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Abstract

Despite sharing many of the socio-economic and political problems that led to revolutions in other Arab states, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia experienced little unrest, a fact many in the West attributed to the Kingdom's closed political system. The absolute monarchy has been viewed as thwarting political dissension through kinship and religious alliances and sharing of oil revenues. This article aims at reframing mainstream Western explanations of the failure of the Arab Spring to gain a foothold in the largest economy in the Arab World and present a fresh vision of Saudi politics and the reaction of Saudis to the Arab Spring—one that transcends the fear and the rigid framework that characterize most scholarly discussions of the Kingdom.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia, Arab Spring, Day of Rage, rentier economy, political reforms, socio-political linkages

The results and consequences of injustice are serious.

—Public Service Announcement, Saudi Television, July 2013

Introduction¹

In June 2013, following a US\$700,000 settlement with Ahmed Ahmed, McDonald's discontinued selling halal products at its restaurants in North America (Little 2013). Ahmed alleged in a 2011 lawsuit that halal McChicken and Chicken McNuggets sold in Dearborn, Michigan were not always prepared properly.

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The situation of the company in America contrasts starkly with the success of its franchise in the heartland of Islam, Saudi Arabia, where its offerings are entirely halal and the restaurant has become a permanent part of the social landscape—so much so that customers have asked if McDonald's offers Kabsa, the Kingdom's national dish. The success of the franchise surprised many, including its parent company, and reflected a commitment to a vision of the social good far broader than that of other European or American companies. While Western corporate managers often argue that their principal responsibility is to earn a profit for their shareholders, McDonald's executives in Saudi Arabia see themselves as responsible to a broader audience: they argue that their company should provide a quality product at an affordable price and a restaurant experience that meets the needs of Saudi families; in addition, the company should give prompt responses to customer feedback and offer opportunities for Saudis to learn the value of hard work. In recent years, this approach has not only benefited the company's bottom line but it also has won its management public recognition for their contribution to combating one of Saudi Arabia's most serious challenges, unemployment.²

The success of McDonald's franchise in Saudi Arabia teaches us something about the Kingdom—about the way Saudis interact with the contemporary world and the people for whom they feel responsible—and this article will reframe mainstream Western explanations of the failure of the Arab Spring to gain a foothold in the largest economy in the Arab World, Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's case is important because the Kingdom outwardly shared many of the same socio-economic and political problems that led to revolutions in other Arab states but experienced little unrest. According to mainstream Western analysis, Saudi Arabia's success reflects its closed and uniform political system where a King, who is an absolute monarch, uses his family's alliance with religious elites and monopoly over the proceeds from oil sales to govern as an unquestioned autocrat. In this model—often called the rentier model—money controls everything. It allows the monarchy to maintain a social order that many outside of the Kingdom could not fathom existing on its own: a nation that is technologically advanced, wealthy and integrated into the global economy but that which still adheres to rigid religious and social norms. Ultimately, the Saudi monarchy administers the Kingdom without any form of citizen input or national dialogue as a family fiefdom or a multinational family business, often informally referred to as 'saudi Arabia.inc'.³

By contrast, this article argues that the Kingdom escaped mass political activism because Saudis reaffirmed their commitment to a governing system based on Islam and a system of mutual obligation and reciprocity—a system that bears a striking resemblance to the system of values that has made McDonald's a successful restaurant in Saudi Arabia. While this system appears uniform and inflexible, in practice it facilitates negotiation among the people of Saudi Arabia, allows for innovative government policies, and, in the words of Fahad Alhomoudi, a leading Saudi scholar, reflects the Kingdom's 'many colors'.⁴ Such flexibility provides mechanisms for Saudis to navigate divergent social contexts, respond to evolving socio-economic circumstances, and to avoid the types of existential political

debates that plague other states in the Middle East. Remarkably, the system helped Saudi leaders recognize (and devise policies to respond to) the factors that brought about the Arab Spring in other states years before younger, Western educated leaders of other Arab states did.

This insight draws inspiration from the recent writing of Lisa Wedeen, Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett. The Leveretts' 2013 book, *Going to Tehran*, discusses how American commentators misrepresent and mythologize Middle East states whose political systems—like Saudi Arabia—use Islamic principles that contradict liberal paradigms. According to the Leveretts, these myths are a product of what the leading US political scientist Louis Hartz called 'liberal absolutism', which argues that liberal democracy is the true form of legitimate government and tends to identify 'the alien with the unintelligible' (Leverett and Leverett 2013, pp. 8–9). These myths also allow commentators to portray Tehran and other governments as they wish them to be (irrational and illegitimate) rather than as they are. Today, these myths are so divorced from reality that the Leveretts believe that they suggest President Kennedy's 1962 statement that the 'great enemy of truth is not the lie...but the myth'—a myth built on clichés and 'prefabricated sets of interpretations' that allow us to 'enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought' (Leverett and Leverett 2013). Indeed, Ahmed Mater, an emergency room surgeon and one of Saudi Arabia's foremost visual artists once commented: 'We don't recognize this. It is always the same perspective. Western journalists come here, spend one week in our country, and go away with a distorted reality' (Stapleton 2012, p. 23).

Freeing ourselves from the myth, opinion and prefabricated set of interpretations about Saudi Arabia allows us to see how discourse in Saudi social and political spaces—rather than riches or repression—explains the Kingdom's response to the Arab Spring. It also allows us to see how the rentier theory's conceptions of Saudi society obscure the reality of the Kingdom's politics, which mirrors the notion of power indicated in Michel Foucault's book, *Truth and Power*: power is a 'productive network running through the whole social body', not the force of repression imposed from above by the King (Foucault 1998, p. 94). The French philosopher's insight is central to the methodological approach of this article, which argues that the Saudi monarch must govern and gain consent for his actions through a constant process of dialogue and negotiation with all the people of the Kingdom's society.

