



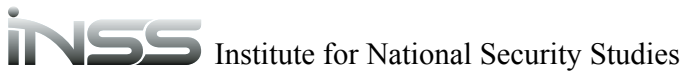
Between Resilience and Revolution: Regime Stability in the Gulf Monarchies

Yoel Guzansky
with Miriam Goldman and Elise Steinberg

Memorandum
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July 2019

**בין חוסן למהפכה:
יציבות המשטרים המלוכניים במפרץ**

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Executive Summary

The rise of the Arab republics in the mid-20th century spurred new challenges for the monarchies of the region, particularly those of the Gulf. These challenges resurfaced during the Arab Spring, particularly as waves of protest struck Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Defying expectations, these regimes demonstrated greater resilience than the Arab republics whose emergence had brought their survivability into question in the first place. While the monarchies of the Gulf indeed face structural challenges, they have thus far adapted to rapid regional change with relative success. In contrast, the rulers of Arab republics, such as Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, all fell when the regional turmoil struck their borders. In Libya and Yemen the overthrow of leadership certainly failed to secure domestic peace.

The Arab protest movements' leadership shared a common demographic composition: it was young, urban and educated. In previous decades, that very demographic made up the anti-monarchical movement in the Middle Eastern countries that eventually adopted a republican form of government, e.g., Egypt in 1952, Iraq in 1958 and Iran in 1979. The spread of protests in early 2011 highlighted the congruent sociopolitical tensions that pervaded the wealthy Gulf monarchies: a sizeable youth bloc that suffered from unemployment, lack of equal opportunity and limited options for political participation or reform. Despite the monarchies' unique governance structure, these same factors spurred protest within their borders all the same.

As detailed in this study, the protests that eventuated within the monarchies unfolded differently in each state, much in accordance with the characteristics unique to each country. These ranged from demonstrations and riots, some of which devolved into violence (e.g., in Bahrain and Oman), to Internet-based campaigns and other less confrontational tactics. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the Shiite minority demonstrated and submitted petitions,

whereas in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) petitions were submitted but no demonstrations manifested. Qatar was notable more for its response to other countries' unrest than for facing its own. All, however, responded with some form of repression, this too spanning a spectrum. Some states' police forces heavily intervened in the protests, as in Bahrain, while others, such as Qatar, acted preemptively, arresting those who spoke out against the ruling family or in favor of civil unrest before any protest could erupt.

On balance, the Gulf States, with the exception of Bahrain, largely managed to avoid the scale of unrest seen in most of the wider region's republics. In fact, in maintaining stability amid the upheavals, several Gulf monarchs consolidated their domestic, regional and international power. The military intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), be it in Bahrain during the protests or in Yemen currently, is representative of a new, more proactive approach toward moderating the influences of the Arab Spring in general, and Iran in particular, and navigating outcomes in accordance with their individual and joint interests. Yet the purpose of this study is not to examine the impact of the opposition on foreign policy, but rather to explain how the Gulf states remained stable enough that they had the latitude to bring their foreign policies into effect. Especially when compared to the region's republics, whose leaders were forced out and that devolved into conflict, questions concerning monarchical survival beckon answers – answers that are addressed extensively throughout this work.

Introduction

The Revolution that Has Yet to Manifest

In 2011, the unrest that spread throughout the Middle East profoundly shook the region in a way that is unprecedented in recent history. In its wake, several regimes fell almost instantaneously, others devolved into civil war, while others are still floundering to this very day. However, and perhaps surprisingly, none of the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf fell, and only one – that in Bahrain – faced, and still in many respects faces, a real threat of destabilization. Analysis of the stability of the monarchies in the Middle East, and the stability of those in the Arabian Gulf in particular, dates back to well before the Arab Spring, but the Gulf monarchies' demonstration of unique staying power invites closer scrutiny.

Arguably, the period of time since the onset of the Arab Spring and its aftershocks – still short of a decade – is not sufficient to adequately evaluate outcomes, particularly as in some parts of the region, the upheaval that began then is still very much ongoing or, worse, has devolved into civil war. An examination of these relatively recent and ongoing phenomena is nevertheless necessary at this juncture so that a framework of analysis can be established and outcomes thus far can be explained, specifically as they relate to the exceptional resilience of the region's monarchies when compared to its republics. The quandary of Arab monarchical survival must be assessed in order to deduce whether the common trends in the monarchies' governance contribute to regime stability or whether they are a function of inherent monarchical stability. Moreover, because these regimes have, in the past, faced similar threats to their stability and survived, such an analysis serves to further the studies thereof, weighing recent realities against established methods of analysis of the resilience of the Gulf monarchies. This will not

only add to the tome of literature on the survival of the Arab monarchies, looking at old explanations in a new context, but will also assist in a practical sense, providing renewed mechanisms to gauge the Arab monarchies' ability to withstand potential, and likely, shocks to their stability going forward.

The Arab Spring did not strike the Gulf's monarchies – Qatar, the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain – with the same intensity it did the rest of the region.¹ Rather, any opposition was significantly inhibited in each monarchy for various reasons. Whereas the broader regional protest movement marked in part a search for increased economic opportunity, Qatari citizens, for example, who enjoy the highest per capita income in the world, had little economic reason to protest. The preventive measures of the Emirates regime, stamping out political Islamic components of civil society before any significant protest emerged, in large part prevented the movement from invading its borders. Oman, which uniquely faces a crisis of succession with no apparent heir to its sultan, experienced a short and localized period of disquiet to which it responded with a “carrot-and-stick” approach, implementing limited reforms in parallel with oppressive measures. In Saudi Arabia, the discontent primarily centered around the kingdom's largely Shiite Eastern Province, yet some broader, albeit much less impactful, protests via social networks were met with a more pronounced carrot-and-stick approach: financial incentivization and strict controls over any dissent. Conversely, the protests and regime responses that manifested in Kuwait reflect the country's long tradition of civil activism that preceded the Arab Spring. As noted above, only Bahrain truly faced a wave of protest similar to those that struck the borders of the region's republics. That movement, coupled with the continued threats to its stability, is fueled by the country's unique demographic composition and its resulting sectarian tensions.

Academic predictions of the end of monarchic regimes can be traced back half a century, to when studies examining the anachronistic nature of the monarchy in an age of progress and change emerged, claiming that the regimes would not manage to withstand the tide of modernization. In his 1968 book, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, renowned scholar Samuel Huntington coined the term “King's Dilemma” to describe the challenge the monarch faces in advancing the state without endangering the throne. In order to retain control, he argued, the king stems the tide of progress to a level that does not threaten the crown, simultaneously implementing repressive policies so as to deter any potential uprising. Huntington deemed this balancing act

untenable, and went so far as to predict that traditional monarchies would become extinct, and if they were to survive in any capacity, would become constitutional in nature.² The survival of the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia, whose only real constitution is the Quran, certainly confounds Huntington's paradigm.

But Saudi Arabia and its monarchic neighbors have not entirely resisted modernization. Rather, as Daniel Lerner explains, modernization is in fact inherent to state development. Pre-dating Huntington in the late 1950s, Lerner predicted that most Middle Eastern societies would progress through a number of specific stages: urbanization, literacy, exposure to mass media and, finally, a desire to participate in political life. He claimed that these social processes, particularly in larger cities, along with the growing power of global mass media, would eventually generate an important change in the mindset of the middle class: as the middle class would become more educated and aware, it would eventually demand its right to actively participate in political life.³ While Lerner was indeed correct in that the Middle East did undergo those exact stages, his predictions concerning society asserting its political rights have largely not held true vis-à-vis the Gulf monarchies – at least, not until now.

In the 1970s, Fred Halliday envisaged that social movements – particularly nationalism and anti-imperialism – would increasingly gain influence in the Gulf states to the extent that they would eventually spur regime change.⁴ Halliday's book, *Arabia without Sultans*, largely based on comprehensive research of the Dhofar region of Oman, presented an analysis of the country's underdeveloped population and predicted a successful armed uprising there. On the basis of that case study, Halliday suggested there would be widespread domino-like political change among the Gulf monarchies. The Middle East is indeed susceptible to the domino effect, as demonstrated by the recent turmoil, but Halliday's predictions, centered around Oman, failed to take into account the fact that under comparable constraints, e.g., the Arab Spring protests, each monarchy could, and would, escape the consequences for different reasons.

Such pessimistic forecasts regarding the resilience of the Gulf monarchies have not emanated only from the academic arena. Practitioners have similarly foreseen the end of the Arab monarchy. In 1979, for example, US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia James Akins sent a telegram to the White House, reporting

that “Saudis are now talking almost openly about the end of the House of Saud, and the inevitability – even the desirability – of a bloody revolution.”⁵

The fact that these predictions have thus far largely not been realized has not prevented researchers from continuing to claim that the Gulf monarchies have little chance of survival.⁶ More recently, at the outset of the Arab upheavals, several experts on the Gulf, among them Christopher Davidson, warned that the region’s monarchies are living on borrowed time and that “most of them will fall within two to five years.”⁷ While the factors underlying the supposed “inevitable” collapse of the monarchies still exist, so do the monarchies. In light of this fact alone, their survival must be examined anew, taking into account the current circumstances and constraints under which they continue to survive and, arguably, thrive.

In assessing outcomes of the Arab upheavals, much research has pointed to the obvious dividing line between regime types: as noted, the region’s republics largely underwent regime change while its monarchies remained stable. On that basis, some experts have claimed that the Gulf monarchies are exceptionally stable and that the resilience they have displayed thus far indicates that they will remain so going forward.⁸ Such extrapolations, however, are insufficiently supported. In the study of international relations, it is rare that any theoretical or example-based research purports to predict future outcomes. Rather, it looks to explain historical and recent events, deriving lessons that may apply in a future context. Therefore, in order to measure whether the monarchy is a more resilient form of government in the region and whether it will demonstrate staying power going forward, this body of research must adequately differentiate between the pressures that exist in each state independently and more deeply probe the potential for political change to penetrate their individual borders. Political change generally results from change(s) in the established social norms, in both the public mindset and the state’s informal institutions. Such changes are already occurring in the Gulf monarchies, primarily due to educational and technological advancements that provide access to information as never before.⁹

Although such advancements have manifested differently in the societies and economies of each of the Gulf monarchies,¹⁰ the six states still retain fundamental similarities¹¹ and, perhaps more importantly, a profound dependence on one another to preserve domestic stability. This mutual dependence is so foundational that it is commonly inferred that the Gulf

monarchies are only as strong as their weakest link. Thus, regime change in one state is likely to create a domino effect that could eventually endanger even the most stable among the royal houses. The monarchies are well aware of the dangerous entanglements that accompany this tight regional network. Nevertheless, many of these inter-state and other intra-state threats have been ineffectively dealt with or completely ignored by the leadership. Hence, in attempting to explain regime resilience, these externalities are identified and assessed in terms of their potential to upset domestic and regional balances. Many of the pressures that the region's republics ultimately submitted to continue to exist in the Gulf, although they may not be evident at first glance.

