

Gulf Monarchies in a Changing Middle East: Is Spring Far Behind?

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Abstract: More than three after the beginning of the Arab Awakening, it appears that the upheavals have, by and large, left the Gulf monarchies intact. While several dictators have fallen—from Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt and Gaddafi in Libya to Saleh in Yemen—monarchies across the region have shown considerable survival skills. But is this purported resilience likely to last even as the Arab Awakening continues to shake the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, or are the monarchs next in line now that the "presidents for life" have met their demise? This article explores the various ways in which Gulf monarchies have experienced political and social mobilizations associated with the Arab Awakening and then analyzes the characteristics that have allowed these countries to weather the storm, focusing on both pre-existing structural and cultural factors, as well as political responses to the unfolding regional protests.

Despite wide demographic, geographical, economic and geostrategic differences among MENA states, the Arab Awakening can be seen as a truly regional phenomenon that has affected every state in the Middle East, albeit to varying degrees.

The Gulf monarchies—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—are no exception. Since 2011, in some of the Gulf states, political opposition movements no doubt empowered by regional developments, have managed to pose a serious challenge to their respective

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monarchs. These were not, of course, the first opposition movements arising in the Gulf; however, since the Arab Awakening, the sitting governments have found themselves facing a more active and outspoken population. The revolutions in the region gave new hope to the citizens of the Gulf and the local movements seeking real political reforms. This makes it more difficult for the ruling elites to dismiss their opponents as "enemies of the people" rather than reform-supporting activists and politically aware citizens.



Quite naturally, protest in the Gulf has manifested in different ways based on the distinct circumstances, ranging from deep-rooted and massive street protests and socio-political mobilization in Bahrain, to a far more circumscribed internal debate in wealthier and significantly more open societies like Kuwait, to public debate revolving predominantly around Twitter® and other social media outlets in Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

The Gulf monarchy most obviously affected by the Arab Awakening has been Bahrain, where the lessons of the Awakening deeply resonated with the Shiite majority, profoundly dissatisfied with the second-class citizenship status awarded to them under a Sunni-minority government. Beginning with the Bahraini "Day of Rage" on February 14, 2011, and continuing in subsequent months, protesters called

for *inter alia*, an end to discrimination against the Shiite population, greater political participation, and a change in the immigration policies that allow Sunnis to be quickly granted citizenship in a bid to change the demographics of the state. Protesters also demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa (who has held the post since 1971) and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.[1] King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa initially responded to these protests by employing three different tools: harsh repression of the protests, assistance from its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbors, and attempts at co-optation by calling for dialogue with the opposition.

By March, following the failure of the short-lived attempt at dialogue between Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and representatives of the main opposition bloc, al-Wefaq, the government turned to its neighbors, welcoming both the $10 billion assistance package for Bahrain and the joint GCC Peninsula Shield force, tasked with guarding strategic sites in order to free up Bahraini security forces.[2] Such forces subsequently focused on crushing internal dissent by implementing curfews, arresting activists, instituting checkpoints, violently putting down political demonstrations, and banning future protests.

In July, as protests continued, the government established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) as a tool to diffuse unrest and gradually ease into—or provide the image of easing into—a path of reform. The commission, tasked with investigating the unrest of February and March 2011, also proposed 26 recommendations. While the government claims to have implemented 18 of them, an independent report by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) claimed that Bahrain had only fully complied with three, while completely falling short of tackling "accountability for officials responsible for torture and severe human rights violations, the release of political prisoners, prevention of sectarian incitement and the relaxation of censorship and controls on free expression."[3] The opposition also appears largely unimpressed by the pace and magnitude of reforms, although they did join a new dialogue between the government and opposition parties that began in February 2013.[4] Such ongoing activities, however, have not put an end to repressive tactics implemented by the regime. In January 2013, for example, the highest court in Bahrain upheld jail sentences against 20 individuals from the opposition, including eight life sentences.[5] Meanwhile, Bahrain also

[1] BICI, "Report," pp. 65-66. See also Frederik Richter, "Protester killed in Bahrain 'Day of Rage'—witnesses," *Reuters*, Feb. 14, 2011.

