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SAUDI ARABIA: A REGIONAL POWER
FACING INCREASING CHALLENGES

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SAUDI ARABIA: A REGIONAL POWER FACING INCREASING CHALLENGES

Abstract:

Saudi Arabia is a key country in the Middle East region. Not only is it home to nearly a fifth of global oil reserves but it has also traditionally represented a bastion of stability in an unstable neighbourhood. In addition, it has been a reliable ally of the West against mutual enemies at least since the 1950s. That led to a tolerant attitude to the rather appalling human rights situation in the Kingdom, an absolute monarchy where the Sharia is the law of the land. However, things are changing due to the substantial drop in oil prices, a young and potentially restless population, disputes over succession, the conflicts in Syria and Yemen... In addition to the growing realisation that the Saudi regime has played a significant role in the propagation of an ideology, Salafi jihadism, which poses a clear threat in the Middle East and beyond.

Resumen:

Arabia Saudí es un país clave en el Oriente Medio. No solo posee alrededor de la quinta parte de las reservas mundiales de petróleo sino que también ha sido un baluarte de estabilidad en un vecindario inestable, además de un fiel aliado de Occidente contra enemigos comunes al menos desde mediados del siglo XX. Ello condujo a una actitud tolerante ante la lamentable situación de los derechos humanos en el Reino, una monarquía absoluta donde la sharía es la ley. Sin embargo, las cosas están cambiando debido a la importante caída de los precios del petróleo, una población joven y potencialmente inquieta, disputas por la sucesión, los conflictos en Siria y Yemen... A lo que debemos añadir que el régimen saudí ha contribuido de forma significativa a la propagación de una ideología, el salafismo yihadista, que representa una clara amenaza más allá de Oriente Medio.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Wahhabism, Salafi Jihadism, Shia Islam, al-Qaeda, Islamic State.

Palabras clave: Arabia Saudí, Irán, Siria, wahabismo, salafismo yihadista, islam chií, al-Qaeda, Estado Islámico.

***NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

BACKGROUND

Since the establishment of the Saudi state, power in the country has been based on two pillars: The first is the monarchy, which is in the hands of the Al Saud family and passed from Abdelaziz Ibn Saud, who founded modern Saudi Arabia in 1932, to his children by order of birth. The second is the Wahhabi religious establishment,¹ which has been giving religious legitimacy to the Al Saud's political project since the mid-XVIII century and has an extraordinary degree of control over Saudi society. The Al Saud are absolute monarchs who not only gave the country its name but also consider it their personal property and, according to tribal practice, extend patronage to different sectors of society in order to secure consent to their rule. For their part, the Wahhabi sheikhs profess to follow the Islam of the first generations of Muslims, *al-Salaf al-Saleh* (the Pious Ancestors), and reject everything that came afterwards – particularly Shiism and Sufism – as *bid'a* (illegitimate innovation). They also teach that it is a religious obligation for Muslims to unquestionably obey the ruler as long as he implements the laws of God.

Wahhabism dominates in the Najd region, cradle of the Al Saud tribe and location of the capital of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. However, in other regions the population espouses other schools and interpretations of Islam, not only Sunni but also Shiite. Most of the inhabitants of the Hejaz, in the West along the Red Sea coast, adheres to either the Maliki or the Shafei schools of jurisprudence. In the south, Shafeis and Hanbalis live alongside Ismaelites and Zaidis (the latter two groups, Shiites). And the east of the country – where most of its oil is found – is home to Twelver Shiites. All in all, Wahhabis make up less than a quarter of the population. However, due to their alliance with the royal family, Abdelaziz Ibn Saud imposed the Hanbali school of jurisprudence they follow as the official doctrine of the Kingdom and granted Wahhabi clerics control over religious, educational and judicial institutions.