Economic advancement and diversification currently dominate the Gulf monarch's agenda. Considering the protests were in large part a revolt against the lack of economic opportunities in the region, this policy pivot is largely thought to minimize the potential of social unrest, and therefore further advance regime stability. Yet, there are scholars – Huntington among them – who hold that this agenda does not necessarily strengthen the monarchy and, in fact, may serve to weaken it. This has not proven to be the case thus far, but there is certainly a tenable argument that the monarchies have shifted focus toward economic advancement out of a fear of impending instability, and that although financial incentivization and economic diversification efforts have certainly stemmed the tide of social and political unrest, they may not necessarily prove sufficient to do so in perpetuity.

This is not to say that the future of the Gulf monarchy is to be determined by the structural elements inherent in the regime type rather than the regimes' policies and practices. Rather, it is a balancing of these factors – the governance structure and the agency executed within that framework – that determine monarchic stability. For example, the efficient use of oil profits, quelling of protests, co-optation (e.g., including protest leaders within the establishment) and reliance on regional and international support all play definitive roles in determining outcomes in the Gulf monarchies. However, the interplay of the monarchical structure and agency are still very much subject to the tide of wider regional and international events. Therefore, the overall decline in the oil price since mid-2014 and the waves of social unrest regionally have sufficiently served to revive doubt in the Gulf monarchy's ability to continue to exchange socioeconomic benefits for sociopolitical quiet. It is at this crossroads that issues surrounding monarchical survival are examined.

This memorandum proceeds as follows: Chapter 1 further explores outcomes of the 2011 uprisings in the republics versus the monarchies, outlining both how they impacted, and continue to impact, the latter, as well as how both regime types responded to the protest movement both within and beyond their borders. Chapter 2 surveys the unique social, political and economic structures of the Gulf monarchies, capturing the essence of why the governance framework and its policies exist as they do. Chapters 3-7 look at the sources of instability common among the monarchies, focusing specifically on oil dependency, militant Sunni Islam, the demographic challenges of an active Shiite opposition, challenges of succession and the age of virtual protest.

Chapter 8 then takes a step back, examining Rentier State Theory (RST), a foundational international relations theory explaining the survival of the Arab monarchies, and its place today. Taking into account the characteristics of the Gulf monarchy discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the challenges it faces addressed in Chapters 3-7, this chapter provides empirical evidence for the theory's continued standing on various grounds, but also exposes where RST is no longer adequate to chart outcomes in the post-Arab Spring era. To support this thesis, Chapters 9-12 therefore expand the discussion to include additional factors – the power of religion, tradition and government as tools of legitimacy, the efficacy of oppression and intimidation to deter social unrest, the influence of external regional and international support to maintain the status quo and the strength of the propagandized “fifth column” narrative – that shed further light on the survival of the monarchies to date. Taken together, these additional factors serve to bolster, yet simultaneously question, the limited ground upon which Rentier State Theory claims to wholly explain the survival of the monarchies. Perhaps more importantly, they provide more plausible explanations for the demonstrated resilience of the Gulf monarchies throughout and since the upheavals. The thorough examination of these contributing factors comes at a vital juncture at which the fundamental reasons for the survival of the Arab monarchy must be reassessed, and perhaps reexplained.

PART I

Is the Arabian Gulf Headed toward Its Own Arab Spring?

Chapter 1

The Arab Spring in the GCC – Background

The protests that took place within the monarchies unfolded differently in each state, much in accordance with the characteristics unique to each country. They ranged from demonstrations and riots, some of which devolved into violence (e.g., in Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait) to Internet-based campaigns and other less confrontational tactics. What they had in common was that all regimes responded with some form of repression, this too manifesting across a spectrum. Some states' police forces heavily intervened in protests, as in Bahrain, while others, such as Qatar, acted preemptively, arresting those who spoke out against the ruling family or in favor of civil unrest before any protest could erupt.

Bahrain

Bahrain was the only Gulf state to experience protests that matched the scale and scope of those in the regional republics. The opposition, which initially crossed sectarian lines, soon evolved into an almost exclusively Shiite movement. It broadly called for an end of rule by minority. Shiite dissatisfaction, however, was not limited to the political sphere. Rather, it was intimately linked to perceptions of sweeping socioeconomic inequality. In response, Sunnis feared that a democratization process that would reduce the ruling Al-Khalifa dynasty's power would lead to a tyranny of the majority, as observed in Iraq post-Saddam Hussein.

Once opposition protests turned violent, the Al-Khalifa declared a state of emergency. Operating under the Peninsula Shield Force (the military arm of the GCC), Saudi troops and Emirati police entered Bahrain, quashing the disquiet by brute force. Simultaneously, political discourse efforts failed: though the government claimed that most of the recommendations issued by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry were implemented,¹ in fact, they were not. This failure stemmed primarily from the influence of

hardline elements on either side, including within the royal family, which was divided between those who supported engagement with the opposition, led by the crown prince, and those who preferred an aggressive response, led by the prime minister.

The prime minister's preference seems to have won out and there remains but a small chance for a sustainable political compromise in Bahrain. After the most prominent Shiite political party, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, boycotted the 2014 elections, the government cracked down on its activity and leadership: the December 2014 arrest of Ali Salman, the party's secretary-general, the June 2016 revocation of spiritual leader Isa Qassim's citizenship and the ban of the group itself the following month illustrate the situation.² When viewed in the context of previous years, during which the Al-Wefaq and its supporters, for example, were permitted to organize large-scale marches, even along the main Budaiya Highway, the politically divisive impact of the regime's action against Al-Wefaq is further pronounced. Thus, while the invocation of Peninsula Shield Force quelled any immediate threat to the Al-Khalifas' reign, the regime's refusal to implement meaningful reform and its crackdown on opposition activity has distanced the island's ruling elite from a vast segment of its population.

In allowing this status quo to remain, Bahrain has failed to rid itself of the vestiges of the unrest. Small-scale protests, roadblocks and low-level militancy, the latter of which is linked to Iran, still continue. The scale and scope of this activity of course ebbs and flows, with natural spikes around anniversary dates and in response to specific government action. In January 2017, for example, the announcement that three Shiite prisoners found guilty of killing Bahraini and Emirati policemen in a 2014 IED attack were to be executed³ spurred several days of opposition unrest. The day before the slated executions, Al-Ashtar Brigades, a Bahrain-based Shiite militant group, shot and wounded a policeman in Bani Jamra.⁴ In its statement claiming responsibility, the group warned the government against proceeding with the executions, directly linking its own actions to those of the government. This pervasive anti-establishment activity, which is encouraged and backed by Iran, indicates that the royal house continues to face obstacles in restoring its legitimacy among great swaths of the Bahraini population. Considering the political opposition undercurrent, as well as the country's continued economic woes that prompted another bailout from its neighbors,⁵ it is reasonable

to assert that Bahrain, of all the Gulf states, remains most vulnerable to a domestic uprising.

Oman

In Oman, the dissent manifested in various locations within the country, including in the major urban centers of Muscat, Sohar and Salalah. James Worrall notes that the Omani protesters' demands touched on all three aspects of civic life: economic, social and political. These included calls for greater job opportunities, increased wages, improved educational opportunities (e.g., a new public university), expanded powers of the Shura Council and an end to corruption, extending to the removal of ministers allegedly using their positions to enhance their personal wealth.⁶ At no point though did they demand that Sultan Qaboos be ousted. Several public demonstrations even emphasized loyalty to the long-ruling sultan. In March 2011, the Omani protest movement went so far as to issue a public apology for its previous acts of violence.⁷

This outcome is attributable in part to Qaboos's carrot-and-stick approach. Alongside his commands to the police to intervene in protests⁸ and arrest individuals accused of "insulting the sultan,"⁹ Qaboos meaningfully addressed several of the movement's key demands. This was demonstrated by his abolishing the allegedly corrupt Ministry of National Economy, expanding the legislative power of the Shura Council, establishing a Public Authority for Consumer Protection and a second public university and pledging to create new jobs. He also increased the public spending budget and held the first municipal elections.¹⁰ Importantly, in assessing the success of the sultan's policies, it should be noted that due to Oman's majority Ibadi Muslim population, sectarian issues do not dominate the discourse as they do in countries such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Although mass protests ceased in 2011, not all of Qaboos's promises have been fulfilled, such as those related to combating unemployment. However, the authorities are seen to be attempting to address this issue through economic diversification plans (see Chapter 3). Oman, which is not an OPEC member state, has neither the reserves nor the revenue of its neighbors. The fact that it and Bahrain were the beneficiaries of a 2011 GCC aid package intended for job creation worth US\$10 billion each indicated not only the region's acknowledgement of the direct impact of unemployment on political protest but the potential impact of such domestic protest on the wider region.¹¹ The

sultanate has been slow to implement the intended reforms of the package, and its dwindling assets and liquidity buffers may very well require a bailout similar to the one Bahrain received in 2018.¹²

Though renewed large-scale uprising may not be imminent (small-scale demonstrations recurred in 2017-2018), the Omani population as well as regional and global governments are concerned about the potential for instability in a post-Qaboos Oman, a scenario addressed in Chapter 6. Given his lack of a pre-determined heir, part of this angst relates to fears that after the sultan dies, the tide of reform will screech to a halt and, worse, potentially reverse.

Kuwait

Kuwait is a sparsely populated country that is rich in resources. Considered the most democratic of the six Gulf monarchies, its political climate allows, to some degree, for criticism of the government (though not of the emir). This is an indication that Kuwaiti citizens have high expectations of their rulers. The ruling Al-Sabah family's motto is "first among equals." The January 2017 execution of a royal family member for the murder of the emir's nephew served to emphasize that no Kuwaiti is above the law. However, the power vested in the emir to dissolve parliament is a strong check on the legislature's power. Despite limitations on that power under Article 107 of the constitution, which stipulates that "dissolution of the Assembly may not be repeated for the same reasons,"¹³ such dissolution is relatively common.

The opposition in Kuwait, similar to that of the broader region, includes a young population seeking representation, Islamist movements, such as the local Muslim Brotherhood offshoot and Salafism, as well as tribal leaders often based in the periphery. Additionally, the *bedoun*,¹⁴ or stateless Arabs, represent a sector of society that does not have the right to vote, which spurred its own protest movement in February 2011, demonstrating for the first time to demand equal rights and citizenship. In the following months, broader protests condemning corruption and calling for the resignation of the prime minister also emerged. These continued into 2012 along with other forms of civil unrest, including labor strikes and an election boycott.

The UAE

In the Emirates, the government reacted to petitions for reform by simply arresting dozens of activists and bloggers, banning the activity of international

NGOs and taking over civil society organizations. In April and May 2011, for example, the elected boards of the Jurists' and Teachers' Associations were replaced with state-appointed representatives after the former supported calls for reform. However, in tandem with this harsh response, the UAE did in fact implement several measures of reform. For example, in February 2011, even before the petition with 133 signatures calling for an elected parliament with legislative power was issued, the government increased the size of the appointed electoral college responsible for electing half of the Federal National Council's membership¹⁵ and allocated funds for the improvement of water and electricity infrastructures; these moves were clearly taken to quell the incoming tide of protest.

Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, political protest is illegal and the imprisonment of activists, even of those moderates calling for a transition to a constitutional monarchy, is not uncommon. The Quran is the kingdom's only constitution, and the idea that it be supplemented with an additional code of law is deemed blasphemous. This is, in fact, one of the main factors that distinguishes the Al-Saud monarchy from its neighbors, which have all adopted a constitutional format to varying extents. Saudi Arabia also has a much larger population – around 30 million people – of whom, in this respect like its neighbors, a large proportion are foreign workers. There are also notable economic disparities between its various regions, especially between urban and rural areas.

