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Saudi Arabia's Response to the Protests in 2011
Analysis of Authoritarian Regime Survival Strategies

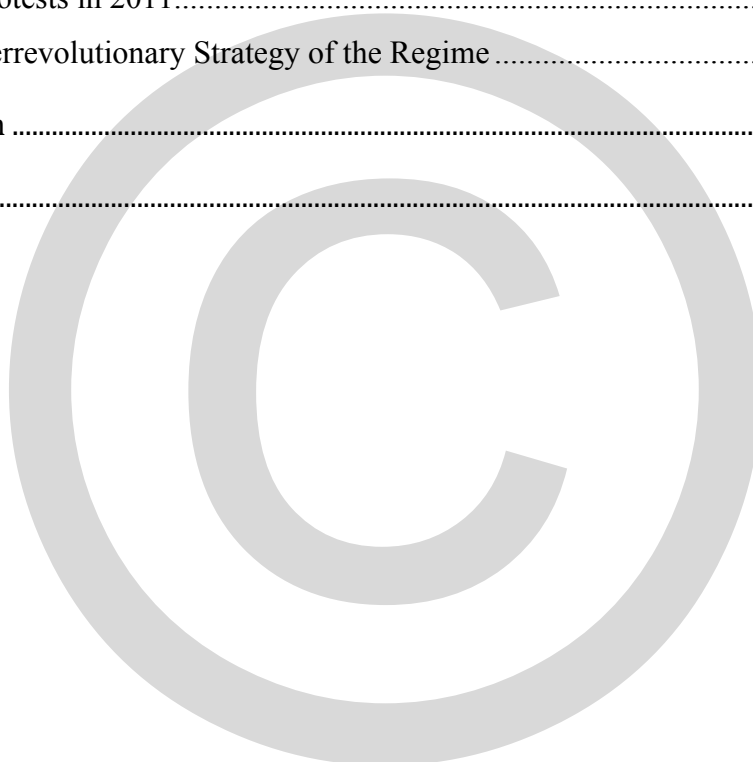


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1 Introduction

When talking about the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia is regularly cited as one of the Middle Eastern states that has not been shaken by a wave of popular uprising. However, those accounts miss the protest movement that developed in 2011 mainly in the Shi'a inhabited Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (Matthiesen 2013: viii).

Roughly 10 to 15 percent of Saudi Arabia's population adhere to the Shi'a branch of Islam. The majority of the Shi'a is settled in the Eastern Province of the country, the largest of the Saudi provinces where the large majority of its oil reserves are to be found (ICG 2005: 1). This strategic importance of the region contributes to the continuously tense relationship between the state and the Shi'a population. The Saudi Shi'a community until the present day faces economic and political discrimination as well as severe restrictions on their religious life. This treatment as "second class citizens" (Human Rights Watch 2009: 9) is in large parts grounded in the country's official religious tenet of Wahhabism, a strictly conservative strand of Sunni Islam, which regards the Shi'a as infidels and as guilty of heresy (Matthiesen 2013: 21-23; ICG 2005: 10). The prominent role of Wahhabi theology in Saudi Arabia – which goes back to the historic alliance between the Al Saud and the Wahhabi clan – leads to a state in which "anti-Shi'ism was built into the structure of political and religious authority and became pervasive in cultural and social institutions" (Jones 2009: 10). Over the last decades the relationship between the Saudi state and its Shi'a population has seen outbreaks of resistance as well as phases of strengthened dialogue and rapprochement (Jones 2009: 9-27). However, even considering some concessions made by the government, the Shi'a population is still experiencing a state of relative deprivation, which leads to a deep-seated dissatisfaction and creates potential for dissent (Human Rights Watch 2009: 9-14). In 2011, fueled by the uprisings that shook the region – particularly in neighboring Bahrain – protestors in the Eastern Province and sporadically also in other parts of the country took the streets to voice demands for human rights, political participation, the release of political prisoners, and an end of anti-Shi'a discrimination.

Why did those protests receive such limited attention in the scholarly debate surrounding the Arab Spring? The paper at hand puts forward the claim that the

regime's choice of counterrevolutionary strategies acts as main variable in explaining Saudi Arabia's stability and survival, and therefore this lack of attention. Based on those observations the paper at hand aims to answer the following question:

How can the reaction of the Saudi Arabian government to the protests in 2011 be assessed within a framework of authoritarian regime survival strategies?

