, Southern District of New York, 11 October 2011), <http://www.justice.gov/opa/documents/us-v-arbabsiar-shakuri-complaint.pdf>.

³⁹ Ahmad Ghallab, "Saud al-Faisal: Iranian Attack on our Diplomats Is Nothing New" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 25 November 2011.

A New Offensive Regional Policy

Still shying away from direct conflict with Iran, the Saudi leadership has since 2005 instead moved to block real or perceived gains in Iranian influence in the region. Since relations deteriorated further after 2011, the Saudis have been pursuing three fundamental objectives: Firstly, working to bolster allied monarchies in the region and limit the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the transformation states. The Saudi leadership has pursued this policy increasingly aggressively, openly approving the July 2013 military coup against Egyptian President Muhammad Mursi and in March 2014 declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. Secondly, Riyadh intervened militarily when protests by the Shiite majority in neighbouring Bahrain threatened the stability of the regime of the House of Khalifa. Bahrain's dependency on Saudi Arabia grew to such an extent between 2011 and 2013 that it has become unclear whether it is actually still an independent state. Thirdly, from 2012 Saudi Arabia supported insurgent groups in Syria, so as to contribute to the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Here too, Saudi policy appears to have become steadily more aggressive. In all three cases, Tehran sharply criticised the Saudi moves. In the case of Syria the risk of escalation is especially great because Saudi Arabia is directly confronting an important Iranian ally.

Solidarity of Monarchs and Autocrats

The Union of Gulf States

At the first sign that the protests in North Africa might spread to the Gulf states, the Saudi government announced support for its financially weaker partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Aid totalling \$20 billion was promised to Bahrain and Oman, prompting ministers from the GCC states to speak of a "Marshall Plan" for the region.⁴⁰ In both countries the Saudi

financial assistance made it easier for the governments to keep the protests in check. The government of Oman was especially successful. Although, as the second-largest GCC state, Oman sees itself as a rival of Saudi Arabia and therefore probably had reservations about accepting the aid, it would have otherwise had difficulty conducting such an effective policy of carrot and stick from spring 2011.

In January 2011 there were initially rather small demonstrations in the Omani capital of Muscat, largely demanding social and economic improvements such as pay increases and action to counteract rising living costs and tackle widespread corruption. But in February the protests spread to the port city of Sohar, the country's commercial hub. After the security forces brutally suppressed them and killed a number of demonstrators, the demonstrations expanded to other cities. The government now made far-reaching concessions, announcing new public-sector jobs and increased pay and social benefits. In March it also dismissed a number of particularly unpopular ministers for corruption and expanded the powers of the elected lower chamber.⁴¹ At the same time the security forces and courts took what was by Omani standards a hard line against the protesters.⁴² In this way the government succeeded in restoring its control of the situation.

Since the 1980s Oman had frequently played an obstructive role in the GCC, maintaining much better relations with Iran than other members and frequently also impeding deeper integration among the six GCC states. After the events of spring 2011, the Saudi King Abdallah appeared to see an opportunity to exploit Oman's dependency on aid from its allies to deepen integration. In December 2011 Abdallah proposed that the member-states of the GCC should join together more closely in a political and economic union. Although the pro-Saudi press celebrated this project as a visionary move and an important response to Iranian "interference" in the Gulf states, it was actually an embarrassing blunder by the king, who

⁴⁰ James Gavin, "Taking the GCC Vision Forward", *Middle East Economic Digest*, supplement GCC Anniversary 2011 (London, December 2011), <http://www.meed.com/supplements/2011/gcc-anniversary/taking-the-gcc-vision-forward/3098601.article> (accessed 21 January 2014).

⁴¹ Peter Salisbury, "Mixed Messages on Reform", *Middle East Economic Digest*, 5–11 October 2012, 34f. (34).

⁴² Ibid.

had probably not even consulted with his ministers.⁴³ It was clear to any observer that the GCC had previously failed to cooperate successfully on politically less controversial projects such as a common currency.⁴⁴ Only the Bahraini leadership responded positively and supported the idea of a closer union over the subsequent months. The reason for this was that Bahrain, like Saudi Arabia, perceived a direct Iranian threat to its security and after the Saudi invasion in March 2011 had become increasingly dependent on its larger neighbour. Resistance to a Gulf union was led by Oman, which saw it above all as an attempt by the Saudis to further entrench their dominance of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Although at least the UAE and Qatar probably shared similar reservations, they held back with criticism. At the May 2012 GCC heads of state summit a partial union of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain was still on the table, but shortly thereafter Oman abandoned its delaying tactics and in June 2012 Foreign Minister Yussuf bin Alawi bin Abdallah declared without further ado that there would be no political union of the Gulf states.⁴⁵ When Saudi politicians again raised the idea in December 2013, Alawi reiterated Oman's rejection, triggering strong words on the Saudi side.⁴⁶ Traditional Omani resistance to Saudi dominance in the GCC probably played a role, but Muscat could also no longer ignore the Iranian position. The official Iranian press opposed plans for a union of Gulf states and also railed against the lesser variant of closer cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.⁴⁷

⁴³ For an example of such an obsequious piece, see "The Federal Gulf Countries?!", *an-Nahar* (Beirut), 21 December 2011.

⁴⁴ The failure of the shared currency (originally to have been introduced in 2010) stemmed from Kuwaiti and Omani resistance and a conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Emirates about the seat of the future central bank. A customs union was approved in 2004 but never implemented. Matthew Martin, "Plans for GCC Union Flounder", *Middle East Economic Digest*, 3 July 2012: 32f. (32).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Raghida Dargham, "Cooperation Council Fears Iranian-Omani Disruption" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 9 December 2014.

⁴⁷ See for example "The Deadly Concern of Those Residing along the Persian Gulf Coasts of the Arab Spring: Bahrain to Be Integrated with Saudi Arabia", *Mardom Salari*, 15 May 2012, quoted from BBC Monitoring Middle East, *Persian Gulf States' Conflicts Can Create "Instability" in the Region – Iran Paper*, 17 May 2012.