Apart from a “Day of Rage” in March 2011 – which only a single person attended, and he was subsequently arrested – demonstrations were confined to Shiite population centers in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province. The movement gained traction shortly after the protests in Bahrain began and turned out to be the most intense and prolonged unrest in the kingdom's history, with the possible exception of the 1979 protests. As in Bahrain, the protests were accompanied by low-level militant activity of more radical elements within the Shiite opposition, which remain active today. Although the majority of these incidents involve small-scale weaponry fired primarily at security personnel, in 2017 there was a notable rise in such activity, targeting an expanded range of victims, including judges and other public figures, with increased sophistication, e.g., projectile attacks.

In response, the Saudi monarchy undertook a multipronged carrot-and-stick approach. In conjunction with a security-oriented response involving

crackdowns and arrests, enticing economic packages were unveiled, and social reform, primarily relating to women's rights, was introduced. Focusing on gender-based reform allowed for the appearance of concrete change without having to address more fundamental issues, such as attitudes among the religious establishment toward major components of society, women and Shiite Muslims, for instance. Such foundational issues that underlie the surface reform instituted by the monarchy thus remain unaddressed.

The kingdom's unveiling of Vision 2030, a sweeping and ambitious plan to diversify the economy, signals that it intends to concretely meet the changing times head on. This reform plan, combined with strict laws banning social disobedience, and the horrifying results of domestic revolt in Syria, Libya and Yemen, help to deter political opposition activity in the kingdom. Yet, the monarchy continues to toe a fine line between reform and preservation of its religious legitimacy, understanding that opposition can also rise from elements that perceive the Al-Saud as betraying its religiously rooted identity.

Qatar

For Qatar, social, political and economic stability throughout the protest period seemed to have encouraged its external intervention in regional conflicts. Qatar avoided civil unrest in large part because, as the country with one of the highest GDP per capita in the world, its population enjoys a particularly high standard of living. Qatar's wealth from natural gas is spread among a very small civilian population of approximately 300,000 nationals (the other 2,400,000 residents are foreign workers).¹⁶ In the common interest of maintaining a high standard of living, political divisiveness and unrest are therefore limited among the country's citizens, the main political concern uniting them being that the low proportion of nationals within the population will eventually mean a loss of the Qatari identity.

This is not to imply that Qatari citizens were not moved by the Arab Spring. Even small-scale opposition activity along protest lines, however, was met by a forceful government response. A case in point: Mohammed al Ajami was arrested after publishing a poem declaring solidarity with Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began: "We are all Tunisia in the face of the repressive elite." Al Ajami was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2012 for insulting then-Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani. The following year, his sentence was reduced to 15 years and in 2016 he was pardoned by

the current emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. Qatari-owned *Al Jazeera*'s coverage of al Ajami's case was almost nonexistent, a further example of the repression endemic in Qatari social life.¹⁷ Importantly, such harsh responses usually fail to stop the criticism altogether, but do help relegate the opposition to the virtual space where anonymity is available but where the impact also tends to be substantially more limited.

On balance, the Gulf states, with the exception of Bahrain, largely managed to avoid the scale of unrest that reached the wider region's republics. In fact, in maintaining stability amid the upheaval, several Gulf monarchs consolidated their domestic, regional and international power. The GCC's military intervention, be it in Bahrain or Yemen, is representative of a new, more proactive approach toward moderating the influences of the Arab uprisings in general, and Iran in particular, and navigating outcomes in accordance with their individual and joint interests. Yet the purpose of this memorandum is not to examine the impact of the Arab Spring on foreign policy, but rather to explain how the Gulf states remained stable enough in the first place that they had the latitude to bring those foreign policies into effect. Especially when compared to the region's republics, whose leaders were forced out and that devolved into conflict, questions concerning monarchical survival beckon answers – and these are addressed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

The Unique Social, Political and Economic Structures of the Gulf Monarchies

The Arab Gulf monarchies do not resemble the monarchic regimes found elsewhere. The majority of the world's remaining monarchies are constitutional in effect: the royal families are accorded a symbolic and ceremonial role to preserve heritage and tradition, while their governments operate as democratic republics.¹ These monarchs neither interfere with democratic processes nor obstruct the will of the people, expressed in the form of free and fair elections. In contrast, the Gulf monarchies are absolute: the monarch and the royal family hold all political, executive and sometimes legislative power. The regime may have one single head of state, as in Oman, or incorporate several members of a royal family, as in the other five monarchies.

Although confrontation between the Arab monarchy and other loci of power, such as an elected body, are not unprecedented, to date none has seriously threatened the absolute rule of the royal houses. The Kuwaiti National Assembly, for example, is quite influential relative to those of other Gulf states, and although it exercises its power broadly, even so far as to force cabinet resignations, the emir is still vested by the constitution with the ultimate power to dissolve the entire Assembly, albeit with some restrictions. It is important to note that such tensions between the monarchy and legislative bodies pre-date the upheavals, though they were notably exacerbated throughout the period of regional protest.

Moreover, despite how relatively new these regimes are – the formal establishment and independence of most of the Gulf monarchies took place in the 20th century – their legitimacy largely derives from cultural tradition. While the notion of royalty – the title of king, for example – is a modern concept, the Gulf region historically fell under dynastic tribal rule. The Gulf states adapted their traditional concepts of leadership to modern structures

and titles. A fundamental key to this system, discussed further in Chapter 9, is the implementation of certain policies and practices that are essential to regime legitimacy.

Of course, the cornerstone of the Arab monarchy's legitimacy is its dependency on oil and gas. While that dependency governs the Gulf's foreign relations due to the Western tendency to build relations with the monarchs based on their available resources and ignore other important aspects of Gulf societies,² the domestic structural impact of these resources is perhaps more vital to state survival, particularly given that they are a key component in the establishment and preservation of the extensive social contracts that form the relationship between ruler and ruled. This involves, to varying degrees, the government's provision of socioeconomic, often "cradle-to-grave," benefits in exchange for citizens' abandonment of political participation and decision-making power.

This social contract is foundational to regime legitimacy. To bolster that legitimacy, the regime additionally clearly defines its relationship with society through policies of institutionalization, exclusion, co-optation and repression. These are often implemented alongside promises of reform, which tend to be gradually implemented over time as a means of limiting opposition.

This gradualism is a key component of the reform process. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah decided in September 2012 that women would be appointed to the *Majlis al-Shura*, an advisory body albeit without any real authority,³ and implemented the decision in January 2013.⁴ At that time, he also granted female citizens over age 18 the right to vote and serve in municipal government. The first election including these amendments took place in December 2015, a year after Abdullah's death.⁵ Additional policies surrounded steady efforts to increase employment opportunities for women in specific sectors of the workforce. As of 2015, women comprise over 50 percent of university and graduate students, but only a much smaller percentage of the workforce.⁶ Abdullah also inaugurated the first co-educational university, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which remains controversial on religious grounds. His successor and half-brother, the presiding King Salman, continued this reform path, most notably by delivering on his June 2017 pronouncement that women would be permitted to obtain driving licenses the following year.

Although these policies certainly mark progress, their implementation has not allowed women in Saudi Arabia to realize their newfound rights. Many women who attempted to drive before the ban was lifted, such as Loujain al Hathloul, remain in prison, allegedly facing various forms of torture.⁷ Extensive gender segregation has contributed to low voter participation among women, such as in the 2015 municipal elections, in which female candidates were restricted from campaigning publicly in front of male audiences. To present their agendas to male voters, female candidates' messages had to be presented by male family members. Perhaps more importantly, the underlying guardianship system, which requires that a woman receives permission from a male guardian to marry, obtain a passport, travel abroad and so forth has yet to be substantially addressed. In February 2019, the kingdom announced that it would study how the guardianship system is being abused, but failed to specify whether action would be taken beyond the study to limit or end the system.⁸

Saudi Arabia is cautiously navigating its way toward policy reform, attempting to balance the interests of those who support and those who oppose this newly adopted path. This gradual process is entwined with equal efforts to address the concerns of the religious establishment, a dual agenda that has historically had success, as in the case of girls' education. Amira Iffat al-Thunaiyan, wife of then-Crown Prince and later King Faisal, established the first private girls' school in 1956. It and other such private schools' success led to the creation of the General Presidency for Girls' Education in 1960 and, ultimately, the establishment of a public school system for girls.⁹ To address religious opposition, control of this body was initially granted to the religious establishment, where it remained until its March 2002 merger with the Ministry of Education.¹⁰ The establishment of female teacher training programs alongside the expansion of girls' education further limited religious opposition by ensuring that gender segregation was preserved at all levels, including among instructors.¹¹

For King Abdullah in particular, the focus on women's rights as a core element of policy reform served an ulterior purpose as well: it provided the appearance of progress and an engaged government in the aftermath of the upheavals, without having to address some of the country's deeper and more controversial challenges, among them the aforementioned guardianship system or the blatant discrimination against the Shiite population, particularly within the formal education system. The October 2018 murder of journalist

Jamal Khashoggi highlighted some of the women's and minority rights issues that continue to dominate Saudi society, leading many to declare that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was never a reformer, and that his portraying himself as one has only been a shield to hide his despotism from the West.¹²

Importantly, the calculated social progress in Saudi Arabia has not altered the longstanding social contract that underpins the stability of the Al-Saud regime, as it does all of the Gulf monarchies. Conversely, reform that addresses public sector spending is not subject to the same measure of state control. The exchange of cradle-to-grave benefits for limited political participation is directly threatened when the former is altered. In other words, although the Gulf rulers retain almost total control, the caveat of "almost" is key. The population harnesses a form of political power by requiring economic incentives to ensure its continued absence from matters of the state.

In addition to balancing the social contract, Gulf monarchs are constrained by the obligation to share power internally with other members of their royal families.¹³ The sole exception is Oman, where the sultan shares only very limited power with his relatives, having neither children nor a designated successor. While there is a path of succession in place, the lack of a tried system is cause for apprehension among regional and international actors about a post-Qaboos era, particularly given the important intermediary role that Oman plays regionally. The succession factor is just one of several that could prove to be a source of instability in the Gulf states, addressed in detail, along with various other factors, in Chapter 6.

PART II

Sources of Instability among the Gulf Monarchies

Chapter 3

Dependency on Oil

Oil and natural gas exports comprise the lion's share of the Gulf monarchies' revenue and, due to high prices in recent decades, enabled their economies to run surpluses and amass significant foreign currency reserves. In turn, the monarchs siphoned off large sums of money to their citizens, upping those sums during the early stages of the protests. However, since 2014 some of these surpluses have turned into deficits, and reserves are eroding as the prevailing social contract hangs in the balance.¹ Saudi Arabia's foreign currency reserves, for example, fell from US\$724 billion at the end of 2014 to below \$500 billion in April 2017² and have remained below \$500 billion since.³ With decreased revenue and increased costs, the current socioeconomic framework is unsustainable.

