Red Alert from Stratfor

Saudi police have reportedly opened gunfire on and launched stun grenades at several hundred protesters today, March 10, who were protesting in the heavily Shiite-populated city of Qatif in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province.

The decision to employ violence in this latest crackdown comes a day before Friday prayers, after which various Saudi opposition groups were planning to rally in the streets. Unrest has been simmering in the Saudi kingdom over the past couple weeks, with mostly Sunni youth, human rights activists and intellectuals in Riyadh and Jeddah campaigning for greater political freedoms, including the call for a constitutional monarchy. A so-called "Day of Rage" of protests across the country has been called for March 11 by Facebook groups Hanyn (Nostalgia) Revolution and the Free Youth Coalition following Friday prayers.

What is most critical to Saudi Arabia, however, is Shiite-driven unrest in the country's Eastern Province. Shiite activists and clerics have become more vocal in recent weeks in expressing their dissent and have been attempting to dodge Saudi security forces. The Saudi regime has been cautious thus far, not wanting to inflame the protests with a violent crackdown but at the same time facing a growing need to demonstrate firm control.

Yet in watching Shiite unrest continue to simmer in the nearby island of Bahrain, the Saudi royals are growing increasingly concerned about the prospect of Shiite uprisings cascading throughout the Persian Gulf region, playing directly into the Iranian strategic interest of destabilizing its U.S.-allied Arab neighbors. By showing a willingness to use force early, the Saudi authorities are likely hoping they will be able to deter people from joining the protests, but such actions could just as easily embolden the protesters.

There is a strong potential for clashes to break out March 11 between Saudi security forces and protesters, particularly in the vital Eastern Province. Saudi authorities have taken tough security measures in the Shiite areas of the country by deploying about 15,000 national guardsmen to thwart the planned demonstrations by attempting
to impose a curfew in critical areas. Energy speculators are already reacting to the heightened tensions in the Persian Gulf region, but unrest in cities like Qatif cuts directly to the source of the threat that is fueling market speculation: The major oil transit pipelines that supply the major oil port of Ras Tanura — the world's largest, with a capacity of 5 million barrels per day — go directly through Qatif.

This is a Red Alert from Stratfor (c) 2011 Reproduced with permission www.stratfor.com