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Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring

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Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring

STÉPHANE LACROIX

Abstract

The Arab Spring has had little visible impact on Saudi Arabia, except in the Eastern Province, where relatively large Shia protests were met with deadly repression. However, it would be a mistake to think that the revolutionary events taking place in the Arab world did not spur debate in the remaining segments of Saudi society. Sunni Islamists were at the forefront of the debate, as they saw 'comrades' of the same ideological orientation participating in revolutions and seizing power throughout the region. Most of them agreed that Saudi Arabia needed change, although they would quickly disagree on the nature and the extent of it. Still, a significant rapprochement took place in 2011 and 2012 between Islamists of all backgrounds and non-Islamist political activists around the issue of political reform and the fate of political prisoners. Yet this was short-lived. By 2012, fundamental disagreements on social issues were pulling Islamists and liberals apart, as had been the case since the 1990s. Political dissent remained, but on a smaller scale. This did not stop the Saudi government from taking drastic measures against the Kingdom's Islamists, especially after the summer of 2013.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring has had little visible impact on Saudi Arabia, except in the Eastern Province, where relatively large Shia protests were met with deadly repression. However, it would be a mistake to think that the revolutionary events taking place in the Arab world did not spur debate in the remaining segments of Saudi society. Sunni Islamists were at the forefront of the debate, as they saw 'comrades' of the same ideological orientation participating in revolutions and seizing power throughout the region. Most of them agreed that Saudi Arabia needed change. But what kind of change?

The Saudi Sunni Islamists' importance does not stem merely from their identification with Islamists from outside the Kingdom. It derives above all from the fact that they represent the Kingdom's largest group of activists and, more importantly, the only one with real organizational structures. In a country where entities not organized by the state are generally – with very few exceptions – not allowed to exist, this means Sunni Islamists are the force with the biggest mobilizing potential in the Kingdom and, consequently, the only force theoretically able to threaten the system.

The vast majority of the Sunni Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia is constituted by what is known as the Sahwa, from *al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya*, the Islamic Awakening. The Sahwa's origins go back to the 1970s, when the religious tenets of Salafism were blended with

the political discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood (and that of its radical heir, Sayyid Qutb), giving birth to a social movement that became extremely popular among Saudi youth. The Sahwa also encompassed several semi-clandestine organized groups, known as *jama'at*. The two main ones were known as the Sururis (*al-sururiyyun*), named after the alleged inspirer of the group, the Syrian Sheikh Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin, and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood (*al-ikhwan al-muslimun al-sa'udiyyun*) – although the latter group was never, it seems, formally affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood worldwide (Lacroix 2011). Though the Sahwa's relationship with the regime was relatively harmonious at the start, this changed in the late 1980s when Sahwa figures became increasingly critical of the royal family's policies. In the wake of the Gulf War, which led King Fahd to call for a large American military presence in Saudi Arabia, the Sahwa became the backbone of a strong protest movement against the royal family, known as the Sahwa's intifada. As a consequence, hundreds of Sahwa leaders and followers were arrested in 1994 and 1995, including the famous sheikhs Salman al-'Awda, Safar al-Hawali and Nasir al-'Umar.

By 1999, most imprisoned Sahwa figures had been released. While some decided to keep a low profile or became closely associated with the regime,[1] others were willing to continue their activism, but disagreed on the target and the means. A first group argued that the priority was preaching with a focus on society, in order to resist the growing trend of social liberalization. For the members of this group, issues such as women and education – two domains in which there was increasing pressure to 'open up' Saudi Arabia – became battlegrounds. This group included most of the prominent sheikhs who had taken part in the Sahwa's intifada, with Nasir al-'Umar and Safar al-Hawali at the forefront.

A second group argued that what mattered the most was political change. Among those, some advocated violence and the transformation of Saudi Arabia into a 'true Islamic state', and joined ranks with al-Qaeda's Saudi branch, known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (QAP). QAP would be most active in the Kingdom between 2003 and 2006, before being crushed by the authorities. Although the group was recreated in Yemen in January 2009 and has attracted some Saudis, it does not seem to have a large presence in the Kingdom and its actions there have remained limited.[2]

At the other end of the spectrum, a separate group of activists advocated a 'civil jihad', using peaceful means, with the aim of transforming Saudi Arabia into an Islamic

[1] The latter was the case, for instance, of Ayid al-Qarni, who became a close ally of the royal family.
[2] The 'new' QAP's most high-profile operation inside Saudi Arabia was a failed assassination attempt on the Saudi deputy interior minister, Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, in August 2009.

constitutional monarchy respectful of the rights of its citizens, regardless of their tribal or family background, region or sect. Those activists, who have been dubbed 'Islamo-liberals' because they blend the language of democracy with that of Islam, submitted a number of petitions to the regime from 2003 onwards and have not hesitated to ally themselves with liberals, leftists or even Shiites to further their ends. They have also striven to gather support among the broader Sahwa base and have sometimes managed to convince prominent Sahwa intellectuals to sign their petitions – although their success in doing so has been only relative (Lacroix 2011).

2. SAUDI ISLAMISTS AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Thus, by the early 2000s, after the repressive years of the mid- to late 1990s, Islamists had once again become an influential voice on social and political issues in Saudi Arabia. Sahwa sheikhs had regained considerable authority, representing an 'alternative religious establishment' whose popularity among the population, especially the young, was arguably larger than that of the 'official religious establishment', headed by Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaikh, whose charisma was far from matching that of this predecessor, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz.[3] The discussions about change in the Kingdom thus did not start with the 2011 uprisings. Yet the events in Tunisia and Egypt that led to the fall of presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak gave a considerable boost to the debate.

From the beginning, the Sahwa's assessment of the uprisings happening in the region was very different from that of the Saudi official religious establishment. Abd al-Aziz Al al-Sheikh, the Kingdom's mufti, was quoted as describing demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt as 'planned and organized by the enemies of the Umma' in order to 'strike the Umma and destroy its religion, values and morals'.[4] This did not stop most Saudi Islamist figures from enthusiastically backing the revolutions in the two countries. The most passionate of them was no doubt Salman al-'Awda, whose weekly show on MBC, *Life is a Word* (*al-haya kalima*), was cancelled, as the regime feared his zeal might be infectious.[5] But more conservative Islamist figures, like Nasir al-'Umar, also praised what was happening – though with a more conspiratorial vision of the West's role in the process.[6]

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[3] Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz had died in 1999 (Lacroix 2011).

[4] *Mufti al-mamlaka: al-muzaharat khitat li-tafkik al-umma*, http://www.alwatan.com.sa/local/news_detail.aspx?articleid=40472&categoryid=5. This and all other links were accessed in September 2013.

[5] *Waqf barnamij 'al-haya kalima' li-l-shaykh al-'Awda*, http://islamtoday.net/salman/artshow-78-145994.htm; the statements that prompted this decision can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pFzwOaPmuw.

[6] See for instance *al-taghyir fi masr… wa tijarat al-ikhwa al-a'da*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/141066.

The stance in favour of revolutions culminated with Syria, which, as time passed and as the conflict turned increasingly violent, became a central cause for the Sahwa. Some Sahwa sheikhs, who could easily gather donations from their followers, even became major channels of funding for the Syrian armed opposition. Their activities became so numerous and visible that, in May 2012, the regime decided officially to forbid such prominent sheikhs as Muhammad al-'Arifi (who had just founded an ulama committee to help Syria, *lajnat al-'ulama li-nusrat Surya*), Ali Badahdah and Abd al-Aziz al-Turayfi from collecting money for Syria outside official channels.[7] Private donations have continued to flow into Syria through Sahwa networks, but collectors have now adopted a lower profile. Salafi groups on the ground were the main recipients of those donations, especially the conservative yet non-global jihadi ones that were part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front.[8] There is no indication that the Sahwa ever supported global jihadi groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), whose ideology has strong differences from the Sahwa's. This is confirmed by the fact that most Sahwa figures enthusiastically greeted the formation in November 2013 of a new Syrian 'Islamic Front' uniting all non-global jihadi Salafi groups (including, this time, Ahrar al-Sham, which was not part of the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front) with the implicit mission of countering the rise of ISIL.[9] Some sheikhs close to the Sahwa, such as Muhammad al-'Arifi and the much-respected Abdallah al-Ghunayman, have also argued in favour of Saudis going to fight in Syria.[10] Others, however, such as Salman al-'Awda, have taken the opposite stance.[11]

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[7] *Al-sulutat al-sa'udiyya tuhadhdhir al-'Arifi wa-l-Turayfi wa Badahdah wa-l-Ghamidi bi-'adam isitqbal tabarru'at li-Surya*, http://www.al-marsd.com/news/view/37318-والطريق في-العريف في-تحذير-السعودية-السلطات-لا سوريا-تبرعات-السرقة بالبدع-والغامدي-وبادحدح.html#.UP30saWDpHI.

