

## **Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring: the Kingdom's Endurance**

Mr. Mohammad Hamza Iftikhar\*

### **Abstract**

When the wave of protests known as the “Arab Spring” spurred through the Middle East starting late 2010, the debate around why some regimes persisted while others fell dominated the academic literature and even continues to this day. This paper focuses on the case of Saudi Arabia and explores what are arguably the five main factors for its endurance during the Arab Spring, specifically between late 2010 and late 2013. By doing so, it aims to contribute towards the existing academic debate of internal versus external factors that have enabled the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia to persist through the Arab Spring, when many other regimes in the region failed to do so. By analysing the statecraft of Saudi Arabia, this paper argues that the internal factors, specifically governance, military, and oil have collectively weighed more than external factors, that are, regional and international relations of the Kingdom. Thereby, justifying the perseverance of the Kingdom during the regional turmoil at that time. Following the main conclusion, the paper also argues that if there was one factor out of the three internal ones which could be credited with being the most effective for the endurance of Saudi Arabia, it would be its key economic pillar: oil. This is because oil and the wealth generated from it significantly supports not just the other two internal factors (governance and military), but also the two external ones (regional and international relations) as well.

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\* The writer has graduated with an MSc in International Relations from The London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE), United Kingdom. He is also Debate Coordinator at ‘The Muslim Debate’.

## **Key Words**

Saudi Arabia, Arab Spring, Middle East, Gulf Monarchies, GCC

## **Introduction**

On December 18, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi – a fruit vendor in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, placed himself on fire in front of the governor's office after his fruit cart was confiscated by the police due to him not being able to afford its license (Jones, 2013). Although Bouazizi's action of self-immolation may have been triggered by the confiscation specifically, however, his decision was influenced by the prolonged unfortunate socio-economic conditions that he and many Tunisians were facing at the time. His action triggered not only a revolution in Tunisia but also initiated a new wave of protests known to be as the "Arab Spring." Since its inception in late 2010, heads of states have been toppled across the region while nations such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen are still in the state of severe turmoil, to say the least. One particular distinguishing factor of these spring of protests was that none of the six Gulf Monarchies, including the largest, Saudi Arabia, experienced a regime change. Why? The answer to this question is what this paper seeks to find.

In order to do so, the paper aims to contribute towards the existing debate in the academic literature on whether internal or external factors have enabled Saudi Arabia to endure the wave of protests in the region at the time of Arab Spring. Although there are many other factors which were at play, however, due to scope limitations this paper will only focus on what are arguably the most important five: three internal and two external factors. The three internal factors include governance structure of the regime, the loyalty of the military, and the possession of vast oil reserves. Whereas the two external factors are regional relations and international relations that have helped Saudi Arabia to endure Arab Spring. By looking at all of these aspects, this paper argues that it is the internal factors which comparatively weigh more than the external ones when justifying the endurance of the regime during Arab Spring. This is because each of the internal factors has played a major role in tackling the relatively fewer protests that took place in Saudi Arabia during the

Arab Spring. Moreover, all three in one way or the other have contributed towards the two external factors as well. Building on from this hypothesis, this paper also argues that if there was one factor out of the three internal ones that can be credited with being the most effective in helping the regime persist, it is indeed “oil” as it significantly aids and supplements all the other four factors, especially the internal two ones.

Although there is no definite “ending” period for the timeline of Arab Spring due to the prolonged conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, however, this paper will be focusing solely at the developments between late 2010 to late 2013. Firstly, we will look at the factor of “governance” in Saudi Arabia, particularly, how a strong relationship amongst the ruling family as well as their understanding with other families and tribes has led to a relatively protest-free governing body. It will also look at how the ruling family has used socio-political measures such as elections and reforms to look after the demands of the majority within the indigenous population. The paper will also take into consideration the religious and cultural legitimacy enjoyed by the leader, that is, the King himself. The second internal factor, “military” will focus on the Saudi military as an institution and argue that military’s loyalty to the ruler has proved extremely beneficial during Arab Spring protests. The paper will explore the concept of “coup-proofing” and apply it to the case of Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, the paper will examine the final internal factor of “oil.” By analysing the quantitative evidence vis-à-vis possession of vast hydrocarbon reserves by Saudi Arabia, the paper will make the case that the revenue generated through oil reserves enabled the regime to sustain itself by affording the measures outlined in all the other factors.

Followed by all the three internal factors, the paper will then explore the first external factor i.e. “regional relations.” It will argue that strong economic as well as security cooperation between the six Gulf Monarchies, mainly of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has ensured them to unify against protests and domestic uprisings such as that of Arab Spring. It will particularly explore the role of Saudi Arabia in this cooperation and how a strong union at the time enabled Saudi Arabia to have significant support when it comes to their own regime survival. Lastly, the paper will explore the factor of “international relations” of the

Saudi Kingdom, by specifically analysing the relationship of Saudi Arabia with the United States. It will argue that the financial and security interdependence between the USA and Saudi Arabia, helps the Kingdom to enjoy the significant support of the United States and its allies during any anti-government protests such as those during the Arab Spring.