The process of dialogue goes on in public and private settings and is legitimized by what Lisa Wedeen calls 'performative practices' (Wedeen 2008, pp. 15–16): the Majlis, open letters, public petitions, salons, shaming and other public rituals that force the Kingdom's elites to be personally accessible to ordinary Saudis, permitting them to voice concerns, hold leaders accountable and maintain a just social order. Nor is the system limited to elites. Artists, football fans, and other apolitical actors contribute to national discussions, often adopting a role analogous to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'organic intellectuals': individuals who are not part of the 'official' intellectual elite but nonetheless articulate,

‘through the language of culture’, the feelings and experiences which society’s masses cannot easily express for themselves.

In order for the Saudi system to function correctly, there must be a constant dialogue between elites and all parts of Saudi society, and Saudi leaders must strive to achieve a delicate balance while adhering to Islamic principles: much like journalists, lawyers, and ‘whistleblower’ government employees in America, Saudi leaders must remain sufficiently engaged in society so that they can understand the needs of the people while they remain separate enough to be able to make changes ‘on their own’ when needed. In such a system, social inequality and elite autonomy are not an extraordinary social dynamic created by oil revenues—as rentier theory holds—but are essential elements to the realization of justice in society. Critically, the concept of ‘justice’ or a just social order is rarely discussed publicly and is not recorded in a written document like a constitution. But it is still universally understood and has deep roots in Middle East history.⁵ An executive in the Saudi food industry compares the concept to the understanding that two passengers sitting next to each other on an airplane flight have about the armrest they share: they may not say a word to one another during the flight, but they both know that it would be wrong to take up the armrest entirely, leaving no room for the other passenger.⁶ There are many examples of this vision playing out throughout Saudi society, and the royal family often reminds foreigners that many of the wealthiest Saudis are not royals and that commoners manage many of the most successful institutions in the country.⁷

Finally, the Saudi system mirrors a defining social reality of the Kingdom: individuals are seldom alone. Shopping malls and other public settings are filled with groups of youth and families, while residential neighborhoods feature multi-generational (rather than single) family compounds. In rural and urban areas, Saudis continuously share physical and social space in a wide array of contexts with their extended families—work, home, leisure and trips to the desert. The King is no different. He often appears in public with other officials and his official portrait is paired with two other portraits, Crown Prince Salman and the founder of the third Saudi state, King Abdulaziz ibn Saud. He and many other Saudis have a *shilla*, or clique, a small group of 10 to 20 friends who meet regularly, talk, exchange information and usually share a common goal (Pascal 2012). Within all of these settings, Saudis of different ages and outlooks must find viable ways to cooperate and to talk to each other—a process that produces discourse, structure and the Kingdom’s politics.

Common Problems, Uncommon Solutions

What we know today as the Arab Spring represented a gradual process that was built up over decades, while the Arab states appeared to be among the most stable governing systems in the world. Many of the Arab heads of state in 2010, including in Saudi Arabia, had been national leaders in the 1970s or were related to the

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men who led their states at that time. Well integrated security structures in Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab World reinforced the governing system.

But the political systems of Saudi Arabia and the Arab World faced environmental and social challenges that even the most ferocious security forces could not address and which were stretching the social fabric to the breaking point from North Africa to the Gulf. The most important challenges were tied to water and population growth. Water was not only critical to life but also to a critical aspect of Islamic worship: Muslims must wash their hands, face, arms and feet before each of their five daily prayers. Only 10 per cent of the Arab World is arable, while many states use more than they receive in rain or snowfall (Vidal 2011). Other states depend on water sources controlled by militarily powerful neighbors. For instance, reduced water on the Euphrates River from Turkish dam construction severely impacted farming communities in Iraq and Syria, many of which were already suffering from an historic drought from 2006 to 2011 that had led to the abandonment of a hundred villages, some of which had been continuously inhabited and cultivated for 8,000 years (Nabhan 2010; Worth 2010).

Despite President Bashar al-Assad's youth, Western education and linkages and his country's outwardly republican form of administration, his policies made matters worse. The Syrian government provided cash subsidies for large farms growing water intensive crops like cotton and wheat for export in regions of the country with severe water shortages. It also allowed the overuse of ground water wells—a practice which reduced the country's water table and seriously degraded the quality of remaining water supplies (Femia and Werrell 2012). As a result, hundreds of thousands of Syrians left their farms and relocated to makeshift camps at the edge of Syrian cities.⁸ The record of Yemen and other republican governments in the Arab world was not much better than Syria (D'Silva 2011).

Saudi Arabia faced similar (if not worse) water challenges in the decade leading up to the Arab Spring but it responded to them very differently than most Arab states. In 2010, 70 per cent of its ancient fossil aquifers had been depleted—far more than what is considered naturally recoverable (Lee 2010). The culprits were clear: population growth, which was on a steady decline since the highs in the 1980s but still increasing⁹ and Saudi agriculture. A generation of generous subsidies, loans and government land handouts had created some of the largest farms in the Gulf, wheat production that met domestic needs and dairy surpluses sufficient to export to its neighbors in the Gulf. One Saudi agricultural company, Almarai is the largest integrated dairy producer in the world. The cows in its state-of-the-art dairy reportedly produce 12,400 liters of milk per year, double the average of European cows (Pendleton 2013; Abu Dhabi *National Geographic* 2012).

But the system and its success came with high costs. Not only did the farms require vast subsidies that put a strain on government budgets but they also utilized enormous quantities of water. To produce a single liter of milk in Saudi Arabia required 1,000 liters of water. Desalinization plants, which the country had already substantially invested in, could only meet part of the rising demand and were also energy intensive. By the middle of the 2000s, experts warned the Saudi

government that the country faced water shortages as serious as its neighbors and could run out of domestic supplies completely within a generation (Lee 2010).

