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“King or Chaos: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring,” interview with Madawi Al-Rasheed by Jeroen Van den Bosch

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KING OR CHAOS: SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

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WHEN THE SHIA DEMONSTRATED, THEY WERE DESCRIBED AS A FIFTH COLUMN, MOBILIZED BY IRAN TO UNDERMINE SAUDI SECURITY. WHEN SUNNIS RESORT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST, THEY ARE REPRESSED AS THEY ARE DESCRIBED AS AGITATORS OR TERRORISTS. SO THESE NARRATIVES ISOLATE ACTIVISTS AND PREVENT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATION-WIDE SOLIDARITIES THAT CAN THREATEN THE REGIME” – SO PROFESSOR MADAWI AL-RASHEED FROM THE MIDDLE EAST CENTRE, THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS, ASSESSES THE TACTICS OF CONTROL OF THE SAUDI REGIME.

INTERVIEW WITH **MADAWI AL-RASHEED**
BY JEROEN VAN DEN BOSCH

How and to what extent has the Arab Spring affected and antagonized the population of Saudi Arabia itself? Looking back now, five years after its start, has society been ‘changed’ in a fundamental way?

Saudi Arabia did not witness the same level of protest that was seen in other Arab countries in 2011. However sporadic protest erupted in the Eastern Province, mainly among the Shia minority immediately after their co-religionists in Bahrain took to the streets of Manama. Also, small pockets of protest

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PROTEST IN SAUDI ARABIA REMAINS VIRTUAL, USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A VEHICLE FOR DISSENTING OPINIONS AND VOICES

were observed in other parts of Saudi Arabia. All these protests called for the release of political prisoners and the respect of their rights. There were no overt calls for the downfall of the regime except at a later stage in the protest among the Shia. However, the regime quickly moved to repress the protesters and clamp down on mobilisation. A group of Saudis established a political and civil right civil society and another group announced the establishment of a political party. As Saudi Arabia does not accept independent civil society organisations, the founders of these two initiatives were immediately imprisoned after a long period of trials. This was followed by more detentions among lawyers and activists. So by 2013 all forms of protest disappeared in reality but some activists continued to voice critical opinions on social media. At the moment, one can say that protest in Saudi Arabia remains virtual, using social media as a vehicle for dissenting opinions and voices. The regime also promised to create jobs, distribute benefits and services in an attempt to contain the wave of small demonstrations. This was during the reign of King Abdullah who benefited from a period of affluence as oil prices were high at the time and the Saudi budget had substantial surplus.

While initially many in Saudi Arabia were optimistic about the impact of the Arab uprisings as they dreamed about a structural change that would usher a new period of constitutional monarchy, elected consultative council and more transparency and reform, they were intimidated by the violence that erupted in other Arab countries. The situation in Syria strongly impacted on their perception of change. Many preferred to remain acquiescent, as they feared the disintegration of the kingdom, the loss of security and the upheaval. So more than five years after the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia remains calm, although there are some problems that might cause upheaval in the future. For example the austerity measures that the new king, Salman, introduced since 2015 as oil prices plummeted to a low level are beginning to be resented. It remains to be seen whether the oil crisis is more dangerous to an oil country than the protest that swept the Arab world.

Scholars have noticed that repression and accommodation are two sides of the same coin in order to maintain power in autocracies. Did the Saudi monarchy’s position weaken since 2011?

The position of the Saudi regime did not weaken after the Arab uprisings but it became more volatile in its domestic and regional policies. It increased repression and surveillance to intimidate activists but also tried to contain dissent which was minimal anyway, compared with that in North Africa or Syria. The regime mobilized the loyal Wahhabi establishment to ban demonstrations and criminalise protest, albeit peaceful. This helped to suppress dissidents and delegitimize their actions.

Was there a noticeable shift from one tactic (repression vs. accommodation) to another in Saudi Arabia's domestic policy?

