

## **THE FORGOTTEN UPRISING IN EASTERN SAUDI ARABIA**

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The eastern region of Saudi Arabia has witnessed a deadly cycle of demonstrations, shootings, and detentions for more than two years. While Shia in the east share grievances with the rest of the country, simmering discontent is aggravated by a history of regime discrimination and provincial neglect. To stabilize the region, the regime must address the roots of dissent at both the local and the national levels.

### **Eastern Turmoil**

- Dissent in the Eastern Province traditionally stems from the regime's sectarian discrimination against Shia and economic neglect and political marginalization of the region.
- Shia activists in the east call for truly participatory governance, the release of political prisoners, the establishment of an elected consultative council, and the writing of a constitution, among other demands.
- The regime has responded with a timeworn strategy of handing out economic subsidies, co-opting Shia clerics to dampen the protests, launching a media counteroffensive that inflames sectarianism, and undertaking a campaign of arrests and detentions.
- The regime's crackdown has deepened divisions between its traditional interlocutors among older Shia activists and clerics, and networks of impatient youth who have soured on the pace of reform. While the goals of these youth activists are similar to those of their older counterparts, they prefer street protests to petitions.

### **Recommendations for the Saudi Government**

#### **Take immediate steps to resolve the sectarian and socioeconomic drivers for protests in the east.**

These include removing Saudi troops from Bahrain, releasing all political prisoners, and establishing a commission to investigate the Ministry of Interior's actions in al-Awamiya, an impoverished town that has been a focal point for Shia dissent and the regime's crackdown.

**End the practice of arbitrary arrests and repeal sweeping laws against "sedition."** These excesses have fueled much of the youth-driven anger in the east and elsewhere in the country.

**Empower elected municipal councils across the country to exert greater oversight and executive authority over their budgets.** In the east, these powers will help bolster infrastructure, improve educational facilities, and diversify the economy—all of which are crucial to staving off youth dissent.

#### **Recognize the Shia Jafari legal code and give Shia representation in the Senior Ulema Council.**

In the long term, increasing the diversity of these institutions will help reduce sectarianism in Saudi society.

**Refrain from tolerating portrayals of eastern dissent as evidence of Iranian subversion.** Such depictions fuel a toxic political environment and contribute to the alienation of the younger generation of Shia.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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