[8] Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin, a Syrian sheikh with strong ties to the Sahwa (he was the alleged inspirer of the Sururi *jama'a* when he lived in Saudi Arabia in the early 1970s), announced his support for this Front as early as December 2012. This is all the more significant since many consider Zayn al-'Abidin to be one of the key links between the Sahwa and the Syrian Islamic scene (Pierret forthcoming).

[9] Seventy-two prominent Saudi sheikhs from the Sahwa signed a statement supporting the Islamic Front: *'ulama' wa-du'a fi-l-mamlaka yasdurun bayanan li-ta'yid al-jabha al-islamiyya fi-l-Sham wa yad'una ila da'miha*, http://almoslim.net/node/195146; the League of Muslim Ulama (see below) also declared its support for the Front: http://www.islammemo.cc/akhbar/syria-althawra/2013/12/10/189355.html.

[10] *Abdallah al-Ghunayman: Wujub al-jihad bi-l-mal wa-l-nafs fi Surya,* http://safeshare.tv/w/bHNnrpZcLs; *al-'Arifi yubki al-musallin bi-faza'i' nizam al-asad wa yad'u li-l-jihad bi-surya*, al-Masriyyun, 14 June 2013.

[11] *Al-'Awda yujaddid tahdhirahu min al-safar li-surya*, http://al-marsd.com/main/Content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%B1-%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7..-%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A4%D9%83%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B5%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7#.Us4cz_bGqS4

Saudi Islamist support for the Syrian revolution was often expressed in sectarian terms, even before the conflict adopted any visible sectarian undertones. Obviously, this sectarian reading of the situation played a major role in turning the Syrian revolution into a cause célèbre for the Sahwa. For instance, Nasir al-'Umar argued as early as April 2011 that what was happening was nothing but a religious war (*harb 'aqadiyya*) between Sunnis and 'a Nusayri [the term Salafis traditionally use to designate Alawis] regime whose strongest allies are Shiites and Jews'.[12] The sectarian rationale – and, more importantly, the Saudi government's open support for the Syrian revolution from the summer of 2011 – also explains why, after he had expressed scepticism about all Arab uprisings including the one in Syria, the Kingdom's mufti, followed by pro-regime sheikhs Salih al-Fawzan and 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Abbad,[13] finally backed what he described as a legitimate jihad[14] while warning young Saudis against going to join the fight.[15]

The same sectarian rationale explains why, amongst all the uprisings outside the Kingdom, the only one which most Sahwa sheikhs actively denounced was the one taking place in Bahrain from 14 February 2011 onwards. The League of Muslim Ulama (*rabitat 'ulama' al-muslimin*), which includes several prominent Sahwa sheikhs, and whose secretary general is none other than Nasir al-'Umar, explained in a statement that 'the events of the Kingdom of Bahrain do not resemble in any way what happened in Tunisia and Egypt; in those countries, what took place were peaceful revolutions by a whole people demanding freedom and dignity, while what happens in Bahrain is sectarian chaos (*fitna ta'ifiyya*) aimed at eradicating the Sunni presence both in society and government, and is refused by the majority of the people'.[16] Other Sahwa figures echoed the Saudi and Bahraini governments' accusations that the protests in Bahrain were sponsored by Iran.[17] Consequently, most Sahwa sheikhs rejoiced at the intervention in Bahrain by the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield on 18 March 2011 to crush the uprising. Only Salman al-'Awda took a slightly different stance: he did call for Bahraini protesters to stop their demonstrations, but he also

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[12] *D. al-'Umar: ma yajri fi Surya harb 'aqadiyya*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/145324.
[13] *Al al-Shaykh wa-l-'Abbad wa-l-Fawzan yalhaqun bi-rakab al-a'imma alladhina yaftuna bi-nusrat al-thawra al-suriyya*, http://alaathar.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/يد لحق-الـ ع باد-والـ علامة-الـ فوزان-الـ علامة
[14] *Mufti al-mamlaka: da'm al-suri al-hurr bi-l-mal min al-jihad*, http://syrianchange.com/2012/03/12/مـ ف تي-م-بـ الـ مال-الـ حر-الـ سوري-دعم-الـ سعوديـ ة.
[15] http://www.alweeam.com.sa/177635/%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%B6-%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC.
[16] *Rabitat 'ulama' al-muslimin tuhadhdhir sunnat al-Bahrayn min hijratiha wa-l-madd al-safawi*, http://almoslim.net/node/143526.
[17] See for instance *bayan hawla ahdath al-Bahrain* (signed by thirteen Sahwi sheikhs), http://www.dorar.net/art/691.

advocated 'peaceful coexistence' and expressed his desire for 'minorities to obtain their legitimate rights'.[18]

3. THE RE-EMERGENCE OF SAUDI CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMISTS

The debate about the legitimacy of revolutions abroad, however, quickly turned into one about the necessity of change in the Kingdom. At the forefront of the debate were the 'Islamo-liberals' and all those advocates of an Islamic constitutional monarchy who had joined ranks with them.

In the years before 2011, constitutional reformists had apparently received a series of strong blows from the regime. A major one occurred when, in February 2007, in the wake of the release of a petition signed by ninety-nine activists and entitled 'Milestones on the way to constitutional monarchy', ten leading members of the movement were arrested.[19] Among them was Sulayman al-Rashudi, an Islamist lawyer from Riyadh who had already been an important figure in the Sahwa's intifada in the 1990s; Musa al-Qarni, a sheikh and professor at the Islamic University of Medina; and Saud Mukhtar al-Hashimi, an Islamist intellectual from Jeddah. Not long after, Abdallah al-Hamid – another former prominent figure in the 1990s Sahwa's intifada, and the true mastermind of the constitutionalist movement – was also arrested (he would be released a few months later).

This situation prompted eleven of their comrades (some Islamists, some from other backgrounds) to establish in 2009 the Saudi Arabian Kingdom's first fully independent Human Rights NGO, called the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (SCPRA). Although its focus is said to encompass all human rights abuses in the Kingdom, SCPRA has been especially active in defending imprisoned constitutional reformists. What could be considered surprising is that the government did not respond to the creation of the SCPRA by arresting its founding members. The SCPRA has even been able to maintain a functioning website (although it is obviously inaccessible from inside the Kingdom without a proxy) where it regularly posts its statements and reports.[20] This indicates that, by 2009, the government considered those activists such a negligible threat that it was almost ready to tolerate them.

This overconfidence on the part of the government was largely a mistake. What officials did not see is that the development of social media and its increasing use in Saudi

[18] *Al-'Awda: Asif li wusul al-ihtijajat bi-l-Bahrayn li-ihtiqan ta'ifi*, http://islamtoday.net/salman/artshow-78-147809.htm.
[19] *Ma'alim 'ala tariq al-malikiyya al-dusturiyya*. The petition can be found at http://menber-alionline2.info/pdf/show.php?id=1114.
[20] http://www.acpra-hr.co.

Arabia had offered constitutional reformists new ways of communicating their ideas. Through Facebook and Twitter, they could reach out to new social groups – especially the young. This came at a moment when, due to their exposure to a wide range of influences through the Internet and the new media, the young were themselves becoming more actively politicized. Those who had been socialized within Sahwa circles – a common occurrence for young people born in the 1980s or early 1990s – were also more ready to challenge the authority of the sheikhs or the *jama'at*, and, while remaining conservative, to advocate a more 'à la carte' approach to Islam. The young Saudis sent to study abroad as part of the scholarship programme established by King Abdallah, whose numbers soared after 2006–7, were also more likely to have this kind of political awareness. The ideas of the constitutional reformists were thus embraced by an ever-growing group of new activists in their twenties or early thirties.

Among them was, to take an example, Walid Abu al-Khayr, a former member of the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood born in 1979, who became one of the most outspoken reformist voices in the Kingdom. Before working closely with SCPRA, he founded his own Monitor of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia in December 2008.[21] He is today one of the better-known Saudi activists, having, for instance, received the 2012 Olof Palme prize for Human Rights.[22] Another young figure who gained some prominence is Muhammad al-Bijadi, who was born in 1978 and was also involved in the activities of the Monitor of Human Rights before becoming a founding member of the SCPRA.

Some of those young reformists saw their role not as mere activists, but also as theoreticians of reform. Thus, in addition to their stances and to the actions they took, some of them started writing books in which they attempted to justify their political positions in Islamic – and even Salafi – terms. An important feature of the Saudi constitutionalist movement since its beginnings is that many of its members are intellectuals who have produced an extensive corpus of texts to legitimize their activism. The movement's godfather, Abdallah al-Hamid, has, for instance, written more than a dozen books since the 1990s in which he has dug into Salafi texts to provide religious justifications for a democratic state.[23] Since the mid-2000s, Muhammad al-Ahmari, who was president of the Islamic Association of

[21] http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=40258229626.
[22] He could not receive it himself as he is banned from travelling. His wife Samar al-Badawi replaced him at the ceremony.
[23] See for instance 'Words are stronger than bullets' (*al-kalima aqwa min al-rasas*), 'The trichotomy of civil society: on the success of the West and the failure of Arabs' (*thulathiyat al-mujtama' al-madani*), or 'So that we don't transform Islam into a mere ritual' (*likay la nuhawwil al-islam ila tuqus*). Most of his books can be found at: http://abubelal1951.blogspot.fr/p/blog-page.html. On Abdallah al-Hamid, see Lacroix (2004).

