



TURMOIL IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

By J.E. Peterson

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The Arabian Peninsula—that is, the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states plus Yemen—has been for the most part touched only superficially by the wave of political instability and popular unrest that has affected much of the Arab world. The GCC states are governed by ruling families that mostly have been in charge for more than two centuries. They can be more accurately characterized as being sclerotic than instable. Saudi Arabia, for example, has had only six kings since 1902. Sultan Qabus in Oman has ruled for more than 40 years; until just a few years ago, he was one of the junior leaders. Yemen has an extremely fractious past and the present regime has an abundance of troubles; still President Ali Abdullah Saleh has led the country for 33 years.

But it cannot be denied that the contagion of unrest, dissidence, and popular revolutionary sentiment that so far has toppled autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt has infected the Arabian Peninsula. Yemen is on the brink of toppling; Bahrain keeps control only through the application of repression once again; Oman withstands persistent protests for the first time; and Saudi Arabia exhibits a familiar unyielding attitude mixed with nervousness.

YEMEN

Without doubt, the most serious situation exists in Yemen. Ali Abdullah Saleh was virtually unknown and unrespected when he slipped into power in 1978. Since then, he has maintained and strengthened his hold over the fractious polity by a combination of shrewdness, the construction of an inner core of support, a reliance on extensive patronage, the maintenance and management of a state of chaos, and, in his own metaphor, dancing on the heads of snakes.

But the wily survivor seems to have been slipping in recent years. His manipulation of unity between north and south Yemen in 1990, followed by the victory in the 1994 civil war, resulted in a northern occupation of the south that southerners resoundingly resent. Southern opposition coalesced around 2007 into a largely peaceful movement that seeks either independence or autonomy and southern activists in 2011 have found common cause with northern opposition.

While conspicuously failing to manage this serious threat to his regime, Saleh has allowed a serious rebellion in the extreme north by the so-called Huthis to continue without foreseeable resolution. A series of all-out campaigns against Huthi strongholds failed to defeat the movement while exposing the military weakness of the regime, antagonizing most of the population of the north through indiscriminate shelling and bombing of villages, and even embarrassing neighboring Saudi Arabia when it was forced to take large-scale action against the Huthis after fighting spilled over into Saudi territory.

Furthermore, the regime's game of courting and denying Islamists, including Islamist extremists, has strengthened the extremists' position. Once Saleh realized that such a policy could not continue indefinitely, his pursuit of an alliance with the United States against the extremists polarized Yemeni attitudes and provoked groups such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to target government officials for execution.

At the same time, these three very serious challenges to the Yemen regime's longevity transcend more fundamental problems bedeviling the Arab world's poorest state. Yemen has been surviving financially thanks to fortuitous oil revenues. But the level of oil production and oil revenues has been waning. While the inception of liquefied natural gas exports will help soften the fall, Yemen's principal foreign-exchange earner by far will not last long. Yemen is an agricultural country with rapidly growing urbanization and a mushrooming and very young population. Its water supplies are on the verge of depletion,

standards of living are extremely low, and the growing legions of youth have few jobs prospects. Even in the best of times, Yemen's future is clouded—and these are perhaps the worst of times.

As of now, Ali Abdullah Saleh is hanging on by his fingernails. Longstanding popular dissatisfaction with him was, until recently, manageable through his manipulation of the political system—a system that with an elected parliament and relatively free press seemed on the surface to be open. He nurtured an efficient power base relying on his immediate family, his own and an allied tribe, and his control of a compliant and tribally dominated military apparatus.

But the winds of change blowing in from the north of Africa brought simmering popular discontent out into enormous street demonstrations. As in Cairo, Saleh's ill-advised attempt to meet peaceful opposition with force did much to change the balance of power. Resignations of members of his party and members of his cabinet multiplied. The most prominent Islamist, Abd al-Majid al-Zindani, announced his opposition. The al-Ahmar brothers, sons of the most prominent tribal leader in the country who died in 2007, declared for the opposition. Finally, Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar (a member of Saleh's own tribe and no relation to the al-Ahmar brothers) and four other generals joined the other side, leaving large swathes of the countryside outside central control.