### **Analytical Framework**

In order to justify the hypothesis and sub-hypothesis presented, the paper uses and takes into consideration multiple arguments put forward by various renowned academic scholars. These include Gilbert Achcar, who argues that monarchies like Saudi Arabia have managed to persist largely due to US protection, hence giving external factor a larger credit (Achcar, 2013). Gregory Gause III, on the other hand believes that the possession of hydrocarbon resources such as oil and the wealth generated from them, especially after the 1970s, has made it possible for monarchies like Saudi Arabia to “ride out the domestic and regional storms,” such as the Arab Spring (Gause III, 1994: 4). Similarly, by examining the case of Saudi Arabia, Stephen Hertog has argued that income generated from oil relaxes the King from his responsibilities with regards to people’s representation and their democratic demands (Hertog, 2010). Michael Hudson, on the other hand, gives great importance to the internal factor of governance as he discusses the cultural and religious factors and how the Gulf monarchs have used both traits to defy demands of representation (Hudson, 1977).

Although all of the aforementioned scholars raise interesting arguments that will be discussed in the coming sections, however, this paper builds its analytical framework largely on the works of Christopher Davidson (2015) and Michael Herb (1999). This is because Davidson’s work not only is the most contemporary but also comprehensive in that he covers all the aforementioned arguments in his book “After The Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies” (Davidson, 2015). Michael Herb’s work on the other hand, although published well before there was any sign of an Arab Spring, nonetheless stands out because he primarily argues and gives credit to the structure of the ruling families in the Gulf as the most important, not only internal but overall, factor when justifying their survival in general (Herb, 1999). Davidson

devotes a lot of attention in laying out external as well as internal pressures and difficulties facing the Gulf Monarchies. He argues that these pressures sooner or later are going to affect all the six monarchies, eventually leading to their collapse. Hence, the first one to fall in the state of anarchy will generate a “domino effect” eventually taking down all the other monarchies with it (Davidson, 2015: 2).

Davidson argues that the economic resources possessed by the monarchies like Saudi Arabia have enabled them to introduce and adopt a “rentier state system,” which allows the Kingdom to utilize and distribute the wealth amongst the indigenous population through various governance techniques such as lower or no taxation. Despite being the very source of wealth, only a small proportion of the local population is involved in the supply chain of oil and gas production. This distance from the production has enabled the indigenous population to become a rentier class (Davidson, 2015: 6-7). Hence, the rulers have less to worry about a revolution within their borders as the majority of the population, being the rentier class, does not feel any incentive to change the regime which is able to guarantee them basic needs and financial security. Apart from the economic factors, Davidson also argues that the monarchies’ way of governance also results in their stability. Although he doesn’t completely agree with Herb, but there’s a certain amount of consensus between both authors. Davidson mentions how the personality of the leader, his tribal heritage, loyalty from other family members, and his religious authority also add into one of the main reasons why the monarchies have managed to persist (Davidson, 2015: 8).

In contrast to Davidson, Herb argues that the resilience of Gulf monarchies like Saudi Arabia is due to their “dynastic” nature. Although he published his findings in 1999, his argument remains relevant today and he still stands by it after the initiation of Arab Spring (Herb, 2012). Herb argues that the way the monarchies like Saudi Arabia in the Middle East govern, including the role of the family, is the best explanation for why some survive and why some don’t (Herb, 1999: 2). According to Herb’s definition of dynastic monarchies, the members of the ruling families are given the opportunity to monopolize the higher offices in the government such as various key ministries (Herb, 1999: 8). Family

domination in the state's governance is what enables oil-rich Saudi Arabia to implement certain policies that guarantee its safety. He argues that it is this nature of the governance structure, not merely hydrocarbon reserves, which explains why the regimes like Saudi Arabia have managed to fight off any revolution or protests like the Arab Spring. This paper, however, largely disagrees with this hypothesis. Herb says that although resources like oil are important, nonetheless it is the ruling establishment that is in charge of utilizing those resources and revenues generated from it to run a stable country in which people would not want to protest against them (Herb, 2012). What this paper argues is that at the end of the day, oil in the case of Saudi Arabia is what makes it possible for the ruler to govern the way that he does. Simply put, if there was no oil, there would be no revenue. If there's no revenue, the King is not able to govern the way Herb said he does, unless there's an alternate source of revenue. But until then, "oil" remains at the epicentre of all the governance mechanisms and statecraft, particularly in the case of Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring between late 2010 and late 2013.

## **Governance**

One of the main factors which academic experts, like Herb as well as Hudson, have credited as the primary reason for the regimes such as Saudi Arabia's resilience is the way they govern their country. To explore this argument, we shall look at Saudi Arabia and the three main characteristics of governance practised there.