To answer this question, the paper will proceed as follows: In the first part, current literature on regime survival of authoritarian regimes will be reviewed and subsequently used to create a theoretical framework for the examination of strategies of regime survival. Based on this framework, the second part of the paper will then proceed to give a short overview of the main causes, the development of the protests and the regime's reaction as documented in the existing – mostly descriptive – literature on the uprising. Subsequently, the regime's counterrevolutionary strategy will be analyzed based on the categories outlined in the theoretical framework. As last step, the conclusion will offer a short overview of the key findings.

2 Strategies of Regime Survival in Authoritarian States

The following chapter serves to give an overview over current literature on the survival of authoritarian regimes in the Middle Eastern context, and to create a theoretical framework of authoritarian regime survival strategies that will guide the analysis of the chosen case study.

2.1 Literature review

In order to understand the current state of literature on authoritarian regime survival in the Middle East, it is necessary to go back to the scholarly debate during the 1990s, when the so-called *transition paradigm* dominated the field. Seeing a transition to democracy as inevitable, proponents of the paradigm attempted to identify any signs of democratization in the region (Valbjørn & Bank 2010: 184-186). Critics of this approach, such as Valbjørn & Bank (2010) denote it as “demo-crazy” (2010: 184) and point to a normativity-caused blindness towards empirical reality (2010: 188). Following the calls for a more realistic view, a strand of literature has developed which tries to approach the puzzle of “Arab exceptionalism” – the survival of authoritarian regime types which have been overthrown in other parts of the world –

by examining how political rule in authoritarian regimes in the Middle East is in fact organized and executed and how this accounts for regime survival (Valbjørn & Bank 2010: 191; Schlumberger 2007: 6-7). Four strands of literature are identified here.

The most prominent strand of literature on Middle Eastern regime stability is the rentier state theory, which argues that the countries' massive oil wealth allows them to refrain from taxing their populations but rather to distribute rents in exchange for political loyalty (most notably: Beblawi & Luciani 1987). Critics of the theory however point to the fact that the theory is neglecting a range of relevant factors, such as the impact of international oil price fluctuations and problems of relative deprivation (Abulof 2015; Schlumberger 2010).

Other authors have looked at the set-up of regimes in order to explain their stability – particularly concerning monarchies. Herb (1999) introduces the regime type of *dynastic monarchies* – controlled by ruling families – as best explanation for the survival of those regimes. Also looking at monarchies, Lucas (2004) points to the rulers' position as unifying force for society and the use of political liberalization as survival strategy in monarchical authoritarian regimes (Lucas 2004: 1124-114).

Another prominent argument is brought forward by scholars such as Josua & Edel (2014) and Bellin (2004), who see the use of coercion or repression as main reason for authoritarian regime stability in the Middle East. The literature on repression distinguishes between different forms of repression taking into account –among others – the means, the intended effects, and targets of repression.

Authors such as Schlumberger (2010), Albrecht & Schlumberger (2004) and Gerschewski (2013) however argue that repression alone cannot explain the survival of authoritarian regimes since stability is created through a combination of repression and legitimacy. While repression presents a useful strategy, particularly to re-stabilize critical situations, it is seen as too costly to maintain stability in the long run (Gerschewski 2013: 21). Therefore, authoritarian regimes need non-democratic sources of legitimacy. Schlumberger (2010) states religion, tradition, ideology, and welfare gains as main sources of such legitimacy. In the framework of legitimation strategies, different authors emphasize a range of subcategories: Heydemann (2007)

for example looks at social pacts between the rulers and the ruled and points to “the interaction of formal and informal modes of conflict resolution, bargaining, and coalition management” (Heydemann 2007: 26) in those regimes. Related to those modes of engaging the population, several scholars point to co-optation as another category linked to legitimacy of authoritarian regimes. While some scholars, such as Gerschweski (2013), present co-optation as separate category besides repression and legitimation, others classify it as a subset of legitimation strategies (Josua 2011).

2.2 Regime Survival Strategies

Based on the reviewed literature, the paper at hand now develops a theoretical framework, which follows Albrecht & Schlumberger (2004) in distinguishing two broad categories of authoritarian regime survival strategies: legitimation strategies and repression.

Legitimation Strategies

In order to create analytical categories of legitimation strategies, the four modes of legitimation as laid out by Josua (2011) will be used.