On the surface, this seemingly would have spelled the end for the president and there were persistent rumors that a negotiated exit strategy was imminent. But caveats can be attached to the actions and position of each of the above personalities. Zindani, one of the founders of the Islamist-tribal-conservative al-Islah Party, had been in "loyal opposition" already since Saleh dropped al-Islah from his government. Abdullah Husayn al-Ahmar, the father, had been prominent in Yemeni politics since the revolution of 1962. But even though he last served as Speaker of the Parliament until his death, he too was a member of the loyal opposition. His sons do not carry the same authority and, since his death, they have tended to waver in their political positions, although the strongest of them, Hamid, is thought to have ambitions.

Generally, it has been considered that years ago General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar had forged a pact with Saleh providing that Ali Muhsin would succeed Saleh as president. This understanding was threatened in recent years as Saleh attempted to maneuver his son Ahmad into position to succeed him. Ali Muhsin was in charge of combating the Huthis—some would say that he instigated the fighting in the first place—but his failure to crush the Huthis weakened his position and perhaps was engineered by Saleh through the withholding of the necessary military assets. It can be considered that all of the above figures have acted as opportunists, sensing the end of the Saleh regime and positioning themselves for the future. Furthermore, all can be described as part of the elite that has dominated Yemeni politics in the last few decades—i.e., they are opposite sides of the same coin that the protesters in the street reject.

The GCC seemed to have brokered a deal that would allow Saleh to leave without punishment but then the inveterate politician backtracked on his promise. At the time of writing, the GCC's intervention remains in play.

Assuming that Ali Abdullah Saleh does depart the scene in the immediate future, there is no clear picture of what a post-Saleh Yemen will look like. Who shall succeed him? Will the military step in to take charge, as it has done in Egypt and in many other Arab countries in the past? If so, which elements of the military? Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar is a powerful figure but essentially part of the establishment (and perhaps has signaled his departure from the political scene) while Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh remains in charge of the elite and powerful Republican Guard.

BAHRAIN

Bahrain is a good example of why the GCC states are not all interchangeable. It is a small country and its oil reserves, small to begin with, have just about run out. Thus the post-oil future that hangs over all six members has struck already in Bahrain. While Bahrain's ruling family has been in charge for more than two centuries, it has been more autocratic than its neighbors and consequently the archipelago has witnessed regular periodic protests and periods of dissidence for more than a century.

Bahrain's troubles are often ascribed to sectarian tensions between a Sunni minority (including the al Khalifa ruling family) and a Shia majority. But the country's political problems are better seen as a perpetual contest between the al Khalifa (who trace their background from a tribe of central Arabia) and their tribal allies who also came to Bahrain from the mainland on the one hand, and the great majority of the both Sunni and Shia population on the other. Among the Sunnis are the hawala families, of Arab origin but who arrived in Bahrain from the Persian coast of the Gulf; they dominate in business. The Shia are principally the Arab Baharna, generally regarded as the original inhabitants, but there are also many Persians who have immigrated over the last century. The opposition also charges the regime with having naturalized thousands of Sunnis, especially Jordanians, Syrians, Yemenis, and Pakistanis, in an attempt to redress the sectarian imbalance.

Sunni and Shia dissidents have banded together in their opposition to the al Khalifa regime in 1938, 1953-1956, 1965, and the early 1970s. But the Shia have taken the lead in organized and persistent opposition because they are the disadvantaged in Bahrain. Shia villages are visibly poorer and lack many of the amenities found in Sunni villages. The Shia are systematically excluded from the military and the security forces and are under-represented in government employment in general and in

senior positions in particular. Thus most of the large numbers of young and unemployed are Shia who have become increasingly disaffected. The serious unrest of the late 1990s was a Shia-driven phenomenon although it had the quiet support of many Sunnis as well.