[2] "Saudi soldiers sent into Bahrain," Al Jazeera, March 15, 2011; and BICI, "Report," p. 134.

[3] "One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report," Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), Nov. 2012; Frederic Wehrey, "The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy," The *Carnegie Papers*, Feb. 2013, p. 20.

[4] Al Jazeera, "Deaths reported after Bahrain protests," Feb. 15, 2013.

[5] Associated Press, "Bahrain upholds activists' life sentences," The *Guardian*, Jan. 7, 2013.

solidified its ties with Saudi Arabia and its GCC neighbors, with recent reports asserting that it will host a permanent base for the Peninsula Shield Force.[6]

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has been following events in Bahrain closely for reasons that go beyond the strong ties between the al-Khalifa and al-Saud families. The KSA deeply fears a regime change in Bahrain, as this could lead to diminished Saudi influence. It also could pave the way for Iran, its main regional foe, to increase its power in the island. Additionally, the KSA and Bahrain, the two most authoritarian countries in the Gulf,[7] have historically played reactionary roles in the region. Finally, Saudi Arabia is concerned that successful demonstrations in Bahrain could trigger larger protests within the Kingdom. Thus far, however, protests have been limited to the KSA's Shiite minority—about ten percent of the population located primarily in the oil-rich eastern province. Marred by violence and repression, these mobilizations also have been the largest demonstrations in the province since 1979.[8] Much like their Bahraini counterparts, the Shiite community in Saudi Arabia took to the streets to demand, *inter alia*, equal rights and increased representation in the public sector.

Along with the crackdown on the protests and the arrest of social and political activists such as the founders of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, the ruling family also engaged in measures to appease the population. While repressing the protests, Saudi Arabia boosted subsidies and other types of benefits,[9] while implementing reforms (albeit at a glacial pace). For instance, women will be able to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections, without the permission of their male guardians;[10] while, more recently, in January 2013, thirty Saudi women were appointed to the unelected and advisory Shura Council.[11]

Oman

Another country that has been only partially affected by the Arab Awakening is Oman, where the awakening spurred small demonstrations against rising prices of basic goods and corruption between January and May 2011. But such protests were never meant to challenge frontally the Sultan and never became a fully-fledged threat to the leadership. This likely was due to the policies implemented by the government, characterized by both crowd-control measures and arrests intended to diffuse the protests—as of February 2013, more than 40 activists

6 "GCC force 'plans headquarters in Bahrain,'" *Gulf News*, Apr. 16, 2013.

7 *Democracy Index 2011,* Economist Intelligence Unit.

8 "Saudi Arabia detains two in restive Shi'ite minority district," *Reuters,* April 30, 2013.

9 Ulf Laessing, "Saudi king back home, orders $37 billion handouts," *Reuters*, Feb. 23, 2011; Jason Benham, "Saudi king orders more handouts, security boost," *Reuters*, March 18, 2011.

10 Associated Press, "Saudi women allowed to run and vote in municipal elections by 2015," The *National*, Dec. 29, 2011.

11 Asharq Al-Awsat, "Newly appointed Shura Council member hails King Abdullah's 'historic' decree," Jan. 12, 2013.

remained in prison[12]—and by economic and political cooptation. The Sultan, for example, increased private sector minimum wage, unemployment benefits, student stipends and pensions; created a Public Authority for Consumer Protection to monitor prices, profiteering and quality; abolished the Ministry of National Economy (largely seen as corrupt); established a National Audit Committee and held the first ever municipal elections in December 2012.[13] In addition, in March 2011, the GCC stepped in and agreed to provide $10 billion for housing and infrastructure in order to generate jobs.

Kuwait

A certain degree of unrest also occurred in Kuwait; the most politically open of the GCC monarchies and home to a parliament with the broadest power. In Kuwait, unrest centered around two main issues: the status and rights of the *bedoun*, stateless individuals denied citizenship by Kuwait, and the issue of parliamentary reforms and political rights.

