



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge  
Knowledge for All

## Workshop 4

# Saudi Arabia and the Arab Uprisings: National, Regional, and Global Responses

### Workshop Directors:

Paul Aarts  
Department of Political Science  
University of Amsterdam  
Netherlands  
Email: [P.W.H.Aarts@uva.nl](mailto:P.W.H.Aarts@uva.nl)

Saud M. Al Tamamy  
King Saud University  
Riyadh  
Saudi Arabia  
[saltamamy@ksu.edu.sa](mailto:saltamamy@ksu.edu.sa)

### Abstract

On the one hand, Saudi Arabia is both regionally and globally an important player which is reflected in an increasingly assertive behavior. On the other hand, the country has many times been viewed as fragile, based on backward values, finite resources, and shaken Western support. However, despite going through some serious destabilizing events in the past, Saudi Arabia has shown a remarkable ability to preserve a high level of domestic stability and regional influence.

Since the start of the ‘Arab Spring’ in early 2011, the Arab revolts have revived arguments about the ‘fragility’ of Saudi Arabia and the possibility that the kingdom would be the ‘next’ to experience its own version of the Arab ‘awakening’. The kingdom, however, has so far been immune from widespread political upheaval, apart from regular skirmishes in the Eastern Province with some groups of Shiite activists. Different reasons can be given for this apparent steadiness (see a.o. Gause 2011a and Lacroix 2011), and it does seem that the regime faces no real threat in the short term.

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia can be considered as one of the main regional actors vis-à-vis the Arab revolts. In some cases, it has helped in preventing, or at least postponing, the impact of the Arab revolts from changing the status quo. This was done *manu militari* in Bahrain, but elsewhere (like in Oman, Jordan, and Morocco) through

financial and diplomatic means. In other cases such as the Yemeni one, Saudi Arabia arranged a peaceful transition of power that caused a minimum change of the existing balance of power. However, in two other remarkable cases, i.e., Libya and Syria, Riyadh has been (or still is) one of the key actors to facilitate complete regime change (in Libya successfully as we know; Syria hangs in the balance at the time of writing). In countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, after things seemed to be completely out of Riyadh's control for a while, the kingdom has shown a remarkable ability to adapt to the new environment and regain some of its pre-Arab revolts leverage. An increasingly important factor, apart from the mainly bilateral relations with specific Arab countries, is the Saudis' growing contest for influence with Iran. Clearly, due to the Arab revolts new fields of competition for Saudi Arabia and Iran have opened up, sometimes labeled as a new regional 'cold war.'

On the global stage, it can be said that there are two contradictory responses towards the developments in the region. The first is that Riyadh's relationships with some major global powers have gone through some difficulties. Saudi Arabia strongly disagrees with both Russia and China over the developments in Syria. Also, since the advent of the Arab revolts, Saudi Arabia and the United States have apparently, and sometimes publicly, disagreed over some vital regional issues. For example, the kingdom seemed to find the way that Washington asked Egypt's Mubarak to step down improper and humiliating. On the Bahraini front, the US showed some reluctance to accept the sending of Saudi troops to the island (though almost simultaneously a multi-billion defense deal was struck between Riyadh and Washington). All in all, Saudi-US relations are under some tension but it seems farfetched to speak of a 'crisis.'

The second type of Saudi global response towards regional developments is the recent 'global reach of Saudi diplomacy,' that is Riyadh's active diplomacy within international institutions, such as the United Nations. Since the beginning of the Arab revolts, Saudi Arabia has appealed twice to the General Assembly in unprecedented moves to gain widespread international support against Iran (and Syria) in particular. Furthermore, the kingdom has shown an ability to mobilize a wide range of countries behind its own political views over the developments in the region through employing its leading position within a number of regional and international institutions, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Conference. The most recent success was booked during the August 2012 OIC meeting in Mecca where Syria's membership was suspended (with only Iran speaking out against).

Against this background, a much deeper examination of the Saudi responses towards the 'Arab Spring' has proved to be desperately needed. Therefore, the main question of this proposed workshop is: How has Saudi Arabia responded to the Arab revolts at the national, regional, and global levels? And what is the impact of these responses?

## **Description and Rationale**

Possible related sub-questions will be:

- Is the Saudi response to the potential impact of the Arab revolts *at the national level* (mainly taking a socio-economic form) intended to replace, and remove the need for, direct political reforms in the short run? Or will it serve as a ground for future political reforms?
- What is the likely impact of the ongoing societal and economic pressures (youth unemployment in particular) on the stability of the kingdom during the era of the Arab revolts?
- Apart from the ‘rise’ of the Shiite protest movement in the Eastern Province, has civil society – and in particular the discourse on ‘citizenship’ (*muwatana*) – been given an impetus via the ‘Arab Spring’?
- Does the Saudi state's sensitivity towards potential public upheavals (taking the form of socio-economic concessions) give the rentier state theory a new ‘lease of life’ or is there a need for new theoretical perspectives (possibly linked to a reinvented social movement theory)?
- How does the ‘political map’ in the kingdom look like? Who (what) are the main political actors? What are their discourses/demands? Related: How central is the role of the Sahwa in this?
- How do sectarian policies look like and are there any limits to their ‘success’? (This also applies to the regional level, see below).
- In terms of Shia politics: Is there a widening gap between Shia ‘notables’ and ‘(Shia) political Islamists’?
- With reference to royal succession: Is the kingdom really ‘out of the woods’ with the apparently smooth transition after the death of Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz?
- What is the impact of new media (blogs, Twitter, and Facebook) on political debate and social mobilization? Has the new media transformed the so-called ‘political landscape’ in the kingdom? If so, how?
- *On the regional level*: What is the significance of some Saudi initiatives such as turning the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into a ‘single entity’? Is such a move directed against possible internal upheavals or against foreign intervention? Is it a hegemonic or a defensive move?
- Is Saudi Arabia really pursuing a ‘counterrevolution’ in the Arab world?
- What is the influence of transnational connections of Saudi Shiites?
- What is Saudi Arabia’s leverage in the countries that experienced (successful) revolts (Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya)? To what extent is there an association with post-revolt Salafist forces in the Middle East and North Africa, and what are the possibilities of a ‘blowback’ phenomenon? (Here detailed case studies are welcome, also on Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Israel-Palestine).
- Is there rivalry for regional influence with Qatar?
- How does the ‘new cold war’ with Iran play out?
- What is the role of Saudi-sponsored media, such as Al Arabiya, in covering the Arab uprisings?