Jordan, Morocco and the GCC

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies also worked to support the surviving Arab monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, which had both experienced only weak protests, and to tie both closer to them. They were initially given the prospect of joining the GCC, although the offer was quickly downgraded to a "strategic partnership". With the original proposal, Saudi Arabia and its partners were probably mainly concerned to reassure both monarchies of their solidarity shortly after the start of the Arab Spring, but also to send a message to the protest movements.

At the GCC summit in Riyadh in May 2011, Secretary-General Abd al-Latif al-Zayani announced that the organisation would make both states an offer of membership and instructed the foreign ministers to work out the details. Representatives of Jordan and Morocco did indeed appear at the meeting of foreign ministers on 11 September 2011 in Jeddah. In December the GCC announced that it would fund development projects to the tune of \$5 billion in each country, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE each contributing \$1.25 billion in each case.⁴⁸

Again, the announcement met with widespread scepticism because strong resistance was to be expected both within the GCC and within the Saudi government. This was first of all connected with differences in economic structure between the Gulf states and both Jordan and Morocco, which are economically much weaker than their Gulf partners. Both would quickly have become an economic burden on the Gulf states. Moreover, Morocco is geographically much too far from the Arabian Peninsula to be taken seriously as an accession candidate. In the case of Jordan, the Gulf states would be accepting a country where the Muslim Brotherhood is strongly represented and Palestinians comprise up to 70 percent of the population. Many Gulf politicians regard the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinians as a potential danger that they would prefer not to see imported into their own countries.

Accordingly, it became apparent in the course of 2012 that neither Jordan nor Morocco had any perspective of joining the GCC. Instead the December 2011 promises of \$5 billion in aid for each served as

⁴⁸ The five billion dollars were to be paid out over the course of five years. "KSA to Finance Morocco Projects Worth \$1.25 bn", *Arab News*, 18 October 2012; "Saudi Arabia to Provide Jordan with \$487 mln for Development Projects", *Jordan News Agency* (Petra), 28 November 2012.

compensation for the subsequent failure to pursue accession. Instead there was increasing talk of a “strategic partnership” with the GCC.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Jordan, which had suffered greatly from the economic repercussions of the Arab Spring, profited from Saudi Arabia’s enhanced interest in the stability of its smaller neighbour. Rising energy costs caused by the loss of cheap gas imports from Egypt were especially problematic. Saudi Arabia helped in July 2011 by lifting the longstanding closure of its markets to fruit and vegetables from Jordan and in October 2011 agreeing to intensify cooperation between the two countries’ customs authorities to ease cross-border trade and travel.⁵⁰ From 2012 growing assistance was provided to care for Syrian refugees in Jordan, financed partly by the Saudi government and partly by public donations.⁵¹ Since 2012 both states have also been working together to support the Syrian insurgency.⁵²

With the Egyptian Army against the Muslim Brotherhood

While Saudi Arabia’s support for Bahrain, Oman, Jordan and Morocco was about preventing revolution spreading to the monarchies, in Egypt it worked to restore the army and parts of the old regime to power. Regarding the generals as the only possible guarantors of stability, the Saudis supported the Egyptian military coup in July 2013. But it had taken more than two years before Riyadh was able to decide to come down so decisively on the side of the counter-revolution. In the end, the most important reason was that it saw the stability of the state endangered by the policies of President Muhammad Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood and a growing polarisation of Egyptian society. Saudi Arabia also wished to end the reign of the Islamists out of fear of ideological competition. Ultimately, Riyadh worried that Tehran could exploit unrest in Egypt to expand its influence there. In the preceding

years the Saudi leadership had put great effort into building a regional alliance of pro-American “moderate” regimes against “extremist” Iran, together with Egypt and Jordan. When threatened with the loss of Egypt as the most important pillar of that coalition, Riyadh believed it had to act.

As soon as protests broke out in Egypt in January 2011, the Saudi leadership reassured Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak of its support. Riyadh was correspondingly dismayed when he was driven out of office on 11 February 2011. All too clear, it appeared to the leading princes, were the parallels to the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979. They were particularly aggravated by the indifference of the Obama Administration, which made no efforts to save its old ally from his fate. It was the realisation that the United States had little interest in the survival of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world that persuaded the Saudi Arabian leadership to pursue a more active regional policy from 2011, and also a more independent policy of its own towards Egypt. At the time there were rumours that the Saudis had offered Mubarak refuge, but nothing official was said in public. That role was taken by the UAE, although the offer was never taken up.⁵³

The Saudi response to Mubarak’s fall was initially cautious, but Riyadh approved the provisional takeover by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) under Field Marshal Muhammad Husain Tantawi on 11 February. In May 2011 the Saudis agreed to support the new Egypt with an initial \$4 billion in economic aid.⁵⁴ Behind the scenes the Saudi government maintained close contacts with the Egyptian military leadership and hoped to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from faring too well in the parliamentary elections, which were held between November 2011 and January 2012. The Saudi position towards Egypt hardened when the Islamists gained about 50 percent of the vote, all the more so after Muhammad Mursi won the June 2012 presidential election as the Brotherhood’s candidate. The reason for the Saudi rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood lies primarily in the fear that it represents a competing – more modern,

⁴⁹ “Asharq Al-Awsat Talks to Moroccan Foreign Minister Dr. Saad Eddine El Othmani”, *Asharq Al-Awsat* (English edition), 28 February 2012.

⁵⁰ Dominic Dudley, “A Watered-down GCC Membership for Jordan”, *Middle East Economic Digest*, 2011, no. 49 (9–15 December), <http://www.meed.com/sectors/economy/government/a-watered-down-gcc-membership-for-jordan/3118489.article> (accessed 21 January 2014).

⁵¹ “Jordanian Ambassador to Riyadh Talks Syrian Refugee Crisis”, *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* (English edition), 1 August 2013.

⁵² See “Revolution in Syria” in this study, pp. 21ff.

⁵³ “Aufatmen am Golf”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 July 2013.

