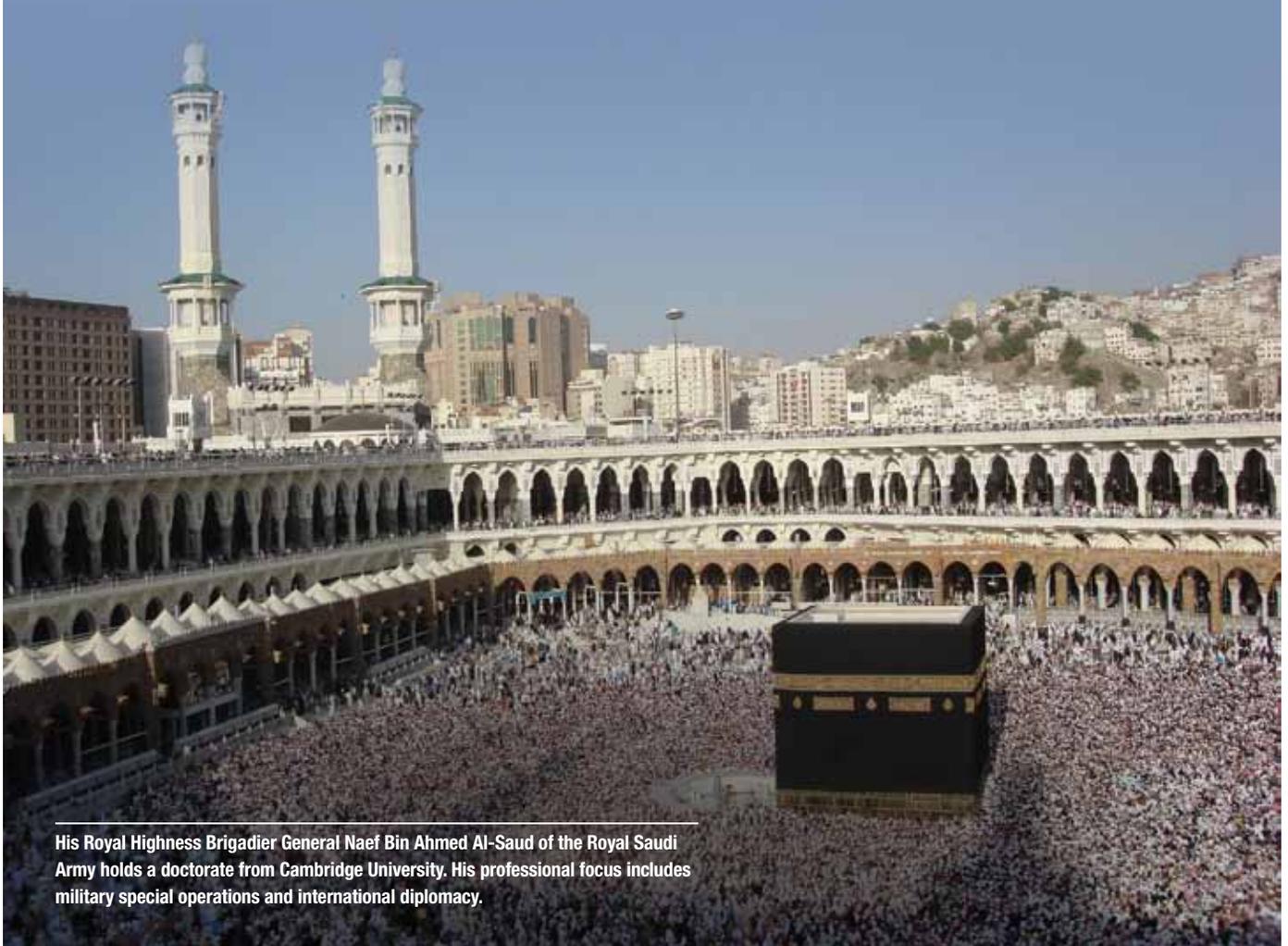# THE Evolution OF Saudi Security AND Enforcement Policies ON Communication

By NAEF BIN AHMED AL-SAUD

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Communication, including social media, is vital to Saudi policy concerns—pursuant to both national and internal security. The evolution of Saudi security policy on communication and social media is being derived to a significant extent from recent external precedents, particularly government actions in the United States and Great Britain, as well as India, Israel, and other countries. The consensus among such countries appears to be that antiterrorism and other anticrime objectives, including public safety, civil order, and governmental alleviation of economic hardship, take precedence over political notions such as democracy.

