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PHOTO SOURCED BY JESS HILL

Qatifi women demonstrate in Safwa, the biggest city in the Qatif district, on February 16, 2012. Messages read "Our martyrs are ambassadors to freedom," "Stop bleeding our blood" and "We don't have abroad [foreign] agendas."

The Growing Rebellion in Saudi Arabia

By Jess Hill

February 24, 2012

Saudi Arabia's King has been unusually outspoken against Syria's regime. But what about the rebellion in his own Kingdom? And what kind of ruler will his heir apparent be?

ON SAUDI ARABIA'S MUCH-ANTICIPATED 'DAY OF RAGE' LAST YEAR, GOVERNMENT MINDERS DROVE A BBC crew into the centre of the capital, Riyadh, to film the 'no-show'. Police had locked down the capital, and they were confident nobody would show up.

Imagine their shock, then, when Khaled al-Johani, a teacher and father of five, walked straight up to the BBC crew, and said: "The royal family don't own us! We have a right to speak." As government minders closed in on the group, he grew more emphatic: "If you speak, they will put you in jail after five minutes!" When the BBC reporter asked him (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9phWXWprjrY%20>) what would happen to him, he replied, "I will go in the jail with a big smile — because I am already in a jail!" (Al-Johani was arrested that day, and has been in prison since March. He stood trial in a closed court on February 22; the verdict has not been made public.)

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Al-Johani was outspoken, but he was just one man. The world's investment community breathed a sigh of relief. *Why were we so worried about this 'day of rage'? Saudis don't protest. Most of them are too comfortable, and internal security is too effective. The Arab Spring won't come to Saudi Arabia.*

But they were wrong.

Saudis *are* protesting. They've been protesting for over a year. Their numbers are growing. And there's no sign of them stopping.

It's all happening in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, home to most of the Kingdom's Shia minority, and 90 per cent of its oil.

Seven people have been shot dead by Saudi security forces since October 2011, two in the past month alone. The Saudi Interior Ministry says these deaths resulted from gun battles between protesters and police. But in all amateur videos that show protesters being shot, there is no evidence that protesters were shooting back.

There have been remarkable scenes of rebellion. One photograph, taken on February 10 this year, shows a young man hurling an effigy of Crown Prince Nayef at a row of armoured anti-riot tanks. It's an extraordinary provocation. Prince Nayef is not only the head of the Interior Ministry — he's also the heir to the throne.

But it's not just a few people defying the Prince. On February 13, at a funeral for the most recent 'martyr', 21-year-old Zuhair al Said, tens of thousands of people marched through the streets, chanting (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugMIP5aH7hM&sns=em>) "No Sunna, No Shia, but Islamic unity! We're not afraid, down with Nayef! You're the terrorist, you're the criminal, you're the butcher, ya Nayef!"

"We will never rest, country of oppressors! Son of Saud [royal family], hear the voice! We will never give up 'til death!"

Prince Nayef responded with his own threat. On February 20, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry said these protests were the 'new terrorism', and were being 'manipulated from abroad' (read: Iran). The Ministry would confront them with 'an iron fist', he said, just like it confronted Al Qaeda.

Toby Jones, an expert on Saudi Arabia at Rutgers University, says this statement is emblematic of Prince Nayef's ruling style, and his worldview. "He is a hardliner: he believes in the use of repression, he is sectarian, he is ideologically anti-Shiite," says Jones. The incumbent, King Abdullah "was practical, and would talk to Shias."

Eighty-seven-year-old King Abdullah is widely admired — even by many dissenters — but he's ailing. It's expected that Prince Nayef will soon inherit his throne. "Nayef is a scary guy, and a move towards crushing communities has to have his fingerprints all over it," says Jones, "because nobody else in the royal family thinks that's a smart move."

Is this indicative of how a King Nayef might rule over Saudi Arabia? If so, the battle in the Eastern Province may have only just begun.

QATIF IS A COASTAL DISTRICT in the Kingdom's East, and the nerve centre of Saudi Arabia's protest movement. 95 per cent of Qatifis are Shiite — the highest concentration in the Sunni-ruled Kingdom. It's also just an hour's drive from Bahrain. "The people of Qatif have more in common with Bahrain than any other Saudi city," says 28-year-old Mohammed (a pseudonym), a Qatifi trying to raise awareness of the protests online (<https://twitter.com/#!/ArabYouth>). When I spoke with him via Skype, he told me "They're pretty much the same people: same family names, same accent."

After Saudi forces occupied Bahrain last March, Qatifis demonstrated in solidarity. "When Saudi forces entered Bahrain, they were showing the victory sign," says Mohammed. "People here were very angry. The first protests that happened afterwards were calling for the forces to leave Bahrain."