To their credit, Saudi leaders, did not follow the lead of other leaders in Arab republics and ignore the challenge of decreasing water supplies and its impact on their citizens or their environment. Instead, they initiated a change in national policy that was consistent with their role in a monarchy and society: actors closely linked to society but who are also autonomous and entrusted with the power to initiate political change when needed to ensure a just social order. Following a series of consultations with the key stakeholders linked to food production (farmers, the Kingdom's privately-managed food industry and ordinary Saudis),¹⁰ the Saudi government announced that the country would start to abandon its subsidies for domestic agriculture and import all of the country's foodstuffs by 2016. The measure, announced in 2007, overturned decades of massive investment in domestic agriculture but was backed by cold logic: food could be imported far easier than water and could be done at a fraction of the cost of producing food domestically.

At the same time, Saudi leaders did not leave farmers, ordinary Saudis or private business at the mercy of volatile global commodity markets or environmental forces. They instituted social 'shock absorbers': the government increased salaries and subsidized a basket of basic products, including rice and baby milk. Saudi officials also offered a gradual reduction of subsidies to help farmers and measures to aid private business, including new port and transportation facilities and help purchasing agricultural land abroad.¹¹ These policy changes were sufficiently important that they bore the King's name: the King Abdullah Initiative for Agricultural Investment Abroad.

The new policy was also well timed because it coincided with Ankara's decision to pursue close commercial and diplomatic relations with Turkey's other neighbors along with the end of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq. These changes opened a new land bridge through Turkey, Syria and Iraq to the Gulf that considerably shortened trips between Saudi Arabia and Europe: while it takes more than two weeks to ship goods by land and sea between Bucharest and Riyadh, it requires as little as a week to ship goods entirely by land between the two cities.¹² The land bridge also made it commercially viable for the first time for small and medium sized companies from Turkey and Southeastern Europe to export to Saudi Arabia and to partner with the Kingdom's agricultural firms.¹³

Riyadh's decision to rely entirely on food imports brought its policies in line with those of many of its fellow Arab states. Even in years of normal rainfall, most states in the region had to import substantial quantities of food and were consequently sensitive to fluctuations in the price of wheat and other global commodities. For years they struggled to import enough food to meet the needs of their burgeoning domestic populations. In fact, three of the fastest growing national populations in the world in 2012—Qatar, the Gaza Strip and the UAE—were in the Arab World (Central Intelligence Agency 2012). Putting further pressure on Arab states were the millions of refugees within their borders. When global food prices rose in 2010

and consequently made daily staples out of reach for many Arabs, most Arab states—unlike Saudi Arabia—had few resources or ‘shock absorbers’—to prevent a spike in domestic food prices. Riots erupted in several Arab states. Riots in one of those countries, Tunisia, set the stage for the Arab Spring.¹⁴

Those riots hinted at the pressure that had been building below the surface in the Arab World for over a decade. The publication in 2002 of the *Arab Human Development Report* revealed what many Arabs had known for years: their nations were underdeveloped socially, were unable to meet either the social or economic needs of their populations, and had fallen behind Asian nations that had once been their peers economically and socially. Those who lacked *wasta* (socio-economic and political connections) were shut out of educational or employment opportunities and had little chance for advancement—a process that produced massive differences between classes (Bayat 2005).

Within this environment, a widespread sense of despair emerged among the Arab youth. Blocked from advancement at home, many Arabs tried to find work abroad. Those who remained in their home countries either did not find work or had to accept wages below the cost of living, especially in the region’s densely-packed cities. Many had to work multiple jobs and depend on their families well into adulthood. Educated professionals had to supplement their official income by taking on substantial part-time or seasonal work. Students could not pass classes at public schools or universities without tutors, many of whom were educators who needed to supplement their menial salaries to make ends meet. It was difficult for men to buy homes in urban areas or have enough funds for the *mahr*, the dowry paid by the groom to the bride. Consequently, weddings were postponed for years.

Saudis were not immune to these pressures, especially the two-thirds of the kingdom’s population below the age of 29 (Murphy 2013, p. 11). In the early 2000s, marriage prices—which included the *mahr*, the wedding, housing and personal items—ranged between 150,000 to 500,000 riyals (US\$40,000–US\$133,000) a person (Hadi 2012). Further adding to these problems was the fact that the prices of houses jumped 19 per cent in Riyadh and 17 per cent in Jeddah, while rental inflation was 20 per cent in 2009 and 10 per cent in 2010 across the kingdom (Sfakianakis, Merzaban & Hugail 2011). These changes were acutely felt because 40 per cent of Saudis live in Dammam, Jeddah, and Riyadh alone (Bugshan 2011), while inflation was 0.8 per cent between 1990 and 2006 (Sfakianakis et al. 2011). An October 2010 Gallup poll found that 27 per cent of Saudis reported that they had trouble affording shelter in the past year (Crabtree 2011a), while in a separate Gallup poll, a majority of Saudis saw themselves as struggling economically (Crabtree 2011b). These costs forced many men to incur financial burdens that they could not realistically support, look for foreign brides, or even postpone marriage indefinitely (Hadi 2012). The effects were little better for women: there was an unprecedented increase in the number of unmarried Saudi women. It now stands at 1.5 million (*ibid.*).

How to deal with these problems remained a challenge for many Saudis and other Arabs. While the actions of al-Qaida inspired some to embrace religious

extremism, others articulated grievances through technology or art. In Egypt, a generation of internet activists challenged the order of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak online. A young Google executive, Wael Ghonim, pioneered many of the online organizing strategies that would become famous in 2011 during an online campaign in 2010 to bring the killers of a prominent blogger, Khaled Mohamed Saeed, to justice.¹⁵ This process was aided by (a) the rapid proliferation of smart phones, which dramatically expanded access to the internet and (b) Facebook's launch of an official Arabic version of the website in March 2009 (Black and Kiss 2009).