Despite broadly analogous restrictions under American, British, Indian, and Israeli laws and government actions, some in the West seem to romanticize social media as a tool for protest in Saudi Arabia. It is therefore ironic that by mid-2011, social media in America, Europe, and Israel expedited the organization of large illegal protests by citizens against their own governments, as a function of economic deprivation that could not be adequately resolved by political activities associated with democracy. In recent years, Saudi government policies have focused on economic development intended in part to address the concerns of its citizens, which has so far tangentially preempted widespread social media–organized unrest that other countries have begun to experience.

This article argues that Saudi Arabia and many other nations have found that communication access, particularly including social media and the Internet generally, may both facilitate and co-opt antigovernment protests and criminal acts including terrorism. Moreover, and analogous to usage by other governments such as those of the United States and Israel, communication infrastructure may be deployed by the Saudi government to track and arrest criminals, including potential terrorists. In fact, relevant Saudi laws may be deemed analogous to U.S. national and internal security policies upheld by Supreme Court decisions. Saudi laws may also be broadly analogous to restrictive Indian Internet laws in the world's largest democracy. Next, the article argues that the Kingdom's experience with Internet technologies is that they provide effective communication methods toward rehabilitation of terrorists and other criminals. The analysis concludes by observing that America and other countries may wish to learn from the Saudi experience in antiterrorism and other criminal rehabilitation through social media. However, social media–organized protests by Israelis due to economic hardship may possibly lead to greater Israeli compassion for Palestinian economic hardship under occupation.

Lessons from Israel and Great Britain

By mid-2011, the Israeli government faced public protests, which were brought about by widespread economic deprivation. Some estimate over a quarter million Israelis participated in protests at some point—similarly organized by cell phone and social media, particularly Facebook.[1] An editorial in London's *Financial Times* stated, "a perception that too many people cannot make ends meet, or even live in outright poverty, motivates Israelis as it did Tunisians and Egyptians in January and February. . . . [I]t is evident that public spending on education and healthcare is low partly because the [Israeli] government's military budget is so high. Nothing better illustrates how a peace deal with the Palestinians would benefit Israeli society as a whole."[2] Among the poorest are Israel's Arab citizens and orthodox Jews.[3] Another commentator in the *Financial Times* points out that Israeli discontent is also caused to a significant extent by a widespread resentment that the country may be under the influence of powerful, small interest groups including Israeli settlers in the occupied territories: the "settlers . . . enjoy cheap, subsidized housing and benefit from public services that are far superior to those available to Israelis living inside the Green Line."[4]

Such mounting evidence of resentment driven by social media—by Israelis inside Israel against Israeli settlers in the occupied territories—may have a powerful, positive impact on the direction of Middle East peace. Palestinians living under far worse economic conditions due to Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza are presumably observing the large Israeli protests and contemplating their own moves. Of course, one concern for peaceful protest is whether a government indiscriminately kills nonviolent civilians in significant numbers. For example, in August 2011, after many months of Syrian military actions against civilian protesters, Saudi Arabia, followed by Bahrain and Kuwait, withdrew their ambassadors, while King Abdullah requested that the Syrian "killing machine" be stopped.[5]

Thus, the Kingdom's leadership has been observing developments in Israel as a test of social media's effectiveness in organizing nonviolent protest to create significant

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shifts in security and economic policy. Since Palestinian welfare and fair treatment are among Saudi Arabia's vital interests, there are two social media questions that matter to the national security interests of both Israel and Saudi Arabia:

■ Will orthodox Jews, Israeli Palestinians, and Palestinians in the occupied territories seize the historic opportunity to organize together via social media to create meaningful nonviolent protests against Israel's pro-settler funding policies that are a root cause of economic deprivation for Israel's majority of civilians living outside of settlements and those living inside the occupied territories?

■ Would Israel be motivated to change its policies as a result of widespread Palestinian social media–organized protests against economic deprivation of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories?