## **Camaraderie**

Unity and greater understanding amongst the members of the ruling family as well as with other families and tribes has proved to be a vital characteristic of Saudi Arabia and hence has greatly aided its struggle to endure the Arab Spring. The large size of the royal family allows the benefit of appointing princes and blood-linked family members to various high-ranked positions in cabinets, parliament, military, public as well as corporate sector, holding the most influential positions in state infrastructure (Niblock, 2006: 14). The steady generation of income due to vast oil reserves enables the state to distribute the wealth to the appointed members, keeping them satisfied while reducing the

possibility of any strife amongst or between the families. Another way the regime is able to avoid any internal conflict is by adopting a non-primogeniture rule. This rule allows the next eldest capable relative to succeed the king, thereby reducing the possibility of bringing about a king who is incapable of ruling. As a result, understanding amongst the family is strengthened as the positions of power doesn't get restricted to just one particular household within the royal family (Owen, 2000: 48).

A good understanding and a healthy relationship between the main tribal families is as important for survival as the understanding within the royal family. In Saudi Arabia, tribal leaders have been elected to local government positions, such as councillors and governors. This entitles the tribes a greater share of representation in the governance. Moreover, the military in Saudi Arabia is also aligned along the tribal lines, which again results in greater cooperation and understanding between the ruling family and the other major tribes or factions (Menaldo, 2013: 33). This, in turn, reduces the incentive for the tribes to rise up against the regime of Al Saud and contributes towards the loyalty of the military, which is discussed in detail in the next section.

## **Representation**

The ability of the Saudi government to use social and political mechanisms in order to look after the indigenous population's requirements is another major factor within the governance structure that helped the regime to endure the Arab Spring. The ruling establishment has carefully and strategically governed through sophisticated political methods which arguably gains them the people's trust. These methods include, but are not limited to, introducing swift reforms, public benefits, municipal elections, parliaments and council systems. However, despite such institutionalisation, the King retains the ultimate power at the end of the day (Brooker, 2009: 62). For instance, if we look at the formal advisory body of Saudi Arabia, the Shura Council, it consists of a speaker and 150 members which are all selected by the King himself (The Shura Council, Article 3). Although the council has the jurisdiction to draft the proposal of new law or an amendment of existing law, it still needs the King's approval before any such law could be implemented (The Shura Council, Article 29). Moreover, the King also decides which

resolutions of the council are referred to the cabinet. If agreed by both council and cabinet, the resolutions are once again sent for the King's approval (The Shura Council, Article 17). This doesn't necessarily mean that there is no representation at all. It just means that there's a different structure in place, one where the King's legitimacy plays a major role in how the majority of the population feels towards him and trust him with taking major decisions.

Saudi Arabia's government had been very cautious when monitoring the early days of the Arab Spring in Tunisia as well as Egypt. Besides the pre-existing legislative mechanisms mentioned before, the Arab Spring led the Kingdom to introduce more, albeit minor, abrupt reforms. This was also the case for neighbouring Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. For example, shortly after President Morsi of Egypt was ousted, Sultan Qaboos of Oman ordered reshuffling of his cabinet in February 2011 (Al Jazeera News, 2011). Kuwait's Prime Minister Nasser was also forced to step down after repeated protests in the streets of Kuwait City (Katzman, 2015: 4). King Hamad of Bahrain went as far as offering \$2,650 to each Bahraini family in the country as an attempt to disperse the biggest amount of protests in the Gulf (Reuters, 2011). Although there were minor protests in Saudi Arabia, still the government made sure that they never evolved into something as big as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen or even Bahrain. With a total estimated value of \$130 billion, the new spending measures undertaken by the Saudi regime in early 2011 were larger than the total annual budget of the country in 2007. These measures included the creation of 60,000 jobs in the Ministry of Interior, the building of 500,000 new houses, increasing the minimum wage to 3,000 Saudi Riyals (\$800) in the public sector, many one-time bonuses for existing civil employees, and various funds for religious organizations (Hertog, 2011). This was followed by the Kingdom's second-ever municipal election in October 2011 (Al Jazeera, 2011) and the inclusion of female members in the Shura Council in 2013 (The Shura Council, Article 3). With such incentives being provided, there is an evident difference in the living conditions of average Saudi citizens and their counterparts in Egypt or Tunisia. Hence, it would be fair to conclude that the majority of the Saudi population did not have the same

eagerness or motivation for revolting against their leaders as opposed to Tunisians or Egyptians in late 2010 and early 2011.

### **Cultural and Religious Legitimacy**

Besides the unity amongst the ruling family and the socio-political mechanisms of Saudi Arabia, religious and cultural legitimacy enjoyed by the King is also a major factor which enables him to gain the trust of the people to rule them, like those with regards to the Shura Council. Unlike the Presidents in the Republics, the King of Saudi Arabia has the natural authority thanks to the religious values, tribal customs and cultural norms which resonate with the society (Yom & Gause III, 2012: 77). Saudi Arabia significantly enjoys cultural legitimacy thanks to its close cooperation and understanding with major tribes and factions, as highlighted before. Moreover, the King also enjoys religious legitimacy as he is seen more of a religious leader, for example 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques', than an authoritarian monarch (Owen, 2000: 50). The close cooperation and relationship between the Al Saud family and the religious leadership during the creation of Saudi Arabia have greatly assisted the regime in securing the religious and cultural legitimacy. This relationship further continues to be strengthened as the religious leadership had been given the responsibility of the judicial system, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Supervision of Mosques, religious education, and religious police, amongst many other institutions (Yamani, 2008: 146-147).