The *bedoun* protests, which started in February 2011, generally have been met by direct repression, even though the government also implemented a few "goodwill" measures. For example, the government pledged (so far in vain) that the Executive Committee for Illegal Residents, established to administer the everyday affairs of the Bedoun, would aim to nationalize 4,000 Bedoons per year. [14] In parallel, beginning in March 2011, there have been political mobilizations concerning issues the National Assembly (Kuwait's version of Parliament), political reform, and corruption. By December 2011, some success had been achieved with the resignation of the Prime Minister and the later dissolution of the Assembly. However, after the opposition won 34 of the 50 seats in the February 2012 elections, the Constitution Court found the newly-elected body unconstitutional and reinstated the one that had been dissolved in December. Even though the Emir later dissolved the reinstated assembly and called for new elections, popular dissatisfaction remained high. This led to a mass boycott of the December 2012 elections, which registered a 39 percent turnout rate—a steep drop from 60 percent the prior February. Since then, the largely pro-regime Parliament has been contested on the streets, with large protests calling for its early dissolution.[15] In March 2013, the main Kuwaiti opposition groups—including trade and student unions and youth movements—officially established an alliance named the Opposition Coalition. In

[12] Elizabeth Dickinson, "A calm Arab summer follows Oman's Arab spring," The *National*, Feb. 11, 2013.
[13] James Worrall, "Oman: The 'Forgotten' Corner of the Arab Spring," *Middle East Policy*, Fall 2012, pp. 106-7; and Sunil K. Vaidya, "Good initial turnout for Oman elections," *Gulf News*, Dec. 22, 2012.
[14] Agence France Presse, "Naturalisation of stateless gets first nod," *Gulf News*, Feb. 7, 2013; "Govt. firm on pledge to naturalize 4,000 bedoun," *Arab Times,* Apr. 15, 2013.
[15] "Kuwaiti Protesters Blocked From Rallying Outside Parliament," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 2012.

addition, they strengthened calls to dissolve the parliament, and demanded a new electoral law, as well as the creation of a multi-party system with the ultimate goal of a full parliamentary system.

Three years after an even-handed report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, few of its recommendations have been implemented. A proposal by authorities in September to relaunch a national dialogue was given a frosty reception by Bahrain's Shia-led opposition that has said it will boycott parliamentary elections planned for November 2014 (the first since protests rocked the country in 2011) saying the vote would cement "absolute authoritarianism" in the Sunni-ruled kingdom.[16]

United Arab Emirates

Unlike the other countries described thus far, the Arab Awakening never arrived in the UAE, at least not in the form of widespread demonstrations. The government responded to regional changes by implementing certain reform and financial measures, likely in an effort to preempt any unrest. In February 2011, for example, the leadership increased the size of the electoral college, the body of Emiratis permitted to vote and elect half of the members of the Federal National Council, which has, however, no legislative power (the other half is appointed).[17] The following month the government issued 5.7 billion UAE dirhams (approximately $1.55 billion) to improve water and electricity networks for poorer areas in the country.

At the same time, the government also initiated a campaign of arresting and cracking down activists. In March and May 2011, for example, the government dissolved the elected boards of the Jurists' and Teachers' Associations following their support for the reform measures espoused in a petition submitted the prior month.[18] Numerous activists were also detained, particularly those connected to *Al Islah,* the UAE's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which increased in scale since the summer or 2012. The arrests culminated in March 2013 with the beginning of a trial of ninety-four activists charged with plotting to overthrow the state. In addition, in November 2012, stricter laws regulating freedom of expression on the Internet were passed, making detentions easier by criminalizing acts against "the reputation of the stature of the state or any of its institutions, its President, the Vice President, any of the Rulers of the Emirates, their Crown Princes, the Deputy

[16] "Shia opposition to boycott Bahrain polls," Al-Jazeera, Oct.. 11, 2014.
[17] Not all Emiratis are permitted to vote. According to lists released in July 2011, only 47,444 individuals from Abu Dhabi are a part of the Electoral College although its Emirati population at the end of that year was estimated at about 438,000. "Abu Dhabi population soars in 2005-2011," *Emirates 24/7 News*, Dec. 6, 2012; see Nour Malas, "UAE Citizens Petition Rulers for Elected Parliament," *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2011; and WAM, "UAE Electoral College list to be out on Monday," *Emirates 24/7 News*, July 10, 2011.
[18] "Ministry dissolves Teachers' Association board," The *National*, May 3, 2011.