- Does the current active Turkish diplomacy in the Middle East present an opportunity or a challenge for Saudi Arabia?
- *On the global level*: What is the significance of the kingdom's growing assertiveness? Is Riyadh, under the pressure of the Arab revolts, forced to reposition itself in the global order?
- How will Saudi-US relations develop? (Similar question vis-à-vis Russia and China). Is the relationship moving from 'special' to 'normal' (or 'transactional')? (Obviously, many sub-questions could be filled in here).

## Anticipated Papers

Compared to its size and role, Saudi Arabia is known as one of the less-documented and little-understood countries in the world. The proposed workshop is expected to encourage further detailed, interdisciplinary, and original research on its political system, foreign relations, and its socio-economic and cultural fabric – studied within the framework of (post-) Arab Spring developments. It is highly likely that the workshop will attract a substantial number of both established and young scholars who are expected to approach the subject(s) from different and original angles that might challenge old but dominant narratives. The workshop will partly build upon the results of the earlier workshop “The Arab Spring: Impacts and Consequences on the GCC” (Gulf Research Meeting, July 2012). The workshop aims explicitly to have a multidisciplinary character.

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Paul Aarts** is senior lecturer in international relations in the Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the politics of the Arab world, with a specific focus on the Gulf countries. He has published several edited volumes and numerous articles in different academic journals, including *Democracy & Society*, *Orient*, *Middle East Policy*, *International Spectator*, *Review of International Affairs*, and *Middle East Report*. He is co-author (with Gerd Nonnemann) of “Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs” (London/New York: Hurst & Company/ New York University Press, 2005/2006). Recently, the updated Arabic edition was published by the Center for Arab Unity Studies in Beirut ([http://www.caus.org.lb/Home/publication\\_popup.php?ID=4763&MediaID=1](http://www.caus.org.lb/Home/publication_popup.php?ID=4763&MediaID=1)).

Earlier this year, he edited, together with Roel Meijer, the report “Saudi Arabia Between Conservatism, Accommodation, and Reform” (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, January 2012; available via <http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/?id=8961&&type=summary>). Last June, he finished a report “From Resilience to Revolt. Making Sense of the Arab Spring” available via (<http://wodc.nl/onderzoeksdatabase/duiding-maatschappelijke-omwentelingen-in-noord-afrika-en-het-midden-oosten.aspx>) or via ([http://issuu.com/pwahaarts/docs/from\\_resilience\\_to\\_revolt](http://issuu.com/pwahaarts/docs/from_resilience_to_revolt)). Later this year he will publish an edited volume (together with Francesco Cavatorta), titled “Civil Society in Syria and Iran. Activism in Authoritarian Contexts” (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner). More on: <http://medewerker.uva.nl/p.w.h.aarts>

**Dr. Saud Mousaed Al Tamamy** is an assistant professor of political theory at King Saud University (KSU), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He was awarded his Ph.D. from the University of Exeter (UK) in 2009. I.B. Tauris will shortly publish his Ph.D. thesis under the title “Averroes, Kant and the Origins of the Enlightenment: Reason and Revelation in Arab Thought.” Al Tamamy's academic interests are political theory and international and strategic issues. He has, among others, contributed to the book “Saudi Foreign Policy 1960-2010” (forthcoming) by writing a chapter on ‘Saudi Foreign Policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict.’ His paper “Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: Opportunities and Challenges of Security” will be published in the coming issue of the *Journal of Arabian Studies* (December 2012). He has also contributed to *Orient* the article “Hegemonic or Defensive? Patterns of Saudi Foreign Policy in the Era of the Arab Spring” (to be published in November 2012). Al Tamamy regularly contributes to conferences and workshops on a variety of subjects. In February 2012, he delivered a contribution to the conference “Gulf Cooperation Council: Choices to Move from Cooperation to Unity,” in Riyadh. The paper presented (“Moving from Cooperation to Unity: Practical Choices”) will be published in *Alta'awn* (nr. 76). Al Tamamy is a part-time advisor of the Riyadh-based Institute of Diplomatic Studies (IDS); the director of the International Scientific Twinning Program (ISTP); a member of the Saudi Political Science Association, KSU; and a member of the Academic Accreditation Committee of the Political Science Department, KSU.

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