The uprising in Qatif may have been inspired by Bahrain, but the grievances are distinct. Shia communities in Saudi Arabia suffer from widespread discrimination and public humiliation — they are banned from teaching their religion in schools, from practicing their rituals in public, and from high positions in government, state-owned companies and the judiciary.

"Lots of people were repulsed by the protests — like, what good is it going to bring? But once people were shot... I mean, it's a whole new ballgame now."

Discrimination against the Shias in Saudi Arabia is fuelled by the kingdom's powerful Sunni Wahhabi clerics. Wahhabism is the official religion in Saudi Arabia — it is hardline, regressive, and viciously biased against the Shia. Wahhabi clerics denounce the Shia as "heretics" and "rejectionists", and have issued *fatwas* (religious rulings) against mixing with them. "Sometimes they are too ridiculous," says Mohammed, "like, 'Don't eat with them — they spit in your food, they pee in your food.'"

These fatwas would be laughable, if they weren't so potent — and dangerous. This week, a pro-government Saudi columnist wrote (<http://www.thearabdigest.com/2012/02/saudi-columnist-calls-for-massacre-of.html>) that if Shiites in the Qatifi village of Awammiya didn't stop protesting, they should be 'perished'. In addition to vicious opposition to the Shia, Wahhabism regards opposition to the ruler as "heresy", which is largely why the clerics have enjoyed so much support from the al Saud monarchy.

Waleed Sulais is a human-rights activist in Qatif. He says this kind of hate speech is reflected in the actions of the riot police who have killed protesters there. "One hundred per cent of people working in the riot police are from the Sunni. When they attack us, they are attacking us like it is *jihad* [religious duty]," says Sulais. "They say we are *kafir* (a Muslim who has knowingly rejected Islam). These people take this belief from where? From the Salafi clerics."

ALL OF THIS RAISES ANOTHER QUESTION: Why hasn't this uprising been crushed?

Tawfiq Alsaif is a renowned political commentator in Qatif. When journalists have been able to reach the city, he's usually one

of their first ports of call.

"I know there have been several people killed," he says, "but in similar situations, we have seen more killings, more arrests. [The security forces] are controlling themselves."

Toby Jones says if you drive just a few kilometres north of Qatif, you might find the answer. "There's this sprawling petro-industrial complex — it's a huge network of pipelines and facilities. Almost all of Saudi Arabia's oil passes through there at one point or another," he says. "And it's vulnerable — not just to terrorism, but people passing by. There are literally pipelines that are exposed."

"If they went offline," says Jones, "it would be hugely catastrophic for the regime, and a problem for the global oil industry."

The world's biggest oil company, the state-owned Saudi Aramco, is also headquartered 25 kilometres away, in Dhahran. "A lot of Qatifis work in the oil industry, and at Aramco," says Mohammed.

He believes the regime's paranoia around the oil industry is key to the protesters' protection.

"People here usually don't sit back. They don't take shit."

"I think the main asset the protesters have is the oil. If this happened in another Shia area, where there is no oil, there would be a total crackdown on them within a few days," he says. "But if they cracked down on Qatif, I bet the oil price would go through the roof."

Jones says that despite years of repression, arbitrary arrests and discrimination, Qatifis have never talked about threatening the oil industry. "The only way they've talked about oil is the way the oil wealth hasn't been distributed to their community," he says. "But they've never used that as a justification for attacking the oil industry. Which is pretty remarkable — it's vulnerable, and they could if they wanted to."

QATIFIS HAVE A LONG HISTORY of political activism. In the '50s and '60s, Arabs flocked to the Eastern Province from across the region, seeking to cash in on the oil boom. These were the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, and the Baathist revolutions in Syria and Iraq; Pan-Arab and Socialist movements were consuming the region like wildfire. When people emigrated from these countries to Qatif, they brought their revolutionary ideas with them.

Since then, says Mohammed, Qatifis have been known for their political awareness. "They're the only ones (in Saudi Arabia) who protest when something happens in the region," he says. "They took to the streets in 2001 to support the second Palestinian intifada, in 2006 against Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and in 2008 against the Gaza war."

"People here usually don't sit back," says Mohammed. "They don't take shit."

Qatifis are unusual for another reason. "Lots of Saudis forbid their women from working, but Qatifi women can be seen everywhere — working in banks, oil companies," says Mohammed. In a country where foreign workers account for a third of the population, Qatif has one of the lowest percentages of foreign residents (http://csis.org/files/publication/100517_SaudiaBrief_complete.pdf) of any region in the Kingdom — just over 12 per cent. Unlike most Saudis, who rely on foreign workers to do "petty jobs" like wait-jobs, cleaning and taxi driving, Qatifis "don't find shame in stuff like that", says Mohammed. "That makes Qatif a much closer community than a lot of other places in the country," he adds.