Rulers, the national flag, the national anthem, the emblem of the state or any of its symbols."[19]

In the UAE there seems to be an increased sensitivity concerning the local Muslim Brotherhood's activities. In a telling declaration in March 2012, the Chief of Police of Dubai, who has been outspoken against the Brotherhood, stated that their "next step is to make Gulf governments figurehead bodies only without actual ruling"—reflecting at least in part the sentiment of the political elites.[20] Such a threat perception could lead potentially to conflict with certain GCC colleagues, specifically Qatar, whose ties with the Egyptian and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood appear to be flourishing.

Qatar

Despite these episodes, however, the Arab Awakening has not led to serious social or political protests in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The same holds true for Qatar, which has experienced little internal unrest. The country has responded to changing regional dynamics by announcing some minimal reforms—plans to hold elections for the Shura Council in the second half of 2013, for example. In addition, Qatar has increased social control, both by periodically arresting activists, including the poet Mohammad al-Ajami, who allegedly insulted the Emir and was given a life sentence (later reduced to 15 years), and by introducing a new and stricter media law that prohibits the publication of material deemed offensive to the ruling family or which endangers state security.[21]

While weathering the storm of the revolutions domestically, Qatar has been involved in the Arab Awakening abroad, actively playing a role, for example, in the process that led to the fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya, by supporting anti-Assad opposition forces in Syria, and by providing economic assistance to post-revolutionary Egypt until the ousting of the Morsi government in the summer of 2013. Also, the Qatari-owned TV channel, Al-Jazeera, acquired additional status and influence for its coverage of the demonstrations across the Middle East.

This brief overview underscores that the Gulf monarchy countries have been only partially affected by the unfolding regional dynamics. The opposition was relatively quiet in both Qatar and the UAE, while in Oman and Saudi Arabia internal protests were relatively isolated and contained early on. The ongoing unrest in Kuwait reflects a long tradition of civil activism that started long before the rest of the region erupted. Only Bahrain experienced widespread turmoil, fed by

[19] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Academic freedom and UAE funding," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 25, 2013.

[20] Roula Khalaf and Simeon Kerr, "Dubai police chief slams Brotherhood," *Financial Times*, March 27, 2012. For further comments by the Police Chief, see Wafa Issa, "Muslim Brotherhood invading UAE social media: police chief," The *National*, March 9, 2012; and "Dubai police chief warns of Muslim Brotherhood, Iran threat," *Reuters*, July 26, 2012.

[21] Delm Alex Delmar-Morgan, "Bahrain, Saudis to Clinch Ties," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2012.

sectarian and political discrimination. Yet, Saudi military intervention, under the banner of the Gulf Cooperation Council, has, at least to date, ended the state of emergency.[22] Even so, internal unrest has occurred in each of the Gulf monarchies raising the question of why no socio-political demonstrations have escalated into fully-fledged attempts to change the political regime.

A New Prism: 'Absolutism and Resilience'[23] of the Gulf Monarchies

Understanding the reasons behind the Gulf monarchies' endurance has long been a crucial puzzle for Middle Eastern scholars and political scientists alike. Needless to say, the gradual demise of the "Arab Presidents for Life"[24] has made this phenomenon even more intriguing and timely, generating several explanations.

