

INITIAL INVESTIGATION:
SAUDI ARABIA'S EASTERN PROVINCE

PREVENTING
PENDING UNREST





Overview

Several recent incidents, which have occurred in Saudi Arabia, significantly increase the potential for civil unrest in its Eastern Province. The most prominent include the sentencing to death by crucifixion of the Shi'a cleric Mimir al-Nimr, the killing of Shiite worshippers during the Ashura commemoration by Sunni gunmen, and the sentencing of Mikhlef al-Shammari to two years in prison and 200 lashings for meeting Shi'a leaders and paying condolences to the family of a slain protester. These events, along with historical Wahhabi dominance and unresolved social issues reinforce the negative perceptions of the Saudi government, which permeate Saudi civil society, specifically within the Shi'a majority in the Eastern Province.

The Eastern Province's population seeks political and social reform, due to historical neglect by the Sunni dominated Al-Saud government. The Eastern Province is of particular strategic importance because it possesses the majority of Saudi Arabia's oil and gas reserves as well as the main refinery and export terminal located at Ras Tanura. Increased social unrest, based on recent events and unresolved social tensions, will lead to violence that can negatively impact the Saudi economy and have significant regional and global implications.

Situation

Similar economic, political, demographic, and sectarian conditions that sparked revolutions in neighboring Arab countries are found in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Saudi Arabia's youth (51% under age 25) are aggressively demanding reform in response to rising unemployment, corruption, and a lack of government representation and freedom of expression. However, unlike the protestors in the early 1980s, the majority of today's protestors are reformists who do not want to overthrow the Kingdom. Reformists seek an end to discrimination, a release of political prisoners, and greater representation in the Saudi Government. Unfortunately, the situation will grow more severe with time as many young activists see outright opposition and violence as the only means to counter existing government strategies, which are based on fear and suppression to maintain order.

“The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is vulnerable to increased dissent and rebellion within its borders.”

The Eastern Province is home to a Shi'a majority population and is the largest of the country's 13 administrative areas. It contains a significant portion of the world's proven oil reserves and is a source of considerable revenue for Saudi Arabia. Yet residents suffer from unfair wealth distribution, poor economic opportunity and a lack of representation within the Saudi government. For example, no cabinet member, deputy minister, ambassador, or head of any university in the Kingdom is Shi'a and the construction of Shi'a mosques in mixed Sunni-Shi'a communities is strictly prohibited. Moreover, government mandated religious restrictions prevents Shi'as from obtaining higher religious education at home and their loyalties are questioned when they seek education abroad.

Saudi Aramco is the world's largest energy company and the backbone of the Kingdom's economy. The majority of its domestic operations are located in the Eastern Province and Shi'as comprise more than half of its workforce. As a state controlled company, Saudi Aramco must plan for the Saudi Government's immediate and future economic and geopolitical policy requirements, as well as its own direct corporate commercial goals. For these reasons, Saudi Aramco's operations are a target for activism making it vulnerable to disruptions in production resulting from protests, strikes, and sabotage. The cyber-attack in August 2012 that erased data on a majority of Saudi Aramco's computers, illustrates the vulnerability of Saudi Aramco's operations during periods of increased social unrest.

Problem

Growing anti-government activism due to unresolved social tensions, fueled by religious ideology and socioeconomic disparities pose significant security threats to the Saudi Kingdom. The root cause of the anti-government opposition in the Eastern Province is based upon historical marginalization from a political system and culture that discriminates against Saudi citizens with Shi'a beliefs. Moreover, regional religious divisions allow external forces to exploit legitimate Shi'a grievances to further civil unrest and potentially destabilize the Kingdom and regional security.

Since 2011, Saudi Shi'as have held protests and demonstrations in major Eastern Province population centers in defiance of government orders. In response, the Saudi Interior Minister, Prince Mohammad bin Nayef bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, vowed to crush the protests with an "iron fist." As a result, Saudi

police forces have killed 21 citizens and arrested more than 950 citizens, 217 of whom remain detained. Moreover, the government initiated an anti-Shi'a media campaign designed to discredit the protestors as agents of Iran while painting the Shi'a population with a negative perception. The Saudi government and its security forces implementation of heavy handed tactics only exacerbates the problems and increases tensions within Shi'a communities. Continued crackdowns on public dissent and oppression of Saudi citizens will only escalate tensions and move Shi'a attitudes and actions toward increased militancy and extremism.

The negative influence of regional actors in the Eastern Province is an ever present threat. Although Iran disbanded Hezbollah al-Hejaz (Saudi Hezbollah) in the 1990s, Iran continues to apply its "soft-power" in the region. The Iranian government disseminates propaganda to shape and influence the opinions and ideas of Saudi citizens through a targeted media campaign. Iranian television and radio channels urge Shi'as to rise against the Saudi and Bahraini regimes. The Al Alam television network is popular among Shi'as in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain for providing coverage of protests and unrest in the two countries. Many Shi'as say they watch Al Alam because channels like Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera largely ignore the Shi'a protests and always provide the Sunni perspective. "Because there's no coverage from the international or free media, everybody is focusing on Al Alam and the Al Manar (Lebanese Hezbollah's channel)," said a Shi'a activist in the Eastern Province.

Solution

Design and implement a proactive communication plan and engagement strategies based on understanding and tolerance to redress existing social tensions and the prevailing fear narrative.

Tensions between Eastern Province Shi'a and the Sunni Government are at a tipping point. A single event by either side has the potential to trigger actions that can lead to violence. Fear and distrust, based on actions and behaviors by both parties dominates the fear narratives and escalates tensions. Greater authoritarianism and oppression threaten to unleash a more militant response from Saudi Shi'as and further isolate moderates who prefer engagement over confrontation.

The Saudi government can mitigate the risk of instability and violence by shifting from a narrative based upon fear and distrust to a narrative of understanding and tolerance. Transitioning from oppression to engagement through a meaningful dialog to achieve compromise, enables the Saudi Government to shape the future security environment and safeguard against internal and external threats. Addressing the root causes of instability and moving toward a more inclusive, pluralistic society is difficult, with no common ground available in the foreseeable future. This requires tailored communications plans and engagement strategies to redress existing tensions and create enduring solutions. Changing the perceptions and narratives in Saudi Arabia will not happen overnight. However, engaging moderate Shi'a leaders in honest discussions can be the Kingdom's solution to develop long-term stability.



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