These changes were acutely felt in Saudi Arabia, where the online community grew from 1 million users in 2001 to nearly 11 million a decade later (CITC 2010). The ease by which they adopted online communications should have come as no surprise because social media resembled their culture 'offline' in which they spend significant time in large groups talking.

Much like other Arabs, Saudis proved effective at using social media to expand their social network and to supplement other mechanisms of cultural and social conversation. A 2011 YouTube video, *Monopoly*, used comedy to document Saudi Arabia's housing shortage and the inability of urban professionals to afford to marry or buy homes (Murphy 2013, pp. 21–22). Others utilized cartoons or animation. Some young comedians utilizing YouTube became household names. Critically these online artists built on a longstanding Saudi tradition of caustic humor and satire, epitomized by *Tash Ma Tash*, a popular television program that ran for over a decade on Saudi television.¹⁶

The emergence of YouTube and social media, however, also helped to spark changes in Saudi culture 'offline'. In the late 1990s, five men—Ashraf Fayadh, Muhammad Khidr, Ahmed Mater, Abdelkarim Qassim and Abdunasser Gharem—met at an artists' colony in Asir and began to hold a regular Majlis at Gharem's flat (Gharem 2011, pp. 38–44). The Majlis, which Gharem led, discussed the arts and the world and mirrored the Majlis his grandfather, a prominent sheikh in a mountain village in Asir, regularly held (Gharem 2011, pp. 44, 182–183). Through the Majlis, materials available online, and the help of Stephen Stapleton, a British artist who visited them in 2003, a new artistic community took shape that aimed to expand the definition of art in the Kingdom and access to arts education. In 2008, the group held a show in London entitled 'Edge of Arabia', a name which is now associated with the artists and those who share their goals. While Edge of Arabia artists are apolitical and should not be confused with the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, their work echoed the concerns of their fellow Saudis: bureaucracy, cultural and technical change, the environment, intercommunal relations, poverty, violence and women in the family and society. Two of Gharem's earliest pieces, *Flora and Fauna* (2006) and *Siraat* (2007), addressed a social concern that would lead to a dramatic change in Saudi government policy in 2007: the need for Saudis to find new approaches to handle their environment and water resources (Gharem 2011, pp. 53–62, 84–87). The work of Gharem and other

artists also highlighted their intellectual flexibility. Many of these artists had permanent jobs in professions other than the arts and were not part of the kingdom's artistic or intellectual elite. Indeed, Gharem was an army officer, whose only formal training in painting and sculpture was in a secondary school arts class that also included two of the hijackers who took part in the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks (Gharem 2011, pp. 28, 40–43).

The Saudi government's official response to rising social pressures and to the new voices online and offline proved to be as intellectually innovative as those in *Edge of Arabia*, incorporating the values that informed its 2007 decision on national food policy and strategies, including political 'shock absorbers'. Among the most important of these political shock absorbers was the Saudi National Dialogue, which was founded in 2003 with the clear blessing of then-Crown Prince Abdullah. The National Dialogue is an independent organization designed to constructively bring multiple ideas and groups, including the Shi'a, into the nation's political life for the first time. Critically, the Dialogue mirrors the Kingdom's long standing culture of exchange and feedback between governing elites and the population. In multiple meetings between 2003 and 2010 in different parts of the Kingdom, the National Dialogue addressed many of the issues that would arise in the Arab Spring. These issues included national identity, women's rights, the challenges facing Arab youth, educational reform, religious extremism and a multicultural world in which power and influence rested not only in the West but also in the peoples of Asia and the global south.¹⁷ The Saudi government also paired the National Dialogue with social training programs at different levels of society and the Interfaith Dialogue, an initiative designed to create opportunities for Saudis to interact with Christians and Jews along with Buddhists, Hindus and people of other Asian faiths (Shoukany 2008). Crown Prince and later King Abdullah provided key political support to these various initiatives by personally receiving representatives from the National Dialogue, maintaining close contacts with the West, and becoming the first Saudi head of state to visit China and the Vatican (Almeena 2006; *BBC News* 2007).

Significantly, these initiatives coincided with concrete policy changes at home and abroad. Begun in 2005, the King Abdullah Scholarship program allowed millions of Saudis from all walks of life to study abroad. Saudi officials frequently utilized social media (Ghafour 2013; Worth 2012) and pursued a more aggressive posture to bring stability to regional affairs. In December 2009, Riyadh initiated its first military operation since 1991 when Saudi forces intervened to aid the Yemeni government in its conflict with the Houthis on the Saudi–Yemeni frontier. Finally, the Saudi state initiated policies in early 2011 to control inflation—especially for food and rent—increased subsidies and proposed a solution that might eventually solve the Kingdom's acute housing crisis: a mortgage law that would permit Saudis to purchase homes without having to pay for everything up front (*Business Monitor Online* 2011).

The Day of Rage

Within months of the implementation of these policies, millions of individuals in the Arab World had gained the confidence to challenge their nations' governments. Beginning in Tunisia in December 2010, political protests over the price of food were transformed into much larger events, where many other issues would be voiced. The video footage of the self-immolation of a fruit seller in rural Tunisia spread rapidly online (and on satellite television), galvanizing large sections of Tunisian society to act. Crowds took personal ownership of their movements and put the blame (and the responsibility for change) at home: *ash-sha'b yuridu isqat an-nizam*. While this phrase is often translated as 'the people want to overthrow the regime', the sentence could include the notion of 'order' because the word *nizam* has an equally plausible meaning other than regime: a society's hierarchies of power, its governing 'system' or 'order'. Critically, when Tunisian President Ben Ali fled Tunis on 26 January 2011, Tunisia's old elites hoped that a new president would end the protests. Instead, demonstrations grew far bolder. By taking this approach, ordinary Tunisians sent a clear message to their leaders: the national leader was a symptom of the problem; it was the *nizam* that had to change.