The kingdom is desperately trying to narrow its budgetary gaps. In its projected 2017 budget, for example, Saudi Arabia reduced its deficit to 198 billion riyals (SAR, approximately 7.7 percent of GDP; equivalent to some \$53b) from 297 billion SAR in 2016 (11.5 percent of GDP) and 362 billion SAR in 2015 (about 15 percent of GDP). In addition to increasing non-oil revenue (including via the GCC-wide 5 percent value added tax [VAT] implemented in 2018 and a monthly fee for expatriate workers), the 2017 budget was based on a four-year plan to achieve a balanced budget by 2020. Notably, non-oil revenue was projected to rise to 212 billion SAR in 2017, following a steady rise from 101 billion in 2012 and 199 billion in 2016.⁴ However, in December 2018, the projected budget partially reversed course, increasing spending in order to spur the economy in the face of weak growth patterns over the last several years.⁵ Similarly, Oman projected a lower deficit, curbed spending and increased revenue in its 2017 budget plan, while also forecasting a rise in non-oil revenue of 4.7 percent.⁶ At the present time, the

Omani economy is in deep trouble, leading some forecasters to predict that it will be the next pressure point in the Gulf in need of a bailout.⁷

The 2014 crash in oil prices from US\$115 per barrel to \$40-50 p/b that lasted over four years (oil prices rose to approximately \$70 p/b in the second quarter of 2019) was caused in great part by OPEC's initial refusal to come to an agreement regarding a reduction in total production.⁸ Saudi Arabia supported stalling the agreement, erroneously predicting that low oil prices would eliminate competitors in North America, and that high shale production costs would keep demand for its oil steady. In addition, the Saudis falsely hoped that low oil prices would stem the West's shift toward other, more economical and environmentally sound energy sources and consumption habits. An additional major political goal in stalling an OPEC agreement was to keep Iran's revenue from its expanded production distribution of oil as low as possible as implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA – otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal) and the removal of financial sanctions came into effect.⁹

In 2015, as the financial tolls of the depressed oil prices set in, all of the Gulf monarchies gradually reduced their subsidy programs. Kuwait was the first to do so, in January, initially cutting diesel and kerosene subsidies (later cutting petrol, electricity and water subsidies as well), and tying prices to the international market as determined by a designated subsidy committee on a monthly basis. Debate surrounding the issue was particularly intense, in part due to Kuwait's relative political openness and the broad powers granted to its parliament elaborated in Chapter 1. Some parliamentary members, for example, proposed that the cuts be postponed for several months so that a study verifying their necessity could be commissioned. In response and underlining the government's assertiveness in the matter, the Kuwaiti oil minister promised that the government would consider recommendations from elected officials, but that the cuts were already implemented following a thorough study.¹⁰ In the aftermath of subsidy cuts, calls for exemptions and reports that companies illegally raised prices arose and remained inadequately addressed.¹¹

The Kuwaiti subsidy cuts remained in effect, and by August 2015 the UAE followed suit. The Emirates government determined that gasoline and diesel prices would be tied to the global market and set each month by a committee comprised of select ministry officials, as well as the CEOs of ADNOC Distribution and Emirates National Oil Company (ENOC). As in

Kuwait, the minister of energy emphasized that “the decision to deregulate fuel prices [was] taken based on in-depth studies that fully demonstrate its long term economic, social and environmental impact.”¹²

By the beginning of 2016, after closely observing the results in Kuwait and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman joined their neighbors and implemented subsidy cuts. Alongside a relatively shocking budget deficit for 2015, Saudi Arabia presented plans for gradual reductions in subsidies for water, electricity and petroleum over five years, with Saudi Aramco selling at the new prices immediately.¹³ Bahrain also implemented gradual increases over four years, from January 2016, in the prices of diesel, kerosene and jet fuel. In an indirect message to its National Assembly, whose members had a history of boycotting sessions of parliament and successfully delaying plans to cut fuel subsidies at that time, the minister of energy likewise stressed that the decision came only after studies analyzing the existing subsidies and government spending were complete.¹⁴ Oman similarly implemented cuts to subsidies in early 2016, leaving Qatar the sole holdout – that is, until May 2016.

Successful implementation of these cuts does not mean that they did not face opposition. Due to this opposition, at times, the new policies required recalibration, but never total reversal. For example, the Kuwaiti judiciary issued a court decision in October 2016, less than two months after subsidies on petrol were initially cut, reversing the policy due to procedural flaws. In response, and in the face of opposition from its National Assembly, the government negotiated an agreement with a number of parliamentary members in which Kuwaiti citizens would receive a certain amount of free petrol per month to offset the higher costs; this did not apply to expatriates, who were required to pay the new prices.¹⁵ More overtly, in Oman in February 2017, protests manifested, for the first time since 2011, demanding that the government impose a cap on fuel prices, which had soared by nearly 75 percent. This demand was subsequently met and regular petrol was capped at 186 Omani *baisa*,¹⁶ though diesel and super petrol continued to fluctuate.¹⁷

While demonstrating that subsidy cuts remain a sensitive issue, these events should be viewed in contrast to historical attempts by Arab countries to reduce subsidies, particularly on energy or basic food items, that often triggered opposition significant enough to force governments to completely reverse course. Relatively speaking, the reactions to these cuts were quite muted. Considering the importance of the social contract in legitimizing the

regime and providing citizens with the high standards of living to which they had long become accustomed, questions concerning the lack of political movement over these policy changes are relevant. Although protest fatigue is a possible explanation for Bahrain, it certainly does not hold sway in the other Gulf monarchies.

As noted earlier, subsidy cuts were implemented gradually. In addition to initial cuts on select items, public discussion concerning the planned policy changes began well before implementation and largely proceeded only after comprehensive studies as to their impact were conducted. In that way, governments first familiarized citizens with the idea of subsidy cuts and then emphasized further down the line that action was only being taken after their necessity and ramifications were fully known. In addition, the rhetoric that surrounded the cuts exposed how the existing subsidies had other economic costs, such as reduced efficiency in the private sector. Gulf economies suffer from higher unemployment, lower rates of productivity and bloated bureaucracies, which altogether serve to limit private sector initiatives and require massive budgeting for public spending. Thus, for example, the World Bank has ranked Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Bahrain relatively low on the “Ease of Doing Business” index, at 102, 94, 66 and 63, respectively. The UAE’s ranking stands out in this regard, at 26.¹⁸

Experts agree that entrepreneurship, which is critical to the development of an effective private sector, must be further fostered in the Gulf. It remains hampered by various structural and cultural factors, including risk aversion and perceptions of failure, prestige attached to and therefore a preference for government jobs and bureaucracies that are difficult to navigate. In a 2012 report on the challenges of entrepreneurship in Oman, Dhafir Awadh Al-Shanfari elucidated these and other impediments, describing a culture that “is characterized as risk averse and highly dependent” with “a high government post or high military rank [...] perceived more favorably by society than being a successful entrepreneur.”¹⁹ A 2014 IMF report on economic diversification in the GCC confirmed this assertion, finding that “the availability of high-paying public sector jobs creates a strong disincentive for nationals to seek private sector employment or become entrepreneurs.”²⁰ This also means that the private sector struggles to compete for high-quality manpower given society’s preference for public sector employment and its accompanying higher salaries, extensive benefits and increased prestige. As a

result, most of the qualified, highly educated individuals who might drive the private sector forward in other countries seek and accept government work.

In June 2018, *The Wall Street Journal* ran a feature article outlining the present challenges Saudi Arabia faces in this regard through the lens of the Nobu Hotel Riyadh: the luxury hotel was struggling to find adequate Saudi-born staff. The situation at the Nobu illustrates an intrinsic problem. In order for Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's economic reform agenda to succeed, Saudi Arabia must de-bloat its bureaucracy and locate jobs for Saudis in the private sector. To do so, the government now strictly enforces its minimum (40 percent) Saudi citizen employment requirement of private sector companies. However, as Stancati and Abdulaziz explain, "for decades...the oil-rich monarchy endowed citizens with what were essentially jobs for life in the public sector, which means that the labor force doesn't always have the skills, and sometimes lacks the motivation, to fill private sector jobs."²¹ In the service industry in particular, motivation is a key component. As Nobu General Manager Simon Fricker stated in the article, "The mindset is: 'I'm too good for that'."²² As service work is largely viewed as shameful in Saudi society, it is all but impossible to grow private sector employment to the scale necessary to make the economic transformation a success.

Simultaneously though, public sector employment and its associated benefits remain an integral component of the social contract. Any attempt to reform this sector must therefore be approached with the same degree of caution as have subsidy cuts. Moreover, in the eyes of the leadership, increases in salaries and available jobs in the public sphere cannot be relinquished as they are perceived as effective tools, if not some of the only tools, to boost the regimes' stake in the social contract and thus quell unrest, as witnessed during the demonstrations. Qatar, for example, announced in September 2011 that it would raise the salaries of public employees by 60 percent and those of the security forces by 120 percent. Saudi Arabia similarly announced the creation of 60,000 new jobs in the security services.²³ These measures were meant to mitigate the threat of socioeconomic protest. In reality, however, they further burdened the government purse, which already suffered from bloated public sectors. Yet, with oil prices as high as they were at the time of the Arab Spring, increased public sector spending was less troubling than the possibility of unrest. This changed once oil revenues plummeted

and the Gulf monarchs were forced to address the socioeconomic realities of the prevailing system.

Given that this system adversely affects the mechanisms of growth, it is unsurprising that international economic institutions have been calling on the Gulf for years to reform its policies. While subsidy cuts therefore draw praise from the IMF and rating agencies, their comments do not hold weight regarding the potential domestic impact of altering the social contract. The monarchs' alone do that. Thus, major initiatives in recent years, which have for the most part originated as top-down approaches, aim to balance necessary economic reform with the need for gradualism. With questions of where to make cuts no less political than they are economic, this remains one of the key challenges with which Gulf states are left grappling. Until now, the regimes never had to seriously address the effects of an unsustainable social contract. If they are to balance their budgets under the present system, the monarchies will need oil prices to reach and remain in the US\$80-90 p/b range. This is where the top-down approach seems to be the only short-medium-term solution: governments reduce public spending and increase revenue while simultaneously preserving both economic and social stability.

As governments look to increase revenue, they are particularly focused on economic diversification and expanding non-oil sectors. There seems to be recognition across the board that low oil prices, global funds increasingly directed to alternative sources of energy, steep market competition from Russia and the United States and finite supplies mean that relying almost exclusively on oil revenue is long-term suicide. The facts are staggering: not only did the Gulf states spend approximately \$160 billion in 2016 – about 11 percent of their GNP – to subsidize the energy sector, but it has been estimated that, in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, local consumption could outpace production, causing oil exporters to become importers instead.²⁴ Thus, expatriate fees, investment in tourism, development of economic zones, bond sales and other mechanisms are being investigated and implemented as alternative revenue sources.