As first mode, the *legal-formal mode* refers to the use of institutionalized regulations, both formal and informal, to gain and maintain legitimacy (Josua 2011: 5). In monarchies, this relates particularly to the use of political liberalization as a strategy to quell dissent (Lucas 2004: 114-115). Reacting to opposition demands, regimes for example grant limited additional civil liberties or allow for elections.

Secondly, the *output or performance mode* of regimes describes their material policies (Josua 2011: 5). This mode is particularly relevant in rentier states, in which material policies consist mainly of the distribution of rents to the population (Schlumberger 2010: 245). In the rentier states of the Arab Gulf, those rents secure high levels of state revenues, which are channeled into public sector employment, social welfare programs and subsidies. While offering very limited political representation, the regime maintains its legitimacy by those economic means.

The third mode of legitimation is *co-optation*, which can be defined as “the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors (or a group of actors) to the regime elite”

(Gerschewski 2013: 22) through formal and informal channels. In the absence of democratic participation, this inclusion of strategically-important actors serves to create stability by satisfying demands for influence, while at the same time allows the regime to balance factors against each other (Gerschewski 2013: 22, Josua 2011: 2).

The last mode of legitimation is linked to discourse and symbol politics, which is why the term *discursive-symbolic mode* will be used (Josua 2011: 5). This mode is closely linked to identity-related legitimacy, such as religious or national identity, and aims to strengthen the unity of the identity-based group as basis for their loyalty to the regime, which is presenting itself as guardian of the identity (Josua 2011: 7-8).

Repression

The second main element of the theoretical framework is repression. Here, the framework follows Josua and Edel (2014). They define repression as the “sum of all strategies by ruling elites to contain challenges to their rule by constraining (raising the costs of contention for) or incapacitating opposition leaders, rank-and-file activists, or parts of the politically inactive population” (Josua & Edel 2014: 4) and stress the importance of three variables: the setup of the regime, the state, and the challenge, in order to understand the choice of repression (Josua & Edel 2014: 1).

Based on Davenport (2007), the authors draw a distinction along the lines of intended effects of repression: while some repressive measures “attempt to modify behavior/attitudes through constraining as well as channeling opportunities” (Davenport 2007: 487), others are intended to “eliminate actors” (Davenport 2007: 487). The terms constraining and respectively incapacitating repression will be used for those forms. Another important specification refers to the targets of repression. Repression is generally most likely to be “targeted against the most challenging actors” (Josua & Edel 2014: 4). Moreover, the extent to which repression targets certain groups, influences the cost of repression, with indiscriminate repression inducing higher costs in terms of popular outrage (Josua & Edel 2014: 4).

As first of the three characteristics, the setup of the regime – ergo the formal and informal structures of power and the relations between the rulers and the ruled – is seen to decisively influence the willingness to use repression. Linked to the regime

type argument discussed earlier, monarchies are less likely to use repression, since they possess a higher degree and different sources of legitimacy compared to republics (Josua & Edel 2014: 4-5). More generally, inclusive regimes which include a broad range of actors into the political process show a lower likelihood of choosing repression as a strategy (Josua & Edel 2014: 5).

Turning to state characteristics, Josua and Edel emphasize the scope and cohesion of the state apparatus as decisive factor influencing a state's capacity for repression. The scope of the security apparatus shows a positive correlation with the likelihood of repression and high levels of internal cohesion render incapacitating repression more likely (Josua & Edel 2014: 5-6).

The last variable influencing the choice of repression is the perception of the challenge by the elites. Regarding the nature of protests –the demands raised and the means utilized – violent dissent, new forms of action as well as demands challenging the regime's power structures are argued to render repression – particularly in its incapacitating form – more likely (Josua & Edel 2014: 6-7). The effect of the size of protests and the level of mobilization on the likelihood of repression is less clear: While a large number of protesters and a high level of cooperation between groups raise the threat perception level and therefore the likelihood of repression, such a context also exponentially increases the costs of repression (Josua & Edel 2014: 7).

3 An “Arab Spring” in Saudi Arabia?

Based on the explanations for regime survival discussed above, Saudi Arabia is portrayed as one of the most stable authoritarian regimes in the region. Throughout its existence, the regime managed to control threats to its rule by distributing oil wealth, selectively co-opting and if necessary repressing its opposition. In 2011, however, the country's marginalized Shi'a community took to the streets and created “the largest and longest protest movement in its modern history” (Matthiesen 2012: 628). The following chapter will now take a closer look at this movement. Beyond giving an account of the events, the paper aims to theorize the regime's counterrevolutionary strategy along the lines of authoritarian regime survival strategies.