This message (and the use of social media) provided a model for Ghonim and other Arabs to use to great effect in their countries, uniting proponents of rival and what many saw as mutually exclusive visions of modernization—the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, who see Islam as the sole foundation of national identity and government and secularists, who promote a national vision consistent with European modernity, where religion and the state are firmly separated. For decades, President Hosni Mubarak had pitted these two groups against each other, but in January and February 2011 they cooperated to stage large protests and bring about his removal from office.

The fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak permitted others to think that other Arab leaders might soon fall using similar models of online activism and mass social protest. In February 2011, a day of protest called the Saudi Day of Rage was also announced online and scheduled to be held in the Saudi capital and other Saudi cities on 11 March 2011. Although the Day of Rage received considerable media attention worldwide, only one person showed up in central Riyadh on 11 March, a 40-year-old elementary school Arabic teacher, Khaled al-Johani (Murphy 2011). There was even less reaction three days later on 14 March 2011 in Riyadh when Saudi forces intervened in Bahrain—an action similar to the one in 2009 in Yemen, when Saudi troops were invited by the host government to enter the country (Chulov 2011). By contrast, large crowds took to the streets of central Riyadh waving flags and honking horns on 18 March 2011 after King Abdullah went on Saudi national television, thanked his people for not participating in the Day of Rage, and announced a government aid program of nearly US\$100 billion, a massive sum for a country of 28 million people. That night Mohammed al-Mutairi, a naval official driving on one of central Riyadh's main thoroughfares,

told a Reuters reporter: 'We are happy because the king has spent money on us, that's enough for us' (Benham 2011).

For most Western social scientists and scholars, the absence of protestors in Saudi Arabia was easy to understand and consistent with the rentier model. In the words of Marc Lynch, King Abdullah married repression with 'a breathtaking package of financial incentives to his population' that 'effectively met the most urgent demands of potential protestors' (Benham 2011). This view is widely shared among many Western scholars but few think it will last: many now argue that the Arab Spring has shifted the worldviews of the Saudi public, especially its youth, who in the future will no longer trade money and a comfortable life for political acquiescence to the Saudi autocracy.¹⁸ In their eyes, the Kingdom's leaders lack the legitimacy of modern and rational democratic governments and are consequently vulnerable to the strong headwinds blowing through the region—a process an American journalist recently likened to watching a gymnast on a balance beam: 'As the body twists frame by frame through the air, we instinctively hold our breath to see if the hurtling gymnast will nail the landing or crash to the mat' (House 2012, p. 3).

To support this vision, Western scholars draw on a host of YouTube and Twitter postings, media reports, secular and modernization theorists and interviews with select Saudis, many of whom share their worldview. Few spend extensive time in the Kingdom. They argue that Saudi youth, who are well connected to the outside world, are angered with the wealth that has been squandered by the monarchy and desire a tangible role in national politics akin to the citizens of Egypt or Tunisia. This political transformation is a natural evolution, a process that mirrors modernization in other parts of the world in earlier eras.¹⁹ These scholars also cite the uneasiness of Saudi Shi'a with the government's attitude toward them and its use of sectarian—that is, pro-Sunni—national symbols. Women, they note, are unhappy with the restrictions on driving and other activities, restrictions that are a product of the modern state and oil. Indeed, one author has recently argued that Saudi 'oil wealth turned women into commodities exchanged by men who can afford them' (Al-Rasheed 2013, pp. 22–23).

An Alternative Explanation

While this vision is increasingly gaining currency among Western scholars of Saudi Arabia and has been echoed by some Saudis,²⁰ it also confirms preexisting interpretations and opinions and—to paraphrase President Kennedy—does so at the expense of thought, of analysis. Most importantly, the core of this argument is what Hartz identified decades ago as 'liberal absolutism', and the approach provides no explanation except for money and religious fanaticism for the existence of a government which does not employ liberal values and institutions. The quotation about the gymnast also exemplifies a key feature of mainstream Western treatments of Saudi Arabia: fear. Authors repeatedly warn Western audiences

about what will (or could) happen should the Saudi government collapse—a trend which Matthew Gray has identified in the recent writings on another Gulf monarchy, Qatar, where ‘too many scholars, arguably, are too keen to play Cassandra’ (Gray 2013, p. 244). These scholars often dismiss analysis that does not conform to their vision as ‘positive’ (that is, overly sympathetic to Saudi Arabia) or which looks at the Kingdom through ‘rose-colored glasses’.²¹ Nor are their arguments innovative or new: William Quandt observed in *Foreign Affairs* in 1994 that ‘there is a cottage industry forming to predict the impending fall of the House of Saud’ (Quandt 1995). Indeed, much of today’s literature and the texts Quandt discussed follow a far older text, Michael Hudson’s *The Precarious Republic: Political Modernization in Lebanon*. In that book, he challenged the Western conventional wisdom in the late 1960s that the country was an island of stability in the Middle East and correctly identified the constellation of forces that would produce a civil war in 1975 (Hudson 1968).

Today a process similar to what Hudson observed in the academic debate on Lebanon may exist in mainstream Western scholarship on Saudi Arabia but in reverse: a political system widely seen as fragile and in danger of immediate collapse may in fact be far stronger than Western scholars believe, with significant reserves of popular support. It is worth noting that the absence of public demonstrations in the streets of Riyadh and in other cities in favor of the Day of Rage did not mean that there was an absence of meaningful public political activism by young Saudis, including those closely connected to the outside world. In Jeddah and other cities young Saudis plastered pictures of the King and patriotic messages on their cars and posted messages opposing the Day of Rage on Facebook (up to 30 pages in one instance). They also publicly displayed their loyalty in public in a group setting, the nation’s premier sporting event, a football (soccer) match between two of the nation’s top clubs, Al-Hilal, and its Riyadh rival, Al-Nassr, at Riyadh’s King Fahd International Stadium. Fans raised photos of the King, waved Saudi flags and patriotic banners. Similar displays of support occurred in games in Mecca and Medina, with one banner containing a slogan which can still be found on the front of some Saudi schools: ‘We do not deserve to live in a country that we are unable to protect’ (*Al-Sulaimi* 2011).