⁵⁴ Marcel Nasr, “Positive Effects of Unconditional Saudi Assistance for Egypt Surpass American Contribution” (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 31 May 2011. It was a year before the first of the promised four billion dollars was paid out. Kareem Fahim and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Saudi Arabia Seeks Union of Monarchies in Region”, *New York Times*, 15 May 2012.

republican and frequently also revolutionary – interpretation of political Islam. As soon as the Tunisian Nahda Party won the November 2011 elections there, implying that the Muslim Brotherhood and ideologically related groups would play an important role in the transformation states, the Saudis started worrying that from Egypt the Brotherhood could become as great a threat as Gamal Abd al-Nasir had been in the 1950s and 1960s. Back then, Nasser’s call for pan-Arab nationalism, socialism and the fall of the region’s monarchies caused great problems for the Saudi regime. It ended in a proper “Arab cold war” conducted largely as a proxy conflict in Yemen.⁵⁵ Because Islamists influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood had dominated a strong opposition movement in Saudi Arabia in the early 1990s too, the House of Saud must regard the assumption of power by a transnationally organised revolutionary movement in a country as important as Egypt as a danger to the internal stability of its kingdom.⁵⁶ As a consequence, after the coup the Egyptian military regime first banned the Muslim Brotherhood and then in December 2013 declared it a terrorist organisation, Saudi Arabia followed suit in March 2014. Aside the wish to demonstrate solidarity, the ruling family also possessed domestic political motives. The fear of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and of Saudi Islamists influenced by them probably prompted Riyadh to undertake this very far-reaching and factually incorrect categorisation. In reality, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has not carried out a terrorist attack since the 1950s.

Saudi Arabia’s hostile stance was highly problematic for the Muslim Brotherhood, which was reliant on economic aid from the Gulf states and remittances from the hundreds of thousands of Egyptian migrant labourers there. President Mursi was therefore at pains to declare in his inaugural speech that Egypt had no intention to “export the revolution”, and visited Riyadh shortly after his election in July 2012. In an obvious attempt to placate the Saudis, he said that the security of the Gulf was a “red line”.⁵⁷ However, his initiative was in vain. This was partly because of his line on Iran,

which convinced the Saudis that Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood would abandon Mubarak’s anti-Iranian policy. In August 2012, shortly after assuming office, Mursi visited Tehran; the return trip to Cairo by his counterpart Ahmadinejad followed in February 2013. But particular friction was created by an ultimately fruitless Egyptian initiative in the Syria conflict. Mursi used the August 2012 summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Mecca to invite the Iranian leadership to join a quartet with Egypt, Turkey and Saudi Arabia to search for a diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal excused himself from the first ministerial meeting in mid-September on reasons of health, but no excuse was offered for his absence from the second meeting in early October.⁵⁸ While the Saudi leadership appears to have initially hesitated somewhat, the view prevailed that neither the Muslim Brother Mursi nor the Iranian leadership should be granted the prestige associated with the quartet. In the following weeks Mursi had to bury the idea of a meeting of four.

The decisive factor for the Saudi decision to support the coup against President Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood, however, was the domestic political escalation in Egypt itself. In the course of the first half of 2013 opposition protests against Mursi’s government grew while the economic situation deteriorated to a point where the country faced bankruptcy. It is to this day unclear whether the Egyptian military discussed its 3 July coup against President Mursi in advance with the Saudi leadership, or sought Saudi support. In any case King Abdallah welcomed the coup, immediately sending an effusive congratulatory telegram to Egyptian Army Chief Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi.⁵⁹ Barely a week later Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait announced a total of \$12 billion in budgetary aid, central bank support and oil products to help Egypt in the upcoming months.⁶⁰ In this way they hoped to

⁵⁵ Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamal Abd al-Nasir and His Rivals 1958–1970*, 3rd edition, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), passim.

⁵⁶ On the domestic political dimension see also “Protests in Saudi Arabia” in this study, pp. 7ff.

⁵⁷ Heba Saleh and Camilla Hall, “Morsi Eager to Ease Saudi Fears”, *Financial Times*, 12 July 2012; “Saudi Pundits Welcome Egyptian President’s Visit to Riyadh”, *al-Jazeera*, 11 July 2012, quoted from *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, 12 July 2012.

⁵⁸ Michael Theodoulou, “Quartet’s Chances for Syria Peace May Be Bleak”, *The National*, 19 September 2012; “Les Saoudiens absents d’une nouvelle réunion sur la Syrie”, *Reuters*, 3 October 2012.

⁵⁹ Ellen Knickmeyer, “Saudis Gain amid Islamist Setbacks”, *Wall Street Journal*, 8 July 2013.

⁶⁰ Saudi Arabia promised five, the UAE three and Kuwait four billion US dollars. Robert F. Worth, “Egypt Is Arena for Influence of Arab Rivals”, *New York Times*, 11 July 2013. Of the Saudi five billion dollars, two billion were earmarked as cash deposits for the central bank, two billion to be supplied in the form of oil products and one billion paid out as direct

avoid the new transitional government immediately suffering payment difficulties, and replaced Qatar as Egypt's biggest donor.

The coup in Egypt also had welcome side-effects from the Saudi perspective, as it considerably narrowed Qatar's regional influence. Since 2011 Qatar had not only stood by the protest movements, but also supplied assistance above all to the Muslim Brotherhood and similar Islamist groups. Qatar's influence had grown accordingly after those groups came to power in Tunisia and Egypt. Although relations between Riyadh and Doha improved tangibly – following long years of tension – after 2008 in the face of the Iranian threat, they began competing for regional influence again in 2011. The coup decided the question in Saudi Arabia's favour, yet Riyadh was not satisfied to leave matters there. During the subsequent months the Saudi government stepped up its pressure on Doha to renounce support for the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Qatari leadership refused, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain recalled their ambassadors from Doha at the beginning of March 2014. Rumours flew about the imminent possibility of further measures, such as blocking Qatar Airways from Saudi airspace or even the closure of the border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The measure plunged the GCC into a dangerous new crisis, with Oman and Kuwait declining to recall their own ambassadors. If the conflict continues or escalates it could threaten the existence of the regional organisation.

