

# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Syria: Saudi Arabia's policy conundrum**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*Saudi Arabia is faced with the succession of its ageing leadership following the death of Crown Prince Nayef at a time that the 89-year old King Abdullah is countering efforts by conservative clerics to employ the Syrian crisis as a vehicle to thwart his minimal reforms and circumvent post-9/11 restrictions on charitable donating, designed to prevent funds from flowing to jihadists.*

### **Commentary**

FOLLOWING THE death of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, barely a year after he was appointed heir to the throne, there is little doubt that the likely nomination of his brother, 76-year old Defense Minister Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz as the kingdom's crown prince will prove to be smooth. Nevertheless, the death of Prince Nayef, who served as interior minister for more than three decades, could prompt the sons of the kingdom's founder, King Abdul Aziz al Saud, to open the door to one of their sons moving into the line of succession to the throne.

The succession issue in the oil rich kingdom that is home to Islam's two most holy cities, Mecca and Medina, takes on added importance at a time that Saudi leaders are seeking to ring fence their country against the region's anti-autocratic protests and clamour for greater freedom. That is proving increasingly difficult despite political and military crackdowns and generous government handouts.

Syria for one poses a conundrum for a policy that supports popular and armed opposition to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in part by fueling sectarian strife in a country teetering on the brink of civil war while at the same time trying to insulate the kingdom from the region-wide challenge to autocratic rule.

Establishment clerics preaching from Friday prayer pulpits as well as on social media denounce the Syrian regime as well as the Alawites, the heretic Shiite sect from which Assad hails, and support the Saudi and Qatari supply of arms through Turkey to armed elements of the Syrian opposition. The clerics, like the government, make no effort to square their support for regime change in Syria and their earlier assistance in easing Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh out of office with their crushing of a popular uprising in neighbouring Bahrain and the crackdown on protests in Saudi Arabia's predominantly Shiite Eastern province, home to much of the kingdom's oil wealth.

## **Wielding a stick and a carrot**

King Abdullah has sought to halt the wave of protests at Saudi Arabia's frontiers by wielding both a stick and a carrot. The Saudi military as well as interior ministry forces under Prince Nayef's leadership responded firmly to Shiite protests and have cracked down on bloggers and activists. At the same time, King Abdullah has sought to preempt dissent by allocating more than US \$100 billion for enhanced services, handouts and the creation of jobs, primarily in the military and security forces, and cautiously moving ahead with snail pace reforms.

In a move designed to ensure government control of policy towards Syria, limit the fallout of the Syrian crisis and tighten government control of the clergy, King Abdullah recently cracked down on independent support for Assad's opponents by conservative clerics. Salafi clerics, who were opportunistically supported by Prince Nayef, and advocate a society that emulates the very early days of Islam, were ordered late last month to halt collecting donations in support of the Syrian opposition. That collection threatened to circumvent central government control of all charitable donations to foreign causes introduced post 9/11. Once Saudi Arabia realized that its charities had been infiltrated by jihadists, including members of Al Qaeda, it ordered a halt to prevent monies from flowing to militant Islamists who are bolstering the ranks of Syria's armed opposition.

Salman al-Awda, a prominent cleric whose relationship with the government runs hot and cold, countered on Twitter that those who wished to independently fund the Syrian opposition would continue to find ways to do so. The government went a step further in early June with a ruling by the Council of Senior Ulema (religious scholars) that banned the calling for jihad in Syria outside of officially controlled channels. In doing so the government sought to prevent Syria from becoming a vehicle in the hand of opponents of King Abdullah for criticism of government policy and advocacy of far more radical change.

King Abdullah's crackdown constituted the second blow in a month to those clerics who oppose reforms such as a relaxation of rules governing the public mixing of the sexes. Earlier they were unable to stop King Abdullah from lifting a ban on young men visiting shopping malls. In a heavily gender-segregated society this allows Saudi youths to furtively glance at the opposite sex and surreptitiously flash or exchange their mobile numbers or social media identities.

Some weeks before cracking down on radical support for Syria, King Abdullah fired a popular cleric and scion of a commercial empire, Sheikh Abdel Mohsen Obeikan, who served as an advisor to the royal court, for opposing the expansion of employment opportunities for women in education, medicine and retail sales and badly needed judicial reform. However the clerics have successfully blocked Saudi women for the first time from competing as official representatives of their country in an international sports tournament, at the London Olympics.

## **A clamour for real change**

Women activists are testing the limits of the king's reform willingness with a campaign to lift Prince Nayef's prohibition of women driving. Some 600 Saudis petitioned King Abdullah last week to allow women to drive in the only country in the world where they are banned from doing so. Women driving has so far been a bridge too far for the king. Scores of women who defied the ban in the past year have been arrested and forced to sign pledges that they would not drive again.

King Abdullah appears to have for now largely insulated his kingdom from the kind of mass anti-government protests other Arab nations are experiencing. The brutality of the struggle in Syria serves as a cautionary tale for many. The calls for change in Saudi Arabia are nonetheless mushrooming, boosted not only by the resilience of the Syrians but also the emergence of Islamists as victors in elections in Tunisia and Egypt.

Reformers are likely to see the death of Prince Nayef as opening the door to a successor like Prince Salman who may be more inclined to lead the kingdom, albeit cautiously, further down the road of reform. The question nonetheless is whether government largesse, crackdowns and minimal, piecemeal reforms will continue to be sufficient to stymie the growing clamour for real change.

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