North America (IANA) in the 1990s, has become another prominent Saudi reformist writing on the compatibility between democracy and Islam.[24]

The fact that younger authors are increasingly taking on this task shows that this remains an important dimension of the movement. One of them is Muhammad al-Abd al-Karim, a young professor of *usul al-fiqh* at Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud University, whose books include *Deconstructing Tyranny* (*Tafkik al-istibdad*), in which he examines the Islamic corpus to deconstruct the idea that obedience is due to tyrannical rulers, and *The Awakening of Tawhid* (*Sahwat al-tawhid*), in which he focuses on the key Salafi principle of Tawhid ('the oneness of God') and stresses its political dimension, which, according to him, negates authoritarianism.[25] Al-Abd al-Karim was imprisoned for a few months in 2010 after he wrote an extremely daring article about royal family politics on his Facebook page.[26] Another name that comes to mind is that of Abdallah al-Maliki, who prompted a huge controversy with his book *The Sovereignty of the Umma Comes Before the Implementation of Shari'a*, in which he argues that, while the implementation of shari'a is desirable, the protection of civil and political liberties should come first.[27] Finally, mention should be made of Nawaf al-Qudaymi, whose book *Longing for Freedom: An Approach to the Salafi Stance on Democracy* became a major source of inspiration for many of the younger reformists.[28]

For constitutional reformists, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt offered a fantastic opportunity to reoccupy the centre of the stage. They were, after all, the oldest and most credible pro-democratization force in the Kingdom. SCPRA started issuing statements commenting on the events as they unfolded. On 11 February, in the wake of the ousting of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, it published a provocative communiqué arguing that the only way for Saudi Arabia to avoid revolution would be to implement constitutional reform.[29] The day before, ten activists and intellectuals – most of them with a Sahwa background and with links to the constitutional reformists – had announced the establishment of the Kingdom's first political party, the Islamic Umma Party (*Hizb al-Umma al-Islami*). They

[24] See for instance 'Democracy: its origins and the question of its application' (*Dimuqratiyya: al-judhur wa ishkaliyyat al-tatbiq*, al-shabaka al-'arabiyya li-l-abhath wa-l-nashr, 2012).
[25] Muhammad al-Abd al-Karim, *Sahwat al-tawhid*, al-shabaka al-'arabiyya li-l-abhath wa-l-nashr, 2012; *Tafkik al-istibdad*, al-shabaka al-'arabiyya li-l-abhath wa-l-nashr, 2013.
[26] Muhammad al-Abd al-Karim, *Azmat al-sira' al-siyasi bayna al-ajniha al-hakima fi-l-sa'udiyya*, http://royaah.net/detail.php?id=894 (the same article was republished in the online magazine *ru'ya*).
[27] Abdallah al-Maliki, *Siyadat al-Umma qabla tatbiq al-shari'a*, al-shabaka al-'arabiyya li-l-abhath wa-l-nashr, 2012.
[28] Nawaf al-Qudaymi, *Ashwaq al-hurriyya: muqaraba li-l-mawqif al-salafi min al-dimuqratiyya*, al-shabaka al-'arabiyya li-l-abhath wa-l-nashr, 2009.
[29] *Al-jam'iyya tubarik li-ahrar masr isqat nizam al-taghiya Husni*, http://www.acpra16.org/news.php?action=view&id=114.

explained that they had chosen to establish a party – which is firmly against the law in Saudi Arabia – because of their belief that the existence of formally organized political entities is a prerequisite for political reform. The founders of the party were particularly influenced by the writings of Hakim al-Mutairi, a Kuwaiti religious scholar known for his book *Liberty or Deluge*, in which, like the Saudi authors mentioned previously, he attempted to justify democratic principles using Salafi references.[30] Al-Mutairi has also played a key role in the establishment of Kuwait's Umma Party, which appears to be linked to its Saudi counterpart through an informal transnational structure called the Conference of the Umma.[31] A particular feature of the Islamic Umma Party is that it calls for the establishment of a 'righteous government' (*al-hukuma al-rashida*), a concept which aims at going beyond the idea of a constitutional monarchy by questioning the monarchical system of government itself.[32]

The days that followed the fall of Mubarak witnessed intense discussions among Saudi Arabia's reform-minded intellectuals, Islamist and non-Islamist. There was a general feeling that this was a historic opportunity to take a public stance in favour of change. The drafting of three petitions was begun almost simultaneously by different groups of activists. The first petition, which explicitly called for a constitutional monarchy, originated from liberal intellectuals such as Muhammad Sa'id Tayyeb, a former Nasserite from Jeddah, and Najib Khunayzi, a former communist from the Eastern Province.[33] The second text identified itself as a 'petition of the young'. Written by young liberal journalist Ahmad 'Adnan, it called for the royal family to offer better representation to the young, in the cabinet and in the Majlis al-Shura.[34]

4. TOWARDS A STATE OF RIGHTS AND INSTITUTIONS

The third petition, entitled 'Towards a State of Rights and Institutions', was arguably the most significant. Its demands included an elected parliament with real powers and the appointment of a prime minister distinct from the king[35] and accountable to the parliament. This amounted to demanding a constitutional monarchy, though – in an attempt to avoid direct confrontation with the regime – the term was not used in the text. It was drafted by a very diverse group of

[30] Hakim al-Mutayri, *Al-hurriya aw al-tawfan*, al-mu'assasa al-'arabiyya li-l-dirasat wa-l-nashr, 2008.
[31] www.ommahconf.com.
[32] *Al-hukuma al-rashida hiya al-nizam al-siyasi al-badil al-qadim*, 17 June 2011, http://www.islamicommaparty.com/Portals/Content/?info=TlRRMEpsTjFZbEJoWjJVbU1TWmhjbUk9K3U=.jsp.
[33] *I'lan watani li-l-islah*, www.saudireform.com.
[34] *Risala ila khadim al-haramayn al-sharifayn*, 23 February 2011. The number of signatories was forty-six. http://www.alwahabi.com/?p=553.
[35] In the Saudi political system, since the days of King Faysal, the king is also the prime minister.

about thirty intellectuals, which included 'Islamo-liberals' such as Muhammad al-Ahmari and Abdallah al-Maliki, liberals such as Muhammad Sa'id Tayyeb, Shiites such as Tawfiq al-Sayf and Sunni Islamists such as Khalid al-'Ujaymi, Khalid al-Duwaysh and Salman al-'Awda (whose participation will be discussed in detail below).[36]

The list of signatories included representatives of all the major Saudi political groups, more than had ever been the case in previous petitions. Islamists in particular were heavily represented. One source close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood even indicates that the group may have taken the formal decision to back the petition, as a result of which regular members were ordered to sign.[37] The negotiations between the drafters of the text and the Sururis to obtain the latter's backing appear to have been less fruitful: as a result, the Sururi *jama'a* refused to support the text formally, with some Sururis denouncing it as 'too weak religiously'. Despite this, several figures close to the Sururi movement, like Nasir al-Hunayni and Walid al-Rashudi, signed individually. This made the scope of signatories absolutely unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. As one interviewee who played a major role in coordinating the petition said: 'How could one imagine that some day, Walid al-Rashudi [who, like most Sururis, is known for his staunch anti-Shiism] would sign the same text as [Shiite] Tawfiq al-Sayf? This gave us so much hope!'[38]

The winds of unity were so strong that even after the Sururis refused to support the petition formally, they made a conciliatory move towards the reformists. They decided to lay out their own vision of reform by publishing a 'reform document' dating from 2005 which they had, at the time, sent to the king without making it public. The demands, supported by a list of signatories of about seventy sheikhs including Nasir al-'Umar, were mostly focused on social and religious issues. They included the need to protect the Salafi creed and to prevent the liberalization of society, although there were also a few lines on the importance of fighting corruption and unemployment. However, the demands bore very little resemblance to those contained in 'Towards a State of Rights and Institutions', and reflected a much more conservative approach to change. Despite this, the Sururis included in the introduction of their text an explicit reference to the constitutional reformists' petition, saying 'We add our voice to all the calls for reform which contribute to the benefit of this country and its people, and among those "Towards a State of Rights and Institutions", while reaffirming the centrality of

[36] Interview with one of the coordinators of the petition, July 2012.
[37] Interview with a young sympathizer with the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, March 2012.
[38] Interview with one of the coordinators of the petition, July 2012.

shari'a in any reform project.'[39] With this, and despite the caveats added by the Sururis, a common platform for reform was starting to take shape around a unifying project – a moment a prominent young reformist would call 'the most important moment to date in the trajectory of change in Saudi Arabia'.[40]

