

**AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE MILITARY:
THE CASE OF SAUDI ARABIA**

Paul Kotsonis

(RIEAS Research Associate)

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Since 2011, the Arab world was filled with violent conflict; in Tunisia the self-sacrifice of Muhammad Bouazizi rose protests which were later followed by the fleeing of President Ben Ali and the subsequent election of Islamist Nahda party; in Libya an uprising started in Benghazi against the country's leader Qaddafi and was followed by military intervention of the UN and later the death of Qaddafi leading to the elections held in 2012; In Egypt rising protests lead Hosni Mubarak to transfer emergency powers to the military; protests and armed conflict also started taking place in Syria and Yemen (Economist, 2016a).

Despite that, Saudi Arabia but also the rest of the Arab kingdoms faced minimal protests or regime changes; Yom (2012) argues that the reason for the stability of Saudi Arabia are external as well as internal: Since the withdrawal of the British in 1971 the US assumed the role of the protector for the region; the external support which has also been related to deployment of US troops on Arabian soil have facilitated stability. Domestic reasons that boost stability include Saudi Arabia's rich oil deposits; profits from oil exports have long funded full employment and subsidized local industries to provide cheap prices for necessities. Finally it is argued that local coalitions of power including members of the house of Saud, regional elites and religious power are all loyal to the existing order to provide them with benefits (ibid).

External support to Saudi Arabia according to the Economist (2016c: 19), has been sufficiently reduced; when Prince Muhamad was asked about the US, he expressed his disappointment replying “*The United States has to realize they are the Number One in the world, and they have to act like it.*” More than that Saudi Arabia’s biggest strength is also its biggest weakness; its economy lacks diversification with oil exports constituting 90% of the government’s profits (Economist, 2016b). The performance of a government that fails to develop a diversified modern industry able to foster a sustainable economic growth becomes affected by price fluctuations; those price fluctuations have the potential to hurt deep the legitimacy of a regime; they can have a serious impact on general welfare; on the loyalty of all social classes that are not included in decision making; and on the good relations amongst elites (Smith, 2013). Smith (2013) posits that lack of diversification can even create a conducive environment to military coups. With the price of oil below 35\$ a barrel in the beginning of 2016 and expectations of the price to remain in low levels in the near future, the house of Saud might face serious challenges to its legitimacy. Saudi Arabia still subsidizes services and provides employment to its people using its \$650bn in foreign currency reserves (Economist, 2016b). However the King’s favored son Muhamad Bin Salman, who currently holds the power has plans to implement cuts in government spending, including cuts in subsidies on water, oil, and electricity as well as cuts in unemployment benefits; the prince also hopes to privatize the oil giant national company Aramco, as well as modernize the health and education sectors (Economist, 2016c). Cuts may induce a loss of legitimacy for the house of Saud and cause social instability.

The imminent threat to a regime’s legitimacy can be balanced by repression and warfare; according to Levitsky (2013) wars can allow for a ruling government to bring destruction to its rivals who might in the future constitute a threat to its existence; wars can also foster sectarian identities of the elites and the masses deepening the strength of the regime while at the same time legitimizing repression. For instance on January 2nd 2016 the Saudis executed a Shia Cleric and 47 people on the charge of terrorism or lack of loyalty to the regime. At the same time Saudi Arabia is shutting communication with Iran and wages war against groups

supported by Iran such as the Houthis in Yemen (Economist, 2016b).

Armed warfare and the rising sectarianism between Shia and Sunni factions can help to solidify the legitimacy of the Saudi regime and help it to dissolve groups that might threaten its rule by repressing them; this is illustrated by the execution of the Shia Cleric on January 2nd. However this gain of legitimacy from acting as ‘guardian’ may very well be offset by the low prices of oil which hurt Saudi Arabia’s undiversified economy. More specifically, the cuts suggested by prince Muhamad could be detrimental to the future of the kingdom; in essence the inability of the regime to produce first, a welfare environment by the provision of full employment, free health and education; second cheap amenities and third, gifts and subsidies to elites, may result in rebellions. Moreover conditions of social stability may be even more at stake if the U.S. fails to come to Saudi Arabia’s assistance when needed.

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