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Saudi Arabia Scrambles to Limit Region's Upheaval

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — [Saudi Arabia](#) is flexing its financial and diplomatic might across the Middle East in a wide-ranging bid to contain the tide of change, shield other monarchies from popular discontent and avert the overthrow of any more leaders struggling to calm turbulent nations.

From [Egypt](#), where the [Saudis dispensed \\$4 billion in aid](#) last week to shore up the ruling military council, to Yemen, where it is trying to ease out the president, to the kingdoms of [Jordan](#) and [Morocco](#), which it has invited to join a union of Persian Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia is scrambling to forestall more radical change and block [Iran](#)'s influence.

The kingdom is aggressively emphasizing the relative stability of monarchies, part of an effort to avert any drastic shift from the authoritarian model, which would generate uncomfortable questions about the pace of political and social change at home.

Saudi Arabia's proposal to include Jordan and Morocco in the six-member [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) — which authorized the Saudis to send in troops to quell a largely Shiite Muslim rebellion in the Sunni Muslim monarchy of [Bahrain](#) — is intended to create a kind of "Club of Kings." The idea is to signal to Shiite Iran that the Sunni Arab monarchs will defend their interests, analysts said.

"We're sending a message that monarchies are not where this is happening," Prince Waleed bin Talal al-Saud, a businessman and high-profile member of the habitually reticent royal family,

told the editorial board of The New York Times last week, referring to the unrest. “We are not trying to get our way by force, but to safeguard our interests.”

The range of the Saudi intervention is extraordinary as the unrest pushes Riyadh’s hand to forge what some commentators, in Egypt and elsewhere, brand a “counterrevolution.” Some Saudi and foreign analysts find the term too sweeping for the steps the Saudis have actually taken, though they appear unparalleled in the region and beyond as the kingdom reaches out to ally with non-Arab Muslim states as well.

“I am sure that the Saudis do not like this revolutionary wave — they were really scared,” said Khalid Dakhil, a Saudi political analyst and columnist. “But they are realistic here.”

In Egypt, where the revolution has already toppled a close Saudi ally in Hosni Mubarak, the Saudis are dispensing aid and mending ties in part to help head off a good showing by the Muslim Brotherhood in the coming parliamentary elections. The Saudis worry that an empowered Muslim Brotherhood could damage Saudi legitimacy by presenting a model of Islamic law different from the Wahhabi tradition of an absolute monarch.

“If another model of Shariah says that you have to resist, this will create a deep difficulty,” said Abdulaziz Algasim, a Saudi lawyer.

Saudi officials are also concerned that Egypt’s foreign policy is shifting, with its outreach to the Islamist group Hamas and plans to restore ties with Iran. The Saudi monarch, King Abdullah, also retains a personal interest in protecting Mr. Mubarak, analysts believe.

The Arab Spring began to unravel an alliance of so-called moderate Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which were willing to work closely with the United States and promote peace with Israel. American support for the Arab uprisings also strained relations, prompting Saudi Arabia to split from Washington on some issues while questioning its longstanding reliance on the United States to protect its interests.

The strained Saudi posture toward Washington was outlined in [a recent opinion article](#) by Nawaf Obaid, a Saudi analyst, in The Washington Post that suggested Riyadh was ready to go it alone because the United States had become an “unreliable partner.”

But that seems at least partly a display of Saudi pique, since the oil-for-military aid arrangement that has defined relations between the two for the past six decades is unlikely to be replaced soon. Saudi Arabia is negotiating to buy \$60 billion in advanced American weapons, and President Obama, in his speech last week demanding that Middle Eastern autocrats bow to popular demands for democracy, noticeably did not mention Saudi Arabia. The Saudi ambassador, Adel al-Jubeir, sat prominently in the front row.

Saudi Arabia is taking each uprising in turn, without relying on a single blueprint. [In Bahrain, it resorted to force](#), sending troops to crush a rebellion by Shiites because it feared the creation of a hostile government — a kind of Shiite Cuba — only about 20 miles from some of its main oil fields, one sympathetic to Iran, if not allied with it. It has deployed diplomacy in other uprisings,

and remained on the fence in still others. It is also spending money, pledging \$20 billion to help stabilize Bahrain and Oman, which has also faced protests.

In Yemen, Saudi Arabia joined the coalition seeking to ease out President Ali Abdullah Saleh because it thinks the opposition might prove a more reliable, less unruly southern neighbor. But Arab diplomats noted that even the smallest Saudi gestures provided Mr. Saleh with excuses to stay, since he interpreted them as support. This month, for example, the Saudis sent in tanker trucks to help abate a gasoline shortage.

On [Syria](#), an initial statement of support by King Abdullah for President Bashar al-Assad has been followed by silence, along with occasional calls at Friday Prayer for God to support the protesters. That silence reflects a deep ambivalence, analysts said. The ruling Saudi family personally dislikes Mr. Assad — resenting his close ties with Iran and seeing Syria's hand in [the assassination of a former Lebanese prime minister](#), Rafik Hariri, a Saudi ally. But they fear his overthrow will unleash sectarian violence without guaranteeing that Iranian influence will be diminished.

In Libya, after helping push through an Arab League request for international intervention, Saudi Arabia sat out and left its neighbors, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, to join the military coalition supporting the rebels. It has so far kept its distance publicly from Tunisia as well, although it gave refuge to its ousted president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

There are also suspicions that the kingdom is secretly providing money to extremist groups to hold back changes. Saudi officials deny that, although they concede private money may flow.

In 1952, after toppling the Egyptian king, Gamal Abdel Nasser worked to destabilize all monarchs, inspiring a regicide in Iraq and eventually the [overthrow of King Idris of Libya](#). Saudi Arabia was locked in confrontation with Egypt throughout the 1960s, and it is determined not to relive that period.

“We are back to the 1950s and early 1960s, when the Saudis led the opposition to the revolutions at that time, the revolutions of Arabism,” said Mohammad F. al-Qahtani, a political activist in Riyadh.