The strength of the 'State of Rights and Institutions' petition also came from the fact that it was signed by 'big names'. The most prominent signatory was no doubt Salman al-'Awda, one of the leading religious figures in the Sahwa. Since his release from prison in 1999, al-'Awda – like al-Umar or al-Hawali – had restricted the bulk of his activities to the religious and social spheres, mostly avoiding direct criticism of the royal family and refusing to sign any new political petition. Because of this, he had been allowed from the early 2000s to run a website called Islam Today (*al-Islam al-Yawm*), and to appear on TV shows. This media presence allowed him to regain and expand his religious authority among the Saudi public. Today, he is arguably one of the Saudi sheikhs with the largest number of followers. One way to measure the extent of his following is Twitter. In February 2014, Salman al-'Awda had close to 4.3 million followers, the third largest following among Saudi religious figures (Muhammad al-'Arifi had close to 8 million, and A'id al-Qarni close to 5.5 million). In the wake of the Arab Spring, al-'Awda's discourse started to change. He enthusiastically backed the revolutions and, in his writings, started to address the issue of political change in Saudi Arabia in unusually provocative ways. In 2012, he published his reflections in a book called *Questions of Revolution* (*As'ilat al-thawra*), which he opened by saying: 'Revolutions happen when deep and serious reform is absent … People don't provoke revolutions, only repression, oppression, corruption, backwardness and poverty provoke revolutions.' He then went on to analyse the causes and consequences of revolutions, quoting Western historians and political scientists as much as Islamic sources.[41] The book, which was first sold at the 2012 Riyadh Book Fair, was subsequently banned.[42]

The diversity and aura of its prominent signatories gave a tremendous impulse to the 'State of Rights and Institutions" petition: it was put online on a dedicated website and on a Facebook page, and within a few weeks, the number of signatories reached 9,000 (most

[39] *Bayan da'wa li-l-islah*, http://www.islamlight.net/index.php/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=21468&Itemid=33.
[40] Interview with one of the coordinators of the petition, July 2012.
[41] Salman al-'Awda, *As'ilat al-thawra*, Beirut: Markaz nama', 2012. On this book, as well as on al-'Awda's activism in the wake of the Arab Spring, see also al-Rasheed (2013).
[42] *Man' kitab al-shaykh Salman al-'Awda*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/162063.

signing with their real names[43]). This was a clear departure from previous such petitions, which had been signed by no more than hundreds. The bulk of the list consisted of thousands of young Saudis in their 20s and 30s, members of this new 'political generation' that had been rising over the past few years and had gained visibility through blogs (Al-Qassemi 2011), first, and later through Twitter and Facebook. On those same social networks, they befriended Egyptian or other Arab activists, from whom they no doubt took inspiration. For the first time, the push for reform wasn't coming from an elite of intellectuals – it was supported by what seemed to be a broader movement.

What made the regime even more nervous were the calls that were soon made on Facebook for a 'day of anger' to take place in Riyadh on 11 March 2011. One of the most active pages in supporting the call was that of the Free Youth Coalition (*i'tilaf al-shabab al-ahrar*), a hitherto unknown group.[44] The call got extra publicity when, on 4 March, a young man called Muhammad al-Wad'ani uploaded a video of himself calling for protest – before being arrested (the video of his arrest, while carrying a sign against the regime in front of al-Rajhi mosque in Riyadh, was also widely circulated[45]). The rhetoric behind the call was ambiguous, as can be seen from the messages posted on the Free Youth Coalition's page: some demanded a reform of the Saudi state, in a language similar to that of the above-mentioned petitions, while others called for a revolution. In an apparent attempt to frame the event in the language of Islam, some of its virtual proponents soon started referring to it as 'thawrat Hunayn' ('the Hunayn revolution'), in reference to the battle of Hunayn in which the Prophet Muhammad had defeated the Hawazin tribe in 630 in the wake of the Muslim conquest of Mecca.[46]

All this took place as Shiite protests, inspired by the uprising in neighbouring Bahrain, had been happening – and growing in size – in the Eastern Province since 17 February. Their leaders – mainly young people independent from all established Shiite groups – were

[43] One of the petition's coordinators tells how he called people one by one when he had a doubt to check that they were indeed who they pretended to be (interview with one of the coordinators of the petition, July 2012)
[44] For an interview with an alleged member of the Free Youth Coalition, see at *Li-madha fashalat da'awa al-tazahur yawm 11 mars?*, http://www.saudiwave.com/ar/2010-11-09-15-55-47/706------11--.html.
[45] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aef5f2gZKN8&feature=related.
[46] It is unclear why this particular battle was singled out here. It could simply be because of its importance, since it is one of the few explicitly mentioned in the Koran. However, a feature of this battle is that, according to the Shiite version of the story, Ali bin Abi Talib, seen by Shias as the first imam, played a decisive role in it. The choice of the name could thus have come from Shiite supporters of the protest movement on the Internet. A more conspiratorial – though not entirely impossible – explanation is that pro-government hackers started diffusing that name, in order to argue later that this was proof of a Shiite conspiracy behind the so-called 'day of anger' (see for instance Prince Khaled bin Talal's interview in which he makes that point, *Al-amir Khalid fi tasrih li mawqa' Lujayniyyat: Hunayn man alladhi wara'ha?*, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/lojainiatcom/QF4cINIbOYY/srnJpkNlf94J).

mobilizing through a number of Facebook pages, with names such as 'The Revolution of the Eastern province' (*thawrat al-mintaqa al-sharqiyya*). One issue first figured prominently on the activists' agenda: the demand for the release of the 'forgotten prisoners' (*al-sujana' al-mansiyun*), who had been detained without trial since the 1996 al-Khobar bombing, which the government blamed on Shiites. After mid-March, the rhetoric of protesters would become more radical, demanding genuine political reforms and, in some cases, the fall of the regime (Matthiesen 2012).

5. THE REGIME'S RESPONSE

The pressure on the regime was stronger than ever. The royal family responded by mobilizing all the resources at its disposal. Distribution was the first and most important part of the regime's counter-strategy. On 23 February, the king announced a package of about US$37 billion in aid to benefit the most vulnerable and/or potentially rebellious sectors of society: the young and the poor. Jobs were created, and subsidies for housing were made available. A similar announcement would be made on 18 March, with an even bigger package: US$93 billion, including more aid, job creation, extra pay for civil servants, etc. (Hertog 2011).

In addition to the carrot, the stick was also used. Some activists, including seven out of the ten founding members of the Islamic Umma Party, were detained, while others were threatened with arrest should they announce their support for the 'day of anger' or show up at the event. On 11 March, the police were in the streets in very large numbers, and checkpoints were set up to prevent anyone who dared to try from reaching the location where protests were purportedly going to take place. Saudi intelligence also seems to have been active on the Internet: according to activists, several Facebook pages were destroyed, while others were hacked.[47] One of the techniques apparently consisted in adding Shiite references to the content of pages supporting the 'day of anger', in order to create this impression that the activists involved were Shiites, not Sunnis. This was in line with the communication strategy followed by the regime: in all state media, it was claimed that all those attempts at 'destabilizing the Kingdom' were the result of an Iranian conspiracy. The fact that Shiite protests were simultaneously taking place in the Eastern Province was mentioned as a proof of this conspiracy – although the two movements had in fact been completely unconnected with each other.[48] Those attacks were successful not only in discrediting the 'day of anger', but also in precluding any subsequent rapprochement between the Sunni and Shiite oppositions since, in

[47] See *Li-madha fashalat da'awa al-tazahur yawm 11 mars?*, http://www.saudiwave.com/ar/2010-11-09-15-55-47/706------11--.html.
[48] On this dimension, see Lacroix (2014).

a context of heightened sectarianism, Sunni activists would not want to be seen as associated with Shiism or Iran (Al-Rasheed 2011).

At the same time, members of the official religious establishment were encouraged to take public positions in support of the monarchy. Mufti Abd al-Aziz Al al-Shaykh appeared on state TV to warn the population against any form of dissent, while the Kingdom's highest religious body, the Council of Senior Ulama, issued a fatwa explaining that 'there are legitimate ways for advice and reform that bring benefits and avoid evils, and writing petitions with the aim of intimidating and causing division … is not one of them', before adding that 'reform and advice should not be through demonstrations and other means that foster chaos and division in the community' and reaffirming that 'demonstrations are forbidden religiously'.[49]

Among the Kingdom's Sunni majority, the regime's response was largely successful. This can be measured by the fact that, on 11 March, no one showed up at the planned protest, except one previously unknown activist, Khaled al-Juhani, who spoke to the journalists who had been brought there by the Ministry of Information in an attempt to show them that no one would come – an act of defiance, filmed on video, which earned him both instant fame and two years in jail.[50]

An even more significant victory for the regime was that, in the days preceding the 'day of anger', it managed to, at least implicitly, earn the support of most of the Kingdom's leading Islamist figures – some of whom had weeks before supported the calls for reform. The only non-virtual group to back the call for protest was the Islamic Umma Party.[51] The remaining Islamist leaders either remained silent, or vocally denounced the calls to demonstrate as did Nasir al-'Umar, who explained that, while demonstrations had been entirely legitimate in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, they should be rejected in Saudi Arabia because 'this is a country based on religion' where demonstrations 'would only benefit the enemies of God'.[52] The anonymous activists responded by publishing a study by the prominent Sahwa sheikh Sa'ud al-Funaysan, in which he defended the legitimacy of demonstrations as a means to pressure the rulers.[53] However, al-Funaysan came out to say that