### **Military**

Military institutions in the Middle Eastern countries have played a significant part, one way or the other, in the Arab Spring. Whether it be republics or the monarchies in the Gulf, the loyalty of the military in many cases proved to be a crucial factor for survival of regimes such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Likewise, this article argues that the military as an institution and its loyalty to the Saudi monarchy partly made it possible for the Kingdom to endure the Arab Spring.

## **Coup-Proofing**

In order to minimize the possibility of any rouge groups within the regime rising up against the state, rulers in the Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia have taken certain measures which James Quinlivan calls “coup-proofing.” Quinlivan defines coup-proofing as five set of actions which a government needs to take in order to prevent a military coup and attain military’s loyalty to the regime. The first is key relationships and loyalties. Meaning effectively placing different loyal members of the family or fellow tribes at different positions in the military to ensure their loyalty to the leader. The second set of action is by constructing a parallel military branch to the regular army. This can be used to counterweight the regular armed forces in case a faction of it attempts a coup. Third, establishing multiple intelligence and security services to keep checks on the loyalty of members inside the military. The fourth set of action is essentially having an expert military which is technically and physically skilled enough to withstand revolt. Lastly, ensuring funding of all these measures and made sure that they are executed (Quinlivan, 1999: 133). Although Quinlivan specifically talks about military coups, however, this article argues that these five steps also helped bring about the loyalty of the military as an institution in Saudi Arabia thus playing a big role in the regime’s survival during 2011-2013 wave of protests.

## **Coup-Proof Regime**

Saudi Arabia is a good example of a coup-proof regime as per Quinlivan’s theory. With regards to the benefits of loyalties and relationship, as we saw in the first section on governance, Saudi rulers have always been good at maintaining relationships with other tribes of the Kingdom. Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, began bridging relationships and ties to various tribes in the Nejd region even before Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932. Even after the formation of Saudi Arabia, the ruling family heavily relied on the tribes for armed men, convincing them to settle in strategic geographical locations to ensure regime’s stability (Owen, 2004: 190).

As far as the parallel military force is concerned, Saudi Arabia also fulfils that requirement. Besides its regular army, which consists of 3

armoured brigades, 5 mechanized brigades and 1 airborne brigade, Saudi Arabia also has a National Guard as well as a Royal Guard as two separate parallel military regiments. According to International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), the National Guard separately has 3 mechanized brigades and 5 infantry brigades (Quinlivan, 1999: 142). All three, however, have distinctive recruits. The regular army mainly consists of tribal members from Hejaz who fought on the side of Ibn Saud prior to the creation of Saudi Arabia. The National Guard includes members from Howeitat, Manasir, al-Murrah, Ruwala and Anaza tribes of Nejd region, as well as Shammar which belongs to the region just north of Nejd. The Royal Guard, on the other hand, consists of a small number of tribal retainers from the conquests Ibn Saud led for the formation of the state (Quinlivan, 1999: 143). Both regular army and the National Guard have more or less equal number of soldiers, and thus far the Saudi government has rejected any proposals for expansion of either one. This can be because if one gets more powerful than the other, it will have the potential to overcome the other in a coup attempt (Quinlivan, 1999: 144).

Saudi Arabia also has multiple security and intelligence services which keeps a check on not just the military itself, but also within the royal family and the general population for the danger of any group conspiring against the regime. The Saudi intelligence apparatus comprises of the General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), General Security Service (GSS), the Border Guard, the National Information Center, the three intelligence branches within the military (navy, army, and air force), the National Guard Intelligence Directorate, the Interior Minister's Bureau of Analysis and Studies, the Foreign Ministry's Information and Studies Center, and the National Guard's Specialized Studies Center (Cordesman, 2009: 271). The wide variety of these intelligence services permits a security apparatus in which there is strict monitoring mechanisms in order to thwart a coup attempt.

With regards to efficiency and skills, the military of Saudi Arabia may not be as skilled as the one of United States for example, however, Saudi government have made efforts to ensure its army's capability to engage in combat, such as a coup attempt or domestic unrest. From cadet

academy to senior officers' college, Saudi Arabia provides its soldiers with ample resources and comprehensive military education (Quinlivan, 1999: 152). Moreover, like many other countries, the Saudi government also sends its military personnel for training in notable and distinguished military academies such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom. One example of this is seen when the former King Abdullah requested a British Military Mission to help modernize the National Guard in 1963 when he was in command of the Guard. King Abdullah's son, Prince Miteb bin Abdullah was one of the many princes who attended the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst, United Kingdom. He later held many important positions at the National Guard (Cordesman, 2009: 175).

Lastly, with regards to financing all these measures, there is one simple answer: Oil. With ample supply of hydrocarbon reserves, the Saudi government has had no major difficulties thus far when it comes to funding its military or making sure the five set of actions for coup-proofing are fulfilled (Quinlivan, 1999: 153).