In any case, such protests have not been limited to Israel and the Arab world. In early August 2011, more reverberations from riots in Tunisia and Egypt appeared across London and other locations in the United Kingdom, turning several areas into "quasi-war zones." These events were organized by social media including Twitter and Facebook, as well as BlackBerry Messenger.[6] The police called the unrest the worst in memory, and the streets of London were flooded with 16,000 police officers.[7]

At the height of the 2011 London riots, which seem to be known as Britain's "intifada

of the underclass," one of Prime Minister David Cameron's former advisors pointed out that the rioting youth "have nothing to lose and nothing to gain."[8] British rioters believed that their lives were going nowhere because they were "further than ever from the sort of wealth that makes them adults. A career, a home of your own—the things that can be ruined by riots—are out of sight."[9] One woman who carried a television out of a store justified her action by stating, "I'm taking my taxes back."[10]

According to an editorial in the *Financial Times* in early August 2011, the government "lost control of England's streets. [The unrest] has exploded into an orgy of arson, looting and feral violence which has spread through the capital and to other English

Great Britain, the Kingdom announced $35 billion in government spending for unemployment benefits, housing subsidies, and other social programs. With these developments in mind, Saudi policies continue to address economic security—and by logical extension, social media as a function of national and internal security—which would appear to be roughly analogous to conclusions reached by Israel and Great Britain.

Ultimately, Western leaders do not want to see "social media" sources organize large protests erupting in Riyadh or downtown Beijing. The serious risk is that Western oil traders and other Western financiers could get nervous due to miscalculations of risk—causing oil prices to skyrocket—and Western economies could finally collapse.

grow over the long term, rather than Western notions of democracy or peace.[19]

Social Media Impacts on Saudi Security Laws

In 2009, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested a social worker for using Twitter by spreading information to protesters about American police movements at the Group of 20 summit of global leaders in the United States. It turned out that while protesters were using social media to try to help other protesters escape arrest, the police were also monitoring the social media site to keep informed about protesters. The protester who was arrested claimed that the FBI wanted to crush "dissent."[20]

Protesters and pundits in other countries may also make false claims about crushing dissent when, as in the United States, Great Britain, and other countries, the government imperative is to protect civilians from protesters who may turn violent. This extends to the Saudi government's objective to monitor and defeat the use of social media in any potential terror-related or illegal means, which broadly parallels U.S. security policies upheld by Supreme Court decisions.

A 2010 Supreme Court decision, *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*,[21] made clear that almost all types of support for groups labeled as terrorists are banned,[22] apparently even if the support may turn out to be advice favoring nonviolence. In 2008, the U.S. Government started an investigation leading to that court case when activists began planning to hold large demonstrations against war.[23]

Analogous to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, the Kingdom restricts those who might try to provide any type of support for terrorists, including communication, whether by social media or other means. Also analogous to FBI investigations, the Saudi government has been known to monitor groups in the Kingdom, or communications about the Kingdom focused on various types of innocent-sounding "rights," particularly when such rights may turn out to involve any type of communication or support whatsoever with respect to terrorism.

Consider the following. In mid-June 2011, the *Washington Post* published a report on FBI raids of homes belonging to labor organizers and peace activists.[24] The American activists appear to have publicly

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cities. . . . The government must now do what is necessary to regain control of the nation's streets."[11] Cameron tackled the threat of social media, stating during an emergency parliamentary session: "Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organized via social media," noting the government's need to "stop people communicating via these Web sites and services when we know they are plotting violence, disorder and criminality. . . . Free flow of information can be used for good. But it can also be used for ill. And when people are using social media for violence, we need to stop them."[12] According to Cameron, the British government would not be deterred by "phoney human rights concerns."[13] Beyond such declarations, one mainstream British publication observed that the London rioters were able to "terrorize" their own countrymen, and that the government considered deploying the British army into the streets.[14]

Thus, Saudi Arabia's security policy on communication including the Internet and social media may need to evolve in this direction as well, with contingency plans for Saudi military deployment to protect the people and in support of the Kingdom's other security and law enforcement institutions. At the same time, it is crucial to note that in early 2011, before the protests broke out in Israel and

According to a report, curiously entitled "America Fears the Great Brawl of China," there are an "estimated 18,000 riots, strikes and protests that break out in China" each year.[15] Consider the global economic destruction if such unrest were to become much more organized through social media or other Internet facilities.[16] According to one Western media dispatch on China, "Since the nationwide student-led protests of 1989, the educated urban elite has mostly been politically quiescent. But the party fears them far more than it does unruly farmers or migrants. Beijing's center was flooded with police earlier this year when calls for an Arab-style 'jasmine revolution' circulated on the internet."[17]