That banner signaled the vitality of the linkages between the monarchy and the Kingdom’s tribes, who have membership in millions. These linkages date back to the first third of the twentieth century when King Abdulaziz assumed a patron–client relationship with Saudi tribes by becoming the chief source of tribal redistribution in the country and convincing them of the benefits of living permanently in settlements. He and his descendants intermarried with the leading tribes in Saudi Arabia, building a web of mutually reinforcing familial and political linkages between the state (*dawla*) and communities in every corner of the country. In February and March 2011, tribes and—more importantly—Saudi youth publicly reaffirmed the vitality of these ties, expressing a sense of collective responsibility (Eyal 2011). One, Faisal Al-Marashi, a 22-year-old college student, told the *Arab News*: ‘Our love for our country and our government isn’t new.

We inherited that from our forefathers who vowed allegiance to King Abdul Aziz' (*Al-Sulaimi* 2011).

Such statements surprised many Saudi leaders but were consistent with the actions and beliefs of many of the nation's most globally-connected youth, who routinely blend Western activities and calls for change with reaffirmations of their society's distinctive customs: men and women freely sit in separate sections at comedy shows, Harley Davidson bikers stop playing rock music in public for prayer. Nor is this behavior unusual. Saudi singers use both Arab and Western instruments in their ballads; many Saudi imams publicize their ideas on Twitter; and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Haia)²² often conduct patrols in Chevrolet Suburbans, the unofficial car of the US state of Texas. Even bedrock symbols of Saudi society are similarly the result of earlier blends of Western and Saudi culture, including drinking the British drink Vimto with Iftar dinners and wearing the red and white-checked Ghutra, the most popular in the Kingdom today. Indeed, a Saudi columnist noted in August 2013 that this style of Ghutra was not worn by Saudis 50 years ago and was 'designed in the United Kingdom and Switzerland' (*Al-Mulhim* 2013).

The reaction of young Saudis to the Arab Spring and the ability of the Kingdom's people to constantly synthesize their culture with ideas from the West suggest that actions of Khaled al-Johani merit reevaluation. The video footage of his interaction in Arabic and English with journalists on 11 March reveals that he was as angry about the absence of resources for his autistic daughter as he was about the absence of political freedoms.²³ On multiple occasions, he speaks passionately about his revulsion that he, a proud Saudi in a wealthy society, must beg for help for his daughter. He notes that the normal institutions of the state, including the state diwan, were of little help in obtaining additional assistance—a necessity for all but the richest families with autistic children because 'financial aid for autistic children amounts to SR 20,000 per year on average, whereas the costs for treatment, medications, rehabilitation, and special education reach as high as SR 130,000 per year' (*al-Sibai* 2012). But al-Johani's comments on standard politics are unsophisticated to the point of comedy, almost as if he is trying to remember what he has seen on television from demonstrations in other parts of the Arab world. He misquotes or makes fun of (it is not clear) the chief slogan of the Arab Spring, in italics; he says the people want to go to jail.

What accounts for this difference in intensity and focus? A reasonable explanation could be that al-Johani's goal on 11 March was to not gain freedom of speech or the other goals that conventional Western scholars assume (and still do) about him. Instead, it was to use the press coverage from the Day of Rage to embarrass and shame the Saudi government into delivering better services to his daughter and other autistic children. If this was his principal goal, then Saudi officials got the message and have acted accordingly. Al-Johani was first imprisoned for a little over a year—far shorter than many comparable cases—and the Saudi state has given far more attention to autism than it did before 2011 (*Al-Omran* 2013).

The process has continued with greater support for children with autism announced in August 2013 (Ghafour 2013).

Even those Saudis interested in bringing political change and modernization to the Kingdom would be wary of following the example of nations in the region which had already experienced political change during the Arab Spring. Their economies are stagnating, social order has decayed and politics in many is paralyzed by what can be seen as incompatible visions of national life (and reality) forwarded by the Muslim Brotherhood and secularist leaders. Syria is in the throes of a civil war with an even worse split between rival camps in society. These states' experiences contrast with Saudi Arabia, which experienced growth rates of over six per cent in 2011 and 2012 (Derhally 2012).

Equally importantly, Saudi officials built on the earlier 'shock absorbers' and took new actions to control prices and retain the public's confidence after spring 2011. In July 2011, Saudi officials broke with the precedent that food companies could pass inflationary costs on to consumers when they forced the Saudi dairy producer Almarai to reverse a one riyal increase in its two liter milk (*The Saudi Gazette* 2011). By doing so, government officials again upheld their unique social role as autonomous political actors capable of initiating change for the greater good. Their actions carried added political significance because Almarai's owner is a prominent member of the Saudi royal family whose brother holds a senior position in government, Prince Sultan bin Mohammed bin Saud al-Kabeer.

These policies were successful in retaining political stability and keeping prices in check in 2011 and 2012, including in the volatile food and housing sectors. By September 2012, *Business Monitor Online* concluded, 'although headline inflation in Saudi Arabia is the highest in the GCC', 'it had trended broadly sideways since 2009'—in other words inflation had remained consistent since 2009 (*Business Monitor Online* 2012). Few Sunni Saudis have expressed sympathy publicly for the Shi'a Saudi opponents of the monarchy or voiced desire to form a common front against it, both of which further reinforce the state's position. Collectively, these successes reinforced the personal popularity of King Abdullah, who was already widely respected for his personal piety and great honesty, especially among young Saudis (Akin 2013).