The regime tries to strike a balance between the sticks and the carrots. But this balance is dependent on the availability of resources to distribute benefits. In order to understand why the regime has survived, one need to go beyond oil. The regime plays an important role in dividing the population along many lines. For example the Sunni-Shia divide prevents serious national politics from emerging and delays national solidarities. When the Shia demonstrated, they were described as a fifth column, mobilized by Iran to undermine Saudi security. When Sunnis resort to peaceful protest, they are repressed as they are described as agitators or terrorists. So these narratives isolate activists and prevent the development of nationwide solidarities that can threaten the regime. Fragmenting the Saudi population along sectarian, regional and tribal lines prevent grass-root politics from being consolidated in the kingdom.



THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE PREVENTS
SERIOUS NATIONAL POLITICS FROM
EMERGING AND DELAYS
NATIONAL SOLIDARITIES

Is rising sectarianism one of the main causes of this shift?

Sectarianism, the politicization of religious difference, is not new in Saudi Arabia. But today it becomes important as it divides the population along rigid lines and prevents various groups from coming together. So the Shia try to demand reform and rights on the basis of their real and imagined victimization while the rest of the population watches how the regime deals with their demands. The occasional violence in the Eastern Province where security forces

target Shia activists has little impact on the rest of the population. But also occasionally violent Shia groups target the security forces. This enforces the regime narrative that the Shias threaten security and expect the rest of the population to support the regime against dissident and radical groups.

Was the start of the Arab Spring itself a turning point in Saudi Arabia's regional policy, or did that come later when new fault lines started forming in the region?

The Saudi regime felt threatened by the Arab uprisings as these were mass protests that cannot be ignored. So it immediately jumped on the opportunity to rescue the friendly regimes in Tunisia and Egypt while supporting the poor monarchies of Morocco and Jordan financially. The regime wanted to preserve monarchies across the Arab region.

In the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudis intervened militarily to save the Bahrain monarchy. However, the main turning point in the Saudi regional policy was to adopt military strategies in Yemen. It launched Operation Decisive Storm against Yemen. This proved to be an important strategy to silence potential dissent at home. The regime adopted a narrative that it is targeted on its southern borders by the Houthis, who are supported by Iran. This absorbed any dissent and silenced those who may have wanted to challenge the regime or put pressure on it to introduce political reforms. It also adopted the Syrian uprising and financed rebel groups in an attempt to bring down Bashar al-Assad, also supported by Iran.

The term 'Arab Cold War' has been dropped in regard to the proxy wars for influence that Saudi Arabia and Iran are both fuelling. Will this state-of-affairs become the new reality for the foreseeable future or do you think this is a temporary realignment of Middle Eastern Realpolitik?

Yes. It is a Cold War but it is heated and threatens to destroy the security of several countries in the region. Syria, Iraq, and Yemen are now the platforms for the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. What complicates the situation is the proxy militias (always sponsored and supported by other regimes) that are deployed to fight this war. On both sides we find that these militias weaken central authorities. Both the Syrian regime and the Iraqi government no longer control security and both countries are threatened with more fragmentation

regardless of whether the regimes survive or not. This also applies to Yemen where several armed groups compete for power on the basis of their territorial expansion in their own countries. Here again, the armed groups are armed by rival regimes in the Middle East.

Finally, the international community has a role to play in this regional struggle. From Russia to the US, we find superpowers adopting opaque policies. The US supports Saudis in the war in Yemen; the central Iraqi government, the Syrian rebels, and the Kurdish parties with the stated objective of defeating the Islamic State. But US support for the Saudis in Yemen has strengthened rather than weakened radical groups such as al-Qaida and IS. On the other hand, the Russians are determined to keep al-Assad in power. So this confusion has so far resulted in human loss and stalemates. The battles in Aleppo and Mosul may be critical but without political solutions and sharing of power in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it is difficult to see how military solutions will lead to stabilization and eventually peace.

Madawi Al-Rasheed is Visiting Professor at the Middle East Centre, the London School of Economics in London. In 2016 she was visiting research professor at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. She is the author of several books on Saudi Arabia. Her latest publication is *Muted Modernists: the Struggle over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia* (OUP, Hurst, 2015).

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by D. Bocquet

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