Cultivating non-oil sectors and expanding the employment base is also proving difficult considering a vast portion of the female population is unemployed for religious and cultural reasons. Although there are indications of changing attitudes toward expanding the employment base to include women, particularly among the younger generation, female representation in the workforce remains extraordinarily low. The obvious solution is for Gulf

states to focus on gaining a return on their investment in education: in Saudi Arabia, over half of university and graduate students are women, yet they constitute less than 20 percent of the workforce, as illustrated in Table 1.²⁵

Table 1: Percentage of Female Labor Force Participation in the GCC²⁶

Country	2015	2016
Bahrain	17	19.8
Kuwait	26.9	29.6
Oman	12.7	12.8
Qatar	13.7	15.3
Saudi Arabia	10.8	15.2
UAE	9.5	12.4

Saudi Arabia has been the most vocal among the Gulf monarchs regarding plans to address its economic issues. Its extensive reserves – 263.1 billion barrels, approximately one-sixth of the world’s oil – and a high daily production rate – under the OPEC agreement, the country’s quota is set at 10.06 million barrels per day (bpd), a 0.5 million bpd decrease, yet an amount that allows the kingdom to preserve its global market share²⁷ – clearly explain the source of Saudi Arabia’s overwhelming reliance on oil revenues. But at the present rate of production, oil will run out in approximately 70 years and it is unclear whether its demand will remain steady in that time period.²⁸ To avert this crisis, the ambitious Saudi “Vision 2030” was born. Unveiled in April 2016, the McKinsey-crafted economic plan was spearheaded by now-Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, also known as MBS. At its most basic, Vision 2030 aims to reduce the kingdom’s dependency on oil by diversifying its sources of income, increasing efficiency and strengthening and expanding the private sector.²⁹ The vision cites three core pillars to support these goals and represent the country’s competitive advantages: (1) its status as the “Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” referring to Islam’s two holiest cities of Mecca and Medina; (2) its investment capabilities; and (3) the kingdom’s “strategic location [...] between key global waterways,” connecting three continents.³⁰

A primary purpose of Vision 2030 is to tackle the kingdom’s employment challenges. The plan calls for a reduction in unemployment rates from 11.6

to 7 percent by 2030 and an increase in female participation in the workplace from 22 to 30 percent, both lofty goals considering that some unofficial estimates put the unemployment rate at around 25 percent.³¹ The plan sets out to create millions of new jobs in the tourism, mining, health, finance and manufacturing sectors, and the kingdom's investments of tens of billions of dollars in these sectors indicate that it is serious about following through on these objectives. For example, in May 2017, a new state company for arms manufacturing, Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), was announced as part of Vision 2030's goal of producing 50 percent of the country's military needs domestically, and it projects creating 40,000 new jobs.³²

Vision 2030 does not seek to slow development of Saudi Arabia's oil and gas sector. Rather, production is to continue unabated so that revenues can fund not only the social contract but this reform plan too. Notably, there is limited support for a return to the days of high oil prices, primarily due to concerns that it could accelerate the development of oil substitutes, new drilling methods, such as shale technology, and alternative energy, all of which would in turn lead to increased supplies and further reduced prices. There is broad recognition that yo-yoing of the oil price is ultimately detrimental to petrostates. For example, should an upward trend in oil prices resume, this could logically result in domestic pressure to abandon efficiency and austerity measures implemented during times of low prices and corresponding deficits. Conversely, should the price remain low – a basic assumption upon which these policies are being implemented – then support for reform is likely to remain intact. Simultaneously, however, sustained low oil prices could also mean difficulties in financing and further delays in economic reform.

Reduced oil revenue is not the only challenge associated with Vision 2030 and similar programs. Economic reform, particularly in the Gulf countries, necessitates corresponding social and cultural changes. In Saudi Arabia particularly, the more traditional and conservative economy must be modified in accordance with the rules of a modern one. This is a difficult task in a culture that incentivizes state-dependency by its very nature. Such dependency of course is not only fundamental to the current economic structure, but also to the social contract. Therefore, implementation of economic reform could potentially undermine domestic stability in a serious way. This issue is joined by additional challenges relating to altering both mindsets and cultural norms, including notions of “prestigious” employment,

entrepreneurial risk and failure and female employment, as well as education systems to prepare students for non-government jobs.

Vision 2030 therefore represents a daunting task for the crown prince. In both word and deed, MBS appears ready to take on the challenge. In a March 2018 interview on CBS' *60 Minutes*, the crown prince proclaimed that "only death" would stop him from ruling the kingdom.³³ He and his father, King Salman, have faced off with hardline conservatives by changing the Saudi social landscape, e.g., allowing women the right to drive and placing strict limitations on the country's controversial religious police. They have also confronted their own family, arresting dozens of high-level figures in and connected to the royal family on corruption-related charges in November 2017. According to state media, the detentions were part of a three-year investigation into "systematic corruption and embezzlement over several decades."³⁴

These arrests should not be seen solely through the lens of a virtuous leader battling corruption. MBS himself is known to enjoy a lavish lifestyle, as evidenced by the oft-repeated story of the crown prince vacationing in the south of France on his \$550 million yacht.³⁵ The removal of certain princes appears all too targeted, e.g., that of former Minister of National Guard Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the son of the now-deceased King Abdullah, who was seen as a potential contender for the throne.

While corruption is not excluded as a prime motivator, the crown prince's further consolidation of power and removal of select rivals resulting from the crackdown cannot be denied. These arrests served to remind the royal family and other high-level figures of his power. Simultaneously, by targeting those at the top of the regime, MBS also sent a clear message regarding the seriousness of his crackdown on corruption. These detentions also serve to refill some of Saudi Arabia's depleted coffers, indications pointing to the preferred end result as settlements that recover the allegedly questionable assets instead of prosecution. Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, for example, was released at the end of November 2017 after reportedly agreeing to a settlement worth \$1 billion.³⁶

But perhaps most importantly, the crackdown has sent a message to the broader Saudi population. As authorities continue to renegotiate the social contract through ongoing subsidy cuts and the introduction of certain taxes, these arrests broadcast to all Saudi citizens that the increasing demands of the government on the people will not filter to the pockets of wealthy

businessmen, government officials and princes.³⁷ Anecdotal evidence indeed suggests that the move is popular among the Saudi populace, and particularly among the young. As the under-30 population comprises approximately 70 percent of the state, it is arguably the most important constituency to please. And while international investors may be concerned by these events in the short term, seriously tackling endemic corruption is liable to make it easier to do business in the country in the longer term.

MBS's actions may be among the most publicized and controversial, but he is certainly not alone. Leaders across the GCC are all embracing economic reform despite its potential to unravel the social contract as it has existed for decades. Once seen as essential to the continued stability of their countries, economic reform is now viewed in that same light, with the royal families at stake should they not implement measures of reform that will expand opportunity for their citizens.

Chapter 4

Militant Sunni Islam

The victims of radical Sunni militant groups are disproportionately Muslim, and while protracted regional conflicts like those in Syria and Yemen certainly comprise a majority of those casualties, so do attacks in the region's more stable countries, including the Gulf monarchies. These states, especially Saudi Arabia, have been targeted in both word and deed by Sunni Islamist groups and are increasingly concerned by their threat.

Before Islamic State (IS) emerged on the scene, Saudi Arabia faced a series of larger-scale attacks carried out by al-Qaeda (AQ) in the early 2000s. At that time, a number of its members returned from fighting in Afghanistan and began shifting their attention to the Saudi royal family, who were perceived as insufficiently Muslim and aligned with the enemy – the West in general and the US in particular. In response, counterterrorism efforts, led by former Crown Prince and Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef, detained multiple AQ members and severely curtailed their domestic operability. Many of those not swept up in those raids fled to Yemen, Saudi Arabia's southern neighbor, where AQ in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was then established through a merger of the Saudi and Yemen-based branches. To this day, the West considers AQAP the most dangerous of AQ's branches and it remains among the most consistently targeted groups by US drone strikes under consecutive administrations.

The success Saudi Arabia achieved vis-à-vis AQ provided a counterterrorism blueprint that proved invaluable as IS emerged as a threat. Given that Islamic State's origins trace back to AQ in Iraq (AQI), it is no surprise that the two groups bear some resemblance. IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, like Osama bin Laden before him, calls for the overthrow of the Saudi government. In addition to condemnation of its relations with the West, the Al-Saud family is similarly perceived as insufficiently Islamic despite

its adherence to Wahhabism, a puritanical version of Sunni Islam, and its control over two of Islam's holiest sites.¹

In other words, the primary points of challenge by both AQ and IS are rooted in ideology and religion, as the royal families of the GCC are seen as having strayed from the path of Islam and are no longer compatible with the "authentic" version the groups seek to propagate. These militant groups, and IS's declaration of the "caliphate" in particular, therefore, are a direct challenge to Saudi Arabia and its regional role. This explains the Saudi Grand Mufti's response to al-Baghdadi's June 2014 declaration of the caliphate, depicting the kingdom as the genuine home of Islam and calling for all Muslims to immigrate by pronouncing the group's ideas a "deviation from Islam and the number one threat to it."²

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State's likeness, however, diminishes in terms of practical implementation of their respective ideological and religious views. AQ's approach to civilians has evolved over time, evidenced by efforts to limit edicts and actions that alienate the local population. "You have to take a gradual approach with them when it comes to their religious practices," explained AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi in a 2012 letter to the head of AQ in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). He continued:

Even if you can just establish love and hate for Allah's sake, and the tenets of monotheism, it would be alright. It's enough that the society is free of the great sins. As for the smaller sins and offenses, they have to be addressed gradually, with patience, leniency and wisdom.³

AQ branches also often discriminate between targets. Military and government personnel and installations are always deemed acceptable, while attacks against non-Sunni Muslims are avoided. Notably, in December 2013, AQAP released an apology for its attack on a hospital at the Ministry of Defense compound in Sana'a, Yemen, describing those involved as disobeying orders by targeting the health facility instead of military targets. AQ affiliates also condemned the November 2017 attack on a Sufi-affiliated mosque in Egypt's northern Sinai Peninsula in which more than 300 people were killed and, though it remained unclaimed, was most certainly committed by IS's "Sinai Province."

IS, on the other hand, rarely distinguishes between civilian, government and security targets. In fact, attacks against Shiite, Sufi and Christian civilians

and places of worship are encouraged. This strategy can be traced back to its predecessor, AQI, which was criticized by the central branch for, among other things, its mass-casualty attacks against Shiites that ultimately helped rally grassroots opposition to the group.

This failure to differentiate among targets has been witnessed in many countries, including Saudi Arabia. IS carried out its first attack in the kingdom in November 2014. Unsurprisingly, their initial victims were Shiite civilians: on November 3, seven Shiites were fatally shot and seven others wounded by three assailants in al-Dalwah, a town located in the Eastern Province. The incident occurred during Ashura, a particularly holy day for Shiites marking the martyrdom of the third Shiite Imam. In response, Saudi security services arrested dozens of suspects, including a core group “directly linked to IS.”⁴ The group’s second attack on Saudi soil occurred on November 22 when a Danish national was shot and wounded while driving in southern Riyadh. In the aftermath, IS supporters released a video claiming responsibility, with arrests the following month confirming the shooting was “in support of” IS.⁵

Between these two attacks, IS issued its first public threats against Saudi Arabia. In an audio recording on November 13, al-Baghdadi accepted oaths of allegiance from five groups, with one claiming to be the Saudi-based “Mujahideen in the Arabian Peninsula.” He also called for attacks on Shiites, security forces and members of the Al-Saud family.⁶ Later that month in its magazine, *Dabiq*,⁷ IS promised readers that “the flag of Khilafah [the caliphate] will rise over Makkah and al-Madina, even if the apostates and hypocrites despise such.” It further declared that Saudi Arabia was a focal point for expansion in the second stage, calling on devotees to remain in the kingdom to achieve this objective rather than travel to distant battlefields.⁸ In order to demonstrate its refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia and the Al-Saud family, IS purposefully generically labeled the territory as “the Arabian Peninsula” and the ruling family with the derogatory name “Al-Salul,” referring to Abdullah ibn Ubay ibn Salul, or the “King of Hypocrites.”