Heading in the Right Direction

But the most important benefit from the success of the Saudi government was not the personal popularity of the king or his officials: it was two invaluable assets that rarely can be bought: trust and hope for the future. According to a 2012 survey conducted by ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 84 per cent of Saudi youth had greater faith in government after the start of the Arab Spring (Burson-Marsteller 2012, p. 18), while 50 per cent of them saw political instability as the top danger to the Arab World (*ibid.*, p. 16). By comparison, the same survey showed that just 33 per cent of respondents viewed the absence of democracy as the chief problem in the region—a solid

percentage of the Saudi population but not enough for anyone to predict the imminent fall of the Saudi monarchy (*ibid.*). In 2013, these percentages remained in place: the same survey firm found that 77 per cent of young Saudis believe that their country is heading in the right direction and has a bright future, a strong endorsement of the current system in the Kingdom (Burson-Marsteller 2012, pp. 10–11).

But an even stronger indicator may be an advertisement for one of the Kingdom's mobile phone providers, Mobily. The advertisement is aimed at ambitious, cosmopolitan, urban and technologically-savvy young Saudis—people like Egypt's Wael Ghonim. In the advertisement, a young Saudi man living in Riyadh in the near future is inspired to begin a major construction project. He immediately emails his idea to a colleague in New York City, who is intrigued by the idea and contacts a third person in Tokyo. The three are shown cooperating online to turn the idea into a viable plan. The video ends with the Saudi convincing a group of multiethnic executives to accept his plan for the new building. The message of the advertisement is consistent with the vision laid out by the National and Interfaith Dialogues: twenty-first century Saudis can stay true to their society's values and realize their dreams if they are educated and are comfortable working with people from around the world. Nor is it likely that Mobily would have produced the ad unless the company was certain that it would appeal to young Saudis.²⁴

Saudis' trust in their leaders—and their vision of how the Kingdom should interact with the world—extended online, where they did not follow other Arabs in using the internet to organize opposition externally or internally to their government. This absence of anti-government political activism online is especially noteworthy for two reasons. First, Saudis in the 1990s pioneered many of the techniques online that would be used to great effect by young democratic activists in Egypt and elsewhere in 2011. Second, the demands for change and criticism of the government that have appeared online have generally not been from young aspiring political leaders but from older established business or cultural leaders. Their message of reform has largely endorsed the system and signaled a confidence in the ability of leaders to meet their obligations.

Such trust extends to those who are among the most prominent critics of government policy and of Saudi society, activists who push for women to have the right to move freely and for the transformation of the Kingdom's male guardianship system of women. At first glance, these advocates' actions seemingly 'fit' the mainstream vision of Saudi Arabia—of Saudi women gaining Western education and awakening to the need to reform patriarchal structures at home that deny them their rights, a vision enhanced by their skillful use of social media and how often their ideas appear in the Western and Saudi media. Among the most important recent examples of this cultural process is *Wadjda* (2012), a movie directed by Haifaa al-Mansour and which chronicles the trials of a girl in contemporary Riyadh who wants to own a bike.

Yet Al-Mansour ironically reveals an important aspect of how a number of advocates for 'women's causes' operate in Saudi Arabia that does not fit Western modernization theories: their willingness to cooperate with the existing Saudi

authorities and to trust that they will respond positively to women's concerns. Al-Mansur partnered with a member of the royal family, Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, to produce *Wadjda* and has asserted that she tries 'to work within the system' and is not 'an activist'.²⁵ She has also voiced her desire that change has to take place in an inclusive manner and that Saudi gender relations are not a simple framework of male dominance over powerless women. Other women have voiced similar nuanced perspectives and sought to redress their grievances in the Saudi judicial system or have accepted appointments to the country's consultative council, the Majlis al-Shura. While these actions could be dismissed as opportunism or naiveté, it is unlikely that these women would have undertaken this strategy if they believed the Saudi government (a) was on the verge of collapse and (b) was unable to meet their needs for justice. Nor would they necessarily welcome the collapse of a system to which they and others are closely connected. Indeed, they do not just see themselves as individual women or Saudis; they are also aunts, mothers and sisters of men and women.

And this approach has yielded successes. The Majlis al-Shura has agreed to take up the issue of female unemployment, especially of educated women, who make up 78 per cent of all unemployed Saudi women (Ghafour 2013). Government officials have already sought to reduce the high rate of unemployment of women by breaking down barriers to female employment and by designating sectors exclusively for them as part of its Nitaqat program, a plan to rationalize labor law meant to make conditions for all workers practical, realistic and fair. Women have also gained employment in industries from retail sales to automobile manufacturing (The role of women in al-Fateh also points to another distinguishing factor of the team: it is not run by members of the royal family.). Women may soon work as field staff for the Haia (*The Saudi Gazette* 2013), whose leaders have publicly advocated for just pay and working hours for men and women (*Arab News* 2013). Saudi authorities have also announced that women will soon be able attend football matches, a significant achievement given the importance of the sport to the Kingdom and its many female fans (Shane 2013). In fact, women were strong supporters (and financial backers) of the surprise 2013 Saudi Professional Football league champion, Al-Fateh (Al-Mulhim 2013). During Ramadan 2013, the Saudi Human Rights Commission sponsored a public service announcement that appeared repeatedly on Saudi television that shows a man abusing his role as the guardian of his daughter, a bright young teacher, for personal financial gain and concludes: 'guardianship is a trust and it was introduced for women's interests and not to be the cause of her problems'.

When thinking about the opinions of Saudi women and the Kingdom's broader society, it is worth remembering that the only protestor on the Saudi Day of Rage in central Riyadh was not a young revolutionary but a middle-aged Saudi primary school teacher whose chief concern may not have been politics. While many in Saudi Arabia and the West see Saudi leaders today as old and out of touch with their youth, the Mobily advertisement suggests that the views of the King and his nation's youth are not as separate as many assume they are.