A postscript on developments in Libya makes clear that economic deprivation is at the root of instability and may not necessarily alter circumstances by simply changing regimes. According to Anthony Cordesman, "We need to recognize that Libya—like all of the other states that have become increasingly unstable since early 2011—is not going to suddenly emerge with stable politics, effective governance, security and human rights for its people, or an economy that offers jobs, development, and a fair share of the nation's income."[18] The risk is that when established governments fall, violence and instability may

criticized—including via social media—American foreign policy toward South America and the Middle East. They claimed that the U.S. Government was using antiterrorism policies as a pretext to target them for their political opinions.[25] The FBI was looking toward the possibility that these citizens may have provided "material support"—which the citizens denied—for Palestinians and Colombians on U.S. Government terror suspect lists.[26] Most of the Americans raided were non-Muslim and, according to one of their lawyers, were "public non-violent activists with long, distinguished careers in public service, including teachers, union organizers and antiwar and community leaders."[27] Thus, Saudi Arabia's national security and internal security approaches do not appear to be more restrictive than the U.S. Government's deployment of FBI raids on American activists and organizers who have used social media to spread political opinions criticizing U.S. foreign policy and possibly implicating "material support" for terror suspects.

Even apart from terrorism, public safety is a paramount concern for government entities that may need to take action by monitoring communication, whether through social media or analogously by cell phone. For example, in mid-August 2011, San Francisco transportation officials turned off cell phone underground service for several hours in order to maintain public safety by stopping a planned protest discovered on the Web site of a protest organizer.[28]

Some in the United States compared the San Francisco transportation agency strategy of temporarily cutting off cell phone use to former President Hosni Mubarak's strategy of cutting off Internet and cell phone services in order to quell protests by the Egyptian people.[29] Other research indicates that Mubarak may have made a mistake in doing so. When Egyptian cell phone and Internet services were disrupted on January 28, 2011, unrest apparently increased instead of decreased. The cutoff caused more civilians to become aware and interested, while more people became involved in communicating face-to-face with greater street presence, and communication became more decentralized and harder to control than simply large gatherings in Tahrir Square.[30] (In contrast to the situation in Egypt involving communication cutoff, the Libyan uprising may have been relentless largely due to North Atlantic Treaty Organization support for the rebels including strategic bombing, access to drones and other intelligence, and other assistance.)

San Francisco's local government determined that it had a legal right to turn off cell phone service on its property under a 1969 ruling by the Supreme Court in *Brandenburg v. Ohio*.[31] In this case, the Supreme Court decided that a government may stop speech that could incite activity considered unlawful (beyond merely advocating violence).[32] In 2011, mass violence apparently did not occur within San Francisco's transportation system, but the local government believed that violence might possibly occur imminently if it did not cut off communication. Thus, even in America, as in Saudi Arabia, it is legal for a government institution to cut off communication in the interests of public safety and security if there is a chance that it could prevent protests that might possibly lead to violence—if considered to be imminent—whether or not violence later occurs.

Analogous to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brandenburg*, other nations including

Saudi Arabia and India place restrictions on speech that may possibly be communicated to incite unlawful activity—whether by social media or other means. In mid-2011, for example, India issued Internet rules to strengthen security and place limits on information, including content that might be considered "insulting" or "blasphemous" or "harmful" to any country.[33] Indian cyber cafés, Web sites, and search engines may be liable to the government for any offending Internet content, including social media. According to the Indian government, its rules weigh security and freedom, deriving inspiration from laws in other democratic countries.[34] According to the deputy minister responsible for information technology and communication, Sachin Pilot, "We must draw a distinction between freedom of expression and freedom of expression with intent to harm or defame someone."[35]

Analogous to both Indian law and the Supreme Court's holding in *Brandenburg*, under Saudi law, mainstream media (including the print media) and Internet sites (including blogs) are restricted from "damaging the country's public affairs," or delivering insults to senior clerics, or "inciting divisions between citizens," among other violations.[36] Also analogous to Indian law and the Supreme Court's holding in *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project*, Saudi proposed laws pending in the Shura Council would punish anyone who may be supporting terrorism by any means, such as "harming the interests of the state" or "endangering national unity."[37]