A prominent school of thought focuses on the nature of the regimes in the Persian Gulf as the key explanatory variable in accounting for political stability. Political Scientist Michael Herb famously labeled the systems of government in the Gulf as "dynastic monarchies." He used this term for the prominent role that the extended ruling family—beyond the monarch—plays in the country's economic, social and political life, resulting in the *de facto* "monopolizing of key offices in the state."[25] According to Herb, by directly controlling high government posts and running an extensive network of patronage, dynastic monarchies are able to hold firmly the reins of the state, while minimizing the chances for other strong and independent centers of power emerging.

In addition, monarchies are described as possessing an additional layer of domestic and regional legitimacy stemming from the cultural, religious, tribal, and clan-based or sectarian ties they can claim to the lands they rule. Moreover, despite significant processes of urbanization in recent decades, the tribal nature of Gulf societies is still strong, making it easier for the royal families to maintain direct contact with their subjects through tribal mechanisms. These political assets are strengthened further by the religious legitimacy claimed by some of the regimes—whether as descendants of the Prophet's tribe, like Bahrain's royal family, or as guardians of the holiest places of Islam, like the Saudi royal household.

Consequently, the Gulf monarchs' claims to power are perceived as more legitimate and less arbitrary than those advanced by their secular and authoritarian counterparts, the "presidents for life." Yet this additional layer of legitimacy could be characterized as more perceived than real, as hereditary monarchies are not

[22]Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest," *New York Times*, March 14, 2011; Kareem Fahim and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Arabia Seeks Union of Monarchies in Region," *New York Times*, May 14, 2012.

23 "Absolutism and Resilience" refers, of course, to Lisa Anderson's seminal work on the subject, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1991.

[24] Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[25] Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democratic Prospects in the Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 235-236.

necessarily an old, traditional Middle Eastern institution, at least not in their current form, which derives from a more modern process of state formation influenced by Western colonial and post-colonial power games.[26] Moreover, regional monarchs also have benefitted from the terrible reputation that preceded the old regional dictators. In comparison, Gulf monarchies were perceived as better off politically as well as economically, while Gulf monarchs were seen as far less vicious, eliciting not just fear but also respect and credibility. [27]

These strong monarchies, perhaps paradoxically, have been more inclined than their republican counterparts to allow for top-down political liberalization. Not fearing the results of elections, these regimes can allow for the creation of cosmetic political representation, as well as nominal political pluralism, as long as it does not challenge the ruler's claim to power.[28] Lisa Anderson, prominent regional specialist and political scientist, explains that monarchies can better cope with societal pluralism, as "they are better able to serve as the central focus in balancing, manipulating, and controlling societies characterized by such vertical cleavages, particularly when those are reinforced by 'antiquity of blood.'"[29] In turn, greater liberalization and societal pluralism, even in its co-opted form, can produce three important and self-reinforcing effects: to deflect internal dissent, to increase chances of co-optation, and to fragment the existing opposition. In turn, this allows the monarchies to simultaneously enjoy greater popularity as well as greater control on internal opposition.

However, explanations focusing on this perceived additional legitimacy of the Gulf monarchies risk over-emphasizing the degree of popularity of these regimes. Marc Lynch, for example, rightly notes that "it is difficult to reconcile the idea of monarchical legitimacy with the tightly controlled media, carefully cultivated personality cults, and brutally policed 'red lines' which generally characterize such regimes."[30] Similarly, one should be cautious about exaggerating the impact of top-down political liberalization. Indeed, societies across the Gulf can hardly claim to have pursued substantial democratization at a dramatically faster pace than the regional "Presidents for life." Before the Arab Awakening began, and with the notable exception of Kuwait, all other Gulf monarchies were ranked by Freedom House as "not free" in terms of political rights, civil liberties and freedom of the press, receiving the same "score" as Tunisia under Ben Ali, Egypt under Mubarak,

[26] See Lisa Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East," *Political Science Quarterly*, Spring 1991.

[27] Daniel Brumberg, "Sustaining Mechanics of Arab Autocracies," *Foreign Policy,* Dec. 19, 2012; Michael Herb, "Monarchism Matters," *Foreign Policy,* Nov. 26, 2012.