Conclusion

It is difficult for Western analysts—who tend to identify ‘youth’ with ‘rebellion’—to conceive of a context in which such issues are not central to public concerns. But this is not always the case. In May 2011 when the 88 year old King Abdullah appeared at the opening of Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University in Riyadh, a state of the art women university with advanced research centres for medicine, nanotechnology, information technology and bioscience, it was observed that the student body treated him ‘like a rock star’ (Murphy 2013, p. 39).

Such receptions return us to one of the central themes of this article: the need for a fresh vision of Saudi politics and the reaction of Saudis to the Arab Spring—one that transcends the fear and the rigid framework that characterize most scholarly discussions of the Kingdom and better reveals how Saudis themselves interact with the changes in their region and the wider world. While such a vision emerges from performative practices found in Saudi Arabia and the values of collective responsibility of government or business leaders, it also emerges from the work of the artists in Edge of Arabia. The movement reached an historic milestone only a month after the Day of Rage when Gharem’s *The Message/Messenger* was auctioned by Christie’s in Dubai in April 2011 for US\$842,000, one of the largest sums ever commissioned for a work by a living Arab artist and hundred times more than his work had ever commanded at auction before (Gharem 2011).

The auction at Christie’s brought unprecedented global attention to Gharem and led to a series of new shows for Edge of Arabia, such as the one in the Brick Lane Neighborhood of London in October 2012. By that time, the movement had broadened to include women and non-Saudis. The work displayed at Brick Lane combined Saudi esthetic and socio-religious traditions with global ones as varied as Asian Calligraphy, Cubism and Hip Hop Art. But one of the most striking pieces was Ahmed Mater’s *Cowboy Code*. The piece is on a vast canvas. It combines two worlds few would see as having anything in common: American Country Music from the 1950s and the Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad from the seventh century. But Mater finds such a link. He juxtaposes multiple English phrases from ‘The Cowboy Code’, a ballad sung by Roy Rogers, one of America’s foremost country music stars, with Hadith, written in Arabic, from the Prophet Muhammad: ‘the texts are saying virtually the same thing’. Are we not dealing here with collage which becomes collision (do these contexts have anything at all to do with one another?) but which emerges as unexpected harmony?²⁶

Ultimately, Mater’s ability to put such a powerful juxtaposition on canvas without embarrassment and with great confidence says much about him personally as an artist but also provides critical insight into why the Saudi people and their leaders have weathered the Arab Spring successfully and are well positioned to deal with the challenges of a radically altered Middle East for many years to come. They have so far avoided the existential questions that have paralyzed other states in the Middle East and forced many Arabs to choose between two incompatible conceptions of national identity and how to view the world. By contrast,

Saudis are used to negotiating among wildly disparate contexts—contexts which many in the West and some in the Middle East may find ‘contradictory’—but which the Saudis experience as part of the multiple faces of reality.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Fourth Gulf Research Meeting (GRM), Cambridge, 2–5 July 2013, organized by the Gulf Research Center Cambridge (GRCC) at the University of Cambridge. Funding for research in Saudi Arabia was provided by a partnership between the International Scientific Twinning Program, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN, USA.
2. Former executive Riyadh International Catering Company in discussion with the author, June 2013.
3. One of the most effective and comprehensive recent examples of this argument is Mary Ann Tétreault (2012).
4. Dr. Fahad Alhomoudi in discussion with the author, July 2014.
5. Middle Eastern states going back to the ancient Mesopotamia have used similar conceptions of justice and government. For a recent study on this concept, see Linda Darling (2012).
6. Executive Saudi food industry in discussion with the author, 1 June 2013.
7. Two excellent examples are Al-Ittihad FC and Al-Shabab FC, both of which are run by businessman who are not part of the royal family.
8. Yemen could run out of all domestic water supplies within a decade (Akkad 2009).
9. Saudi Arabia’s population grew from 4 million in 1960 to nearly 27 million in 2010. In the 1980s, the population grew by 63.3 per cent (Sambridge 2011).
10. Farm workers were overwhelmingly foreign nationals and consequently not part of the arrangement. Agricultural economist, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in discussion with the author, May 2013.
11. Such measures were important for Saudi agricultural business, many of which were focused on the domestic or Gulf market. For instance, nearly 100 per cent of Almarai’s revenues came from the Gulf in 2012. *Saudi Arabia’s Almarai milks profits out of the desert*.
12. Calculations based on those available at www.searates.com.
13. European Trade Official in discussion with the author, July 2013.
14. According to the World Bank, global food prices rose 36 per cent between March 2010 and March 2011. The costs of basic commodities—like maize (74 per cent) and wheat (69 per cent)—rose still higher (Talley 2011).
15. For more on Ghonim’s work in this period, see his memoir, Wael Ghonim (2012: 58–81).
16. For more on the linkage between *Tash ma Tash* and web comedians, see Jensen (2012).
17. For more on the national dialogue, see Peuschaft (2013).
18. A good recent example of this argument is in Davidson (2012: 1–15, 191–228).
19. For a recent treatment of this argument, see Davidson (2012: 191–228).
20. A leading Saudi figure who has publicly warned about the future should the government not reform is Shaykh Salman Al-Ouda, a Sunni scholar with over 2 million followers on Twitter.
21. A recent example of this discourse is the treatment of Natana de Long-Bas’ work in Al-Rasheed (2013: 45).
22. This organization is usually referred to (incorrectly) as the religious police.

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23. For the video of the British Broadcasting Arabic report from Riyadh that includes al-Johani's words to foreign reporters, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxinAxWxXo8>
24. The video is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onHjazZ4OTQ>.
25. For more on her views see Haifaa al-Mansour, interview by Gavin Esler, *Hardtalk*, BBCWORLD, July 16, 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01cw007>
26. To see a picture of *Cowboy Hadith*, go to: <http://edgeofarabia.zenfolio.com/guardianimagery/h44B5120C#h44b5120c>.

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