[49] The statement can be found at http://www.almouazeen.com/archive/index.php/t-39210.html; see also 'Saudi Clerics Slam Protest Calls', AFP, 6 March 2011.
[50] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxinAxWxXo8.
[51] *Risala min hizb al-umma al-islami ila shabab 11 mars*, http://www.islamicommaparty.com/Portals/Content/?info=TlRJd0psTjFZbEJoWjJVbU1TWmhjbUk9K3U=.jsp.
[52] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RQrsiMUhTs.
[53] Sa'ud al-Funaysan, *Nazarat shar'iyya … fi wasa'il al-taghyir al-'asriyya*, http://taseel.com/display/pub/default.aspx?id=881&mot=1.

his study was purely theoretical and did not apply in the current Saudi situation.[54]

The Islamist leaders, it seems, were not willing to take the risk of falling out with the regime. This certainly had to do with the threat of repression. Yet it also seems that some bargaining between the regime and the Islamists took place. In exchange for their support, Islamist leaders were promised extra funding for the Kingdom's religious institutions – and indeed, as part of the second package announced by King Abdallah on 18 March, religious institutions received about US$1.2 billion. This was especially important for the *jama'at* – which constitute the Islamist movement's most organized part – since they use those institutions as their bases. This episode resembled what happened in 1993–4, during a previous phase of Islamist dissent in Saudi Arabia. Around those years, the *jama'at* decided to withdraw their support from the movement of protest that had started in the late 1980s, and had escalated in the wake of the Gulf War (Lacroix 2011). Their calculation was simple: as soon as they believed the costs of supporting protest were higher than the expected benefits, they sided with the government. The same scenario was followed in March 2011, though after a much briefer phase of dissent.

6. RECREATING A MOMENTUM: THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

In the days following the failed 'day of anger', the state media rejoiced: by not showing up at the planned protest, the people had offered the King a silent *bay'a* ('oath of allegiance').[55] Although most of the well-known pro-reform activists had not officially supported the calls for protest, there was now a general feeling among them that the momentum for reform was being lost. In the following weeks, they would strive to recreate this momentum.

The regime's strength, according to many of the activists, was that it ruled over a divided society. Islamists of different strains and liberals kept on fighting each other over society-related issues (the issue of women being the most symbolic, and polarizing, of them), which allowed the royal family to position itself as arbitrator between the competing factions, siding now with the liberals, now with the Islamists, while convincing each of the two sides that the regime's resilience was the best protection against the threat represented by the other.[56] This policy was also meant to keep the debate at an infra-political level, allowing the

[54] See an interview with Sa'ud al-Funaysan, http://www.slaati.com/inf/news-action-show-id-35274.htm.
[55] *Al-sa'udiyya … yawm al-bay'a al-samita*, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 12 March 2011
[56] The term *idarat al-sira'* (managing the conflict') is sometimes used by activists to describe this government technique. This technique shares certain features with what scholars have termed 'competitive authoritarianism', though without the electoral dimension present in other contexts (elections in Saudi Arabia are limited to the municipal level and, after they became politicized in 2005, the government enforced their non-political character).

regime to escape criticism.

The rise from the early 2000s of the constitutional reformist movement, which brought together individuals of Islamist and liberal backgrounds on a shared political platform, was aimed at avoiding that trap. Yet constitutional reformists had not managed to create a durable coalition. What was needed, the activists thought, was an issue around which a wider consensus could be formed.

Since 2007–8, the defence of political prisoners in Saudi Arabia had become more and more central in the discourse of the pro-reform activists. The SCPRA and Walid Abu al-Khayr's Monitor of Human Rights were among the first to highlight the issue. After March 2011, the defence of political prisoners imposed itself as the new 'master frame' that Saudi activists adopted. The strategy behind this shift was simple. If by 'political prisoner' one means any individual detained for political reasons and without any formal charges, then the Kingdom has between several thousand and thirty thousand political prisoners.[57] Most of them are Sunni Islamists suspected of supporting al-Qaeda and generally arrested after the group started perpetrating attacks in the Kingdom in 2003, but among them are also constitutional reformists and Shiite activists. In other words, this is an issue of concern for all points on the political spectrum. It is also an issue for which there exists a core group of people who are easy to mobilize: the prisoners' relatives, some of whom, after years of waiting, are ready to do whatever it takes to get their loved ones back.

Twitter quickly became the means through which most of the mobilization for and communication around political prisoners took place. Everyday, new hashtags appeared, soon quoted by hundreds. Mostly, they featured the name of a person in detention or recently arrested. Relatives of prisoners opened accounts on which they tweeted about their ordeal – soon to be re-tweeted by an increasingly large crowd of sympathizers. Accounts specializing in news about Saudi political prisoners were even created, such as @e3teqal ('arrest'), which in early 2014 had more than 100,000 followers. Soon, prominent figures, among them a significant number of Islamists, started tweeting about the issue: Yusuf al-Ahmad, Ibrahim al-Sikran, Muhammad al-Ahmari, Abdallah al-Hamid and many others. On 16 March 2013, Salman al-'Awda tweeted an open letter to the government in which he said he demanded the release – or fair trial – of all the detainees and warned the government of dire consequences

[57] Independent Saudi human rights organization, such as the SCPRA, claim political prisoners number as many as thirty thousand. On the government side, the figure quoted is generally several thousands (although the government obviously rejects the term 'political prisoner' and refers to them as 'terrorists' and/or 'criminals').

should the situation continue as it was.[58] 'People here, like people around the world, have demands, longings and rights, and they will not remain silent forever when they are denied all or some of them', al-'Awda said. 'When one becomes hopeless, you can expect anything from them.'[59] Soon, the hashtag 'Salman al-'Awda's letter represents me' (*Khitab Salman al-'Awda yumaththilni*) became one of the most widely used among Saudi tweeters, despite attempts by pro-government accounts to popularize the counter-hashtag 'Salman al-'Awda's letter does not represent me' (*Khitab Salman al-'Awda la yumaththilni*).

Despite the fact that it now relied on social networks, this form of activism was not new in itself: petitions and open letters demanding reforms and rights had been issued by Saudi opposition figures for years. Yet what made the mobilization in defence of political prisoners different – and more threatening – was that it was not limited to this, but included more spectacular elements such as street demonstrations and sit-ins in front of symbolic places: the Ministry of Interior, the prisons, the governorates or the branches of the government-sponsored human rights association. Typically, those would involve tens of people, rarely more. Still, this was largely unprecedented in a country where – with the exception of Shiite areas – there is almost no culture of street protest.[60] In some cases, activists organized 'flash-mob' types of demonstrations, reminiscent of protests in Syria at the beginning of the uprising: people would show up at a certain location at night, shout slogans for a few minutes while filming the event, and then run away before the police arrived. The video would then be uploaded to YouTube. This seems to have had a snowball effect: throughout 2012 and 2013, tens of such protests were held.[61] In the first months of 2013, the conservative city of Burayda became one of the hot spots of those demonstrations. One increasingly popular slogan was 'The people want to free the prisons' (*al-sha'b yurid tahrir al-sujun*). One could sometimes also hear 'The people want the implementation of the law' (*al-sha'b yurid tatbiq al-nizam*), which stresses that the detention of people for years without trial is a violation of the Saudi legal system itself. In both cases, the reference to the slogans of the Arab Spring was obvious: 'the people want', *al-nizam* (here, the 'law' – but the same word also means the 'regime'). Some of the images available on YouTube show protesters burning pictures of the current minister of interior, Muhammad bin Nayef – a clear sign that parts at

[58] The tweets are available at http://twitmail.com/email/78010944/6.
[59] For a translation of the open letter, see http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2013/3/salman-open-letter
[60] The 1994 demonstration known as the 'intifada of Burayda', which represented the peak of the post-Gulf War movement of protest, is one exception. Yet this type of gathering was extremely rare in Sunni areas until the past few years.
[61] Many of the videos can be seen on the YouTube account 'e3teqal', linked to the Twitter account mentioned above: http://www.youtube.com/user/e3teqal?feature=watch.

least of the movement have become increasingly radical.[62] It is noteworthy that women (generally the wives or daughters of prisoners) featured prominently in many of those gatherings. This irruption of women, though covered in abayas and full-face veils, in the sphere of public activism represented a significant novelty for Islamists. Some of those women even emerged as leaders and gained fame within the movement, such as Burayda's Rima al-Juraysh.[63]

When the police intervened, this generally led to arrests. Several prominent activists were among the detained, in particular Muhammad al-Bijadi, a co-founder of the SCPRA and one of the first Saudis to have advocated the organization of sit-ins to demand the release of political prisoners.[64] He was arrested on 21 March 2011 for taking part in a gathering in front of the Ministry of Interior and was sentenced to four years in prison. Relatives of the prisoners were also regularly arrested, though they would generally not be prosecuted and would be released after a few days. The largest number of arrests to date took place in Burayda on 4 March 2013, during what became known as the 'Burayda sit-in' (*i'tisam Burayda*): there, the police arrested 176 people, including 15 women and several children.