[28] Russell E. Lucas, "Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2004), pp. 103-119.

[29] Lisa Anderson quote in Russell E. Lucas, "Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type," p. 107.

[30] Marc Lynch, "Does Arab monarchy matter?" *Foreign Policy,* Aug. 31, 2012.

or Libya under Gaddafi.[31] Reporters without Borders also assigned scores within a similar range to Gulf monarchs and "Presidents for life," with the important exceptions of Kuwait and the UAE.[32] The Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index confirms the notion that, overall, Gulf monarchies could not claim additional legitimacy based on greater internal democracy, again with the exception of Kuwait.

Finally, just as claims concerning the Gulf monarchies' greater legitimacy and popularity are often exaggerated, these countries' capacity to divide-and-rule, as well as to repress risks, are overestimated also. It should not be forgotten that Mubarak, Gaddafi, or Ben Ali were masters of conspiring, dividing, and oppressing.

This is not to discount completely the hypothesis that the Gulf monarchies' stability is enhanced by their greater legitimacy, attempts at political liberalization, as well as through their better control and co-optation skills. Rather, it is to suggest that, by itself, this framework is insufficient to understand the GCC countries' resilience during the Arab Awakening.

It is impossible to grasp the lesser impact and better reaction to the regional turmoil without taking into consideration these countries' greater capabilities to provide financial incentives and co-optation. The vast literature on *rentier* states—those deriving the majority of their national income from the exploitation of their natural resources—emphasizes how such governments can rely on their riches to control the economy, to create and sustain large patronage networks, and to distribute benefits, subsidies and wealth in order to diffuse internal dissent.[33]

Within the GCC monarchies, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—with their large wealth and natural resources—comply with this definition. And even "poorer" GCC countries like Oman and Bahrain rely heavily on profits derived from natural resources. In turn, the rosy economic picture gives the Gulf monarchies two main advantages: weaker economic grievances and stronger tools to confront them.

First, most Gulf citizens simply have not faced the same economic hardships that those in other MENA states have experienced. They enjoy larger average income per capita than all the other MENA states,[34] with significantly lower poverty and inequality scores.[35] Also, according to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development index—which measures not only wealth but also standards of living—in 2010, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait

[31] See Freedom in the World 2010, Freedom House, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world.

[32] "Europe Falls From its Pedestal, No Respite in the Dictatorships," Press Freedom Index 2010, *Reporters Without Borders*, http://en.rsf.org/spip.php?page=classement&id_rubrique=1034.

[33] Gregory Gause III, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 4 (2011), p. 85.

[34] See "GNI per capita ranking, Atlas method and PPP based, 2011," World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GNI-per-capita-Atlas-and-PPP-table.

[35] See "Headcount (k greater than or equal to 3), percentage population in poverty (% of population)," Human Development Data for the Arab States, United Nations Development Program, http://www.arab-hdr.org/data/indicators/2012-68.aspx.

ranked as the first five most developed countries in the MENA region (with Oman in 7th place, preceded by Lebanon).[36] Although the Arab Awakening went far beyond the economic sphere, certainly economic grievances and social inequality did contribute to fueling the regional protests. Within the Gulf, economic stability and widespread privileges softened the tone, as well as the magnitude and the sense of urgency, of the protests.

Secondly, after demonstrations broke out, Gulf monarchies heavily employed their riches to boost internal subsidies. They also relied on the GCC to increase economic assistance to Bahrain and Oman (as well as to Jordan in order to curb its own revolutionary forces). In addition to the $10 billion in aid that was given to Bahrain and Oman by the GCC, there are other examples of post-Arab Awakening "buy-offs." These include the staggering $130 billion in public subsidies package announced by Saudi Arabia in February 2011, featuring salary raises, unemployment benefits, student bonuses, as well as new housing projects and more jobs.[37]

As noted earlier, cooptation to deal with dissent was employed in conjunction with a mix of repression, political negotiation and reform, and reliance on foreign policy, which largely managed to keep discontent at bay.