3.1 The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia

Representing a minority in Saudi Arabia, which is home to an overwhelming Sunni majority population, the Shi'a have historically and to the present day faced religious discrimination, economic deprivation and exclusion from the political process (Human Rights Watch 2009). The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, which is prominent in Saudi Arabia and exerts far-reaching influence both over the government and society, enables sectarian incitement and discrimination against the Shi'a community (ICG 2005: 9-10; Wehrey 2013: 5-6).

While most Saudi Shi'a have adopted the practice of concealing their faith (*taqiyya*) and Shi'a leaders have practiced political quietism throughout most of the country's existence, there have been phases of heightened resistance as well as efforts for dialogue with the regime (Jones 2009: 11). Concretely, the 1970s saw a rise in Islamist opposition (Jones 2009: 12). Especially the younger generation within the Shi'a community was increasingly dissatisfied with the political quietism of their leaders and infuriated by the discrimination they endured. Further motivated by the events in Iran, in 1979 they took the streets to demand religious, political and economic rights, and an end to discrimination. The movement was harshly repressed by regime forces, causing many of its leaders to flee into exile (Al-Rasheed 2011: 516). After a period of oppositional mobilization from abroad, in 1993 the Saudi king invited the Shi'a opposition back into the country as a gesture of reconciliation and promised more religious freedoms and economic opportunities. In exchange the opposition had to stop their publications and recognize the legitimacy of the regime. In practice, however, little changed in the discriminatory practices against the Shi'a through achieving "marginal recognition", while the regime had managed to co-opt a powerful opposition (Jones 2009: 18-20; Al-Rasheed & Al-Rasheed 1996: 114). The early 2000s marked a subsequent quiet period, which saw some – albeit mostly cosmetic – concessions by the regime, such as the creation of a National Forum for Dialogue and elections for municipal councils (Matthiesen 2013: 74-75; Jones 2009: 21-24). This lack of real change increasingly created a sentiment of frustration, particularly among the Shi'a, which erupted in early 2009 when government forces assaulted Shi'a pilgrims in Medina, leading to protests and riots (Jones 2009: 25-26).

Leading up to the events in 2011, the situation of the Shi'a remained difficult. Restrictions in practicing their faith, discrimination in education and employment as well as underrepresentation in the political system cause disproportionate economic and social hardship for the Shi'a (Wehrey 2013: 4-6; ICG 2005: 9-10). This current situation and the historical development leading up to it have to be taken into account when looking at the protest movement that developed in 2011.

3.2 The Protests in 2011

Within the framework of popular uprisings throughout the region during the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia experienced the first protest on February 17, 2011 in the Eastern Province, during which protestors demanded the release of local prisoners (Matthiesen 2012: 634). This first protest can be seen to be partly motivated by a transnational flow of ideas between Arab countries – particularly through close ties with the Bahraini Shi'a – and partly grounded in specific grievances of the Saudi Shi'a (Matthiesen 2012: 630-631). The regime reacted promptly and released several prisoners in an attempt to prevent further demonstrations. However, protests erupted during the following days in several cities of the Eastern Province. Some protestors demanded the release of nine Shi'a prisoners (“the forgotten prisoners”) that have been held in prison without trial for their alleged involvement in the Khobar Tower bombings in 1996. This openly-voiced demand crossed a first red line for the regime and therefore sparked swift repression (Lacroix 2014: 13; Matthiesen 2012: 634-635).

The movement was organized by groups of Shi'a youth who see themselves as independent from traditional opposition groups. Those groups show a decisive difference in their choice of means, namely street protest, compared to oppositional activities carried out by older activists, who called for reform, particularly for a constitutional monarchy, through petitions (Wehrey 2013: 1; Matthiesen 2012: 635).