Saudi Arabia started to project itself as a regional power in the 1940s, when oil revenues started to flow in. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was one of the main players in what historian Malcolm Kerr famously dubbed the Arab Cold War, which confronted traditional monarchies and Arab socialist republics; the first bloc was led by Faisal Ibn Abdelaziz Al Saud, first as Crown Prince and prime minister and later as King of Saudi Arabia; the second, by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The instrumentalisation of religion was a central element in the struggle, and Saudi Arabia offered a refuge to members of the Muslim Brotherhood fleeing persecution in Egypt, Iraq and Syria as well as bankrolling their activities in the Arab world and in the West.² In addition, the Saudi state was restructured and even more power

¹ It should be noted that Wahhabis consider that term – which derives from the name of the founder of their sect, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab – derogatory. They prefer “Ahl al-tawhid” (the people who profess God's unity), “Salafis” (those who follow the example of the Pious Ancestors) or “Hanbalis” (because they adhere to the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence).

² For an interesting account of how the Muslim Brotherhood developed their network of mosques and organisations in the West with Saudi funding, see Ian Johnson, *A mosque in Munich: Nazis, CIA and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. The eponymous mosque was established in 1958.

was put in the hands of the Wahhabi sheikhs in the name of fighting communism. They were given total control over education, set up universities and other institutions to promote their ideology, monopolised the official media and issued fatwas (religious rulings) accusing non-Wahhabi Muslims of apostasy.³ The worst affected group was the Shiites, who by some estimates make up nearly a fifth of the Saudi population but are systematically discriminated against and derided as “rawafedh” (“rejectionists”).

The Kingdom’s influence greatly increased after the 1973-74 oil crisis, when the price of its main source of income multiplied by a factor of four. That extraordinary wealth was used to further modernise the country and improve the standard of living of its citizens, but also to increase its international clout. The Saudi regime continued financing groups considered useful to its agenda, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as sponsoring the development of an international network of madrassas, mosques, cultural centres, etc. to propagate its rigorist, Salafi version of Islam. Consequently, Saudi Arabia was a major actor in the so-called “Islamic Awakening” which started in the 1970s and saw Islam become a significant political force in the Muslim world and beyond, sidelining hitherto dominant ideologies such as Nasserism or communism. In the Muslim world Salafis were tolerated by so-called secular regimes because of their emphasis on individual piety, shunning of politics and tacit acceptance of the established order; they were perceived as an attractive alternative to the political Islam of the Muslim Brothers and other Islamists, who wished to subvert the status quo.

However, Salafism is not always quietist, as shown by the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 – a few months after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The leader of the militants who stormed the mosque, Juhayman al-Otaybi, was the son of a respected family of the Najd and former student of then-Grand Mufti Abdel Aziz al-Baaz. He was the product of a Wahhabism which had been influenced by the revolutionary ideology brought to the Kingdom by the Muslim Brothers.⁴ He proclaimed his brother-in-law as the Mahdi⁵ and stated that his goal was to institute a theocracy based on a pure version of Islam in preparation for the apocalypse. Hundreds were killed during the siege, including hostages, security forces and militants – and dozens of surviving militants were publicly beheaded after it was over. The Saudi authorities reacted to the attack by granting Wahhabi clerics even more power over education, the media, policing the public space... Twenty-two years

³ See Jafar Alshayeb, “Governance of Sectarian Diversity in Saudi Arabia”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, February 2013, pp. 3-4. In: <http://www.arab-reform.net/governance-sectarian-diversity-saudi-arabia> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

⁴ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament”. *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2014. In: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

⁵ The Mahdi is a Muslim eschatological figure who will come to rule the world and rid it of evil before the Day of Judgement. According to a hadith, he and his father will share the name of Prophet Mohammed and his own father, hence the fact that Juhayman al-Otaybi’s brother-in-law was called Mohammed Abdullah was interpreted as a sign.

later another product of the same environment, Osama bin Laden, organised the worst terrorist attack in world history; 15 of the 19 perpetrators of that attack were also Saudis.

SAUDI ARABIA AS A REGIONAL POWER

Saudi Arabia has been one of the main players in the Middle East for over half a century, as well as a staunch ally of the West. Its importance for the latter is two-fold: From an economic viewpoint, it has around a fifth of the world's proven reserves of oil; politically, its conservatism made it a useful partner against representatives of anti-Western ideologies such as Pan-Arabism and communism. As a result, Western powers have systematically turned a blind eye to human rights abuses in the country, including the violation of fundamental freedoms, the systematic discrimination of minorities and the guardianship system which relegates women to the legal status of eternal minors. As mentioned above, in the 1950s and 1960s the enemy was Arab socialism. In the 1970s, Sadat's U-turn after Nasser's death and the long and brutal Civil War in Lebanon did much to put an end to dreams of pan-Arab unity, but the Islamic Revolution in Iran brought to the fore a new enemy which promoted militant Shiism, posing a threat to the stability of countries with a Shia majority (notably Iraq and Bahrain) or substantial Shia minorities (i.e. Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia; the case of Yemen, where Shiites are not Twelvers but Zaidis, is slightly different).

