

Massive police mobilisation stifles “Day of Rage” protests in Saudi Arabia

By Chris Marsden
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Massive numbers of police succeeded in intimidating anyone seeking to join protests after the Muslim Friday prayers. The demonstrations were called by Saudi Arabian dissident groups in cities throughout the country, including the capital Riyadh.

Protesters failed to turn up in significant numbers for a planned “Day of Rage”, after thousands of riot and security police manned checkpoints and patrolled every block in Riyadh. Helicopters flew over the city and searches were carried out of cars and pedestrians. At al-Rajhi mosque, site of a rally last Friday, a dozen protesters were dispersed and a number of arrests were made.

The same scenes were replicated in the second city of Jeddah.

A rally of several hundred took place in the eastern city of Al-Hofuf, calling for Shiite prisoners to be released. Protesters marched through the village of Awwamiya, also in the Eastern Province.

On Thursday night, security forces shot and wounded three Shiite protesters in Al-Qateef in the Eastern Province who were calling for the release of nine Shiite prisoners jailed for 14 years without trial. A witness said police fired percussion bombs to disperse the crowd of around 200-500.

These acts of repression were followed by a pro-forma statement from the Obama administration, which is posturing as a defender of democracy elsewhere in Libya, Egypt and the Middle East. Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters, “What we have said to the Saudis and to all the people of the region is that we’re going to support a set of universal values in any country in the region. And that includes the right to peaceful assembly, to peaceful protest, to peaceful speech”.

The Saudi regime clearly understood the worthlessness of such statements.

Opposition groups calling for political and economic reforms were started by political activists operating on Facebook and Twitter, who called for the “Day of Rage” as well as a “Saudi March 11 revolution”. The “Day of Rage” Facebook group alone has nearly 33,000 followers. One faction has also called for nationwide protests on March 20.

The protests are demanding separation between the monarchy and a proposed elected parliament, which would replace the appointed Shura (consultative) Council, an independent

judiciary, the abolition of the secret service police, the release of all political prisoners and guarantees of freedom of expression. Amongst their social demands are a minimum wage of 10,000 riyals (\$2,667) and job creation. Official unemployment is at 10.5 percent, rising to 30 percent in the 20-29 age group.

The oppositionists have been inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, but are articulating long-standing social tensions in Saudi society.

A major feature of the protest has been the anger of Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority over the systematic discrimination they face from the Saudi royal elite. The government bases its authority on championing an extreme version of Sunni Islam, known as Wahabbism, which allows no interpretation of Islam but its own.

This societal schism is made more significant by the fact that the 10 to 15 percent of the population who are Shiite overwhelmingly occupy the Eastern Province, where 90 percent of Saudi’s 260 billion barrels of proven oil reserves are found.

The protests are viewed by the Saudi regime as an extension of those in the small neighbouring island of Bahrain. There the demographic mix is reversed. Shiites make up 70 percent of the population now in open revolt against the regime of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, even after decades-long efforts begun by the British to create a larger Sunni base for the Khalifa family’s rule. In June 2002, Bahrain began allowing employees of the Gulf Cooperation Council to obtain dual Bahraini nationality.

The fate of the two countries is connected by far more than the 16-mile King Fahd Causeway. The effort at social engineering has historically been known as de-Iranisation, a pointer to another major concern for the Saudis, which have long contested Tehran for strategic influence in the region. Tehran considers Bahrain to be rightfully part of its jurisdiction.

As in the past, the Saudi government has pledged to assist Bahrain combat the uprising that has seen protests by 200,000 people. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* earlier reported that 15 tank carriers transporting a total of 30 tanks have been transported to Bahrain from Saudi Arabia. Last year, Saudi Arabia intervened

militarily against Shiite rebels on its border with Yemen.

Mohamed Dehqan, one of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's inner circle, gave an interview with Iran's Fars news agency in which he warned the Saudis not to intervene. Saudi leaders "should know that the Saudi people have become vigilant and do not allow the rulers of the country to commit any possible crime against them.... Considering that the developments in Bahrain and Yemen affect the situation in Saudi Arabia, the [regime] feels grave danger and interferes in the internal affairs of these states".