IS additionally seeks to operate in areas where it can exploit existing sectarian tensions. It therefore focuses resources in already tenuous societies such as those in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, as well as in stable countries such as Saudi Arabia. The militant group has identified this population as a “soft underbelly,” seeking to alienate the Shiite minority from the Sunni majority (or vice versa in the case of Iraq) in the hope that a violent reaction by the minority will trigger harsh government responses and spark a cycle

of violence that will eventually undermine state stability.⁹ Al-Baghdadi also intended for attacks against Shiites to exploit existing hostilities so as to recruit more fighters. In Saudi Arabia in particular, this strategy has exploited the existing system of state-sanctioned discrimination, especially in the education system, along with the establishment's anti-Shiite rhetoric that is used to garner support for its actions vis-à-vis Iran and its proxies.

Should Saudi Shiites, for example, react violently in response to such attacks or look to Iran for assistance, they would reinforce their already-existing image as collaborators with Tehran, while the Saudi government would be viewed as unable to protect Sunni citizens. This sort of intensified sectarian strife is IS's desired outcome. Thus, on consecutive Fridays in May 2015, suicide bombers targeted two Shiite mosques in the Eastern Province, killing at least 24 people and wounding more than 100.¹⁰ The following month, another Shiite mosque was targeted, this time in Kuwait City.

Despite the lessons it learned from AQI, IS did not accurately predict the response to attacks against Shiites, mosques and other controversial targets. Thousands of Sunnis, for example, attended the funerals of those killed in the November 2014 al-Dalwah shooting in Saudi Arabia, some of whom reportedly chanted "Sunnis and Shiites we are brothers."¹¹ High-level officials also visited those who were wounded and the families of those killed under the media's watchful eye, a scene repeated following the 2015 mosque attacks. In Kuwait, a week after an IS bombing, the emir attended unity prayers at which Sunnis and Shiites prayed alongside one another.¹² IS therefore amended the practice, refraining from issuing formal claims of responsibility for more controversial attacks, including the July 2016 suicide bombings in Jeddah,¹³ al-Qatif and Medina. The last of these in particular, which occurred outside the city's holy Nabawi Mosque, was subject to widespread condemnation, even from other extremist Sunni groups such as the Taliban.¹⁴

Thus, in contrast to its expectations, these and similar incidents ultimately alienated IS from the societies in which they operated and continue to operate. In a 2015 poll, 78 percent of Saudi respondents viewed IS as "very negative" and another 14 percent as "fairly negative."¹⁵ Aside from its unpopularity, IS has begun to find it logistically difficult to conduct successful operations in Saudi Arabia. Along with the country's security and intelligence apparatuses' steadily developing capabilities, locals have taken it upon themselves to enhance their security. This explains why the May 2015 suicide bombing at

a Shiite mosque in Dammam did not cause as many casualties as expected: the perpetrator, dressed as a woman, was refused entry into the mosque by local guards and was only able to detonate his explosives outside.

The proportion of attacks (both successful and thwarted) against Shiites dropped from 28 percent in 2015 to 21 percent in 2016, while those against government/security targets remained relatively steady at 56 and 54 percent, respectively.¹⁶ This decline can potentially be explained in terms of ease: with Shiites suspicious of unknown Sunnis in their towns and the Eastern Province already home to increased security due to large populations of Westerners and oil installations, security forces are seemingly everywhere. This makes state operatives more targetable, as does the fact that the militants executing these attacks, usually Sunnis, may in some cases be blood relatives of IS sympathizers. In September 2015, two such militants executed a Saudi serviceman who was also their cousin.¹⁷ Similarly, in February 2016, the Ministry of Interior announced that a sergeant in the Special Emergency Forces was killed by six Saudi nationals who had “taken advantage of family links between them and the victim to draw a defenseless man to a remote site on the road.”¹⁸

These types of unsophisticated attacks that are inspired rather than ordered directly by IS pose the greatest risk not only to Saudi Arabia and its GCC neighbors but globally. With the loss of the “caliphate’s” territory in Iraq and Syria, resources are and will be increasingly directed toward encouraging fighters to return to or remain in their home countries and conduct attacks there. For Saudi Arabia, this threat is particularly acute given that its citizens are clearly susceptible to IS recruitment. According to an October 2017 report on foreign fighters by the Soufan Center, approximately 3,244 Saudis have traveled to Syria or Iraq, and an estimated 760 have returned home. These numbers are second only to Russia (3,417 who traveled to Iraq/Syria) and Tunisia (800 returnees), respectively.¹⁹

The monarchies see those returnees as a serious security threat. During an April 2016 thwarted attack in the southern Asir Province, one of the detained suspects was a former IS member in Syria who then returned to Saudi Arabia via Sudan and Yemen.²⁰ In December 2014, 40 of 135 arrested suspects were accused of traveling to “conflict areas,” joining “extremist organizations” and returning to Saudi Arabia to conduct attacks.²¹

In response, Saudi Arabia has implemented a multi-pronged strategy. On the one hand, it has attempted to address underlying issues that cause its youth

to turn to groups like IS, by diverting money toward housing, employment, education and so on. It has also joined other countries in monitoring the Internet, messaging platforms and clerics, while also engaging in extensive counter-messaging campaigns aimed at combatting IS ideology.²² On the financial side, authorities are working to cut off local sources of funding for the militant group.

Saudi security services have also augmented their capabilities, engaging in widespread intelligence gathering and arrest operations targeting IS sympathizers and supporters. In 2015 alone, at least 588 IS-linked individuals of various nationalities were arrested, a figure that dropped to an estimated 105 a year later.²³ Information retrieved from these arrests, surveillance and monitoring techniques and other methods have helped foil IS activity. In its December 2016 report, Le Beck International, the security and risk management firm, calculated the proportion of thwarted attacks, finding that this figure grew from 22.2 percent in 2015 to 41.7 percent the following year. The number of casualties from these attacks notably declined, from 56 to 17 deaths and from 182 to 30 injuries.²⁴ This trend continued into 2017 with multiple pre-emptive security operations and thwarted plots reported, including the dismantling of an IS cell in Riyadh that was planning an attack on the defense ministry.²⁵ In fact, there was only one successful attack – an October 2017 shooting outside a Jeddah palace – that was never claimed by any group. However, Saudi security forces arrested 13 individuals said to have links to IS as late as April 2019.

Saudi Arabia and several Gulf monarchies such as the UAE use an innovative but controversial rehabilitation approach to arrestees in which individuals receive psychological treatment and religious guidance in a secure facility rather than serving hard time in a traditional prison. These alternative facilities date back to the early 2000s during the country's crackdown on al-Qaeda and continue to operate today, with plans to open additional centers in the near future. The success of such programs is far from clear. A November 2014 CBS report found that 59 out of 88 al-Qaeda suspects detained that September "had been through reform programs and then released."²⁶ In December, Shura Council member Latifah al-Shalan stated that 47 out of 77 "individuals who participated in terrorist activities that took place in al-Ahsa a few weeks ago" had been enrolled in rehabilitation centers.²⁷ There are also many cases of detainees previously imprisoned on terror-related charges who returned to IS, although it is unclear whether they served time in

a regular prison or a rehabilitation program. In September 2015, for example, security forces conducted four simultaneous IS-linked raids in Riyadh and Dammam, one of which resulted in the death of a Saudi citizen previously imprisoned for three years after traveling to Iraq.²⁸ In January 2017, one of two suicide bombers who detonated explosives during a police raid in Jeddah had been imprisoned for traveling to “conflict zones,” and after his release “continued to [...] engage in terrorist activities.”²⁹

The Al-Saud regime, which in great part derives its legitimacy from a pact with the *ulema*, the religious establishment that dates back to the 18th century,³⁰ must also balance its counter-militancy efforts and messaging with the concerns of religious conservatives. Historically, this was largely achieved through gradual change, compromise and appeasement. However, another method of addressing opposition from religious conservatives was the financing of missionary organizations and the exportation of jihad. These missionaries, tasked with spreading Saudi Arabia’s version of the religion, experienced a surge in support after the 1979 Grand Mosque incident.³¹ More notably, the regime used both rhetoric and money to oppose the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In addition to helping finance the cost of the conflict, through fundraisers in the media and at mosques and through other avenues, Saudis were encouraged to travel to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets. Abdul Aziz ibn Abdullah ibn Baz, who would become the country’s Grand Mufti in 1992, issued a *fatwa*, or religious judgment, explaining that jihad in Afghanistan was the individual duty of every Muslim.³² One of the first to volunteer was a man by the name of Osama bin Laden.

This problematic exportation of jihad and financing of terror, including the leaderships’ turning a blind eye to the transfer of money from businessmen and charitable organizations to militant groups, continued until September 11, 2001. At that point, in the wake of US pressure, the regime became increasingly vigilant in combatting these forces, intensifying its aggressiveness in the wake of al-Qaeda attacks domestically in the early 2000s and the declaration of the IS caliphate in 2014.

More recently, the religious establishment’s influence has been rolled back and by implementing the social reforms discussed previously, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman continues to uphold his October 2017 proclamation that the country will return to a “moderate Islam.” This return is feasible due to the flip-side of the relationship between the ruling family and religious establishment: as much as the royal family relies on the *ulema* for religious

legitimacy, the *ulema* relies on the continuity of the Al-Saud rule to preserve its comfortable position in society, which includes control over religious institutions and many comfortable and prestigious government positions.

One of the hidden purposes of these reforms is likely linked to the very sensitive issue regarding perceptions of similarities between Sunni militant groups and Saudi Arabia's puritanical form of Islam. Along with both groups' controversial attitudes toward Shiites and its offshoots (such as Alawites), parallels have been drawn regarding their outlooks on capital punishment, women's rights and religious tolerance. Saudi Arabia practices strict gender segregation, has stipulations regarding acceptable public female attire, considers holidays such as the Prophet Muhammad's birthday forbidden innovations and bars public adherence to other religions unless inside Western compounds. Both IS and Saudi Arabia also have their own form of religious or moral police responsible for enforcing Islamic law, albeit their differing versions. Perhaps most notably, IS reportedly "adopted official Saudi textbooks for its schools until the extremist group could publish its own in 2015."³³

The kingdom's own foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, suggests that the leadership is well aware of the issue. When questioned by *Frontline*'s Martin Smith as to "why [...] this extremism came from your [Saudi] schools and from your mosques," al-Jubeir first explained that the "Iranian revolution created a reaction in the Sunni world that then translated into extremism and violence on our streets." When pressed, he noted that Iran could not bear the entirety of the blame: "And in part I blame ourselves, also, in hindsight. Are there things that we could have done? Probably. But at the time ... that all those forces were being unleashed, you deal with them at the time. Thirty years later, you can go back and say, 'Could things have been done differently?' Of course."³⁴

While Saudi Arabia is an unwilling host to the greatest amount of IS activity among the Gulf states, the kingdom is not alone in facing this threat. In July 2015 in Kuwait, a month after the June mosque bombing, approximately 200 preachers who allegedly supported the militant group were fired.³⁵ Renowned for their turning a blind eye to financial support of foreign militant groups, Kuwaiti authorities implemented a harsh crackdown, particularly after the US sanctioned three Kuwait-based financiers in August 2014. The Kuwaiti ambassador to the US made haste to explain that "Kuwait has passed legislation to fight terror and its financing and has established

the executive tools to implement it.”³⁶ However, in March 2017, the US Treasury Department sanctioned yet another Kuwait-based financier for providing support to al-Qaeda-linked groups.