Additionally, online activism was rising in those days, mobilizing for a nation-wide “Day of Rage” on March 11. Presenting rare cross-sectarian oppositional efforts, the mobilization online nevertheless failed to bring people to the streets in the face of regime repression and economic handouts by the regime (Matthiesen 2012: 635-637, Al-Rasheed 2011: 517). Specifically, in late February and again in mid-March, the Saudi King announced a package of economic gifts to the Saudi population, which

amounted to an estimated sum of USD 130bn and included among others measures an expansion of public sector employment, spending on state-subsidized housing and salary raises for public sector employees. It is interesting to note that large parts of these handouts were distributed to institutions, which the Shi'a population cannot access or benefit from (Wehrey 2013: 12-13; Matthiesen 2012: 636).

Despite the failure of the “Day of Rage”, protests in the Eastern Province continued and were further fueled in mid-March when the Saudi government sent its troops into neighboring Bahrain to repress the Shi'a protest movement (Matthiesen 2013: 50-51; Al-Rasheed 2011: 517-518). This action was perceived as confrontation by the Saudi Shi'a, who – calling for a withdrawal of the troops – were able to mobilize increasing numbers of protestors (Wehrey 2013: 12; Matthiesen 2012: 637-638). Already at this stage, the widening gap between traditional Shi'a leaders and co-opted Shi'a opposition activists on the one side and dissatisfied Shi'a youth on the other became visible. While the former renewed their allegiance to the regime and called for an end of protests, the young generation voiced their frustration and their demands on the streets (Al-Rasheed 2012). Besides raising Shi'a-specific demands they also called for broader reforms, such as a constitution, an independent judiciary, an elected consultative council (*majlis al-shura*), and greater power for municipal councils (Wehrey 2013: 3-4).

Faced with mounting pressure caused by the ongoing protests in the Eastern province, the Saudi government then started an extensive campaign in order to discredit the protests as Iranian-led Shi'a conspiracy aiming to divide the country (Wehrey 2013: 13-14; Al-Rasheed 2011: 514, 520-521). Wahhabi religious scholars played a key role in the sectarian campaign by spreading the narrative and by warning the population of the “wrath of God” (Al-Rasheed 2011: 520) against all protestors.

Additionally, while continuously repressing the protests in the Eastern Province, arresting hundreds of activists and protestors in the process, the government also offered a political concession. Reacting to demands for political participation the government announced in May that elections for the Municipal Councils would be held in September of that year, after having been postponed since their original date in 2009 (Matthiesen 2013: 87; Wehrey 2013: 13).

After sustained protests and repression over the summer the situation escalated in November, following the death of two young protestors by regime forces. Their funerals turned into the largest protests so far, with 20,000 people taking the streets on November 23, in what Matthiesen calls a “spiral of protest, repression, and public burials” (Matthiesen 2012: 650). For the first time during the uprising, people chanted the line “death to Al Saud” and thereby directly attacked the royal family. This in turn provokes further violence by regime forces. Again, Shi’a clerics try to prevent a further escalation by calling for an end to the protests (Matthiesen 2012: 645-652).

Continuing to the present day, the Eastern Province is experiencing protests and remains under strict surveillance by regime forces, repressing every small sign of dissent. Since the beginning of the uprising, at least 15 Shi’a youths have been killed and hundreds have been jailed. Promises of redressing Shi’a grievances by the Saudi government have not been followed by concrete actions. The protest movement has largely failed to spill over to other regions of the country and to mobilize support from the Sunni population (Wehrey 2013: 19; Matthiesen 2012: 658-659).

3.3 Counterrevolutionary Strategy of the Regime

After providing the empirical background, the following chapter will now analyze the regime’s response to the protests along the lines of the theoretical framework.

Legitimation Strategies

As a monarchy, Saudi Arabia is able to mobilize different sources of legitimacy, such as “traditional and religious justifications for their rule” (Josua & Edel 2014: 5). The factor of religious legitimization is particularly relevant in the case of Saudi Arabia through the key role Wahhabi clerics (*ulama*) play until today in Saudi society and politics. Another important source of legitimacy for the Saudi rulers is the extensive oil wealth that serves to secure the population’s loyalty by distributing the wealth.

Turning to the first of the four modes of legitimation, the *legal-formal mode*, the use of political liberalization as regime survival strategy can be seen in the response to the protests in 2011. Faced with demands for political participation, the Saudi government announced in May 2011 that the municipal council elections that were

planned for 2009 would finally be held (Matthiesen 2012: 644). While such measures of political liberalization oftentimes succeed in quelling dissent – at least temporarily – this announcement did not achieve the intended effect and the elections were marked by an extremely low voter turnout. This can be seen as due to two reasons: Firstly, the impact of the elections was marginal. Only half of the seats of the councils were elected, while the king appointed the other half, and furthermore, the municipal councils are severely constrained in their power. Secondly, at the time of the announcement the level of disillusionment with real reforms by the government had reached a threshold at which such limited political concessions were insufficient to deter protests (Matthiesen 2012: 644).