Still, it is hard to attribute the monarchs' luck solely to oil. For example, Libya's oil did not protect Gaddafi, while resource-poor countries like Morocco and Jordan have managed to weather the storm. However, the combination of greater resources, greater control and cooptation skills do shed light on these monarchies' resilience, especially when combined with a third crucial factor—external geopolitical alliances. Indeed, geopolitics can play an important role in explaining stability in the Gulf. The fortunate combination of significant natural resources and a geostrategically significant location have, over time, produced solid alliances between the Gulf monarchies and foreign powers, especially the United States.

Certainly foreign powers' interests in the MENA region extend well beyond the Gulf. Indeed, some of the regimes that experienced fully-fledged revolutions also had powerful foreign backers. France and Italy both had extensive ties with Libya; Mubarak enjoyed cozy relations with both Europe and the United States; and, over the years, France had maintained cordial ties with the Ben Ali regime. In fact, French Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie had to quit her post after coming under scrutiny for urging her country to support the Tunisian dictator when the Arab Awakening first began.[38]

Yet, none of these relations and interests were as strategic, or as likely to be compromised by regime change, as the United States' interest in preserving

[36] "Human Development Index (HDI)," Human Development data for the Arab States, United Nations Development Program, http://www.arab-hdr.org/data/indicators/2012-54.aspx.

[37] Jon B. Alterman, "Slippery Choices," Gulf Analysis Paper, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 2012.

[38] "French Foreign Minister Alliot-Marie quits over Tunisia," *BBC News,* Feb. 27, 2011.

"stability" in the Gulf. In addition to oil dependence, U.S. military presence in the MENA region is also anchored in the Gulf, with the headquarters of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) in Bahrain, the forward headquarters of the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) in Qatar, as well as other military installations distributed along the Gulf. It is, therefore, no surprise that the demonstrations in Bahrain elicited far cooler support than those in Tunisia or Egypt, as the direct stakes for the United States were much higher.

Foreign backing has represented a real force multiplier and has also significantly reduced international pressure. The media coverage and international outrage elicited by the repression of the protests in Bahrain, for example, pale in comparison to the outcries regarding those in Tunisia or Egypt.

In addition to foreign alliances, Gulf monarchies also can rely on a powerful political, economic, and military tool to deal with internal protests: the Gulf Cooperation Council. GCC members came together and relied on the organization to manage what they saw as a collective threat to their stability. Consequently, the GCC boosted economic assistance to the weaker members of the alliance—Bahrain and Oman. It also stepped up its involvement in regional diplomacy, for example in the Yemen case, and also strengthened its foreign policy stance, by openly siding against Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria.[39] Showing far more teeth than the Arab League, GCC members also increased internal military coordination and used force when faced with real stability challenges to the regime. This was true in Bahrain, for example. In turn, this revealed a two-fold agenda, that is, to ensure continuity and the status quo within the Gulf and to step up and advocate for external change in the remainder of the region, provided such change suited the political and security needs of the Gulf.[40] In turn, this explains the GCC's desire to provide assistance to Jordan and to ensure the monarchy's survival, while simultaneously calling for the demise of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Overall—despite some foreign policy differences—GCC members agreed on the importance of keeping the Awakening away from the Gulf, as well as on the idea that the GCC would be a crucial tool in preserving stability. Late 2011 invitations to the kingdoms of Morocco and Jordan to join the organization, along with discussions of "unions" and plans to deepen cooperation, should all be seen as moves to strengthen the GCC as a collective security tool to deal with external as well as internal threats.[41]

The reasons behind the Gulf monarchies' resilience seem to go beyond the structural dimension and the monarchies' greater legitimacy and control. Rather, they depend upon a mix of wealth, favorable geostrategic alliances, strong regional coordination, and mutual assistance.

[39] Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, "Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States," Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, May 17, 2012, p. 22.
[40] Silvia Colombo, "The GCC and the Arab Spring: A Tale of Double Standards," The *International Spectator*, December 2012, p. 8.
[41] Mehran Kamrava, "The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Led Counterrevolution," Orbis, Winter 2012, p. 26.