The Kingdom's first major foreign engagement was in neighbouring North Yemen in the 1960s, where it supported the semi-mediaeval Mutawakkilite imamate against the Nasserist supporters of the Yemen Arab Republic, backed by Egypt. It was the hottest conflict of the Arab Cold War and has been dubbed Egypt's Vietnam. In the 1980s Saudi Arabia was the main financier of the Afghan mujahidin who battled the Soviet-backed communist regime in Kabul, while the US provided them with weapons. Thousands of Arabs went to Afghanistan to take part in the Jihad against communism, including hundreds of Saudis, strongly encouraged by the Wahhabi sheikhs. The most famous was Osama Bin Laden, who would go on to establish al-Qaeda with some fellow veterans. In the early 1990s, so-called Afghan Arabs returned to their countries of origin and became a significant factor of instability – especially in Algeria, where many were prominent members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in the civil war which left as many as 200,000 dead, but also in Egypt, where an Islamist terror campaign claimed hundreds of lives in the mid-1990s.

Also in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states bankrolled Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the protracted war against Iran out by fears that the Islamic Republic's attempts to export its revolution might find an audience among their Shia population. By the time the war ended in 1988, Iraq was in no position to repay the money it had borrowed and demanded that the debt be forgiven, arguing that it had protected the region from Iranian expansionism. When Kuwait failed to comply, Saddam invaded. King Fahd allowed US and coalition troops to be stationed in the Kingdom to defend it and liberate Kuwait, to the despondency of Wahhabis who considered the presence of "infidel" forces in the land of the two holy mosques a

desecration. They included Osama Bin Laden, who had offered to protect the country with his Arab Afghan veterans. He would later issue a fatwa denouncing what he considered the American occupation of Saudi Arabia⁶ and identify the presence of those troops as one of the motives for the 9/11 attacks.⁷ The US finally relocated its headquarters in the Middle East to Qatar in 2003.

In recent years Saudi Arabia has gone to great lengths to consolidate its place as a regional superpower, prompted by the relative US disengagement from the Middle East and by fears of Iran's ambitions. Last year it was reported that the Kingdom had become the world's largest importer of weapons, spending \$6.46bn.⁸ And it has been using them: In 2011 Saudi troops crossed the bridge to Bahrain to help the authorities suppress a pro-democracy movement by the Shiite majority portrayed as an Iran-backed sectarian insurgency.⁹ Since September 2014 its planes have been taking part in the disappointing US-led campaign against the Islamic State.¹⁰ And in March this year it launched Operation Decisive Storm against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, which continues as the appallingly misnamed Operation Restoring Hope.

The events surrounding the Arab Spring also strained relations among the traditional Sunni forces. On the one hand, the ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Tunisia and, particularly, Egypt revived worries in Saudi Arabia about a competing model of Sunni state with its own agenda and, apparently, less averse to a closer relationship with Iran.¹¹ On the other hand, Qatar's support for the Brotherhood and increasingly independent foreign policy presented a challenge to Saudi leadership of the Gulf region. That led to a messy breakup between Saudi Arabia and the Brotherhood, which was designated a terrorist organisation in the Kingdom, and Saudi support for the coup in Egypt in July 2013.¹² Furthermore, in March

⁶ Osama bin Laden, "Declaration of war against the Americans occupying the land of the Two Holy Places". August 1996. In: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996 (last accessed 10/11/2015).

⁷ Osama bin Laden, "Letter to the American people". November 2002. In: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

⁸ Saudi Arabia is followed by India, which spent \$5.57bn in 2014; China comes in a far third, with \$2.60bn. See Niall McCarthy, "Saudi Arabia has become the world's biggest arms importer". *Forbes*, 10 March 2015. In: www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/03/10/saudi-arabia-has-become-the-worlds-biggest-arms-importer-infographic/ (last accessed 5/11/2015).