On the level of material policies, the *output or performance mode*, Saudi Arabia's rentier political economy enables the regime to use economic handouts as a regime survival strategy. In times of threats to the legitimacy of the regime, such as during the protests of 2011, Saudi rulers increase public spending and give financial gifts to their population in order to increase material legitimacy (Al-Rasheed 2012). In this fashion, the Saudi King in February and March 2011, shortly after the beginning of protests, announced an extensive economic package, including raises in subsidies, public sector salaries and spending on public sector employment and state-provided housing. As mentioned before, however, large shares of these handouts were provided to institutions and programs, which do not include the Saudi Shi'a (Matthiesen 2012: 636). Therefore, while being argued to have created a deterrent for demonstrations, this has to be seen as mainly focused on the Sunni population, since economic grievances of the Shi'a community were only marginally addressed.

The third mode of legitimation, *co-optation*, is another time-tested strategy of the Saudi government. In the absence of an inclusive political process, the regime in this way aims to incorporate strategically-relevant actors of Saudi society, such as religious and tribal leaders, in order to control those groups and to balance their power against each other. During the uprising in the Eastern Province, however, this strategy proved to be difficult. On the one hand, Shi'a clerics and traditional opposition activists assumed their traditional role as interlocutors of the regime with their constituents by calling for an end of the protests or by channeling demands into less contentious forms such as petitions and dialogue with the regime. Yet on the other

hand, the new generation of activists was not willing to be co-opted by the regime or controlled by the older generation, and vented their anger and frustration with economic grievances and years of political standstill in street protests (Matthiesen 2012: 640-641). Throughout the protests, the rift between traditional Shi'a leaders and the politically active youth grew even wider (Matthiesen 2012: 657). While some dialogue between the regime and youth activists was achieved, the rapprochement never went far enough to co-opt the leaders of the youth movement (Wehrey 2013: 14). The decentralized nature of the movement (Matthiesen 2012: 639) furthermore complicated efforts to control it through means of co-optation. Regarding the co-opted Sunni clerics, on the other hand, the strategy of co-optation worked as usual. Particularly Wahhabi clerics played a central role in fostering loyalty to the regime by discrediting the protests (Al-Rasheed 2011: 520-521).

The campaign to discredit the protests as illegal and as Iranian-led Shi'a conspiracy to cause chaos and expand its regional influence can be situated in the fourth mode of legitimation strategies, the *discursive-symbolic mode*. The fostering of sectarian tension by spreading anti-Shi'ism has been used throughout the regime's existence to prevent cross-sectarian cooperation and divert attention from the government's failings (Wehrey 2013: 6). In reaction to the protests in 2011, the Saudi government launched a media campaign aiming to discredit the ongoing protests, which used narratives of national and religious unity and portrayed the protests as led by external agents, hinting at the involvement of Shi'ite Iran to destabilize the country. This strategy of sectarianizing the protests proved to be highly effective in preventing a spill-over to other regions, since in this situation "Sunni activists would not want to be seen as associated with Shiism or Iran" (Lacroix 2014: 13-14). At the same time, liberal media outlets criticized religious hate preachers for their sectarian incitement. This alternative discourse further played into the regime's hands. Once again, the regime could portray its society as divided along many lines and itself as only actor able to unify the different groups (Al-Rasheed 2011: 522).

Repression

As second step, the theoretical framework will be used to analyze repression as reaction to the protests. Looking at the intended effects of repression, with constraining repression on the one side and incapacitating repression on the other

side, both intended effects can be traced in the application of repression in the case at hand. While never clearly situated at one side of the spectrum but rather presenting a mixture, the clearest distinction between the two forms is linked to the targeting of repression. The repression targeted at protestors and high-profile activists in the Eastern Province can be argued to aim at incapacitating those actors. The high number of arrests, during protests as well as in the form of manhunts for specific actors, and the heavy violence against protestors leading to several fatal incidents support this argument (Matthiesen 2012: 632-655). At the same time, the repression directed at the broader population tends toward constraining repression, with the government trying to prevent solidarity with the protestors to avert a potential spill-over of protests. Measures taken to raise the costs of contention are the increased nation-wide presence of security forces quelling every small sign of protest and the declaration of protests as illegal (Wehrey 2013: 13; Matthiesen 2012: 635). Primarily, however, the movement's failure to mobilize protests in other parts of the country can be attributed to the sectarian discourse strategy rather than constraining repression.