### **The Republics**

In order to better understand the necessity of military's loyalty and its role in helping Saudi Arabia endure the Arab Spring, we need to briefly look at the cases where military's loyalty was not secured, or where the regimes were not coup-proof. In Tunisia, for example, one of the major reasons why the revolution turned out to be successful in toppling the infamous Ben Ali was the decision of Army Chief Rachid Ammar to turn against him and back up the protesters by not oppressing them (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Following Ben Ali's ouster, the Egyptian military was also seen to avoid the use of force against the protesters, defying direct orders from Hosni Mubarak (BBC UK, 2011). Simultaneously, as the revolution in Yemen was gaining momentum, several top military officers declared their support for anti-government protestors and even deployed units for their security against the pro-government ones (Al Jazeera, 2011).

Considering the fate of Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, it is pretty evident that loyalty of the military is one of the most important reasons

for the survival of Saudi Arabia. By coup-proofing itself, the Saudi government has enjoyed ample loyalty of its military which not only secured them from an internal coup but also assisted them in tackling the protests inside its own borders during 2011-2013.

## **Oil**

One of the most discussed factors by scholars and political commentators when discussing the survival of not just Saudi Arabia, but all six Gulf States in general, is the vast amount of hydrocarbon reserves most of them possess. The six GCC states together control around 30 per cent of the world's crude oil reserves. In 2013, the six states altogether produced 24 per cent of the total world crude oil production (Hussein, 2014). The hydrocarbon reserves not only supply the Gulf States with cheap fuel but most importantly, help them have a steady and ample supply of revenue. Saudi Arabia is no exception either. This paper argues that the possession of such a great amount of oil reserves have immensely helped the Kingdom, to survive the Arab Spring. The reason why this section follows the ones on military and governance is because it will illustrate how the possession of such reserves leads to a great amount of revenue which then makes it possible for Saudi Arabia, to govern the way it does whilst maintaining a loyal military. Moreover, the following sections on regional and international relations will also relate back to the importance of revenue generated from the oil production. Hence, justifying the sub-hypothesis, that is, if there was one factor within the three internal factors which could be credited with contributing the most towards the survival of Saudi Arabia, it is surely 'oil'.

Saudi Arabia is not only the largest producer of crude oil amongst the six Gulf Monarchies, but it was also the largest oil producer in the world before, during, and even after the Arab Spring i.e. 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 (CNN Money, 2016). In 2010, crude oil production in Saudi Arabia was at 8,165,600 barrels per day. In 2011, the most eventful year of the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia significantly increased its production and produced a total of 9,311,000 barrels per day. Similarly, it increased its crude oil exports from 6,644,000 in 2010 to 7,218,000 barrels per day in 2011. As a result, for 2010, 2011, and 2012, Saudi

Arabia generated 214,897, 309,446, and 329,327 million dollars from petroleum exports, respectively (OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin, 2015). One can notice how significantly Saudi Arabia's revenue from such oil exports increased as the Arab Spring picked up its momentum throughout 2011, 2012 and 2013. Similarly, in order to keep its populace satisfied, the Kingdom's GDP per capita also significantly increased from \$18,754 in 2010, to \$24,883.2 by the end of 2012, which is one of the main reasons why the minor protests against the regime never picked up any significant momentum as the majority weren't ready to give all this up (The World Bank, 2016).

The increase of production of oil enabled the Kingdom to utilize the money for its governance measures as well as ensuring the loyalty of the military, through measures which were mentioned earlier. Before the oil revenues started to flow in after 1948, and particularly after a rise in oil price in the 1970s, the Saudi government had to rely on taxation, customs, loans from business and tribal merchants, non-petroleum exports, all of which required the state to collect taxes and duties from its population. This was no longer the case by 1970s and was definitely not the case before or during the Arab Spring. On the contrary, the state was now the distributor, with no reason to depend upon its population for major income (Niblock and Malik, 2007: 21; Hertog, 2010).

The argument that oil is the most significant factor for the endurance of Saudi Arabia is further strengthened when one looks at the figures above after 2013. As the Arab Spring relatively settles down by 2014, the production and exportation of oil, as well as the GDP per capita in Saudi Arabia, all relatively decrease. For example, from 2012 to 2014 there was a 13.4 per cent decrease in revenue generated from petroleum exports (OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin, 2015). Similarly, there was almost a 3 per cent decrease in the GDP per capita from 2012 to 2014 (The World Bank, 2016). Both changes are not substantial, however, the trajectory of changes in exports and GDP per capita demonstrates the reaction of the Saudi government towards the Arab Spring. Most importantly though, it shows how the regime itself depends upon the oil reserves as a tool for its persistence and the country's stability.

Michael Herb argues that the presence of oil reserves does not matter more than the structure of governance of the ruling family like that of Saudi Arabia (Herb, 1999 & 2012). However, in light of the evidence presented previously, this paper contests Herb's hypothesis because the possibility of having a governance system as that of Saudi Arabia eliminates when you take "oil" out of the equation. Oil – being the main source of revenue – for Saudi Arabia serves as the foundation of its survival and stability. All the other four main factors, both internal and external, are heavily dependent upon a steady source of revenue. Moreover, since there is no major alternate source of income as steady as oil, the presence of such reserves are comparatively the most significant of all factors when justifying the endurance of Saudi Arabia during Arab Spring.