⁹ Michael Birnbaum, "For Bahrain protest movement, democratic hopes give way to sectarian concerns", *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2011. In: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/19/AR2011031903478.html> and http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/19/AR2011031903478_2.html (last accessed 11/11/2015).

¹⁰ Deborah Amos, "Saudis grow increasingly critical of the campaign against ISIS". *NPR*, 19 February 2015. In: <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/02/19/387533380/saudis-grow-increasing-critical-of-the-campaign-against-isis> (last accessed 11/11/2015).

¹¹ Ernesto Londoño, "Visit by Egypt's Morsi to Iran reflects foreign policy shift". *The Washington Post*, 27 August 2012. In: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/visit-by-egypts-morsi-to-iran-reflects-foreign-policy-shift/2012/08/27/4baf4b3a-f060-11e1-b74c-84ed55e0300b_story.html (last accessed 11/11/2015).

¹² There is some evidence that the relationship is on the mend. See, for instance, Taylor Luck, "Iran nuclear deal: Why are Saudis wooing the Muslim Brotherhood?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 23 July 2015. In: <http://m.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0723/Iran-nuclear-deal-Why-are-Saudis-wooing-the->

2014 Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha for eight months, until Qatar promised that the Brotherhood would not be allowed to operate from the country and vowed to expel its leaders.¹³

CHALLENGES FACING THE KINGDOM

Despite the favourable outcomes (from a Saudi perspective) in Bahrain and Egypt, the Kingdom faces a series of problems which threaten its stability. They are the result of a combination of structural and contingent factors, including those alluded to above: its succession system, the Wahhabi ideology promoted by the state, the situation in Yemen, the appearance and expansion of the Islamic State... To those we should add the low price of oil, which has had a considerable impact on the Saudi budget. The IMF has even warned that the country might be bankrupt by the end of the decade.¹⁴

The Saudi social contract, based on benefits to citizens in exchange for their acquiescence, is showing signs of strain. There are significant economic disparities, public services are often inadequate and much-needed infrastructure projects are expected to be delayed due to the budget deficit.¹⁵ The Saudi population is young and potentially restless: two-thirds are under 30, 30% of those are unemployed and they are avid users of the social media¹⁶ – which, judging from the fierce suppression of online dissent, is a source of concern for the authorities.¹⁷ Disgruntlement became visible in 2011-12, when thousands of Saudis went down to the streets, not only in the marginalised Shia Eastern Province but also in large towns of the Hejaz such as Jeddah, Ta'if and Tabuk, and even in Riyadh.¹⁸ Demands included political liberalisation, an end to corruption and programmes to tackle employment.^{19,20} The

[Muslim-Brotherhood](#) (last accessed 12/11/2015).

¹³ Ian Black, "Qatar-Gulf deal forces expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood leaders". *The Guardian*, 16 September 2014. In: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/16/qatar-orders-expulsion-exiled-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-leaders> (last accessed 9/11/2015).

¹⁴ Adam Leyland, "Saudi Arabia could be bankrupt within five years, IMF predicts". *The Independent*, 24 October 2015. In: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-could-be-bankrupt-within-five-years-imf-predicts-a6706821.html> (last accessed 9/11/2015).

¹⁵ Matthew Martin, "Saudi Arabia said to delay contractor payments after oil slump". *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 19 October 2015. In: <http://www.businessweekme.com/Bloomberg/news/190/newsid/1330/Saudi-Arabia-Said-to-Delay-Contractor-Payments-After-Oil-Slump> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

¹⁶ "A virtual revolution". *The Economist*, 31 September 2014. In: <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21617064-why-social-media-have-greater-impact-kingdom-elsewhere-virtual> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

¹⁷ For a discussion of the Kingdom's draconian laws on freedom of speech and the cases of some prominent dissidents, see Lara-Zuzan Golesorkhi, "Cases of contention: Activism, social media and law in Saudi Arabia". *Arab Media & Society* 20, Winter 2015. In: <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=859> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

¹⁸ "Saudi police patrol Riyadh ahead of demonstrations". *BBC News*, 11 March 2011. In: <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/saudi-police-patrol-riyadh-ahead-demonstrations> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

¹⁹ "Saudi security breaks up protest, witnesses say". *CNN*, 20 March 2011. In: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/03/20/saudi.arabia.protest> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

regime reacted with a combination of repression, especially against the Shiites, and social benefits amounting to over \$100 billion.^{21,22,23} Furthermore, the Council of Senior Religious Scholars issued a fatwa condemning the demonstrations as “contrary to what Allah Almighty commanded”.²⁴ They eventually petered out, but the problems which provoked them remain.