Counter-Revolution in Bahrain

Saudi Arabia acted most decisively in relation to neighbouring Bahrain, where it intervened militarily after protests threatened to spiral out of control and endanger the rule of the House of Khalifa, which is closely allied with Saudi Arabia. In Bahrain the Arab Spring demonstrations were only one of many waves of a protest movement largely rooted in the country's Shiite majority that began long beforehand. Even before 2011, Saudi Arabia had been leaning on the Bahraini leadership to refrain from taking reforms too far, and sought in the first place to hinder the emergence of a constitutional monarchy there.

The intervention, prompted by a call for help from the GCC by the Bahraini government, underlines

financial aid. Michael Peel, Camilla Hall and Heba Saleh, "Saudis and UAE Pledge \$8bn", *Financial Times*, 10 July 2013.

Riyadh's willingness to take great risks in order to protect the Khalifas and prevent any political emancipation of the Shiites in Bahrain. The sometimes enraged attacks by Iranian politicians and media made it clear that Tehran regarded the intervention as a provocation. This was especially dangerous because the clashes in Bahrain did not end with the suppression of the demonstrations. Instead, the Shiite youth have succeeded in maintaining their protests in the face of sometimes draconian counter-measures. The outcome was festering unrest that could not seriously threaten the country's stability, but threw up the question of an alternative solution to the crisis. At the same time, financial assistance, military invasion and political support made Manama increasingly dependent on Riyadh, turning Bahrain into a de facto Saudi Arabian protectorate. The Bahraini government therefore regarded the union of Gulf states proposed in May 2011 more as a renewed promise of protection than any infringement of its already largely theoretical sovereignty.

The cause of the unrest in Bahrain lies in the political and socio-economic disadvantage that the Sunni rulers impose on the Shiite majority of 50 to 70 per cent of the roughly 550,000 citizens.⁶¹ As in Saudi Arabia, the conflict sharpened after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, because the Bahraini government suddenly saw its domestic Shiites as a potential fifth column of the new Islamic Republic of Iran, and stepped up its repression. This policy repeatedly led to episodes of unrest and a series of protests that ran from 1994 to 1998 and became known as the "Bahraini Intifada". The government violently dispersed demonstrations, detained thousands and deported the leader of the protests. Only after the accession of Emir Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (born 1950) in 1999 did the regime make concessions to the opposition, releasing political prisoners, permitting exiles to return and raising the prospect of democratic reforms. But enthusiasm for the announcements, which were codified in a "national charter" approved by referendum, was already waning by 2002 when it became clear that the Khalifas had no intention of sharing power and ending the discrimination against the Shiites, as many Bah-

⁶¹ The figures are highly contested and government representatives often assert that the Sunnis are in the majority. In any case the proportion of Sunnis has increased over the past three decades.

rainis had hoped.⁶² In the following years unrest flared up at intervals and escalated again in August and September 2010, when the government detained about 160 Shiites in the run-up to parliamentary elections, including about two dozen opposition leaders.⁶³

In this atmosphere, the February 2011 protests in North Africa, Syria and Yemen also encouraged Bahrainis to rise up against the policies of their ruling family. The demonstrations began on 14 February and within a few days concentrated on the Pearl Roundabout close to central Manama.⁶⁴ Although many Sunnis initially participated, the dominance of the Shiite opposition quickly ensured that they drifted away. Before dawn on 17 February the government had the roundabout cleared by force; four demonstrators died and clashes with the security forces ensued during the following days.⁶⁵ Although the ruling family briefly changed its tactic and on 13 March offered an open-ended dialogue, the situation escalated.⁶⁶ After the demonstrators returned to Pearl Roundabout from 20 February, some raised more far-reaching demands for the fall of the ruling family and the end of the monarchy. When they also blockaded the nearby financial quarter of Manama and threatened to march on the royal palace, the ruling family called for assistance from Saudi Arabia and the GCC. Saudi and UAE troops entered on 14 March, moving into prepared positions in the capital Manama and securing key strategic points, ministries and other government buildings. This freed domestic security forces and squads of regime loyalists to break up the protest camp on Pearl Roundabout, again killing several demonstrators. At

62 International Crisis Group (ICG), *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt*, Middle East/North Africa Report 105 (Brussels, 6 April 2011), 4.

63 Simeon Kerr, "Bahrain Faces Unrest Ahead of October Elections", *Financial Times*, 3 September 2010; Thanassis Cambanis, "Security Crackdown in Bahrain Hints of End to Reforms", *New York Times*, 27 August 2010.

64 In the middle of the roundabout was a large statue comprising six upward-pointing stylised dhow sails holding a huge pearl. The pearl and the sails symbolised the long history of pearl-diving and trading in Bahrain, while the number six stood for the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The monument was erected in 1982 to mark the organisation's third summit meeting, and destroyed after the March 2011 crackdown.

65 An impressive if one-sided account can be found in the documentary "Shouting in the Dark" on *aljazeera.net*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html>.

66 Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, *Report* (Manama, November 2011), 165.

the same time a wave of arrests began. Seven Shiite leaders were later sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.⁶⁷

The Bahraini conflict remains unresolved. One reason for this is the radicalisation of the conflicting parties. The most important opposition group, al-Wifaq, has lost control of the militant Shiite youth. Since March 2011 there have been almost nightly clashes between demonstrators and security forces in the Shiite villages surrounding Manama, during which numerous young demonstrators and (much more rarely) police have been killed. Increasingly frequently demonstrators throw petrol bombs, and a number of bombings with improvised explosive devices have been carried out.⁶⁸ The violent protests are principally sustained by several thousand young militants who have rejected the established political organisations, which they regard as too conciliatory. They operate under the label "February 14 movement" but are only weakly connected to one another through social networks such as Twitter.

In the ruling family and its supporters a shift can also be observed towards uncompromising repression of the opposition. This current is led by the king's uncle, Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman (born 1935), who has led the country's government since 1971 and was already regarded as a proponent of an authoritarian security state under the father of the current king.⁶⁹ Other important protagonists are Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmad bin Salman Al Khalifa, Minister of the Royal Court, and his brother Khalifa bin Ahmad, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, who are known in the country simply as "the Khalids" (al-Khawalid).⁷⁰ They are all especially hated by the Shiite opposition, and the demand for the prime minister's resignation was one of the top priorities of the demonstrators in 2011.⁷¹

The present King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa appears unable to face down these conservative hardliners. Since succeeding to the throne in 1999 as a reformer

67 Interviews in Manama, 7–11 December 2012.

68 Inga Rogg, "Eskalation in Bahrain, Polizist durch einen Sprengsatz getötet", *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 20 October 2012.