When long-time ruler Shaykh Isa died in 1999, many Bahrainis saw the succession of his son Hamad as a positive development. Isa had never been very interested in the affairs of government and he reigned while his brother Khalifa ruled as prime minister. Khalifa not only made himself one of the wealthiest men in the Gulf, he also easily became the most hated man in Bahrain for many Bahrainis. Through his control of internal security, Khalifa spearheaded the wave of repression that saw Bahrainis jailed for political offenses, some of them tortured, and others victims of the peculiarly Bahraini practice of exiling. For expatriates, Bahrain was a welcoming place to live and work, but deep-seated tensions underlay the friendly, prosperous air of the capital al-Manamah.

In his first two years as ruler, Hamad enacted a number of long overdue reforms. Prisoners were freed, exiles were welcomed home, real steps were made toward freedom of speech and press, and the ruler engaged in serious dialogue with opposition leaders. In 2001, however, he declared himself king and the process of change stagnated. True, he held elections for a national assembly but the elected assembly was matched with an appointed assembly whose speaker could cast the final vote breaking any tie. Furthermore, electoral constituencies were gerrymandered so that Shia representatives won a maximum of 18 of the 40 available seats, even though they constitute the majority of voters. Most of the other seats have been won by Sunni Islamist supporters of the government.

The political situation remained unresolved until the “Arab spring” of 2011 burst forth in Tunisia and Egypt. In imitation of Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Bahrainis occupied Pearl Roundabout as the center of their vocal opposition to the government. The goal of most of the protesters was not the toppling of the regime as in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, but genuine reform beginning with the dismissal of the prime minister (and the king’s uncle) Khalifa. He was seen by many as the leader of the hardline faction of the ruling family while the heir apparent and son of the king, Salman, was regarded as the liberal leader, urging dialogue and accommodation. King Hamad was said to be in the middle.

In the end, the hardliners won out and the regime reacted with repression, eventually clearing the roundabout. More protesters began to call for the overthrow of the regime and the government acted with force, arresting many and instituting martial law. Not all Bahrainis have protested and there have been mass demonstrations in support of the government. But the government has been stubborn in its rejection of opposition demands. It apparently has sought to stoke a sectarian dimension of conflict, it has declared that Iran was behind opposition movements, and it has re-arrested some opposition leaders and closed the principal opposition newspaper.

Disturbingly, the al Khalifa have received the support of fellow GCC monarchs and they invited Saudi Arabian and United Arab Emirates (UAE) troops to enter Bahrain in support of Bahraini security forces—although it is debatable how much of an “invitation” Saudi Arabia needed. The situation has quieted and many of the foreign media have departed. But underneath, nothing has changed. All the al Khalifa remain in their usual positions, the old allegations of unjustified arrest and torture have resurfaced, hundreds of Bahrainis are being held by security forces, and thousands of young Bahrainis remain unemployed and disaffected. The economic damage of the last several months is enormous while the tenuous “social contract” between ruler and ruled is fraying badly.

OMAN

Many observers were surprised when calm, quiet Oman produced its own explosion of demonstrations and protests, most visibly the takeover of the Globe Roundabout in the town of Suhar. They should not have been, however. While Oman has been a reasonably well-run country with an easy-going and practical people, it faces many of the same economic problems as Bahrain. Oil production is relatively small and has been declining over the last decade. The population is burgeoning but jobs are scarce and standards of living for the majority of Omanis pale beside the prosperity of the small elite.

Older Omanis regard their ruler, Sultan Qabus, with considerable respect, noting that before he took control in 1970, life was hard; after his accession, development began in earnest and life changed for the better. But some 80-90 percent of all Omanis were not alive in 1970 and they do not know the travails of the previous period. Their attitude to the sultan is based more on their poor job prospects and the ostentatious lifestyles displayed by the sultan and many of his ministers who have grown rich while in public service. They do not wish to replace the sultan or the system, they just want promises to be fulfilled and justice served upon those they regard as corrupt.

