

## Last Bastion

# Saudi Arabia's Silent Battle to Halt History

By *Susanne Koelbl* in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

**Saudi Arabia's rulers are doing their utmost to resist the tide of history. The wealthy Arab country wants peace and stability within its society and in the region. But even the ultraconservative kingdom has not remained untouched by the unrest in the Arab world.**

He landed at around midnight with two wives, an entourage of 59 people, including three cabinet ministers -- and a 7.6-centimeter (3 inch) piece of shrapnel in his chest. He walked down the gangway with great difficulty -- but "upright," according to eyewitnesses -- to a waiting convoy that would take him from the airport north of Riyadh to the city's large military hospital. The Saudi Arabian capital lay silent in the desert night, its landmark Kingdom Tower brightly lit in the darkness.

Riyadh stood in sharp contrast to the city Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh had just fled. For the past four months, the people in the Yemeni capital Sana'a had demonstrated against his regime and had taken to the streets, first by the tens and then by the hundreds of thousands, to demand an end to his regime. Saleh had his forces shoot at the protesters almost every night, but with each week the attacks from the other side came closer to his palace -- until June 3, when grenades were launched into the presidential mosque during Friday prayers, killing several of Saleh's bodyguards and **seriously wounding him** and his ministers.

Saleh, 69, is the third autocrat to be swept out of office by the tide of Arab unrest in the region, and the second to find refuge in Saudi Arabia. Since the Tunisians forced their leader, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to flee to Jeddah in January, none of the monarchs and presidents in the Arab world can be sure of retaining power anymore. Their subjects continue to vent their rage across four time zones, from Mauritania to Oman. The Arab world is out of joint.

### Life as Usual

But not Saudi Arabia, or so it seems. And not Riyadh. As ever, Saudi men sit in their large SUVs, stuck in traffic between the steel-blue facades of office buildings, and the wives of these men are still having their drivers drop them off in front of the shopping malls in downtown Riyadh, where they scurry from Prada to Ralph Lauren and then disappear into Starbucks for a latte -- in the "family department," a room on the side kept separate from the world of men.

The boulevards and promenades of the Saudi capital look as though they had been swept clean, as if some mysterious force had extinguished all public life.

Riyadh has nothing like Avenue Bourguiba in Tunis or Tahrir Square in Cairo. In fact, there is no sign in Saudi Arabia of a public political discourse that could be compared with the debates, held in secret at first and then more and more in the open, with which the unrest began in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. Almost every political discussion seems to end with the same words: Long live the king!

Saudi Arabia feels like a realm that has come to a standstill in a rapidly changing world. Its leaders, most notably the 86-year-old King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, are pinning their hopes on the old principle of stability, as if Ben Ali had not been driven out of Tunisia, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had not been toppled and Yemen's Saleh had not just been admitted to one of their hospitals with a piece of shrapnel in his body.

### Influencing Neighbors

King Abdullah must have been pleased to see his enemy Moammar Gadhafi in difficulties, but it troubled him to see the avalanche the young protesters in Tunisia had unleashed. He didn't hesitate a moment before offering exile to the embattled Ben Ali.

Abdullah was disgusted to see what happened to Mubarak in Cairo. Saudi Arabia still hasn't come to terms with the Egyptian revolution. Nevertheless, it promised €2.7 billion (\$3.98 billion) to the military

council in Cairo to provide the new leadership with "a certain level of comfort," as an Arab financial expert put it. It went without saying in Cairo that the Saudis wanted the Egyptian courts to spare the elderly Mubarak, and the Egyptian chief of staff personally thanked the Saudi king for his pledge of financial support.

Abdullah noted angrily how the spark of revolution jumped to the small country of Bahrain in February, and the Shiite majority rebelled against the Sunni Al Khalifa royal family. The moderate king finally lost his patience and, in a first in Saudi history, sent the soldiers of his national guard across the King Fahd Causeway to Manama to crush the uprising.