69 Joseph A. Kéchichian, *Power and Succession in Arab Monarchies: A Reference Guide* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 76f., 91f.

70 Justin Gengler, "Gulf Apart: Bahrain Faces Political and Sectarian Divide", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, (January 2012): 32–37 (33).

71 Interview with Shiite opposition figures, Manama, 10 December 2012.

who wished to pursue a less repressive line than his father, he has been regarded as more open to dialogue and compromise than his relatives. But his reform initiatives ended at the latest with the unrest of 2011, and he is now either too weak or too indecisive to support the reformers in the ruling family. Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad (born 1969) is regarded as the most moderate member of the dynasty, but has lost ground to the hardliners.

Perhaps the most important reason for the strength of the hardliners is their closeness to the Saudi government. The prime minister maintained a close personal friendship with the Saudi Interior Minister (1977–2012) and crown prince (2011–2012) Naif bin Abd al-Aziz, until his death in 2012. The Saudi leadership and the Bahraini hardliners both see the protests as an Iranian plot to topple a legitimate government with the aid of the Bahraini Shiites, and interpret any attempt to come to an understanding with the Shiite opposition as a dangerous sign of weakness.⁷² The Saudi leadership is said to have been insisting for years that it would not accept a constitutional monarchy in Bahrain, as demanded by al-Wifaq and also desired by some of the reformers. But there is no convincing evidence of any Iranian role in the protests. In the absence of local allies, Tehran instead appears to restrict itself to sharply criticising the Bahraini and Saudi leaderships for their policies towards the Shiites and the intervention in Bahrain. But the accusations by the Bahraini and Saudi governments and the verbal attacks from Tehran have made many regime-loyal Sunnis today much more strongly anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite than was the case before 2011.⁷³ For this reason the conflict in Bahrain is increasingly assuming a confessional dimension.

At the same time Bahrain has become so thoroughly dependent on Saudi Arabia that it is questionable whether it can still be regarded as a sovereign state at

⁷² The chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Defence and National Security in the Bahraini Consultative Council (Majlis ash-Shura), Khalid bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, said something similar on 1 April 2013 in a speech at the Bahrain International Symposium of Bahrain University attended by the author. The events in Bahrain in 2011 had nothing to do with the Arab Spring, he said, and were instead a coup attempt supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hizbullah with the objective of establishing an Iranian-style Islamic Republic.

⁷³ Justin Gengler, "Bahrain's Sunni Awakening", *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, (Washington, D.C., 17 January 2012), <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712> (accessed 5 November 2012).

all. No longer possessing meaningful oil reserves of its own, Bahrain is highly dependent on Saudi Arabia, which funds about half of its budget through direct and indirect support.⁷⁴ That dependency has been increased since 2011 by the economic repercussions of the unrest, as tourists stayed away and the financial centre of Manama, which was long one of the most important in the Gulf region, suffered. The Shiite youth have responded in their own way to the close ties between the two countries. It is conspicuous that unrest and protests often occur in parallel in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern Province. These are often demonstrations of solidarity, for example by the Saudi Shiites shortly after the intervention in Bahrain. But religious, cultural and kinship contacts between the Shiite communities have always been close, and might suggest a certain degree of coordination of activities. In any case there is great concern in Riyadh about intensified cooperation between the Bahraini and Saudi Shiites.

Growing Saudi influence also impacts on domestic political debates in Bahrain. After the death of Saudi Interior Minister Naif bin Abd al-Aziz, who had long been the Saudi leader responsible for Bahrain, many oppositionists hoped that his successor, his son Muhammad bin Naif, would be a moderating influence on the Bahraini leadership. Their expectations were raised in late 2012 and early 2013 when a Saudi delegation did actually seek discussions with al-Wifaq, and the Bahraini government made a new offer of dialogue in January.⁷⁵ But as the subsequent months were to show, however, the Bahraini and Saudi governments were in fact sticking to their guns.

Revolution in Syria

Since 2012 Saudi Arabia has also become the most important supporter of the Syrian insurgents after Turkey and Qatar. However, Riyadh long held back in the hope of establishing cooperation with the United States. But Washington was unable to decide to support the rebel groups in any meaningful way, especially as they became increasingly Islamist. The Saudi

⁷⁴ Saudi Arabia shares the 300,000 barrels per day produced by the Abu Safa offshore field equally with Bahrain and supplies the Bahraini refinery at Sitra at heavily subsidised prices. Kenneth Katzman, *Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress (Washington, D.C., 6 January 2014), 34.

⁷⁵ Interview with Bahraini intellectual, Manama, 31 March 2013.

hesitancy may also stem from fears concerning the Iranian reaction to their funding and arming the rebels. Not until November 2012 were there significant indications that Saudi Arabia was working with the United States to gradually expand their support for insurgents in southern Syria, via Jordan. The United States appears to have repeatedly prevaricated and obstructed, leaving the Saudis increasingly dissatisfied and impatient. The turning point was the Syrian army's chemical attack on the eastern outskirts of Damascus on 21 August 2013, in which about 1,400 civilians died. When Washington first announced a military strike but then changed its mind, Riyadh apparently began increasing its support to selected rebel groups even without US participation.