When Shiite protests began in February in the Eastern Province and Medina, they were met with repression. Shiite women were beaten and arrested and a ban imposed on all demonstrations. Shiite cleric Tawfiq al-Amer was detained after calling for a constitutional monarchy and equal rights for Shiites. In order to defuse tensions, he and 25 other detainees were later released.

The security apparatus was placed on high alert for the first time since a Shiite uprising of February-March 2009, prompted by the crackdown on a Hajj annual pilgrimage to Medina.

Ten of thousands of police, army and other security personnel were then sent to the Eastern Province. The Interior Ministry posted a warning that "security forces are lawfully authorized to take all necessary actions against whoever tries to violate the laws" of the kingdom that "totally prohibit all kinds of demonstrations, marches and sit-in protests".

The chairman of the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars of Saudi Arabia, Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Sheikh, issued a fatwa stating, "The council affirms that demonstrations are forbidden in this country".

Raising the spectre of Iranian backing, Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal warned that the kingdom would "cut off the fingers of those who try to interfere in our internal matters, and we reject dictates from any foreign party.... Reform and advice are not achieved through protests and means which lead to sedition and fragmentation of society", he said.

The concern over possible protests in Riyadh and Jeddah shows that, just as with the social movement in Bahrain, Saudi dissent is by no means merely sectarian in character. Social divisions are beginning to make themselves felt.

The regime faces the very real threat of a unified movement developing between the Sunni population and the Shiite opposition, particularly among the nation's disenfranchised and impoverished youth.

Saudi Arabia is expected to emerge as the sixth richest economy of the world in terms of per capita GDP by 2050, surpassing Canada, the United Kingdom and Switzerland, according to Citibank. Saudi Arabia is expected to have a \$98,311 per capita income by 2050. But such averages mask the growing social crisis for the majority of the population. About 60 percent of Saudi Arabia's 19 million people are under the age of 30. Many have no job, with unemployment at 40 percent amongst 20 to 24-year-olds, including in the urban

centres of Riyadh and Jeddah that are home to six million.

The regime faces an explosive situation given that Saudis are well-educated and well informed. Ten million are online and follow revolutionary events in the Middle East avidly. An earlier protest in Riyadh was started by a young Sunni man, Mohammed al-Wadani, who had uploaded a YouTube video explaining why the monarchy has to fall.

Israel's *Haaretz* commented, "Any good political analyst can read the signs that the kingdom bears all the hallmarks of a nation ripe for revolution".

To offset this danger, last month the octogenarian King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz promised \$36 billion dollars in benefits, included a 15-percent salary raise for public employees and financial aid for students and the unemployed. A further \$58 billion was pledged over the next four years for education, infrastructure and healthcare. It has since been reported that the unemployment benefits recently decreed by Abdullah have dropped in value from 3,000 riyals to 1,000 riyals and will only be given to unemployed men.

The silence of Washington and other imperialist powers over repression in Gulf monarchies is animated by the same fears as their Saudi client—of social upheavals, a disruption of oil supplies and regional instability.

Bahrain, for example, is home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet, providing Washington with strategic positioning in the relation to the entire Persian Gulf region. Saudi Arabia, which produces nine million barrels daily, is the only country with the "swing capacity" needed to offset lost supplies and avoid a further spiralling of fuel prices that could plunge the world economy into renewed recession.

The situation remains precarious for the Saudi regime and all the region's despots. Yesterday saw thousands march towards Bahrain's royal court but were blocked by hundreds of riot police and armed Sunni residents. Tens of thousands of protesters marched in Yemen demanding the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In Kuwait, riot police used tear gas to disperse 500 stateless Arab protesters who were demanding citizenship rights in Jahra, west of Kuwait City. In Iraq, hundreds protested in Baghdad, Fallujah and several other cities.

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