However, those arrests ran the risk of being largely counterproductive for the regime, especially when they targeted women. Knowing the outrage this would provoke in a conservative society, the activists produced a number of videos featuring some of those women telling how they were mistreated – and in some cases beaten up – by the police.[65] This sparked a strong wave of criticism on Twitter with the hashtag 'except the women' (*illa al-nisa'*),[66] and more demonstrations were organized 'in support of the women of Burayda'.

7. THE *MUHTASIBUN*: UNEASY ALLIES

The activists who had engineered the 'recentring' of the Saudi pro-reform movement around the issue of political prisoners had thus been partly successful. A new momentum had been created, and the activists had apparently managed to remobilize part of the Islamist camp around their cause. However, looking at who exactly those Islamists were who most vocally spoke in defence of the political prisoners, a different impression emerges: the *jama'at* – the

[62] See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4sC1PpMKdM.
[63] Rima al-Juraysh's husband was arrested in 2004. She has been actively demanding his release since 2007 and has been detained at least twice, in 2012 and 2013.
[64] See the International Federation for Human Rights report on the Saudi government pressures on al-Bejadi as early as 2009: http://www.fidh.org/Nouvel-articleSAU-001-0809-OBS-117.
[65] See for instance *jara'im al-dakhiliyya 'ala hara'ir Burayda* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5-G1HylU0Q); in another video, a woman recounts how Rima al-Juraysh was allegedly tortured by the police (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMndG4fQ7Es) .
[66] This happened after a video by Ibrahim al-Sikran called 'Except the Women', denouncing the arrest of women by the authorities, was widely circulated.

most structured part of the Islamist movement – had, again, remained silent. The Islamists who became most involved were independents. Some of them were relatively 'centrist' figures such as Salman al-'Awda. Others were much more radical, and came from a loose movement that had been gaining ground in the field of Islamic activism since the mid-2000s: the *muhtasibun*, or proponents of *hisba*.

The principle of *hisba*, which is synonymous with that of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (*al-'amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar*), designates the duty of Muslims to encourage their fellow believers to abide by the teachings of Islam and reprimand those who do not do so. This principle is central in Salafi doctrine (Cook 2001). Because it can obviously have subversive implications if it is used to challenge the authorities, the modern Saudi state has striven to control it. This is why in 1926 King Abd al-Aziz created a 'committee for commanding right and forbidding wrong' – sometimes referred to as the 'Saudi religious police' – which was implicitly meant to be the only legitimate enforcer of the principle of *hisba* (Lacroix 2011). On several occasions, however, this unwritten rule was violated by groups that sought to reprivatize the concept of *hisba*, by claiming it for themselves. They sometimes also promoted a more political understanding of the concept. It is through the principle of *hisba* that both al-Jama'a al-Salafiyya al-Muhtasiba (the Salafi group which practises *hisba*), a radicalized faction of which would storm the Grand Mosque of Mecca in 1979, and the initiators of the Sahwa's intifada justified their activism (Lacroix 2011).

The figure of the *muhtasib* (he who practises *hisba*) therefore appears regularly in modern Saudi history. Since the mid-2000s, a new wave of *muhtasibun* has started to gain visibility. It was initiated by a number of Salafi sheikhs whose distinguishing feature was that they did not belong to any of the established *jama'at*, and could therefore act independently. Among them were older sheikhs like Fahd al-Qadi and Muhammad al-Farraj, and younger ones such as Yusuf al-Ahmad, born in 1968 and a professor of shari'a at Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud university, known to some of his followers as 'the sheikh of the *muhtasibun*' (*sheikh al-muhtasibin*) or the 'lion of *hisba*' (*asad al-hisba*). Some sheikhs close to the Sururi *jama'a*, such as Muhammad al-Habdan or Abd al-Rahman al-Mahmud, would sometimes publish statements in support of their actions – but they would not generally take part in them.[67] Soon, the *muhtasibun* became extremely popular among young Islamists, attracting hundreds of them.

[67] See for instance *bayan hawla ma'rad al-Riyad al-duwali li-l-kitab*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/161837 (signed by Abd al-Rahman al-Mahmud and Abd al-Aziz Al Abd al-Latif, among others).

The initial focus of the *muhtasibun* was the preservation of social morality, which they saw as threatened by Westernization and liberalization. Because they considered that the 'religious police' was not doing its job with sufficient zeal, they thought what was needed was to 'revive the culture of *hisba*' and form groups of volunteer vigilantes. In a course on 'the rules of *hisba*', Yusuf al-Ahmad describes the different possible forms of *hisba*. The first is *hisba* 'on the ground' (*maydaniyya*), when the *muhtasib* sees someone doing something blameworthy, for instance a shop owner selling tobacco or a woman not properly veiled. The *muhtasib* must tell him or her (in the case of a woman, without looking at her) that he or she is doing something wrong, and what the proper Islamic ruling on the matter is. Other forms of *hisba* include *hisba* 'through writing ' (*bi-l-kitaba*), for instance by publishing articles or printing pamphlets denouncing 'immoral' actions; 'through the Internet', by writing on forums or sending private emails; and finally, in what has become the most controversial form of *hisba*, 'through visits' (*bi-l-ziyara*). In this case, the *muhtasib* and a group of his followers pay a visit to a specific place where they suspect 'immoral behaviour' may be taking place and practise *hisba* there.[68] The first occurrences of this to be widely reported in the media took place at performances of plays: in 2006, at Al-Yamama university in Riyadh;[69] and in 2009, at the King Fahd Cultural Centre in Riyadh.[70] In the first case, the intervention of the *muhtasibun* even provoked a fistfight.[71] Every time, the complaints of the *muhtasibun* were the same: that there was no proper gender segregation in the theatre, that the play contained music, and/or that the theme of the play was 'against Islam'. Two events with high symbolic value for the regime would also, year after year, become the prime target of the *muhtasibun*: the Janadriyya festival of heritage and culture, and the Riyadh Book Fair.[72] Again, the absence of proper gender segregation was one of the main criticisms of the *muhtasibun* – in addition to the fact that the book fair sold a surprisingly wide range of books, including some openly critical of Salafism and advocating other Islamic traditions. In several occasions, some of the *muhtasibun* were arrested during their 'visits',[73] while the Ministry of Media and Culture declared that the authorities were taking 'strict measures' to prevent this kind of *hisba* from

[68] Yusuf al-Ahmad, *qawa'id fi-l-ihtisab*, http://ar.islamway.net/lesson/66021.
[69] http://www.buraydahcity.net/vb/archive/index.php/t-140334.html
[70] http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/02/06/article407676.html
[71] The video, which was widely circulated at the time, can still be seen on Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alROrb3BmJo.
[72] See for instance http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/02/139940.html.
[73] For instance, http://almoslim.net/node/160600; http://www.buraydhnews.com/news.php?action=show&id=4708.

taking place.[74] In March 2013, the head of the religious police had to reaffirm that 'the door of *ihtisab* [i.e. the practice of *hisba*] has been closed once and for all',[75] meaning that this obligation is to be carried out exclusively by the body he represents.

A central debate among the *muhtasibun* and their sympathizers was, from the start, whether their criticism was to remain exclusively directed at society or whether it should also target the authorities. At the beginning, it seems they adopted a cautious approach. From 2007 onwards, for instance, Yusuf al-Ahmad sent letters to the authorities demanding the release of imprisoned sheikhs – but those were not made public.[76] Increasingly, however, the *muhtasibun* became more and more political. This was a natural development: although their early actions consisted in denouncing social practices they considered un-Islamic, this pitted them against the royal family, who sponsored – or at least tolerated – those practices. After 2011, the *muhtasibun* became less and less reluctant to challenge the authorities openly. During one famous incident, at the 2011 Riyadh Book Fair, the *muhtasibun* harassed the Minister of Media and Culture, asking him to remove certain books on display and to put the state's media and culture policies 'in conformity with Islam'.[77]

A government measure that sparked considerable anger on the part of the *muhtasibun* (and conservatives in general[78]), and contributed to further politicize them, was the decision to encourage women to work as cashiers, beginning with lingerie stores.[79] This prompted the *muhtasibun* to cross a red line by organizing on 15 December 2012 a visit of tens of them – a veritable show of force – to the Ministry of Labour, where they requested to see the minister.[80] In an unprecedented move, on 20 and 29 January 2013, tens of *muhtasibun* staged protests in front of the royal court.[81] In a statement signed by seven of the movement's leading sheikhs, including Fahd al-Qadi, they explained that they protested against the policies of social