In Saudi Arabia, activism online has thus far not created significant challenges to the Royal family or the rest of the government. For example, a "day of rage" organized via social media, including Facebook, fizzled out.[38] In any case, King Abdullah has ensured that newspapers, and by implication social media, have considerable freedom to question religious clerics, discuss the rights of women, report on police abuse, and so forth. Thus, for example, religious clerics may be criticized or questioned in public media or forums, but not personally attacked.[39]

Saudi Arabia would be willing to advise Western institutions on structuring effective social media programs to rehabilitate a broad spectrum of violent criminals

When foreigners aim to influence events under a particular nation's control, whether by social media or otherwise, that nation may take it upon itself to expel or repel such foreigners. By further extrapolation, a nation may request assistance from another in such security matters—as Bahrain had to ask for Saudi assistance in 2011—due to concerns about the disruptive influence of foreigners that would appear to have been greater national security threats than those faced by Israel from self-proclaimed Westerners aiming to visit Palestinian lands under occupation and use social media to spread international awareness.

Saudi Social Media Strategies

While the Western approach toward violence caused by social media substantially concentrates on punishment,[40] a separate example of the Saudi government's social media approach to counterterrorism is the Sakina program, which has achieved considerable success in persuading radically inclined

youth toward moderation.[41] The program is run by a nongovernmental organization supported by the Interior Ministry, Education Ministry, and Islamic Affairs Ministry. Sakina's religious experts deploy social media to hold online discussions in chat rooms with people who initially seem to support extremist views. The experts aim to ask online extremist sympathizers why they seem to believe in religious violence, and then the experts point out how those views contradict the peaceful teachings of Islam.

Such dialogues via social media have had a multiplier effect against violence due to their perpetual availability online where others can read and share them. Violence in the Kingdom has been drastically reduced since authorities started becoming involved in such social media. Saudi advice has been sought by numerous other Arab countries wishing to structure similar antiviolence social media programs.[42]

One analyst in the West observed that the Sakina program has "international appeal" as it draws audiences and interaction throughout the Middle East as well as the West and particularly the United States.[43] It thus stands to reason that if asked, Saudi Arabia would be willing to advise Western institutions on structuring effective social media programs to rehabilitate a broad spectrum of violent criminals typically indigenous to and rampant in the West—not merely limited to terrorists.

Coincidentally, by late June/early July 2011, several mainstream Western media (not just social media) reports appeared concerning Google's self-proclaimed "idea" to try using social media against extremists. Curiously, Saudi Arabia's preexisting Sakina program was not emphasized. But at least one of the leaders of the new Google project was formerly with the U.S. Department of State. Is it possible that State Department personnel who now work with social media against extremism may not be aware of highly successful preexisting Saudi social media programs against extremism? It would appear that top individuals in the Kingdom may need to be more high profile in deploying mainstream media to proclaim the success of particular Saudi policies, especially pertaining to broad social media access and effective nonviolence programs.

As one mainstream European media source pointed out about the new Google social media antiextremist program, "to solve the problems of violent extremism, clever technology and algorithms are only a sideshow."[44] The Saudi approach to antiviolence programs does not rely on social media programs alone, but further deploys highly qualified experts, along with available rehabilitation programs and incentives for success.

Tangentially, given the importance of Palestinian welfare to Saudi national security, the Kingdom's policies may develop in the direction of supporting social media to provide similar success in encouraging Israelis, Palestinians, and other Arabs to get to know each other at least initially over the Internet while discussing sports, photography, and other common interests—including peace prospects.[45] These days, physical interactions between Palestinians and Israelis tend to be constricted to army checkpoints.[46] At least one Facebook site appears to encourage peaceful coexistence, as Israeli President Shimon Peres and the President of the Palestinian Authority both posted welcome messages.[47] Behold the future of Middle East peace.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that social media are increasingly being used by Arabs and Israelis to promote communication toward peaceful coexistence. Such efforts deserve support as an evolving part of Saudi security policy on social media, particularly if some of the many Israelis now protesting their government's economic deprivation also use social media to help Palestinians under occupation travel to Tel Aviv to protest economic deprivation without access to meaningful careers, decent housing, world-class health care, or education. Ultimately, further development toward well-targeted Saudi-supported social media policies could catalyze profound achievements toward Middle East peace. **JFQ**

NOTES

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