On the other hand, the question of leadership may soon be coming to a head. Since the death of the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, Abdelaziz Ibn Saud, in 1953, it has been ruled by his eldest living son until his own death (except for Prince Mohammed, who declined to be appointed successor to King Faisal in 1964²⁵). As a result, its rulers have become increasingly old and fragile. King Salman, who ascended to the throne last January, is 79 and widely believed to be suffering from dementia. Many suspect that the country is effectively being ruled by one of his sons, 33-year-old Muhammad ibn Salman, whom he has appointed Deputy Crown Prince (i.e. second in line to the throne) as well as Minister of Defence, Chairman of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company and Chief of the Royal Court. Such unprecedented concentration of power is clearly resented by other branches of the family. Tensions became manifest in September, when a senior Saudi prince who was not named for security reasons circulated two letters calling for a change of leadership and told *The Guardian* about disquiet about the King’s health within the royal family and in wider Saudi society.²⁶

Compounding the discontent is the ongoing military campaign in Yemen, whose architect and public face is Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The country purportedly being supported in the face of Iranian interference is paying a heavy price, with thousands of Yemenis dead – over half of them, civilians – and tens of thousands, injured.²⁷ Although the operation has

²⁰ “Saudi unemployed graduates protest to demand jobs”. *Reuters*, 10 April 2011. In: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/10/us-saudi-protests-idUSTRE73914E20110410#GG0jjHVQmZL2AxsE.97> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²¹ “Saudi Arabia: Arrests for peaceful protest on the rise”. *Human Rights Watch*, 27 March 2011. In: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/27/saudi-arabia-arrests-peaceful-protest-rise> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²² Kevin Sullivan, “Saudi Arabia’s secret Arab Spring”. *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2012. In: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabias-secret-arab-spring-8223550.html> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²³ Donna Abu-Nasr & Zainab Fattah, “Saudi King boosts spending as protests sweep Arab world”. *Bloomberg*, 18 March 2011. In: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-03-18/saudi-arabian-king-abdullah-boosts-spending-as-protests-sweep-arab-world> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²⁴ “A fatwa from the Council of Senior Scholars in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia warning against mass demonstrations”. *Islamopedia Online*, 3 October 2011. In: <http://islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/fatwa-council-senior-scholars-kingdom-saudi-arabia-warning-against-mass-demonstrations> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²⁵ Awadh Al-Badi, “Institutionalising hereditary succession in Saudi Arabia’s political governance system: The Allegiance Commission”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, February 2008, p. 2. In: <http://www.arab-reform.net/institutionalising-hereditary-succession-saudi-arabia%E2%80%99s-political-governance-system-allegiance> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²⁶ Hugh Miles, “Saudi royal calls for regime change in Riyadh”. *The Guardian*, 28 September 2015. In: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/28/saudi-royal-calls-regime-change-letters-leadership-king-salman> (last accessed 6/11/2015).

²⁷ Alessandria Massi, “Yemen crisis: Death toll rises as Saudi Arabia’s allies intensify ground operation”.

succeeded in rolling back the Houthi advance, it also seems to have benefited al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Islamic State.²⁸ In addition, the conflict has caused fatalities among the Saudi soldiers fighting in Yemen and in Saudi Arabia itself, due to Houthi shelling over the border.²⁹ The tremendous human cost and the fact that there is no prospect of a solution has turned many against the war, both in Saudi Arabia and among its more-or-less-willing allies. Prominent Saudi academic Madawi al-Rasheed has described it as “impossible to win”,³⁰ and the position of the young defence minister could soon become untenable.