Saudi Arabia cannot intervene directly in Syria, where the unrest began in March and came to a preliminary head last week with a massacre in the city of Jisr al-Shughour. The House of Saud and the clan of Syrian President Bashar Assad have eyed each other suspiciously for years, and yet the Saudis would like to see the Syrians released from the embrace of their Shiite archenemy Iran. But there is one concern the two leaders share: They want calm in their countries, not change. As a result, Damascus supported Riyadh when its troops marched into Bahrain, and Riyadh is remaining silent, no matter how brutally Assad's forces crush the protests in Syria.

### **Bringing History to a Halt**

And finally there is Yemen, whose sovereignty the Saudi Arabian air force had until recently routinely ignored to bomb Shiite rebels across the border. But now that it has been confronted with sheer chaos since the eruption of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia is pinning its hopes on stability. On Tuesday of last week, the Saudis announced that they were sending a donation to the orphaned leadership in Sana'a, in the form of 3 million barrels of oil.

By sending troops to Bahrain, billions to Egypt, goodwill to Damascus and oil to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, which is expected to earn \$300 billion in oil revenues this year alone, is leaving no doubt as to what it intends to do with its power and money in the region: The kingdom wants to bring history to a halt and reinstate calm and stability on all fronts.

But how stable is Saudi Arabia itself? There are few countries on whose stability the world depends as much as it does on that of Saudi Arabia, which is currently responsible for 12 percent of global oil production. Exactly how calm is this wealthy country that wants nothing but calm all around it? And where are the first cracks beginning to appear?

### **'Democracy Is the Only Solution'**

Jamal Khashoggi sits in his office in the Kingdom Tower, 300 meters (about 1,000 feet) above a city that stretches to a hazy horizon. "The absolute monarchy is obsolete," says Khashoggi. "Democracy is the only solution." Others in Saudi Arabia would be interrogated and locked up for such words.

Khashoggi, one of the country's most outspoken intellectuals, is wearing a snow-white shirt that reaches to the floor, known as the *thaub*, and a black cord keeps his head scarf in place. It's the standard work attire of Saudi Arabian businessmen.

The former reporter was a good friend of former Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, whom he knew as a young man in the 1980s, during the war in Afghanistan. He often visited him in the caves of Tora Bora and most recently met him in Sudan in 1995.

At the same time, Khashoggi is seen as one of the most progressive thinkers in the country. He is building a television network modeled after Al-Jazeera for Prince Waleed Bin Talal, a billionaire and a reformer within the royal family.

Saudi Arabia is a land of contradictions. Some of the things that are thought and expressed there would sound absurd, even outrageous, if voiced in the West. To this day, many in Saudi Arabia believe that bin Laden did not attack the Twin Towers in New York. "Of course it was him," says Khashoggi.

He confesses that he had long shared bin Laden's view that there are only two ways to liberate the Arab world of its corrupt regimes: by infiltrating the political system through its institutions, or by violently overthrowing the depraved ruling cliques. Democracy "was not an option at the time," says Khashoggi.

### **Signs of Insecurity**

A drive through the kingdom today, to Jeddah in the relatively liberal West, for example, to Dammam in the oil-rich Eastern Province, or to the fundamentalist city of Buraydah, which is nicknamed the "heart of darkness," reveals a society that senses that things cannot continue the way they have been going if everything is to remain unchanged -- in other words, stable.

There are signs of insecurity, such as a decree recently issued by the king, under which the grand mufti and other clerics can no longer be criticized. The law probably says more about the dwindling power of the religious leaders than about their strength.

Members of the opposition are constantly being imprisoned. Some 11,000 have been arrested since Sept. 11, 2001, and more than 5,000 are still in prison today.

Who exactly these prisoners are is difficult to say. There is no transparency, and there are no legal procedures that adhere to international standards. Some are members of radical Islamic movements that are strongly resistant to Western-style modernization.

### **'We Must Be Careful that the Current Doesn't Wash Us Away'**

"We are sensitive," says General Mansour Sultan al-Turki of the Saudi Arabian Interior Ministry. The two-star general is sitting in a large, yellow leather armchair in a wing of the Interior Ministry in Riyadh. The building looks like a giant UFO with which half the city could be evacuated into space, if necessary. "We must be careful that the current doesn't wash us away," he explains.