### **Regional Relations**

Thus far, the focus was on factors which were domestic in nature to justify how Saudi Arabia managed to survive the Arab Spring. However, a strong alliance and close relationship of Saudi Arabia with the rest of five neighbouring Gulf States as part of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has also proved to be one of the vital characteristics when justifying its persistence alone, and of Gulf States altogether.

### **Economic Cooperation**

The six GCC countries signed an agreement on 25th May 1981 which established the Council whose basic objective was to achieve "coordination, integration and inter-connection between the member states in all fields in order to achieve unity between them" (GCC Charter – Article 4, 1981). The GCC Charter (1981), the Economic Agreement in 2001 and multiple resolutions authorized by the Supreme Council of the GCC, all have stressed on the joint economic action and cooperation amongst the six monarchies. Article 9 of the Economic Agreement (2001) states that all six-member states should adopt integrated policies with regards to the oil, gas and mineral industry "to achieve optimal exploitation of natural resources." Furthermore, the second sub-section of Article 9 specifically focuses on unity and a unitary stance with regards to economic cooperation. It states the following:

Member States shall adopt unified policies for oil and gas and shall take common positions in this regard towards non-Member States and at the international and specialized organizations” (GCC Economic Agreement - Article 9, 2001). This shows that Saudi Arabia and the rest of Gulf States favour greater economic cooperation amongst themselves in order to strengthen themselves as a bloc with unified policies “towards non-Member States.

Fast forward to the eve of Arab Spring, the close economic cooperation between the oil-rich Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC states was clearly visible. As the Arab Spring gained momentum in Tunisia and Egypt, Saudi Arabia rose to new prominence as the guarantor of status quo in the Gulf. As we witnessed previously, Saudi Arabia had plenty of oil revenue in order to use for concessions in the wake of the Arab Spring. Therefore, it also helped its not-so-affluent counterparts by offering them economic aid to cope with domestic unrest within their respective borders (Yom and Gause III, 2012: 83). This can be witnessed in the first quarter of 2011, when in the wake of demonstrations in Bahrain as well Oman, the richer Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar as well as UAE and Kuwait came together in order to offer economic assistance to both Bahrain and Oman in the form of \$20 billion aid packages. Needless to say, a big share of that amount was contributed by Saudi Arabia (Hertog, 2011).

### **Security Cooperation**

Apart from the economic aspect, Saudi Arabia also has a significant security cooperation with its Gulf neighbours. The GCC declaration stresses the unity and interconnection of the GCC States as well as the collective security principle, stating that, “the GCC security is integral, and that any attack on one member state should be considered as an attack on all other states, and that the responsibility to confront the attack is a collective one.” A very similar structure to that of the NATO can be observed there. But there’s more, the declaration adds that “interference in the internal affairs of any member state will be regarded as interference in that of all the Member States” (GCC, 2014: 39). This goes on to show how much the Gulf States like Saudi Arabia prioritize their security, and just a decade after the oil boom, they decided to form such

an organization which protected their economic as well as security interests.

For Saudi Arabia on the eve of Arab Spring, security of all the Gulf States was one of its top priority. This can be witnessed even before the creation of GCC, when Saudi Interior Minister said after the outbreak of Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988, that “the security of each Arab Gulf State is the security of Saudi Arabia” (Guzansky, 2014: 641). Hence two years later, in 1982, the GCC established a Peninsula Shield Force whose purpose was to reduce the Gulf States’ dependence upon foreign forces and increase their capability of dealing with any national security threat to any GCC member (Guzansky, 2014: 642). This Peninsula Shield Force particularly came in handy when Bahrain was hit with a significant wave of protests during Arab Spring in March 2011. Leading with 1,200 troops, Saudi Arabia headed the Peninsula Shield Force as it marched into Manama on March 14, 2011, and helped the Bahraini regime disperse the protesters by cracking down on them and making numerous arrests. A Saudi official at the time is reported in the New York Times saying: “This is the initial phase, Bahrain will get whatever assistance it needs. It’s open-ended” (Bronner and Slackman, 2011). This sort of dedication and commitment by Saudi Arabia, to prevent Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa to face the same fate as Ben Ali, Gaddafi or Mubarak, proves the significance of security cooperation amongst the GCC states and how that justifies the argument that strong regional relations of the Saudi monarchy have proved to be one of the major external factors leading to not just its own survival individually, but also of the other Gulf States like Bahrain, during the Arab Spring. If the Saudi regime can come to the rescue of its Gulf neighbours, then it’s hard to believe that those neighbours wouldn’t repay the favour if Saudi Arabia’s internal stability was at stake.

