



Saudi Crackdown Raises Specter of Wider Dissent

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Few noticed a rare protest that took place in Saudi Arabia in late January 2011 as a wave of popular uprisings swept the Middle East and North Africa, toppling the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Yet that protest, as well as criticism of the government's handling of floods in the Red Sea port of Jeddah in 2009, play an important role in Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's extension of his crackdown to members of the ruling family and the military. Prince Muhammad is attempting to stamp out any form of opposition to his mercurial rise, economic and social reform plans, and conduct of the Yemen war.

Prince Muhammad has dismissed and/or detained eleven princes, various senior government officials, top military officers, and an unidentified number of prominent businessmen largely linked to different factions within the ruling family. He will also be heading a new [anti-corruption committee](#) that will be looking into the handling of the Jeddah floods of 2009.

Those floods killed 120 people and caused destruction as well as prolonged power outages in Jeddah. The floods triggered an unusual public debate about the management of public funds and infrastructure defects. The Saudis said the port city's poor infrastructure was the reason why the floods had such a devastating effect, prompting dozens to protest.

In 2011, another protest arose in response to a mass Blackberry message campaign calling on residents to gather on the city's main shopping street. Up to 50 protestors are believed to have been arrested.

The government, in a bid to address the frustration in Jeddah, this year contracted China's state-owned Chinese Communication Construction Group

(CCCCG) to build a 37-kilometer channel to catch rain and flood water. "It might be an ordinary channel in another area, but it isn't the same in Saudi Arabia and it has special importance and came after painful lessons," said [Ma Chifeng](#), the director of CCCC's Jeddah City Project for Flood Drainage.

The political [crackdown](#) is of course about much more than the Jeddah floods, even if making them one of the anti-corruption committee's initial focal points is significant. Among those dismissed and/or detained were National Guard head Prince Meteb bin Abdullah; economy minister and former Jeddah mayor Adel bin Mohammad Fakeih; and navy commander Abdullah al-Sultan, as well as reportedly [businessmen](#) such as multi-billionaire Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz, a major shareholder in some of the world's best-known blue chips and a media mogul who is widely seen as a liberal. Also swept up in the crackdown were Waleed bin Ibrahim al-Ibrahim, a brother-in-law of King Fahd; Abdulaziz bin Fahd, the late king's son and owner of the Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC), which operates the Al Arabiya television network; and Saleh Kamel, head of one of the Middle East's largest conglomerates, who in the past had close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Prince Meteb, a son of the late King Abdullah, was the last senior member of the ruling family unconnected to King Salman's branch of the family to be in a position of power. The tribally rooted guard, a military unit founded alongside the military to protect the ruling family rather than the country, was long seen as a stronghold of King Abdullah and his closest associates.

The crackdown on National Guard and military commanders coincided with the [firing of a missile](#) by Houthi rebels at Riyadh, a signal that the Saudi capital is now within their range. The firing suggested that Saudi Arabia's strategy in the two and one-half year-long Yemen war, based on an air campaign rather than the commitment of Saudi ground troops, has so far failed to achieve its declared goal of ensuring the kingdom's security.

The crackdown also follows the [disappearance and alleged kidnapping](#) of three of four known dissident members of the Saudi ruling family who had gone into exile in Europe. Among the four were Prince Turki bin Bandar, a former senior police officer responsible for policing the ruling family; and Prince Sultan bin Turki, the husband of a late daughter of King Abdullah.

It also follows a wave of earlier arrests of scores of Islamic scholars, judges, and intellectuals whose views run the gamut from ultra-conservative to liberal. Among those arrested were scholars Salman al-Odah, Aaidh al-Qarni, and Ali al-Omari; poet Ziyad bin Naheet, and economist Essam al-Zamil, some of whom have more than [17 million followers](#) on Twitter.

The detentions were designed to silence 1) alleged support in the kingdom for an end to the almost four-month old Gulf crisis that has pitted Saudi Arabia and its allies against Qatar; 2) mounting criticism of the kingdom's conduct in the Yemen war; and 3) criticism of Prince Muhammad's reforms.

Beyond grandiose plans, Prince Muhammad has yet to deliver on the economic aspects of his reform plans articulated in his Vision 2030. He has so far delivered on limited, headline-grabbing social changes, such as lifting the ban on women's driving and the granting of access for women to sports stadia. These changes were needed for his economic reforms as well as for the encouragement of greater entertainment opportunities that contribute to economic growth and address grievances among youth, who account for a majority of the kingdom's population. Prince Muhammad has yet to deliver on jobs in a country that has high un- and under-employment and whose population has been weaned on cradle-to-grave welfare.

The most recent crackdown breaks with the tradition of consensus within the ruling family, whose secretive inner workings are equivalent to those of the Kremlin at the time of the Soviet Union. The dismissals and detentions suggest that Prince Muhammad, rather than forging alliances, is extending his iron grip to the ruling family, the military, and the National Guard to counter what appears to be widespread opposition within the family as well as the military to his reforms and the Yemen war.

This raises questions about a reform process that is increasingly based on a unilateral rather than a consensual rewriting of the kingdom's social contract. "It is hard to envisage MBS [Prince Muhammad] succeeding in his ambitious plans by royal decree. He needs to garner more consent. To obtain it, he must learn to tolerate debate and disagreement," wrote [*The Economist*](#).

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