The Saudi government was initially rather uncertain in its stance towards the peaceful protests that began in Syria in February 2011. Relations with Damascus had been miserable since the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005, a close ally of the Saudis. Although they blame Syria for the attack, that did not prevent the Saudis from cooperating with the Syrians after 2008 to prevent an escalation of the situation in Lebanon.⁷⁶ Until spring 2011 King Abdallah and some of the leading princes maintained hopes of one day separating Syria from its alliance with Tehran and thus reducing Iranian influence in the Middle East. In general terms, too, the ruling family tended towards preserving the authoritarian status quo and was altogether suspicious of the protest movements. Only when Bashar al-Assad ignored King Abdallah's warnings to act less brutally towards the demonstrations and the violence spiralled in summer 2011, did the Saudi leadership position itself against Assad. In a widely noted speech in early August King Abdallah criticised the violence of the Syrian regime, demanded Assad "stop the killing machine" (iqaf alat al-qatl) and called for reforms.⁷⁷ In the same month Riyadh recalled its ambassador from Damascus. Under pressure from the Saudis, the Arab League also suspended Syria's membership in November 2011 and imposed additional sanctions.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Guido Steinberg, *Saudi-Arabien als Partner deutscher Nahostpolitik*, SWP-Studie 35/2008 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, December 2008), 26, 28.

⁷⁷ For extensive excerpts from the speech see "Guardian of Holy Sites in 'Historic' Speech: Kingdom Rejects Developments in Syria" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 8 August 2011.

⁷⁸ David Ignatius, "Saudi Arabia's Burst of Confidence", *Washington Post*, 20 November 2011.

Although important behind the scenes, in public Saudi Arabia was overshadowed by Qatar, which held the rotating presidency of the Arab League in 2011 and chose to back the Syrian opposition. The rivalry between the two Gulf states shaped the development of the Syrian exile opposition in the subsequent period, where its frequent power struggles also reflected Saudi-Qatari competition. Initially the Qataris gained the upper hand and installed many of their allies in the leadership of the Syrian National Council established in August 2011 and the National Coalition (al-I'tilaf al-Watani) founded in November 2012.⁷⁹ Qatar cultivated representatives of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, whereas the Saudis backed its secularist rivals. After months of bickering the National Coalition chose Saudi ally Ahmad Jarba (born 1969) as its leader.⁸⁰ Despite the infighting, Saudi Arabia provided diplomatic support to the National Coalition jointly with Qatar and appears to have somewhat expanded its assistance after Jarba's election. In March 2013 the alliance consequently took Syria's place at the Arab League summit in Doha.

Saudi and Qatari support for the insurgents inside Syria followed a similar trajectory. By early 2012 at the latest, Qatar and Turkey were funding and arming the rebels. Ankara and Doha agreed that their support should prioritise groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but also supported Salafists and jihadists. In the meantime Riyadh was waiting for Washington to decide to support the insurgents meaningfully.⁸¹ Through 2012 there were only isolated reports of Saudi Arabia providing Syrian deserters with money to purchase small arms and ammunition.

One particular appointment demonstrated that Riyadh was itching to pursue a more resolute line. In July 2012 King Abdallah chose Prince Bandar bin Sultan Al Saud (born 1949) as the new head of the General Intelligence Directorate (Ri'asat al-Istikhbarat al-'Ammah, GID). Many observers were astonished because Prince Bandar had long ceased to play a significant role in Riyadh politics. He had been secretary-

⁷⁹ Its full name is the "National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces" (al-I'tilaf al-Watani li-Quwa al-Thaura wa-l-Mu'arada al-Suriya).

⁸⁰ With Muhammad Tayfur, the Muslim Brotherhood also supplied one of the two deputies. "Syrische Nationale Koalition hat neuen Präsidenten", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 July 2013.

⁸¹ Adam Entous, Nour Malas and Margaret Coker, "Bandar the Deal Maker: A Veteran Saudi Power Player Works to Build Support to Topple Assad", *Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013.

general of the new National Security Council since its institution in October 2005, but appeared unable to make political headway against the interior and defence ministries.⁸² Bandar's appointment represented a statement in two respects, because he is regarded as equally pro-American and anti-Iranian. As Saudi ambassador to Washington from 1983 to 2005 he became a close confidant of the pro-American King Fahd, for whom he managed the crucial relationship with the US Administration. During his long tenure as ambassador he became well-liked in Washington, well-connected in the US political scene and close to individual (Republican) politicians. He had also always argued for a hard line against Iran. With his appointment (in addition to his role in the National Security Council) as head of the GID, which was responsible for supporting the insurgents in Syria, Riyadh appeared to have decided to launch a proxy war against Iran.⁸³ In the work of supporting the Syrian rebels, Bandar was assisted by his younger brother Salman bin Sultan (born 1976), who took charge of relations with the Syrian opposition. Despite being very young for the post in Saudi terms, Salman was unexpectedly promoted to deputy defence minister in August 2013.⁸⁴ This was an important indication of the growing importance of Bandar and his circle in Riyadh politics.

After Bandar took charge at the GID, Riyadh stepped up its pressure on Jordan, whose government publicly called for a peaceful resolution but was working behind the scenes with the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Saudi foreign minister is reported to have leaned on the Jordanian leadership, which initially refused to take an open stance against the Assad regime.⁸⁵ From summer 2012 onwards there were sporadic reports in the US press that Washington had decided to train and arm insurgents.⁸⁶ In fact the United States had already been training fighters at a base in Jordan since 2012. But there appear to have been frequent disagreements between the Americans and Saudis, because Prince Bandar pressed for more decisive action. He also proposed an approach known as the "southern strategy" aiming to assist insurgents

independent of the Muslim Brotherhood and the jihadists from bases in Jordan to counterbalance the groups in northern Syria supported by Qatar and Turkey.⁸⁷ Washington in particular refused repeated Saudi demands to supply shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles.⁸⁸ In the course of 2013 the Americans are reported to have repeatedly suspended "southern strategy" measures.⁸⁹ In the face of US resistance, Saudi efforts remained largely ineffective.