The decision to use repression – particularly in its incapacitating form – predominantly as direct response to protestors in the Eastern Province is in line with the argument that repression is usually targeted against the most challenging actors (Josua & Edel 2014: 4). Furthermore, as Al-Rasheed and Al-Rasheed (1996) point out, anti-Shi'a religious discourse has regularly been employed by the regime in order to justify coercion against and repression of Shi'a protests (1996: 116).

In a similar vein, linked to regime characteristics, the lack of inclusiveness of the Saudi system increases the likelihood of repression in general, and particularly with regard to its Shi'a population, which experiences tight limits on political participation apart from a few co-opted Shi'a leaders. This co-optation structure and the rift between traditional activists and the youth also present an important impetus for the use of repression regarding challenge perceptions by the regime. The means of expressing dissent chosen by the youth is street protest, contrary to less contentious forms chosen by traditional activists. Furthermore, the mobilization of new actors for the protests outside of the traditional Shi'a opposition and the efforts to reach out to Sunni youth activists in an attempt to create coalitions raises the level of threat perception by the regime decisively (Wehrey 2013: 18). Combined with demands that

challenge the power structure of the regime and raise “taboo” issues, the nature of the protests therefore triggered the use of repression by the regime.

4 Conclusion

The paper at hand has attempted to theorize Saudi Arabia’s response to the protests emerging in its Eastern Province in 2011 by situating the currently mostly descriptive literature within a theoretical framework of authoritarian regime survival strategies. Based on the analysis the following main findings can be emphasized:

Enjoying various sources of legitimacy, such as religious and material legitimacy, the Saudi regime’s counterrevolutionary approach heavily relied on legitimation strategies. Underpinning Schlumberger’s (2010: 236) argument of the need to adapt legitimation strategies to the specific context, time-tested strategies of the Saudi regime have shown different levels of effectiveness in countering the protest movement in 2011. While the *legal-formal mode* of legitimation, concretely the political concession of holding municipal council elections did not prove successful due to disillusionment of the population, the *output mode* effectively increased the material legitimacy of the regime and deterred large shares of the population from supporting the protests. The third mode, *co-optation*, shows a mixed picture. Traditional interlocutors of the state, both Sunni and Shi’a, remained loyal to the regime. Spreading the government-promoted sectarian narrative, Sunni clerics succeeded in persuading their constituents of the unlawfulness of the protests. In the case of co-opted Shi’a leaders, however, the situation proved difficult due to the increasing rift between them and the youth. Therefore, calls for an end of the protests were decisively less influential and in some cases even sparked further criticism (Wehrey 2013: 2014). Furthermore, co-optation of youth activists did not occur. Lastly, the *discursive-symbolic mode* has to be emphasized in the case at hand as highly effective in discrediting the protests and preventing a mobilization of the broader population.

Repression as second pillar of the Saudi counterrevolutionary strategy has been used to constrain and incapacitate mainly Shi’a activists. Some forms of constraining repression can also be seen with regard to the Sunni population. Saudi Arabia’s

regime characteristics and the given context of elevated perceived threat rendered repression a viable option. As in many cases, the effects of this repression are mixed. While repressive measures served to erode the will of protestors and their ability for contention, the use of deadly force against protestors also sparked outrage and led to further mobilization (Matthiesen 2012: 642-643, 649-650).

While small protests in the Eastern Province are ongoing, the movement has failed to mobilize broader parts of Saudi society – particularly the Sunni majority. As this paper argues, the regime’s comprehensive counterrevolutionary strategy is a key reason for this failure. Through providing political and economic concessions, utilizing existing bonds of co-optation and invoking sectarian mistrust the regime managed to discredit the protest movement and to maintain its legitimacy in the eyes of its majority population. Additionally, repression has been used to prevent demonstrations and silence oppositional activists. For now, this strategy has proven successful. Nevertheless, the failure to address underlying causes of dissent and the effects of increased sectarian tension could prove dangerous for the country’s continued stability – particularly regarding the new youth movements.

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