But that doesn't mean people have been unified about the protests. "It is a topic of conversation, and debate. People say, 'They should not go out', and others say, 'They have to go out,'" says Mohammed.

"Honestly, in the beginning, I thought ok, Qatifis want to go out — especially the deprived — and they want to say they have a voice. I'm ok with that," he says.

"After a while, though, we started having checkpoints everywhere. It was really annoying. Lots of people were repulsed by the protests — like, what good is it going to bring?"

"But once people were shot... I mean, it's a whole new ballgame now."

THIS WEEK, THE STREETS OF QATIF have been quiet. In the poor village of Awammiya, where many of the demonstrations have flared up, protesters are still gathering — but in small numbers. Tawfiq Alsaif says people are waiting for the next move: "It could come up again anytime."

The community's unofficial leader, Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, used his Friday sermon last week to attack the House of Saud, critiquing it for its hypocrisy in criticising Syria for killing its citizens, while condoning the deliberate killing of Qatifi demonstrators.

"For more than 20 years [al-Saffar] has tried to bridge the gap between the Shia community and the government," says Qatifi

political commentator Tawfiq Alsaif. "He's met too many officials — including the king — trying to find a solution to the problem of discrimination. But it seems that finally he found himself failing."

"He's the real bellwether," says Jones. "If [al-Saffar] doesn't walk it back in the next week or so, it means that the moderates [in Qatif] are about to disappear."

That could mean bigger and more frequent demonstrations in Qatif. Alsaif says the government needs to take the community's problems seriously. "They cannot just say it is the work of foreign agents — this ignorance won't solve the problem," he says.

Crown Prince Nayef "is a scary guy, and a move towards crushing communities has to have his fingerprints all over it."

He warns that if the demonstrations continue in Qatif, they could be contagious. "People in other areas [of Saudi Arabia] are not that much satisfied. When they see a model like Qatif continuing for a year or more, that might encourage people to do the same thing."

Jones, however, is not optimistic that serious dialogue is possible. "Sectarianism is at an all-time high. What Shias in Saudi Arabia can expect in the future is more of what they live with on a day-to-day basis now: large numbers of checkpoints, a hostile response from the regional and central government, hostility in the classroom, discrimination of various kinds, public humiliation and persecution, no redistribution of wealth," says Jones.

"It's going to be terrible for the foreseeable future. I don't want to be one of those people who says terrorism is the likely outcome of this. But if the authorities keep working like this, what other options do they have?"

*For more information on the status of Shia communities in Saudi Arabia, read the [Human Rights Watch report](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/09/03/denied-dignity-0) (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/09/03/denied-dignity-0>), *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens*.*

The Saudi women's rights activist Manal al-Sharif lives just a half-hour drive away from Qatif (she is Sunni, however, and not aligned with the Shiite protest movement). [Read The Global Mail's profile of her](http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/i-am-woman-watch-me-drive/17) (<http://www.theglobalmail.org/feature/i-am-woman-watch-me-drive/17>).

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10 COMMENTS ON THIS STORY**by Abdulrahman**

There is no need to re-invent the wheel. It is a political fact that any system has a limitation (s) in pursuing whatever objective, including the US with all its military might. A clear example is the US disastrous failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, which hampered their grand objective, namely the new Middle East.

Despite the US/Iraqi Shiite alliance in Iraq the US could not create a model democracy that would inspire the surrounding populations to follow suit. On the other hand, the failure of the US in Afghanistan, which is a primitive country by all measures, shows the limitation of a super power

Rest assure the house of Saud is aware of its limitation, and one of them is the vulnerability of the oil pipelines around Shiite Qatif. However, these pipelines are also a Shiite vulnerability. The oil is a national wealth and its vulnerability at the hands of Shiite minority would embolden the entire Sunni majority against them and their Iranian cronies. And this would be a case of Sunni vs. Shiite rather than Humanity vs. Economy.

Inciting Shiites to make the oil pipelines vulnerable and encouraging them to be Iranian agents is misleading them into the unknown and clearly shows that they don't have an agency over their potential deadly acts.

February 29, 2012 @ 8:45am

**by Jaber**

It's ironic, there is no outcry in the western press about Washington's blind eye to civilian atrocities committed by its puppet states Bahrain, Saudi Arabia etc. But every one is interested in Homs. Prior the arming of rebels our city was safe now our women are raped by the dozen thanks to foreign powers.

March 2, 2012 @ 3:33am

**by Egy**

King Abdullah is alone will be fallen without people.

Soon all tribal clans will claim their lands which have been stolen by the tyrant.

"..the tyranny arabian king has stolen our oil mines with our ethnic groups for slavery.."

The King Abdullah MUST BE FALLEN DOWN!!!

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Supported By: Africa Egypt Sudan Libya Kenya Iraq Qatar UAE Yemen

November 12, 2012 @ 1:28am