From spring 2013 the Saudi leadership became increasingly impatient and now publicly demanded more determined support for the insurgents. Their dissatisfaction spiked in September 2013, after the regime's 21 August chemical attack on the eastern outskirts of Damascus in which 1,400 civilians died. Washington announced military retaliation, but backed down after agreeing with Russia and Syria that all Syrian chemical weapons would be destroyed. The Saudis viewed the cancellation of the US strike as a grave error that the Syrians and Iranians would interpret as a sign of weakness.⁹⁰ Riyadh had not only been quick to welcome the controversial decision to launch attacks, but had also tried – unsuccessfully – to have a resolution backing military action adopted by the Arab League.⁹¹

The Saudis seem to have made their decision to start assisting selected rebel groups in September 2013, initially without the support or assistance of the United States. Reports soon began appearing about deliveries of light arms and even anti-tank weapons, although the Saudis continued to heed the American request to deny persistent rebel requests for anti-aircraft missiles.⁹² There was also talk of Saudi Arabia planning to train up to 50,000 Syrian fighters and infiltrate them into the country via Jordan to fight the Assad regime (and the jihadist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). While Saudi politicians repeatedly insisted that they were supporting only the Free Syrian Army, there were persistent reports

⁸² For details on Bandar and the National Security Council see Steinberg, *Saudi-Arabien* (see note 76), 8f.

⁸³ Entous, Malas and Coker, "Bandar" (see note 81).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interview with GCC diplomat, Manama, 7 December 2013.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Karen DeYoung and Anne Gearan, "U.S. Closer to Widening Nonlethal Assistance to Syrian Rebels", *Washington Post*, 11 April 2013.

⁸⁷ Entous, Malas and Coker, "Bandar" (see note 81)

⁸⁸ Kevin Sullivan, "Saudis Line Up against Syrian Regime", *Washington Post*, 8 October 2012.

⁸⁹ Interview with GCC diplomat, Doha, 29 October 2013.

⁹⁰ Loveday Morris, "Persian Gulf Ties at Risk as Russia Plan Is Mull'd", *Washington Post*, 12 September 2013.

⁹¹ Karen DeYoung, "Kerry: Saudis Support the Strike", *Washington Post*, 9 September 2013; Mayy el Sheikh, "Arab League Endorses International Action", *New York Times*, 2 September 2013.

⁹² Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "Syrian Rebels Say Saudi Arabia Is Stepping Up Weapons Deliveries", *New York Times*, 13 September 2013.

that the Army of Islam (Jaish al-Islam), founded in September 2013 by the Salafist activist Zahran Alloush, was to be a second pillar of this strategy.⁹³ In November 2013 the Army of Islam, operating above all in the Damascus area, joined forces with other Islamist and Salafist (but not jihadist) groups to form the Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiya).⁹⁴ The Saudis were suspected of being behind this alliance, too. In early 2014, however, it still remained unclear whether the Army of Islam could really become a militant force to be reckoned with, nor to what extent this organisation and the Islamic Front would in fact become an instrument of Saudi policy.⁹⁵ Units of the Islamic Front did participate in operations in January 2014 aiming to drive out the former al-Qaeda affiliate Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Although the strongest group within the Islamic Front, the Free Men of Syria (Ahrar ash-Sham), are regarded as a Qatari and Turkish client, Saudi politicians assert that this occurred at their bidding. The Saudis are still seeking to integrate their allies into the Free Syrian Army Supreme Military Council and chain of command, and to gain them political representation through the National Coalition. These moves are, however, unlikely to succeed, and a military alternative to the jihadists that is strong enough to lead a successful fight against the Assad regime is unlikely to emerge.

⁹³ For detail on these plans see Yezid Sayigh, *Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray* (Carnegie Middle East Center, 28 October 2013), <http://carnegie-mec.org/2013/10/28/unifying-syria-s-rebels-saudi-arabia-joins-fray/greh> (accessed 22 January 2013).

⁹⁴ On their structure see Aaron Y. Zelin, *Rebels Consolidating Strength in Syria: The Islamic Front*, Policy Watch 2177 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute, 3 December 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebels-consolidating-strength-in-syria-the-islamic-front> (accessed 22 January 2013).

⁹⁵ In their first major confrontation with regime forces in the Qalamun mountains north of Damascus in early December 2013, the Army of Islam forces appear to have retreated very quickly. Yamin Husain, "The Defeat of Nabak: Army of Islam under Suspicion" (Arabic), *al-Hayat*, 10 December 2013.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Syrian example illustrates best how aggressive Saudi regional policy has become since the advent of the Arab Spring. Riyadh's plan to support non-jihadist Syrian insurgents to counterbalance the rise of the jihadists in 2012 and 2013 is still in its infancy, but merely proposing to topple an authoritarian Arab regime in itself represents a revolution for what was just a few years ago still a very cautious Saudi regional policy.

In fact it is far from certain that Saudi Arabia will be able to continue its new Syria policy. Firstly, Riyadh can only support Syrian rebel forces if one of Syria's immediate neighbours is prepared to cooperate. In summer 2012 Saudi Arabia consciously decided to work with Jordan, but King Abdallah of Jordan fears the vengeance of the Assad regime. It is therefore possible that the Jordanian government could force Saudi Arabia to suspend its aid at any moment. Secondly, Saudi Arabia would no longer support the rebels if a diplomatic solution were achieved. As unlikely as that might appear in the coming years, the situation on the ground changes so rapidly and frequently that longer-term predictions would be futile. But the longer the conflict continues, the more likely it is that the Saudis will expand their support and turn the conflict into a proxy war with Iran. In that context the strategy reportedly pursued since September 2013 of supporting non-jihadist Salafist groups alongside the Free Syrian Army is extremely dangerous. For it will be hard for the Saudis to retain effective control over the strengthened groups and prevent them from committing acts of violence against religious and ethnic minorities. Such atrocities would in turn exacerbate the conflict. Additionally, some of the groups thought to be supported by the Saudis are cooperating tactically with the jihadists of the Nusra Front and thousands of Saudi volunteers have joined jihadist organisations in Syria. There is some evidence that the Saudi leadership has been taking this problem more seriously since winter 2013/14. The most important hint came in early 2014, when Prince Bandar lost responsibility for the Syria file to his cousin, Interior Minister

Muhammad bin Naif.⁹⁶ The latter made a name for himself as an energetic fighter against al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Yemen and is not expected to support jihadist groups.