[74] *Al-thaqafa wa-l-i'lam: ijra'at sarima fi ma'rad al-kitab amam al-ihtisab al-'ashwa'i*, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 3 March 2012
[75] *Abd al-Latif Al al-Shaykh: Bab al-ihtisab ughliq tamaman*, http://www.alriyadh.com/2013/03/13/article817086.html.
[76] See Ibrahim al-Sikran, *al-mubadarat al-ihtisabiyya: Yusuf al-Ahmad namudhajan*, http://www.saaid.net/Doat/alsakran/34.htm.
[77] *Muhtasibun yuthiruna shaghaban bi ma'rad al-kitab*, 2 March 2011, http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/02/139940.html .
[78] Even the Council of Senior Ulama, in a rare move, denounced the government decision by issuing a fatwa forbidding women to work as cashiers: http://saudiwoman.me/2010/11/01/another-day-another-misogynist-fatwa.
[79] This has now reached other sectors, most recently commercial pharmacies: http://arabnews.com/commercial-pharmacies-open-door-female-staff.
[80] *Wafd min al-muhtasibin yunaqish wazir al-'amal*, http://www.daoo.org/dim/news.php?action=show&id=50141.
[81] 'Clerics Protest Outside the Royal Court', 15 January 2013, http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2013/1/clerics-protest-royal-court.

liberalization – especially on women's issues – pursued by the regime.[82] Some of them were arrested.[83]

The politicization of the *muhtasibun* led to one surprising development in early 2011: the rapprochement between some of them and the rights activists campaigning for the Kingdom's political prisoners. By June 2011, a number of *muhtasibun* figures had become among the loudest voices in the campaign for prisoners' rights. Among them was Ibrahim al-Sikran and the 'sheikh of the *muhtasibun*', Yusuf al-Ahmad. Both of them recorded a number of video speeches in which they defended the cause of political prisoners, calling it 'the most serious issue in Saudi Arabia today'.[84] In his third speech on 7 July 2011, in the wake of the arrest of women who had participated in a protest in front of the Ministry of Interior, Yusuf al-Ahmad used particularly strong language, addressing the royal family in the following terms: 'I tell the custodian of the two holy places, the minister of interior and Muhammad bin Nayef: … fear God for your people, fear God for the prisoners! … Pay attention to your people, pay attention to the boat before it drowns!'[85] The next day, Yusuf al-Ahmad was arrested, generating wide support on the social media. On 11 April 2012, al-Ahmad was sentenced to five years in prison, prompting another wave of support. He would, however, be freed by royal decree on 12 November 2012.[86]

The rapprochement that had taken place between the rights activists and constitutional reformists, on the one hand, and the *muhtasibun*, on the other hand, was extremely worrying for the royal family. True, the authorities had managed to keep the *jama'at* under control, making sure the most organized part of the Sahwa would not participate in any anti-government action. Despite being 'free electrons', however, the *muhtasibun* were popular, especially among the younger Islamists.

Arresting al-Ahmad did not stop the rapprochement. Quite the contrary happened instead: in a rare gesture of trans-ideological solidarity, numerous constitutional reformists and young Twitter activists replaced their pictures with that of al-Ahmad. In the pantheon of imprisoned 'reformist heroes', Yusuf al-Ahmad – a man with extremely conservative views – had joined the liberal Muhammad al-Bijadi. Young Saudi activists organized Twitter

[82] *Al-mashayikh wa-l-a'yan yasdurun bayanan hawla ziyaratihim li-l-diwan al-maliki*, http://www.twasul.info/index.php/local/item/21167-لـ درة-زيـ ارتـ هم-حول-بياناًـيـ صدرون-جدة-مـ شايـ خ-الـ عروس#.UZmMZL84Zz_.

[83] 'Saudi Clerics Arrested Outside the Royal Court', 29 January 2013, http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2013/1/king-appears-clerics-arrested.

[84] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ2NBDBm0B4.

[85] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqmpInlVsy0.

[86] Yusuf al-Ahmad has, since his release, become less vocal in his criticism of government policies.

campaigns in support of al-Ahmad, asking people to tweet and re-tweet the hashtag 'al-Ahmad'. This was so successful that, in one case, 'al-Ahmad' became the fourth most 'trending' word on the social network at a global level.[87]

8. HAMZA KASHGARI: BACK TO BASICS

What did, however, put a considerable strain on the fragile consensus that had emerged around the issue of political prisoners was a major scandal that took place in February 2012 around a young man called Hamza Kashgari. Born in 1989 and a resident of the city of Jeddah, Hamza Kashgari's profile was in many ways quite typical of the new political generation on the rise in Saudi Arabia: like many Saudis of his age, he was socialized among Sahwa circles (in his case, the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood), before entering a period of introspection after his teenage years which led him to break away from the Sahwa and to start reading from a wide array of sources.[88] He would later become part of a group of young Hejazis with a strong interest in philosophy, which they met to discuss at a café in Jeddah called *al-Jusur* ('Bridges'). On 4 February 2012, on the occasion of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*), Hamza Kashgari wrote a poem on his Twitter account in which addressed Prophet Muhammad as an equal who can be criticized, and for whom he 'shall not pray'.[89]

Those words sparked outraged among Saudi Islamists, who considered them as an instance of pure blasphemy. As soon as he understood the danger of the situation, Kashgari removed the tweets and issued an apology, yet it was too late: Twitter and Facebook were already full of messages calling for him to be punished for having 'insulted the Prophet'. In a sermon pronounced the next day, Nasir al-'Umar even wept and begged for Kashgari to receive the Islamic punishment for apostasy – meaning death – in order to prevent the Umma from suffering a collective punishment.[90] The storm lasted for a few days, during which Kashgari managed to leave the country and travel to Malaysia. On 9 February, he was arrested there at the request of the Saudi government and extradited to Riyadh a few days later.

This did not stop the debate around Kashgari. True, very few people defended him[91] – to most Saudis, it was obvious that he had crossed the line and that his statements had to be

[87] 'Saudi Arabia: Tweets for Jailed Saudi Activist Draw Global Attention', 16 March 2012, http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/03/16/saudi-arabia-twitter-users-join-forces-to-create-awareness-about-jailed-activist/.
[88] Interview with Yusuf al-Dayni, April 2012.
[89] For more on Kashgari's tweets, see http://www.pri.org/stories/2012-02-13/saudi-journalist-facing-trial-tweets-about-prophet-muhammad.
[90] The video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qB5I5V099BI.
[91] There was one statement in support of Kashgari, but very few of the signatories were Saudi (*muthaqqafun yatadamanun ma' al-katib al-sa'udi Hamza Kashgari*, http://www.free-hamza.com/?p=435).

denounced. Yet, while the most intransigent Islamists – the Sururis and the *muhtasibun*, in particular – insisted that a harsh punishment was needed, others argued that since Kashgari had apologized and repented, he should be cleared.[92] Again, this revealed the same generational split discussed earlier in this paper: those who were the most willing to find excuses for him were the younger Saudis, those who were of Kashgari's generation and to some degree understood his quest for intellectual independence, even while strongly rejecting his conclusions. Two thousand six hundred of them – men and women – went so far as to sign a petition in which they openly denounced the 'paternalistic guardianship' exerted over the young by the religious sheikhs, claiming instead 'their right to exert their own judgement'.[93] The Kashgari affair also provoked considerable debates within the *jama'at*, where the young members were growing increasingly rebellious vis-à-vis the decisions of their leaders. Most of those debates took place behind closed doors. Yet, in an extremely rare move, forty young Saudis with a Sahwa background – some of them affiliated or close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood – wrote a petition in which they explicitly denounced the excesses of their sheikhs during the Hamza Kashgari affair.[94]

During the few weeks that followed Kashgari's arrest, a number of Islamists started arguing that the problem was much larger than just Kashgari. The Kashgari phenomenon, they claimed, was nothing but the natural consequence of the disproportionate influence liberals had managed to exert in Saudi Arabia. Islamists started posting articles and videos on YouTube with names such as 'Hamza Kashgari, the Student of the School of Turki al-Hamad and Abdallah Hamid al-Din',[95] two prominent liberal figures. A prominent Sururi preacher, Khadar bin Sanad, explained on Twitter and on TV shows that Kashgari was part of a mysterious atheist body named 'the Kaynuna organization' after a book of existentialist philosophy called *al-Kaynuna al-mutanaghima* (*The Harmonious Being*) by Hamid al-Din.[96] In mid-March 2012, tens of Jeddah ulama published a joint statement denouncing the growing presence of places of 'deviation and scepticism' under the pretext of 'culture or thought or

[92] *Qadiyyat Kashgari fi-l-mudawwanat: al-hujum 'alayhi mubarraran lakinnahu dakhal hayyiz sira' al-tayyarat*, http://www.an7a.com/63459

[93] *Bayan al-shabab al-sa'udi*, http://youthpetition.wordpress.com.

[94] *Khitab hawla tada'iyat qadiyyat Hamza*, http://islamtoday.net/albasheer/artshow-12-163609.htm. This is the second instance in which youths close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood publicly rebelled against their elders. The first happened in 2004–5, when some young Saudi Brothers created a website called al-Ahrar ('the free ones'), www.ala7rar.net, in which they openly questioned the ideas and strategy of their *jama'a*. The website was closed a few years later as a result of pressures from senior Saudi Brotherhood figures.