A further justification for this argument can be made when we look at how the Gulf States reacted after the close call in Bahrain. Few months after the protests in Bahrain, the GCC approved a proposal on 2nd July 2011 to boost the Peninsula Shield Force by 100,000 by the end of the year (Kermali, 2011). In addition to the instant measure to strengthen the security of Gulf States, the GCC held its Supreme Council’s 34th session

in Kuwait on December 2013 which established multiple measures such as “Unified Military Command,” “GCC Unified Defense Command,” and “GCC Academy for Strategic and Security Studies” with an aim to strengthen the defence capabilities of the GCC States (GCC, 2014: 35). These developments are most likely not to be a mere coincidence considering the timing and the fact that the last such defence measure taken by the GCC was back in 2000 when the member states signed a Joint Defense Agreement in Manama, Bahrain (GCC, 2014: 35).

### **International Relations**

Lastly, the other external factor which has contributed towards the endurance of Saudi Arabia during the Arab Spring is the international and diplomatic relations of the regime with major Western powers such as the United States. In order to make the case for this argument, this paper will only look at the relationship between the two countries explicitly. Ever since the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, Saudi Arabia among the other Gulf States had been trying to gain the support of another foreign ally which could help it secure full control over its territory. Successfully, Saudi Arabia was able to secure such close alliance with the United States. An alliance which mainly came about as a result of oil exploration in the Kingdom and then later evolved into definitive military cooperation that included import of heavy military equipment. This hence led to a close relationship of the Kingdom with the US administration, allowing it to tackle the relatively minor protests of Arab Spring within its own borders without any foreign vocal objection.

Saudi Arabia became the dominant focus of policymakers in Washington soon after the discovery of oil in the Kingdom around the 1940s. One American official is reported to have said in 1948 that the Kingdom is “what is probably the richest economic prize in the world in the field of foreign investment” (Achcar, 2013: 98). The special relationship between the United States and the Al Saud family represented both commercial and strategic interests of both sides. A large part played in the shaping of that relationship was by Aramco (Arab-American Oil Company), which before nationalization in the late 1970s was originally a group of American oil companies. Aramco then became

an important institution of the Saudi Kingdom for the development of its oil sector and generating a steady revenue which, as we witnessed earlier, helps the government to run things smoothly. It was an unlikely union between the Saudis and Americans but was one which was meant to last, and clearly assisted Saudis in overcoming the distress of Arab Spring (Achcar, 2013: 98-99).

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, there was a significant amount of danger that his next target would be Saudi Arabia. Hence, the Kingdom sought the protection of the United States. This not only gave the US the opportunity to physically establish its presence in the Gulf region but also received economic advantages (apart from the earnings of American oil firms) for providing security through establishing military bases in the region (Achcar, 2013: 102). Moreover, when we look at Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States with regards to oil trade, we can see how much is at stake for the US, particularly its economy. According to the rankings published by the US magazine Fortune in 2011, the American oil firms Exxon Mobil, Chevron and ConocoPhillips, were the second, third and fourth biggest firms of the United States, respectively. In total, out of the twelve biggest firms, eight were oil companies (Achcar, 2013: 103).

Coupled with the statistics provided by the Washington-based Institute of International Finance on the capital outflow from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to the United States and Europe, one can get the idea of how much is at stake for both the US and Saudi economy. Estimates provided by the IIF show that capital outflows for the five-year period 2002-2006 from the Gulf States amounted for \$530 billion. Out of this total, \$300 Million went to the United States. According to the similar statistics, GCC states' foreign assets tripled between 2002 and 2009, reaching a gross total of \$1,470 billion by the end of 2009. Moreover, the group of oil exporting countries in the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia, all together are the third biggest holder of US Treasury bonds, after China and Japan respectively (Achcar, 2013: 104). Clearly, the United States wouldn't want its third-biggest creditor to become unstable. While regime changes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, or even Algeria would in some ways impact the US economy due to the

globalised nature of the international economy. However, if a resource-rich Gulf State and key ally like Saudi Arabia were to go under drastic regime change, the impact would be far worse for not just the US but its allies as well. Such a scenario would mean that Saudi Arabia would potentially default on its credits, which could have a severely negative impact on the US economy, bearing in mind that the US economy was already greatly affected by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009. Hence, the capital outflow together with investment in the United States significantly strengthens the relationship of Saudi Arabia with the US. It ensures the Saudi government in a way that if the regime was to be ousted, the United States would be severely affected economically and lose a significant amount of regional influence in the Middle East. Thus, making survival of the Saudi Arabia during Arab Spring in the interests of those in Washington as well as its close allies.

The oil industry is not the only industry in the United States that has serious stakes in Saudi Arabia. The military industry would be as much, if not more, in favour of stability in the country. According to the US Department of Defense, Saudi Arabia was the chief client of United States arms industry from 1950 to September 2010. Saudi Arabia received nearly 17% of all US foreign military exports, as well as 78% of total foreign military construction deliveries (Achcar, 2013: 104). Saudi Arabia also signed contracts worth \$13.8 billion with the US for defence services from 2007 to 2010, more than any other country (Achcar, 2013: 104-105). Moreover, in 2010 US Congress gave President Obama the go-ahead to close a military equipment and services deal worth \$60 billion with Saudi Arabia, which was the biggest arms deal ever recorded in the history of United States (Achcar, 2013: 104).