But in relations with the United States the Syria question is only one of several issues that have heightened tensions since 2001. The starting point was the widespread view in Saudi Arabia that the United States is not only inactive in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also one-sidedly pro-Israeli. Ill-feeling grew when the Bush Administration toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq against the explicit advice of the Saudi leadership. But the most important aspect is US policy towards the Iranian nuclear programme and Iran's advances in the Arab world. Following the interim agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in November 2013 Saudi criticism of the Obama Administration assumed a sometimes shrill tone. Prince Bandar for example threatened that Saudi Arabia would turn away from the United States.⁹⁷ But such threats appear increasingly impotent given that Riyadh has been attempting for more than a decade to assert its own interests vis-à-vis Washington – mostly in vain. The Saudis lack any convincing alternative to the United States, because no other state is willing and able to guarantee their security. Cutting ties with the United States would leave the Kingdom vulnerable and unprotected.

The Saudi leadership's stormy reaction to American willingness to seek a solution with Iran confirms that this is where it sees the biggest problem for its regional policies. Riyadh fears the Iranian nuclear programme not primarily because Tehran might one day order the use of nuclear weapon, but more out of concern that Iran could exploit an atomic shield to support militant groups in neighbouring countries with impunity and thus destabilise the Gulf region. That is why stopping the Iranian nuclear programme, which Riyadh rightly regards as primarily military in motivation, is an important concern. Behind the scenes, representatives of the ruling family have also repeatedly underlined that

⁹⁶ Rudolph Chimelli, "Still abserviert: Riads legendärer Geheimdienstchef Prinz Bandar entmachtet", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 February 2014.

⁹⁷ Sayigh, *Unifying Syria's Rebels* (see note 93).

they are in favour of a military strike against the Iranian nuclear programme and would lend support. Because they view Iran's striving for predominance in the Gulf region and the Middle East as a whole with great wariness, quite independently of its efforts to build nuclear bombs, they cannot welcome any possible agreement between the United States and Iran over the nuclear programme. Instead, a US-Iranian rapprochement threatens to erode Saudi Arabia's role as the most important US ally in the Gulf region. In Saudi eyes such a reconciliation could quickly lead to an agreement permitting Iran to establish regional hegemony in exchange for concessions on its nuclear programme. So what from the European and German perspective would be a complete success – an agreement that made it impossible for Iran to produce nuclear bombs with any speed – would from the Saudi perspective do nothing to eliminate the underlying problem. So if the talks with Iran turn out to be successful, a second similarly challenging diplomatic task would follow, namely to calm the cold war that has already begun between Saudi Arabia and Iran and thus reduce its considerable escalation potential.

That conflict also affects German foreign policy. Even if Germany imports only a very small proportion of its oil and gas from the Gulf, the region's significance for the global energy markets will tend to increase in the coming years. That applies especially to Saudi Arabia, which possesses about one third of the world's known oil reserves. These reserves also give the Persian Gulf enormous geopolitical significance in the longer run. Since Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's visits in October 2003 and February 2005, all German governments have continuously expanded relations with the Arab Gulf states. Although the contacts are today largely determined by commercial interests, Germany has become an increasingly important partner over this period and the security dimension in particular is considerably more prominent than just a few years ago. The best evidence of this is that Airbus Defence is supplying the technology for securing the entire length of Saudi Arabia's external borders. The German government has been supporting the project since 2009 by sending federal police to train their Saudi colleagues to operate the new systems.

Against this background a debate has emerged in Germany about relations with Saudi Arabia, flaring up at irregular intervals over news about arms sales. Each time, it becomes obvious that the Kingdom is an exceptionally tricky partner for Germany and that there are convincing arguments both for a deepening of

relations and for a distancing. The fundamental insight that Germany, as one of the world's strongest economies, has a deep interest in constructive co-operation with the world's largest oil supplier speaks for close relations. Since the 1970s Saudi Arabia has shown itself to be a dependable energy partner for the West, supplying the global economy with oil at acceptable prices. In recent decades Riyadh has pursued a moderate price policy and often utilised its spare production capacity to make up for shortfalls arising through production and export problems in other oil-producing states. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict too, Riyadh has promoted solutions that come very close to the European proposals, while its regional policy has long given preference to diplomatic solutions.

It is their authoritarian domestic policy, characterised by countless human rights violations, that speaks against the Saudis, and the political system that grants Wahhabi religious scholars enormous influence over society, justice and education. The consequence is restrictions not only on the religious rights of Christians and Jews, but in the first place on those of non-Wahhabi Muslims. In practice this affects principally the up to 15 percent Shiites in the Kingdom, who are not recognised as Muslims but treated as heretics. The Wahhabi slant of Saudi politics also affects Germany directly, because Riyadh promotes the export of Wahhabi teachings by supporting religious NGOs like the Muslim World League and its affiliated charities. This policy contributes decisively to the global dissemination of Salafism, which is a domestic as well as foreign policy problem for Germany and Europe.⁹⁸

Since 2005 Saudi Arabia has been showing an aggressive face in regional politics. Its sometimes justified but often paranoid fear of the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran and the Shiites in the Arab world, and the countermeasures it adopts, have the effect of worsening confessional tensions. In particular its support for the Egyptian military coup and the subsequent brutal suppression of protests demonstrates that the Saudi leadership easily mistakes subjugation for stability. Its policy on Bahrain also encourages the regime there to reject urgently needed political reforms and keeps the unrest alive. Although Saudi Arabia can claim to be pursuing a clear line in Syria and focuses its support on the Free Syrian army, reports about help for Sala-

⁹⁸ Guido Steinberg, *Wer sind die Salafisten? Zum Umgang mit einer schnell wachsenden und sich politisierenden Bewegung*, SWP-Aktuell 28/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2012).

fist groups like the Army of Islam are worrisome. The ideological boundaries between them and the jihadists are fluid and – if the reports are accurate – the Saudi policy threatens to deliver multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Syria to Sunni fanatics. Worse still, this policy is likely to exacerbate the future terrorist threat to the Arab world and Europe emanating from Syrian groups.

Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CRS	Congressional Research Service
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GID	General Intelligence Directorate
ICG	International Crisis Group
MEMRI	Middle East Media Research Institute
MERIP	Middle East Research and Information Project
SCAF	Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
UAE	United Arab Emirates