Another source of concern is Syria, where Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have been funding the Islamist opposition to the Assad regime. It is unclear who is supporting whom, but there is worrying evidence of Saudi backing for any group fighting Bashar al-Assad, including al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front.³¹ Moreover, a small but non-negligible section of the Saudi population is sympathetic to Al-Qaeda and/or Islamic State, which is not surprising given the Wahhabi indoctrination Saudi citizens are subjected to. Many conservative Saudis see in those groups a “purer” form of Islam, free of the Saudi royal family’s corruption and its alliance with infidel Western powers. As a result, and despite the royal decree criminalising those who fight abroad,³² the country is one the main contributors of foreign fighters to IS.³³ The group has perpetrated several attacks inside the Kingdom, mainly against Shia targets, and hundreds of suspected IS members have been arrested.³⁴

The image of the regime in the Muslim world, based to a great extent on its housing the two holiest sites in Islam, Mecca and Medina, has recently suffered two blows: In early September, more than 100 people were killed when a crane crashed onto the Grand Mosque in Mecca; bad weather conditions were blamed. Less than two weeks later, during the annual hajj pilgrimage, a stampede cost the lives of more than 2,000 people according to

International Business Times, 21 October 2015. In: <http://www.ibtimes.com/yemen-crisis-death-toll-rises-saudi-arabias-allies-intensify-ground-operation-2150040> (last accessed 6/11/2015).

²⁸ Kareem Shaheen, “Jihadis likely winners of Saudi Arabia's futile war on Yemen's Houthi rebels”. *The Guardian*, 7 July 2015. In: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/jihadis-likely-winners-of-saudi-arabias-futile-war-on-yemens-houthi-rebels> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

²⁹ “Saudi general killed on Yemen border while ‘defending country’, army says”. *The Guardian*, 27 September 2015. In: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/27/saudi-general-killed-on-yemen-border-while-defending-country-army-says> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

³⁰ Madawi al-Rasheed, “Saudi war in Yemen impossible to win”. *Al-Monitor*, 2 October 2015. In: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/10/saudi-arabia-lose-protracted-war-yemen.html> (last accessed 6/11/2015).

³¹ Gareth Porter, “Obama’s failure on Saudi-Qatari aid to al-Qaeda affiliate”. *Middle East Eye*, 23 May 2015. In: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/obama-s-fail-saudi-qatari-aid-al-qaeda-affiliate-1176814251> (last accessed 8/11/2015).

³² Badr al-Qahtani & Obaid al-Suhaymi, “Saudi King issues royal decree cracking down on terrorism”. *Asharq al-Awsat*, 4 February 2014. In: <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/02/article55328501> (last accessed 12/11/2015).

³³ Federica Cocco, “How many foreign fighters have joined Islamic State?” *The Week*, 24 June 2015. In: <http://www.theweek.co.uk/islamic-state/64120/how-many-foreign-fighters-have-joined-islamic-state> (last accessed 8/11/2015).

³⁴ “Saudi Arabia says arrests 431 Islamic State suspects, thwarts bombings”. *Reuters*, 19 July 2015. In: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/19/us-saudi-security-idUSKCNOPS0GQ20150719#mYtBlLapRAuau0j2.97> (last accessed 8/11/2015).

some reports – although the Saudi authorities have stubbornly kept the official death toll at 769.³⁵ Many of them (at least 465) were Iranian, and Iran has questioned the ability of Saudi Arabia to organise the pilgrimage as well as accusing it of kidnapping its former ambassador to Lebanon, who had done the hajj under a false name and has been missing since the tragedy.³⁶ Needless to say, this has only strained relations between the two countries further.

The reputation of Saudi Arabia has also been tarnished in the West. The long-running campaign in favour of Saudi liberal blogger Raif Badawi has put the spotlight on the lack of freedoms in the country.³⁷ The rise of Islamic State, whose Salafi-Jihadi ideology has much in common with Saudi Wahhabism, has provoked countless memes in the social media making unflattering comparisons (e.g. between the punishments meted out in the Kingdom and those favoured by IS).³⁸ In that regard the case of another Saudi dissenter, young Shiite Ali Mohammed al-Nimr, reportedly sentenced to be beheaded and crucified, has also attracted much unfavourable reporting.³⁹ The appointment of a Saudi as head of a leading UN panel on human rights last September attracted both condemnation and derision.⁴⁰ Moreover, the situation of “British grandfather” Karl Andree, a 74-year old expatriate sentenced to 12 months in jail and 350 lashes after home-brewed alcohol was found in the boot of his car,

³⁵ Jon Gambrell, “Saudi Arabia hajj disaster death toll at least 2,177”. *Associated Press*, 19 October 2015. In: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/578f12d781d04f82a7ccf14f818e9280/saudi-arabia-hajj-disaster-death-toll-least-2110> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

³⁶ Arash Karami, “Mystery continues over Iran's missing ambassador”. *Al-Monitor*, 5 November 2015. In: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/iran-lebanon-ambassador-hajj-stampede.html> (last accessed 10/11/2015).