Furthermore, between 1991 and 2011, Saudi Arabia was the world's fifth largest arms importer, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). With no surprise, the United States was its largest supplier, followed by the United Kingdom and France (Achcar, 2013: 106). Boeing, one the biggest US aircraft manufacturer, received an order of 84 F-15SSA Strike Eagle fighter jets from Saudi Arabia in December 2011. This was in addition to the modification on 70 F-15S already in the Saudi fleet. Overall the deal was worth a total of

\$29.4 billion (Achcar, 2013: 104). The deal by itself is capable of keeping Boeing's F-15 line operating for at least until 2017, along with 600 suppliers of Boeing in 44 states within the US (Achcar, 2013: 105-107). In the backdrop of the financial crisis of 2009, and with that much money involved on top of the oil contracts, the United States government is left with no strong motivation to disrupt such a healthy and beneficiary relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although one can argue that if there were to be a regime change in Saudi Arabia, it would still continue to maintain good relations with the US, however, with so much at stake, that is just too much of a risk for the US to take.

## **Conclusion**

After analysing the five main internal and external factors which have led to the survival of Saudi Arabia during Arab Spring 2011-2013, justified by evidence from both primary and secondary sources, this article argues that internal factors comparatively weigh more than the external ones when explaining the remarkable endurance of the Kingdom. Although all factors contributed towards the survival of Saudi Arabia in the various ways which have been discussed, however, the three internal factors i.e. governance, loyalty of military, and possession of vast oil reserves, comparatively proved to be more significant than regional relations amongst Gulf States and international relations such as that with United States. This is because, as the paper argues, governance mechanism instituted by the Saudi government made it possible for it to rule in the way that they did and look after its own population. It also enabled to construct a close relationship with the United States, as well as with other GCC countries. Hence, both external factors were in many ways supported by the internal one i.e. governance. Secondly, the possession of oil reserves, the most important internal factor, allowed Saudi Arabia to not only maintain and establish regional and international relations but also enabled it to govern in the mentioned way together with ensuring the military's loyalty. Hence, this also validates the sub-hypothesis that if there was one factor which could be credited the most with the survival of Saudi Arabia, it is "oil."

To test these hypotheses, the paper divided itself into two main parts depicting the academic debate, with the first one covering the internal

factors and the second external. Firstly, it explored governance techniques of the Saudi government. In particular, the strong understanding and satisfaction amongst the ruling elites, socio-political mechanisms such as elections and reforms to implement some sort of democracy, and the cultural as well as religious legitimacy enjoyed by the leader himself. Then the article explored how the Saudi government managed to secure the loyalty of their military by using Quinlivan's "coup-proofing" theory. The loyalty of the military hence significantly helped the regime to preserve stability within its own borders and also outside - in the case of Bahrain. Thirdly, the argument on "oil" reinstated the sub-hypothesis by analysing statistics and the trajectory of oil production and GDP per capita before, during and after the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. It presented the evidence and argued that the revenue generated through this vast amount of oil reserves, the monarchy was able to sustain itself by affording the measures featured in all other four factors, both external and internal.

Fourth factor and the first external one focused on the regional relations of Saudi Arabia with its regional allies. It argued that strong economic, as well as security cooperation between the Gulf States via GCC, has ensured all of them to unify against any threat towards any of the respective ruling families, just like the Arab Spring protests. This, in turn, provides Saudi Arabia with a significant amount of regional security and insurance as it was part of that strong alliance. Lastly, the paper talked about the international relations of Saudi Arabia by analysing its alliance with the United States. It argued that due to the financial interdependence between the two countries, as well as US strategic interests in the region, Saudi Arabia is able to enjoy a significant amount of support from Washington and its allies during challenging times for the state such as that of Arab Spring.

Whether Davidson's predicted domino effect is going to take place or not, only time will tell. However, it would be a mistake to claim that Saudi Arabia will endlessly continue to carry on its impressive endurance the same way as it did during the Arab Spring. The Kingdom certainly cannot rely forever on oil. As the reserves continue to deplete, the Al Saud family needs to come up with an alternative and sustainable source

of revenue which would enable them to carry on the authoritarian yet effective statecraft. One such audacious move has been taken by the current Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. He is determined to reform the Saudi economy by introducing radical economic reforms, such as cutting public payroll, subsidies on water, fuel and electricity, and introducing a value-added tax on non-essentials, amongst other changes (The Economist, 2016). It is not certain at the moment that Prince Muhammad has everything worked out. After all, it looks like the long-held Saudi social contract of “no representation without taxation” is gradually going to change. Saudi Arabia and the other royals that might follow its example have to make sure that they are able to pull off this delicate transition. It is vital for the ruling family to implement necessary reforms that not just buy off people’s aspirations and demands for representation but actually fulfils them. If the people of Saudi Arabia begin to feel the burden of future economic reforms, they might voice their anger in a similar way that the Tunisians or Egyptians did in 2011. And with not enough money to ease their burden, the royals may just run out of time.

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