The general is part of a generation that perceived the introduction of the telephone as "confusing and dangerous," and which was worried about women getting the devices into their hands, because it would enable them to speak to strange men outside the house.

No one invited globalization to Saudi Arabia. It simply arrived. Banning satellite connections or blocking websites didn't help stave it off.

TV soap operas, Pizza Hut and online dating services are changing Saudi society as much today as the religious reformer Mohammed Bin Abd al-Wahhab, who preached the pure teachings of the Prophet Muhammad and the strict separation of the sexes, did 200 years ago. Like everywhere else in the Arab world, the Internet and television are used intensively in Saudi Arabia, to which furious conservatives say: "The camel already has its snout in the tent."

The divorce rate is 40 percent today, families are shrinking and cities are exploding. One in three Saudi Arabians has diabetes, and just as many are overweight.

### **High Expectations**

Some 2 million of the country's 20 million citizens are studying in universities, with 110,000 attending the world's top institutions. After studying abroad, the grandchildren of the wealthy oil generation return home with high expectations. They want the same things that their parents have: a driver, a nanny and a gardener. But there are no jobs, and 26 percent of men are unemployed.

The first girls' school in the country opened in the early 1960s. Today young women make up 52 percent of university students. Many men are horrified at the thought of these women driving themselves to work in the future -- like 32-year-old Manal al-Sharif who recently filmed herself driving as part of a campaign for women's rights, and was promptly arrested.

The general with the moustache sinks more deeply into his armchair, as if he felt the burden of responsibility on his shoulders. He too has daughters. "The woman is a cause for concern," he says with a sigh.

The ministry he serves is run by a strict hand. Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz is seen as a counterweight to, and potential successor of, his brother, the moderate reformist Abdullah. Nayef's ministry is a bastion against all those who could destabilize the Saud monarchy, which has ruled the country for two generations: terrorists, criminals and provocateurs.

A joke making the rounds these days is that one reason wealthy Saudis never take part in protests is that it would mean having to get out of their SUVs. Instead, goes the joke, if they were ever to take to the streets, they would prefer to send their employees, the Pakistani drivers and Filipino gardeners, who would then hold up the protest signs for them.

## 'There Are Very Few Dissidents Here'

"We don't need demonstrations, because we talk to one another," says General Turki. He speaks softly, as if he knew that the masses support him and his king. "There are very few dissidents here," he adds.

A law has been in place for the last three months that bans demonstrations. It was adopted in the wake of protests by the Shiite minority in the city of Qatif that had supported the rebellious Shiite majority in Bahrain. The protests continue to this day.

Large oil pipelines lie to the left and right of buildings in Qatif, but Shiites have never attacked any of these facilities. They are apparently not fundamentally opposed to the state or in favor of overthrowing the king. Instead, they are protesting over civil rights, a lack of recognition and discrimination against a minority that the regime doesn't trust. The Shiites make up about 10 percent of the population, but they are not permitted to serve in the military or hold high office. They are denounced in the schoolbooks as heretics.

The regime senses that these conditions are unsustainable in the long run. In Qatif, the provincial governor is now speaking directly with representatives of the protesters about the construction of new mosques and the possibility of women becoming school principals. The government's concessions go far enough to tame the protesters' rage, but only as far as necessary.

## Deep Pockets

Until now, the government has simply had to reach into its coffers to keep the people happy whenever there has been a problem. King Abdullah recently promised his people \$129 billion in new benefits. He approved low-interest mortgages, forgave the debts of the families of deceased farmers and ruled that students no longer had to repay the government for their foreign tuition. He also raised the salaries of civil servants by 15 percent and introduced unemployment insurance. Medical care is already free for Saudi citizens. Under these circumstances, who would rebel against the government?

"It still won't work," says Jamal Khashoggi. "We can't just spend another 100 trillion riyal tomorrow to keep everyone happy. What do we do when the oil runs out?" Khashoggi speaks quietly and quickly, as if with his words he were trying to accelerate developments in his country. "Everyone wants modernity," he says, "but no one wants the side effects which go with it."