³⁷ Raif Badawi has recently been granted the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. For more details, see “Saudi blogger Raif Badawi awarded Sakharov human rights prize”. *The Guardian*, 29 October 2015. In: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34667260> (last accessed 9/11/2015).

³⁸ After the Saudi justice minister threatened to sue a Twitter user who compared Saudi Arabia to the Islamic State, the hashtag #SueMeSaudi became trending topic. See: <https://twitter.com/search?q=suemesaudi&src=typd&lang=en> (last accessed 30/11/2015).

³⁹ Ali Mohammed al-Nimr is a nephew of prominent Shiite activist sheikh Nimr Baqr al-Nimr, who is also awaiting execution. He was arrested for taking part in the 2011-2012 mobilisations when he was only 17 and charged with terrorism. His supporters claim that he has been tortured. See Michael E. Miller, “Ali al-Nimr was a boy when thrown in Saudi prison. Now he’s a man, and is sentenced to die”. *The Washington Post*, 7 October 2015. In: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/10/07/ali-al-nimr-was-a-boy-when-thrown-in-saudi-prison-now-hes-a-man-and-is-sentenced-to-die> (last accessed 8/11/2015).

⁴⁰ Christopher Ingraham, “Why one of the world’s worst human rights offenders is leading a U.N. human rights panel”. *The Washington Post*, 28 September 2015. In: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/09/28/why-one-of-the-worlds-worst-human-rights-offenders-is-leading-a-un-human-rights-panel> (last accessed 9/11/2015).

has received much attention in the UK.⁴¹ Needless to say, the role of Saudi Arabia in the spread of Wahhabi Jihadism came up again in the aftermath of the Paris attacks.⁴²

Salman al-Dossary, editor of Saudi-financed, pan-Arab newspaper *Asharq al-Awsat*, has recently published a piece entitled "The media campaign against Saudi Arabia"⁴³ in which he criticises British media reporting on Saudi Arabia as an arrogant attempt to impose Western values on others. Al-Dossary is no radical; indeed, in his piece he explicitly rejects the hypothesis of a Western media conspiracy against his country. However, his trite argument exposes a breach which is not, as he pretends, the West versus the rest, but those who believe in universal human rights (including Saudi dissenters) versus advocates of the subordination of those rights to cultural and religious relativism. Unfortunately, Saudi specificity and, all too often, alleged foreign conspiracies, continue to be the excuses brandished by the authorities to avoid carrying out the sweeping reforms the Kingdom badly needs.

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***NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los *Documentos de Opinión* son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

⁴¹ Kashmiri Gander, "British grandfather Karl Andree faces 350 lashes in Saudi Arabia over 'home-brewed alcohol'". *The Independent*, 13 October 2015. In: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/karl-andree-saudi-arabia-to-punish-british-grandfather-and-cancer-survivor-with-350-lashes-a6691676.html> (last accessed 9 November 2015). Andree has spent a year in prison, but the pressure on the British authorities to raise the case with their Saudi counterparts seems to have spared him the flogging ordeal.

⁴² Angus McDowall, "Saudi Wahhabi dilemma in spotlight after Paris attack". *Reuters*, 17 November 2015. In: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/11/17/us-france-shooting-saudi-militants-idUSKCN0T61JU20151117#6rD4g2tQrqK4aVVC.97> (last accessed 30/11/2015).

⁴³ Salman al-Dossary, "Al-hamla al-i'lamiyya dhid al-sa'udiyya". *Asharq al-Awsat*, 28 October 2015. In: <http://aawsat.com/home/article/484376/%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9> (last accessed 9/11/2015). The piece was republished by other Saudi-financed media, such as the pan-Arab news channel Al-Arabiya.