

SAUDI ARABIA AND THE ARAB SPRING

After young Saudi Arabian blogger Hamza Kashgari allegedly insulted Islam's founder, many of the more conservative in his home country called for his execution. Kashgari fled to Malaysia, was deported back home and now faces charges of blasphemy, apostasy (renouncing one's religious faith) and atheism. In Saudi Arabia, those charges carry a death sentence.

According to an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (CSM) (Feb. 27, 2012), though the case against Kashgari may stem from seemingly blasphemous Twitter messages about the prophet Muhammad's birthday, it is really about new tensions in Saudi Arabia following the Arab Spring of 2011.

Saudi Arabia, a Middle Eastern country of approximately 830,000 square miles (2,149,690 sq. km), is slightly more than one-fifth the size of the United States. It constitutes 80 percent of the Arabian Peninsula, lying north of Yemen and bordering the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

Saudi Arabia's current population is almost 27 million, of whom 90 percent are Arabs. Although estimates vary considerably at any time, approximately 9 million people in Saudi Arabia are registered foreign expatriates from Yemen, Egypt, India and other African and Asian countries. Another 1.5 million are illegal immigrants.

Saudi Arabia is the world's top oil exporter. It has one-fifth of the world's proven supply of oil reserves, which is second largest in the world behind Venezuela. Along with those distinctions comes an amazing amount of money associated with petroleum. Indeed, the oil sector accounts for 45 percent of Saudi's GDP and 90 percent of its export

earnings. The government has recently been trying to diversify the economy and employ more Saudi Arabian citizens by encouraging growth in the private sector.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, which means the top governmental and religious leader is the king. Succeeding kings are selected from among the Saudi royal family by the family itself without any public election. Generally, the king's power is total, as there is no legislative body. The king, however, may consult with his ministers and the Consultative Council, a body of appointed advisors. The current king, King Abdullah, age 87, came into power in 2005, and is one of the world's wealthiest royals.

Not only is Islam the only recognized religion in Saudi Arabia, but the entire government is run according to the religion's tenets. Law in Saudi Arabia is based on *sharia*, or Islamic law derived from the Koran (Qu'ran), the Muslim holy book, and from Islamic tra-

has even restrained the conservative religious establishment, to some extent. For example, King Abdullah created an initiative in 2008 that encourages religious tolerance on a global level. In 2009, he restructured his cabinet, allowing more moderates to hold ministerial and judicial positions, while also appointing the first woman to the cabinet.

After the Arab Spring revolts of 2011, however, Saudi Arabia's monarchy became increasingly nervous about uprisings on its own soil. Subsequently, during the past year, the monarchy has made an effort to placate religious groups, hoping to buttress support for the regime, thus preventing the same sort of revolution that occurred in Egypt.

While the ruling Al-Saud family is spending \$130 billion on jobs and housing program to keep its citizens happy, it has also released billions of dollars into the security and religious establishments, two of the royal family's biggest supporters.

To stem dissent, Saudi Arabia's government has enacted an anti-terror law that effectively labels dissenters as terrorists and allows extended detention without charge or trial. Public protests have been banned and many peaceful protestors and rights advocates have been arrested.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have expressed concerns regarding Saudi Arabia's human rights record for years, especially with regards to the rights of women and minority Shia (a branch of Islam) citizens.

The United States and other Western countries have remained mostly silent on Saudi Arabia's human rights record. The United States imports more than one million barrels of oil a day from Saudi Arabia and made its largest arms sale ever in 2010 to the Saudi government—a sale worth \$60.5 billion.

Saudi Arabia remains one of the most stable and dependable countries in the region, although its potential for major regional disruption is enormous, should intense internal conflict break out.

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ditions. Although Saudi Arabia's interpretation of *sharia* is not as strict as the Taliban's in Afghanistan, the Saudis are far stricter than most other Muslim countries. As examples, western wear is mostly banned for women, women are not permitted to drive, and men and women are not allowed to work in the same office.

Under King Abdullah's rule during the past six years, Saudi Arabia's monarchy has appeased some of the country's more moderate citizens and groups. In fact, the monarchy

Sources: GITN #598, "Saudi Arabia's Monarchy, Nov. 16, 2001; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sa.html>; <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/the-saudis-need-those-high-oil-prices-02232012.html>; and Dickinson, Elizabeth, "Saudi Blogger in Peril," *Christian Science Monitor*, Vol. 104, Issue 14, Feb. 27, 2012.



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