The UAE confronted IS in much the same manner it did Muslim Brotherhood-linked operatives. In 2015, 41 individuals were detained for allegedly aiming to form a “Caliphate state, in conformity with their extremist ‘takfiri’³⁷ thoughts and beliefs.”³⁸ The Emirati government, in conjunction with the US, also set up the Sawab Center, whose stated aim is “to counter the terrorist messaging that is used to recruit foreign fighters, fundraise and terrorize local populations,” as well as “undercutting [the militant group’s] appeal among young Arabs in the region to help staunch the flow of foreign fighters.”³⁹

Bahrain’s sectarian tension between its Shiite majority population and Sunni minority ruling class makes the island nation an obvious target for IS. In fact, one of the militant group’s more prominent members is Bahraini Turki al-Binali, who voluntarily left Bahrain in 2013, first to Libya and then on to Syria⁴⁰ where he was ultimately killed in a 2017 airstrike. He and 23 others, including his brother, were charged in October 2015, most in absentia, for attempting to establish an IS branch in the country.⁴¹ More than a year later, in December 2016, IS released a nearly 30-minute video featuring Bahraini fighters criticizing the Al-Khalifa family, calling for Sunnis to attack both Shiites and the US military base⁴² and vowing to dispatch members to Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.⁴³ Notably, however, while there is a so-called “Bahrain Province” of IS, the sole attack for which it has claimed responsibility occurred not in Bahrain, but in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province.

Simultaneously, the ruling family worries that cracking down too hard on Sunnis could alienate its prime base of support, particularly at a time when Shiite opposition activity and Iranian support for militant groups are seen as the primary threats to stability and the regime. And regardless of IS’s rhetoric, the government understands that there are clear obstacles to IS successfully operating on the island. In addition to a notably smaller pool of Sunni recruits, there are only two ways to enter the island – through the airport or via the King Fahd Causeway; choosing the latter would require a potential attacker to also successfully bypass Saudi intelligence and security. Yet, IS has proven relatively adept at radicalizing sympathizers online and encouraging less sophisticated attacks so as to fly under the radar. The rise

in IS recruits of foreign nationals from Saudi Arabia serves as a reminder to Bahrain and others that it is not just locals, but expatriates as well, who are susceptible to IS.

Addressing threats within their borders was complemented by all six Gulf monarchies' joining the US-led anti-IS international coalition created in September 2014.⁴⁴ The coalition's military efforts were organized under the Combined Joint Task Force for Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), whose mission was to "defeat [IS] as a military force on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria."⁴⁵ For the Gulf and other Arab states, participation went beyond symbolically demonstrating that the coalition is not just another Western intervention: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan have all conducted airstrikes in Syria (and Jordan also in Iraq). However, the US continued to bear the lion's share of strikes: as of early May 2017, the US was responsible for 16,717 out of 21,065, with the remaining coalition members conducting 4,347 and this ratio has likely continued.⁴⁶ In an unexpected policy pivot, in December 2018, President Donald Trump announced a "full" and "rapid" withdrawal of US troops from Syria, prompting a slew of military resignations, including that of Brett McGurk, the US envoy to the CJTF-OIR.⁴⁷ With the US path forward in Syria now less sure, such resignations increase uncertainty as to whether future Gulf efforts will be backed by the United States.

Additionally, in December 2015, Saudi Arabia declared the establishment of an Islamic military coalition with the stated goal to "fight against terrorism."⁴⁸ Starting with just over 30 Muslim majority states, membership rose to 41 states by the following year. Al-Jubeir even stated that the coalition would not rule out the possibility of deploying ground forces in the future. However, while such a promise that "nothing is off the table"⁴⁹ did not come as a surprise, given Riyadh's offer as early as February 2016 to send troops to Syria, it also never materialized. Importantly, this alliance does not include Iran or Iraq, indicating that its unstated goals are to counter Tehran and promote the Saudi vision of pan-Islam, something that IS's "caliphate" directly seeks to challenge.

Despite these efforts, the threat posed by extremist Sunni groups to Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states is not expected to diminish in the coming years. In addition to the Islamic State's overall ability to exert force in the region's monarchies, its loss of a territorial "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria will likely translate to a shift in focus and resources from governance to the

activities more traditional to militant/insurgent groups: recruitment and attacks. Although security and intelligence forces have improved their intelligence capabilities, they have to contend with the increasing threat of lone wolf-style attacks. They are rather competent at mapping networks, obtaining intelligence, tracking returning fighters and flagging suspicious purchases, but they are severely challenged by the task of identifying individuals radicalized online, particularly over a short period of time, with no connections to known suspects and no criminal history. These individuals, inspired by IS and AQ, tend to commit unsophisticated attacks that are substantially more difficult to identify and preempt. This includes the use of small arms and crude homemade explosives, but also involves everyday items such as knives and cars, as evidenced by the multiple stabbing and vehicular attacks that have become commonplace. Although many of the perpetrators never crossed security forces' radars, including the one responsible for the failed October 2017 bombing in Manhattan, others who were known were overlooked too. Karim Cheurfi, for example, who was behind the April 2017 shooting on the Champs-Élysées in Paris, had been investigated the previous January for seeking to obtain weapons and expressing a desire to kill police.⁵⁰ Similarly, Anis Amri, the Tunisian national who perpetrated the December 2016 vehicular attack at a Berlin Christmas market, had been under surveillance prior to the incident.⁵¹

These lone wolf-style, unsophisticated attacks pose some of the more serious threats to the Gulf monarchies, and stopping would-be attackers before they become radicalized requires more than money and intelligence capabilities. Crown Prince MBS's call for a return to "moderate Islam" is certainly a step in the right direction, but without comprehensive reform in areas such as school curriculums and improved sectarian relations, as well as a good, hard look at current de-radicalization programs, IS will continue to find recruits from the Gulf.

Chapter 5

Shiite Opposition

This chapter focuses on how the Sunni-Shiite divide manifests in three of the six states – Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait is discussed first due to its relatively large Shiite population and its direct experience with IS attempts at stoking sectarian tensions, e.g., the May 2015 mosque bombing. Bahrain is included as it is the only Gulf monarchy with a Sunni ruling family and a Shiite majority population. Finally, Saudi Arabia, whose Shiite population is proportionally similar in size to that of the UAE, but whose unique context – its population concentration in the oil-rich Eastern Province and the kingdom’s stricter interpretation of Islam – puts it at risk for unrest.

According to the Pew Research Center, Shiites constitute an estimated 10-13 percent of the total worldwide Muslim population and 11-14 percent of the Muslim population in the Middle East and North Africa. Although the majority – between 68 and 80 percent – live in Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq,¹ there are sizeable populations in each of the six GCC states (see Table 2), their degree of societal integration varying from one country to the next.

Table 2: Proportion of Shiites in the Gulf States²

Country	Proportion of Shiites in the population
Bahrain	65-75%
Kuwait	20-25%
Saudi Arabia	10-15%
UAE	10-15%
Qatar	10%
Oman	5-10%

In Kuwait, Shiites comprise approximately one third of the total population and are relatively well integrated. Although not fully representative of their

proportion of the population, they do, for example, hold six of the 50 seats in the country's National Assembly, a body that has the greatest power and influence when compared to its counterparts in the GCC.³ This is not to say that Kuwaiti sectarian relations are tension-free, but rather that divisions between Kuwaiti Shiites and Sunnis are not pervasive in the day-to-day. Such integration is historically rooted, with Kuwaiti Shiites, for instance, joining their Sunni countrymen in resisting Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi invasion in the first Gulf war.

In contrast, Bahrain arguably represents the worst case of integration of its Shiite majority population, the issue having come under increased scrutiny since protests broke out in February 2011. In the protest's early days, the demonstrations were not exclusive to Shiites, with some Sunnis joining to demand greater political freedom, equality and economic opportunity. It was, in other words, another iteration of the Arab Spring. Many were frustrated by the ruling family's failure to fully implement the constitutional reforms it had promised a decade earlier in the National Action Charter that was approved in a referendum with 98 percent of the vote.⁴ In fact, the date of the first protests – February 14, 2011 – was the 10th anniversary of that referendum.

When King Hamad came to power in Bahrain following the death of his father in 1999, there was hope that the change in leadership would also generate change elsewhere. After all, the violence of the decade's uprisings, which had been met with widespread repression, had only just subsided. And, indeed, Hamad laid out plans for reform in 2001 that included cancelling the National Security Law (which permitted unrestricted arrests), releasing political prisoners and permitting political exiles to return to Bahrain with their rights restored. That year also heralded the aforementioned referendum, with the National Action Charter leading to the 2002 parliamentary elections and establishment of the country as a constitutional monarchy, although the latter would largely remain true on paper only.

Despite this progress, reform slowed and was never fully realized. The power of the elected National Assembly was curbed by the creation of an appointed upper house, while elections were marred by boycotts, fraud accusations and gerrymandering.⁵ In 2010, the election was also preceded by a crackdown on primarily Shiite protesters who, in addition to demonstrating, became violent, throwing Molotov cocktails and burning tires,⁶ reminding many of the events of the 1990s.

The royal family was concerned that expansive reform and liberalization of the political system would strengthen the Shiite majority and its political forces. Since then, the regime has been pushing back by granting citizenship to large numbers of Sunni Muslims so as to change the demographic balance. This strategy is not new though; it can be traced all the way back to the period immediately after the Al-Khalifa family captured Bahrain in 1783, when Sunni tribes were invited to settle on the island,⁷ to more recently, such as in April 2014 when Youseff Harb of Al-Akhbar accused the leadership of offering citizenship to Sunni refugees who fled Syria for Jordan in order to manufacture demographic changes.⁸ That same year, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, Bahrain's largest and most prominent Shiite political party until its forcible dissolution in 2016, alleged that the government was prioritizing "naturalized foreigners" in the distribution of housing and other services, while also "adopting a systematic plan to replace the native people of Bahrain with foreigners of various nationalities."⁹

In addition, the Al-Khalifa regime faced external pressure from Saudi Arabia, whose leadership worried that expanded rights for Bahraini Shiites would lead Shiites in its Eastern Province to seek similar changes.¹⁰ The Al-Saud feared that expanded rights in Bahrain and the wider regional protests could serve to encourage minority elements in Saudi society to push for greater political representation and other reforms. This fear was, in fact, partially realized in 2011 when Shiite protests in the Eastern Province emerged alongside those in Bahrain. In response, Riyadh acted not only domestically, but under the auspices of the GCC Peninsula Shield Force dispatched Saudi troops along with Emirati policemen to Bahrain to help quell the unrest. Some of the troops are still there.