Khashoggi and his radical ideas trouble the establishment, especially because of his dire predictions: "This nation will be reformed, just like other nations. We too need freedom, transparency, the rule of law, a prime minister, a real parliament."

What if the democratic process succeeds in Tunisia or Egypt, Khashoggi asks? "We can't afford to become politically isolated."

The royal family does figure in Khashoggi's scenario, but in the form of guardians in a constitutional monarchy. It isn't surprising that someone like Khashoggi has already been fired several times from his positions as editor-in-chief of leading Saudi newspapers. No one in the country wants so many changes to happen so quickly.

## Refusing to Wear a Headscarf

The female blogger Kholoud al-Fahad, 30, might be a kind of a symbol of this rapid, disconcerting development. Fahad lives in Dammam in the Eastern Province and is the mother of two children. She wears her hair uncovered. In addition to refusing to wear the face veil known as the niqab, Fahad often goes out in public without a headscarf.

Fahad wears an expensive designer *abaja* around her slim figure, with a knee-length silk skirt and high heels visible underneath it. And she smokes.

She writes angry articles about the fact that women in Saudi Arabia are not permitted to travel without the signed permission of their so-called male protectors, that they were not allowed to vote once again in local elections in September, even though the law only requires that a person be 21 years old, be in full command of his mental faculties and have a Saudi passport. She ridicules the practice of men controlling every movement women make and the claims of high-ranking clerics that women are too emotional to make decisions.

Fahad has everything -- a car, a driver and money -- and could easily lead a comfortable life behind the

walls of her large house.

### **'Don't Be Afraid'**

But she wants more. She wants to become a TV host. Her family is horrified over the prospect of her having to show her face to an audience of millions.

"Why are you working against society?" her mother asks. "Why do you humiliate us?" an uncle asks angrily.

As a girl, Fahad was the most devout child in school, until her father, a developer who traveled a lot, threw the Wahhabite books she had been reading into the bathtub, where they came apart.

Six years ago, she was with her father in a shopping mall when the *mutawa*, the golden robe-wearing religious police, approached them. She quickly pulled her veil over her head. "Why are you doing that?" the father asked. "Don't be afraid." That incident changed her life, says Fahad.

### **Male Feminists**

It is possible that there are as many male feminists as there are female feminists in Saudi Arabia today. Some are even in the palace. In 2009, the king opened the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology near Jeddah. He had ordered the separation of the sexes to be lifted at the new institution, where women and men sit next to each other in lecture halls. When a cleric issued a fatwa against the modern university and its promoters, the king dismissed him.

Political scientist Samir Anabtawi taught at Yale University for a long time. Paintings by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee hang in his living room, while a string concerto is playing on the stereo.

The king and his princes are the glue that holds society together, says Anabtawi. He points out that many in Saudi Arabia want reforms, including many of the royals, but that no one wants the country to end up like Iraq, Yemen or Syria.

Soon the king could be a man who was educated at an elite American university, says the professor. The only question, he adds, is whether the kingdom will first experience a "period of gerontocracy," as the crumbling Soviet Union did 30 years ago.

The sons of the country's founder, Ibn Saud, are all older than 65 today. Perhaps the biggest source of instability lies in the rivalry within the large family over the throne.

### **'History Is Happening'**

The Saudis have invested their oil billions cleverly in the last 30 years. When the king breeds Arabian horses, and when he irrigates the desert and educates his elites, he now has top advisers from Europe and the United States to help him. There is even progress in the so-called heart of darkness, Buraydah, where women now have mobile phones and access to the Internet. Instead of the black full-body veil that even covers the hands and the face, very young women are now wearing veils with a narrow slit for their eyes, which sometimes offers a view of sophisticated makeup -- which can be considered progress by Saudi Arabia's standards.

General Turki would like to have seen the king enact a law early on that at least banned the cameras in mobile phones. "Because of our daughters," he says.

In Kingdom Tower, the journalist Jamal Khashoggi leans triumphantly against his desk, his eyes flashing with excitement. "The mobile phone camera is on my side," he says. "History is happening. No one can stop it."

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*

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