Looking Ahead: Spring in the Gulf

The Gulf monarchies have not been immune to the Arab Awakening, but they have been able to weather the regional storm. Even the weakest link in the Persian Gulf chain, Bahrain, has survived while, for other Gulf States like Qatar, the regional turmoil resulted in a temporary boost to their regional power and status. Similarly, Gulf Scholar Professor Abdelkhaleq Abdullah notes that the UAE and Dubai specifically have benefitted economically from the regional upheaval. The turmoil shows that there is no "alternative safe haven for business and businessmen in the Middle East and North Africa."[42] Even so, the Arab Awakening has brought the issue of political, social, and economic reforms to the forefront within the Gulf, yet has kept a reformist, rather than revolutionary, connotation.[43]

But even though the Gulf monarchies are stable at the moment, at least compared to the rest of the region, this does not mean that the status quo should be taken for granted.

First, societies across the region are increasingly better educated, more connected—both between each other and globally. They are more involved in the public sphere of their respective countries. Demands for significant social and political change, therefore, are not likely to disappear. Citizens in the Gulf are plugged into this new reality and their desire to see real change cannot be coopted *ad infinitum*. In the words of Fatima Ayub, a journalist and policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, "The old social contracts wherein patronage systems, flush with resource wealth, buttressed loyalty to leaders are slowly eroding. In their place is emerging a new awareness that citizens are political actors rather than passive subjects."[44]

Second, in addition to the existence of a more active and empowered citizenship, Gulf monarchies also have to deal with several important challenges, including tackling internal corruption and providing meaningful integration into the workforce for both male and female populations, especially for the large youth sector.

Third, as formerly authoritarian regimes become more open and free, the "demonstration effect" may embolden internal opposition. If, while ruthless dictators like Gaddafi or Assad managed to make even the worst monarch look good, the rise of more accountable governments and popular leaders may tarnish the luster of the monarchies.

Fourth, and perhaps more significantly, the entire system built on subsidies and cooptation is inherently unstable because it depends on foreign demands for oil and high oil prices. As such, any drop in oil prices could affect the governments' capability to keep up with its system of bribes and subsidies.

42 Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, "Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States," p. 20.

43 Abdullah, "Repercussions of the Arab Spring on GCC States," p. 30.

44 Fatima Ayub, "What Does The Gulf Think About The Arab Awakening?" European Council on Foreign Relations, April 10, 2013.

Paradoxically, the recent sharp increase in public spending may, in the long-term, spell trouble for the monarchies. The case of Saudi Arabia is especially enlightening on this matter; after having additionally raised the bar of expectations by distributing large sums of wealth, it is legitimate to ask how long the Saudis can keep up with this trend, especially given the Kingdom's high fertility rates and significant youth bulge. And one must wonder about what may happen when it becomes clear that such high expenses cannot be sustained. Jon B. Alterman, Middle East policy expert, highlights another paradox regarding this situation: "The GCC states need increasingly high oil prices to promote domestic security. Yet, those higher prices tend to abet Iranian misbehavior, which threatens their external security."[45] Therefore, while the GCC monarchies need high oil prices to support the cooptation system, those same high oil prices also strengthen their regional foe, Iran.

All these elements illustrate how important it is for these countries to listen to internal as well as regional calls for change before the reformist wave becomes a revolutionary tsunami. Accordingly, concrete and tangible political and social liberalization and substantial reforms seem the only way out of this predicament. Otherwise, a number of Gulf monarchies risk following in the steps of the Bahraini royal family, now ruling over an embittered, angry population that has largely stopped believing in the regime's promises. Some countries, like Kuwait, seem to be more open to facing the music, conveying, both domestically and to the world, that the monarchs are prepared to adapt to the rapidly changing region. Given the context, this seems the smart way to go about business.



[45] Jon B. Alterman, "Slippery Choices."