[95] *Hamza Kashgari tilmidh madrasat Turki al-Hamad wa Abdallah Hamid al-Din*, http://wa3yan.com/archives/5006.

[96] See the tweets by Khadar bin Sanad (@Khader_sanad) on 13 February 2012. All there was to the story, it seems, was that Hamid al-Din had organized a number of debates around his book at al-Jusur café (see for instance Abdallah Hamid al-Din, *Liqa'at al-kaynuna al-mutanaghima*, al-Hayat, 23 December 2011).

human rights', which had contributed to giving rise to phenomena such as that of Kashgari.[97] A few months later, a strongly worded statement signed by 105 sheikhs – Sururis as well as *muhtasibun* such as Fahd al-Qadi – warned of a wave of atheism threatening the 'land of the two holy places' and demanded that the authorities take decisive measures against it, in particular by arresting and trying all those responsible for it.[98]

9. CONCLUSION

What appears, therefore, is that, after the political momentum of 2011, the Kashgari case somehow brought the Saudi public sphere back to 'business as usual'. On the one hand, the conservatives were denouncing the liberals and asking for the authorities to intervene to curb their influence – which they did by arresting Kashgari[99] and, later, in June and December 2012, liberal blogger Ra'if Badawi and prominent liberal writer Turki al-Hamad, both also accused of blasphemy.[100] On the other hand, the liberals were praising the 'reformist moves' of King Abdallah, who, among other symbolic gestures, had given women the right to vote for municipal elections from 2015, and appointed thirty women to the consultative council – achievements many of the liberals saw as landmark victories against the Islamists. This was the same balancing act the Saudi monarchy had been performing for decades, and which had contributed to guarantee the regime's resilience. And it was, apparently, still working very well.

Yet the political momentum has far from completely disappeared. Protests have continued not only in the Shiite villages of the Eastern Province but also, as part of the campaign for the release of political prisoners, in the cities of Najd and Hijaz. In 2012, there were even instances of protests on several university campuses – an unprecedented development, even if the demands were related to study conditions and did not carry a broader political message. In addition, the *muhtasibun* have persisted on their path to politicization, organizing several more protests in front of the royal palace.[101] And some of the most prominent Islamist and reformist figures have persisted in challenging the regime, as did

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[97] *Bayan 'ulama' wa du'a Jidda 'an mahadin al-inhiraf wa-l-tashkik*, www.lojainiat.com/main/Content/بيان-جدة-عن-محاضن-انحراف-الالحاد-والشك

[98] *Bayan hawla mawjat al-ilhad fi bilad al-haramayn*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/166284.

[99] Kashgari was quietly released in October 2013.

[100] Ra'if Badawi was sentenced to seven years in jail and 600 lashes in 2013; Turki al-Hamad was released in June 2013

[101] For instance, in October 2013: http://www.onaizatoday.com/news-action-show-id-5588.htm. This protest is particularly significant because of the participation of Sahwa figures close to the Sururis, such as Nasir al-'Umar and Abd al-Rahman al-Mahmud.

Salman al-'Awda on numerous occasions in 2012 and 2013.[102] In the summer of 2013, the official Saudi backing of the Egyptian military's forceful removal of President Muhammad Morsi and the ensuing repression of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood prompted a wave of criticism among the Sahwa (Lynch 2013). Almost all of its major sheikhs made statements or signed petitions denouncing the 'coup'. And while some, like Nasir al-'Umar, stuck to pure religious rhetoric, arguing that it is 'forbidden to rebel against a Muslim ruler' and that what happens in Egypt is 'a struggle between the Islamic project and the Westernizing project opposed to Islam',[103] others framed their arguments in more or less explicit terms as a defence of electoral democracy. On 8 August 2013, for instance, fifty-six sheikhs, some of them known to be close to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, condemned the 'removal of a legitimately elected president' and a violation of 'the will of the people'.[104] They added: 'We express our opposition and surprise at the path taken by some countries who have given recognition to the coup, … thereby taking part in committing a sin and an aggression forbidden by the laws of Islam – and there will be negative consequences for everyone if Egypt enters a state of chaos and civil war.'[105] Though 'some countries' certainly includes the United States and Europe, the statement was also meant as a message to Saudi rulers.

The resilience of dissent may explain why the Saudi regime has decided to take harsher measures to silence the remaining critical voices: after the constitutional reformists arrested in 2007 were sentenced to long periods of jail in November 2011 (mostly between fifteen and twenty-five years), the leaders of the SCPRA were put on trial. Two of them, Muhammad al-Qahtani and Abdallah al-Hamid, were condemned in February 2013 to ten years in prison. Walid Abu al-Khayr has also been put on trial, and the founders of a more recent human rights organization, Union for Human Rights (*al-ittihad li-huquq al-insan*),[106] have been interrogated. In the wake of their denunciation of Saudi Arabia's support for the military takeover in Egypt, the prominent Sahwa sheikh Muhammad al-'Arifi and the Islamist intellectual Muhsin al-'Awaji were also briefly detained. Al-'Arifi was then put on a travel

[102] In addition to the open letter mentioned above, another sign of this renewed pro-reform activism on the part of al-'Awda is a video called 'Where Did You Get This?' (*min ayna lak hadha*?): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InqD2edqb4U.
[103] *Bayan hawla ahdath masr*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/186224?page=2.
[104] Some of the same sheikhs, along with Sururi figures, issued another statement on 13 January 2014 criticizing in very harsh terms Egypt's largest Salafi party, Hizb al-Nur, which supported the army's 'coup' against Morsi and by doing so 'harmed the interests of Islam and Muslims, in Egypt and outside' (*Bayan hawla al-mawaqif al-siyasiyya li-Hizb al-Nur*, http://www.almoslim.net/node/198580?page=1). This is unprecedented since, until that statement, the Sahwa had taken no position on the new Salafi parties created in Egypt and elsewhere in the wake of the Arab Spring.
[105] *Bayan al-'ulama' al-sa'udiyyin hawla ahdath masr*, http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/21f77113-6847-48a5-9d59-9ca704bdc1e2.
[106] http://www.unionrights.net.

ban.

The extent of the support in the Kingdom for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after Morsi's removal finally led the monarchy to adopt a more drastic measure: on 4 February 2014, a royal decree announced that 'belonging to intellectual or religious trends or groups that are extremist or categorized as terrorist at the local, regional or international level, as well as supporting them, or showing sympathy for their ideas and methods in whichever way, or expressing support for them through whichever means, or offering them financial or moral support, or inciting others to do any of this or promoting any such actions in word or writing' will be punished by a prison sentence 'of no less than three years and no more than twenty years'.[107] This decision thus included both al-Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, since the Egyptian government declared the Muslim Brotherhood 'a terrorist organization' on 25 December 2013. In theory, even using the 'four-finger' Rabaa sign on a Twitter profile – something extremely common among Saudi tweeters in the autumn of 2013 – could now be a cause for arrest. More importantly, this decision is meant as an impending threat to all organized political activism in the Kingdom – especially any coming from the Sahwa. On 7 March 2014, the Saudi government decided to make things even more clear by explicitly naming the Muslim Brotherhood, and all organizations that 'resemble it in thought or in word', as terrorist organizations, along with more obvious suspects such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.[108]

A parallel development is the apparent willingness of Saudi authorities to exert a stricter control on social networks, starting with Twitter, which is now used by 6 million to 8 million Saudis, depending on estimates.[109] The Saudi government blocked the web-based communication platform Viber in June 2013, and there are reports that WhatsApp and Skype could be next.[110]

Yet it may be difficult for the Saudi government, in the long term, to limit its response to repression and patronage as it did in the past. What has happened since the start of the Arab Spring is more than the result of the activism of a limited number of individuals whose arrest

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[107] *Al-Sa'udiyya: Amr maliki yuharrim al-intima' ila tayyarat mutatarrifa*, http://alhayat.com/Details/599682.
[108] *Nass qarar al-sa'udiyya bi-idraj al-ikhwan 'jama'a irhabiyya'*, al-Masriyyun, 7 March 2014, http://almesryoon.com/السياسي-407713/نشر ذ-نص ذ-قرار ة-سعودية الدراإ بإدرج جماعة-الإخوان-جماعة إرهابية. For an analysis of this, see Stéphane Lacroix, 'Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament', http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament.
[109] See for instance 'Saudi Arabia "May End" Twitter User anonymity', http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/03/201333103422235646.html.
[110] 'Saudi Arabia Plans to Block WhatsApp Within Weeks: Report', http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/16/us-saudi-internet-idUSBRE95F04R20130616.

or silencing will solve every problem. Though the *jama'at* have remained staunchly supportive of the government, there has been a sizeable transformation in Saudi political discourse, in particular among the independent Islamists, who have become more likely to support political reform and to speak out on government abuses. This transformation also derives from structural social changes, which have led to the emergence of a new generation of Saudis who are more prone to making pro-rights demands, who are more independent from religious leaders (although they may themselves have Islamist leanings), and who have become used to talking about politics relatively freely. Though the royal family has undoubtedly won the first round of the game, it could therefore experience more challenges to its authority in the not-so-distant future.

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