Sultan Qabus has made a number of concessions, dismissing twelve ministers, promising to create 50,000 jobs and a range of economic benefits, and initiating steps to broaden the remit of the elected yet largely ineffectual consultative body. None of these changes has diminished his own authority and none of the dismissals involved his own immediate family. Nevertheless, several key figures found themselves without jobs, including the minister of national economy, the minister of the royal office (roughly equivalent to the White House chief of staff), the head of the Royal Court, and the head of the important Royal Oman

Police.

Despite this, the youthful protesters have refused to give up and they continue to demand more changes, including the prosecution for corruption of leading officials. The government has been taking an increasingly hard line, detaining some protesters for criminal behavior but pointedly refraining from the type of repression prevailing in Bahrain.

SAUDI ARABIA

A number of petitions calling for social justice and political reform have been circulated by so-called liberals and even Islamist reformists for the attention of King Abdullah, first when he was heir apparent during King Fahd's long illness and then as king. Much hope was placed on the king to institute long-overdue political reforms. And Abdullah responded by such promising steps as establishing a national dialogue, welcoming back Shia religious leaders from exile, and removing girls' education from the grasp of the conservative religious establishment. But reform seems to have stalled in the past several years. A ballyhooed national "day of rage," inspired by demonstrations elsewhere in the Arab world, was a bust – only partly because of a heavy security presence.

There has been persistent low-level dissidence, however, among the country's restive and repressed Shia community. From a practical point of view—that is to say, regime survival—Saudi Arabia's Shia do not pose a formidable threat. Their numbers are limited, even though they constitute a sizeable minority of perhaps a million or more. With a few exceptions, they are concentrated in one region of the country. Admittedly, that region is the important Eastern Province where Saudi Arabia's oil is located, but they are probably a minority even in that region and their dominance in their two traditional centers of al-Hasa and al-Qatif oases has been diluted by the immigration of Sunnis.

So in large part the "Arab spring" has passed Saudi Arabia by and the country is girding for a return to another blazing hot summer. Grievances of one sort or another undoubtedly are nursed by much, indeed a large majority, of the citizenry. But it should be remembered that the kingdom has weathered a violent storm by its own Islamist extremists and most Saudis seem to have little stomach for activist stances that could rock an essentially calm boat.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The other three members of the GCC—Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE—have been almost untouched by the contagion of protest. It is not coincidental that these are the "rich" three members, with small populations and high oil (and in Qatar, gas) production. The UAE, however, seems to be taking no chances, and has detained three bloggers in a continuation of a policy of quietly muzzling potential dissent.

The immediate crisis seems to have passed in the affected GCC states while Yemen remains in turmoil. Most GCC citizens seem to wish their governments would be more responsive and less oriented to the benefit of the elites. They do not, however, want drastic changes, let alone regime change. The exception is Bahrain where a compliant attitude is increasingly under threat by growing numbers who see no change in the dismissive attitude of the ruling family and its return to reliance on repression instead of resolution of political disputes. It is doubtful that any of the rulers and their families have grasped the fact that change cannot be avoided and it is best to introduce substantive reforms now rather than be forced into them later.

Yemen provides an all-too-uncomfortable close reminder of the chaos that could emerge in the GCC's future. At the time of writing, Ali Abdullah Saleh still clings to power in Sana'a despite all odds. But the country remains in the grip of massive dissatisfaction, incipient rebellion, violent threats from al Qaeda, desertions among the president's allies, and severe economic liabilities. There is no easy answer to most of these problems and limited viable actions that a more responsive and popular government can take to solve them. What is certain is that whether Saleh leaves or hangs on, the country's political and economic problems will persist.

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