Despite and perhaps due to the cross-sectarian nature of the early days of the 2011 Bahraini protests, violent police intervention soon followed. Thousands of people lost their jobs and/or were sent to prison for supporting or participating in demonstrations, even doctors and nurses who treated the wounded in those protests. The intervention also took on sectarian overtones, as more than 40 Shiite mosques were reportedly demolished,¹¹ well more than any recorded damage to the Sunni protest community.

In an attempt to address the demonstrations and soften external criticism, particularly from the West, in July 2011, the king established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) to look into the alleged incidents that occurred during the period of unrest the previous February and March.

That same month, a short-lived “National Dialogue” began, but was marred by Al-Wefaq’s exit. A second National Dialogue was attempted in 2013, but again faced boycotts and other difficulties and was ultimately suspended in January 2014.¹²

In November 2011, BICI published its conclusions in a detailed report that included unprecedented criticism of the regime. Among other things, it cited unnecessary and excessive force, terror-inspiring behavior and unnecessary damage to property, abuse of detainees, as well as discrimination against and excessive dismissals of particularly Shiite workers and students.¹³ The report provided 26 recommendations, which the government falsely claims it has since implemented. In 2012, the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED) found that only three of the 26 recommendations had been “fully implemented,” 15 only partially, “no meaningful progress” on six and an inability to fully evaluate two.¹⁴ Three years later, in November 2015, Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) reported that only two of the 26 recommendations were fully implemented, 16 were partially implemented and eight were “not implemented at all.”¹⁵ In April 2017, ADHRB further reported that the two recommendations it previously described as fully implemented no longer met that classification due in part to the restoration of law enforcement power to the National Security Agency which was in violation of recommendation 1718.¹⁶ The US also weighed in, the Senate Commission on Foreign Relations concluding in June 2016 that Bahrain needed to take “further steps” to fully implement the BICI recommendations.¹⁷

The events of 2011 continue to impact Bahraini society, with sometimes daily, small-scale protests and roadblocks that wax and wane with symbolic anniversaries, holidays and government action against opposition groups and figures. Before the government began cracking down on Al-Wefaq after it boycotted the 2014 elections, the party had been given a certain amount of leeway to, among other things, hold large-scale, peaceful protests along the main Budaiya Highway. After the boycott, which served to very publicly challenge the government’s claims of reform, authorities targeted Al-Wefaq, its leaders and its affiliates. These actions prompted Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC Quds Force commander, to threaten armed resistance and the toppling of the regime due to its insulting and inappropriate treatment of Isa Qassim, Al-Wefaq’s spiritual leader, whose citizenship had been revoked and who was later convicted of incitement to violence.¹⁸ Indeed, there are

local militant groups that operate to incite violence, many supported by Tehran, but the government's response to these groups plays a role in the cyclical state of affairs.

According to the Bahraini establishment, Iran has a plan to establish a Shiite religious state on the island, and the country's Shiites are the intended emissaries to implement that plan. However, while Iran does recruit from the local population and would certainly be pleased if a Shiite-led state were to emerge, there is little proof that the majority of Shiite Bahrainis are enthusiastic about the idea or even particularly support Iran. Not all Shiites agree politically: some prefer to achieve change peacefully from within the system; others espouse more violent methods. Some call for preserving the royal family's position at the helm, while others call for a complete overhaul in the leadership. This is also true religiously: some look to their local religious clerics for guidance and inspiration, others identify primarily with the Shiite Iraqi religious establishment in Najaf led by Al-Sistani and still others maintain an eye toward Iranian clerics in Qom. Although the government insists – with evidence to prove its contention – that Iran is supporting Shiite militant groups such as the Al-Ashtar Brigades, two members of which were named by the US Department of State as Specially Designated Global Terrorists,¹⁹ the number of these militants compared to the country's population is relatively small.

Rhetoric proclaiming Iranian influence also helps to delegitimize demands from Bahraini Shiite society: Manama asserts it will not negotiate with or address ultimatums from a foreign power. Iranian interventionism also serves as way to garner support from the domestic Sunni population, regional partners and the West. With its stability challenged by internal political forces, powerful foreign allies are an important support system. These include Saudi Arabia, which provides significant military and economic support to Bahrain, as well as the US and UK, both of which maintain a military presence on the island. Interestingly, there is actually division among the opposition with regard to the West's support: some see it as a restraining force preventing the government from acting effectively and others perceive it as offering legitimacy to their claims regarding the regime's repressive practices.

This is not to imply that Tehran's interference does not pose a threat. Multiple Shiite militant groups, several of which receive material and financial support and training from Iran and its regional proxies, are responsible for dozens of casualties. These groups largely use small arms and homemade

explosives to attack security forces and installations, though in recent years, more sophisticated operations have been uncovered and the list of their preferred targets has expanded. This includes the 2015 discovery of an “elaborate network of hidden underground bunkers and an above-ground [explosives] manufacturing operation”²⁰ and a 2017 attack that targeted a pipeline in Buri. The use of Molotov cocktails and burning tires to block roads have also become commonplace, demonstrating that at least some opposition elements – primarily the younger ones as indicated by photos and videos posted to social media – have become disillusioned with what they deem to be ineffective non-violent methods.

In 2017, concerns regarding Iranian influence reemerged: after a period of declining militancy the year prior, almost 10 IED and shooting attacks and a prison break occurred in the first two months of the year. What was particularly concerning about this string of violence was that security personnel were not the only victims. On February 14, two civilians were injured on Sitra Island when an IED detonated as they drove past and just over a week later, on February 23, another IED lightly injured a civilian in Sanabis. Regardless of whether these were the intended targets – they likely were not – the attacks spotlighted the grave damage to civilians caught in the crossfire. Thus, despite comprising a small proportion of the population, these elements will continue to affect the country in terms of their threats to security and the economy. Global businesses seeking to expand operations to the Gulf, for example, will likely turn to the UAE instead of Bahrain.

Just across the King Fahd Causeway in Saudi Arabia, the Shiite population also faces an uphill battle toward social equality. State-sanctioned discrimination, particularly in the education system, has fomented a perception of Shiites as inauthentic Muslims. Political rhetoric regarding Iranian intervention that questions the loyalties and motivations of Shiite protesters has also encouraged the perception that elements within this population are Iranian agents disloyal to Saudi Arabia. Their demonstrations for increased rights are not viewed as legitimate appeals by a segment of the Saudi population, but rather a front for Iranian coercion.

The Shiite protest movement has a long but muted history in Saudi Arabia. During the upheavals, aside from the one attendee at the Saudi “Day of Rage,” protests were concentrated in the Eastern Province, home to the country’s Shiite minority, most of the country’s oil and a large concentration of Westerners. However, this was not the first time that Saudi Shiites took to

the streets to demand better conditions. Like the 1979-80 protests, those in 2011 were largely led by younger members of society frustrated by the status quo. But there were also two key differences: the Arab Spring elsewhere and technology. The 2011 protests were part of and encouraged by a wider regional phenomenon that spread at an unprecedented rate via the Internet and social media. The generation of Facebook, Twitter and smartphones meant that the Shiite youth in Saudi Arabia could watch the former presidents of Tunisia and Egypt fall from power, could see the protesters gather at the former Pearl Roundabout in Manama and, most importantly, could readily communicate with one another about what occurred – all factors that could prompt rapid self-reflection regarding what was stopping them from doing the same. The protesters of 2011 could also organize the demonstrations themselves more easily using cell phones and social networks. The advantages of technological advancement, however, were not one-sided, as the regimes simultaneously improved their Internet monitoring and censorship systems, meaning that such communications and events were not known exclusively to the participants.²¹

The allegation of an Iranian hand in civil unrest and violence in the Eastern Province prevails despite the fact that Shiism in Saudi Arabia does not necessarily entail support for or from Iran. Like Bahrain, Saudi Shiites are not a politically or religiously homogenous group. Although the majority are Twelver Shiites, the most common sub-sect and the majority of Iran's Shiite population, there are Ismaili and Zaidiyya minorities located primarily in the south of the kingdom. Even among Twelver Shiites in the Eastern Province, there is disagreement regarding religious authority: some look to local clerics, others to Sistani of Iraq and yet others to Iran. However, these differences have not prevented the Saudi government from broadly viewing the population center there as a fifth column and protesters in particular as acting on behalf of Iranian interests.

These perceptions are joined by policies of state-sanctioned discrimination. In addition to the negative images of Shiites the educational system has officially endorsed, it is more difficult for Shiites to, among other things, obtain building permits or senior positions in the government and military, and there are also limitations on their public displays of religion and construction of mosques. Shiite-majority areas, despite their rich oil resources, also tend to obtain less infrastructure investment from the state.

However, such discriminatory rhetoric and policies have not succeeded in reducing the risks associated with a potential Shiite protest movement. This danger is a result of three key characteristics of Saudi Shiites: the relatively vast size of the minority population, their geographical positioning in the midst of large oilfields and their closer physical proximity to Iran.

Domestic sectarian relations between the Saudi government and its Shiite population can and have changed over time, corresponding sometimes with similar shifts in relations with Tehran. The end of the Iran-Iraq war, the death of former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in June 1989 and the election of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami, both of whom looked to improve relations with Iran's neighbors, resulted in a thawing of relations and thus reduced tensions between the Saudi leadership and the Shiite minority.

Over time, official steps have also been taken to reduce tensions with the Shiite minority. These were often in direct response to protests, underscoring the government's recognition of the threat that unrest among the Shiites poses to the state. Thus, following two Shiite petitions presented in 2003, then-Crown Prince Abdullah initiated a plan aimed at reconciliation with this minority, which included a "National Dialogue." Shiite demands included the recognition of Shiism as a sect of Islam, equal opportunity in education and employment and new legislation to combat religious discrimination. Both petitions, however, emphasized national unity and loyalty to the royal family.²²

The National Dialogue seemed promising at first, yet it failed to bring about concrete change. Recommendations were vague, such as: "Ulema, preachers, university professors and students should advise and direct people toward the right path using all available means including the media while developing ways of preaching that correspond to human concerns."²³ Shiism was not officially recognized as a school of Islamic jurisprudence and discrimination toward the population remained widespread.

However, the dialogue itself endeared the crown prince to the reform seekers, and his ascension as king was viewed optimistically. Indeed, reform is one of King Abdullah's legacies, particularly in the area of women's rights, although he too embraced the historical preference of gradual change to avoid angering hardline conservatives. Regarding Shiites, Abdullah, as previously noted, began permitting large-scale Ashura celebrations, while one of the 39 female Shura Council members appointed in 2013 was a Shiite woman, one of only a handful of Shiites on the Council.

Despite King Abdullah's popularity and the regime's continued attempts to pacify the Eastern Province by combining the carrot-and-stick approach – economic incentives coupled with the use of force – the possibility of unrest remained of concern. And rightfully so: protests all too readily reemerged in March 2011 as part of the wider Arab Spring movement, spurred in great part by the demonstrations in Bahrain. That month, the Saudi and Emirati forces' entrance into Bahrain under the auspices of the GCC served only to intensify domestic sectarian tensions.²⁴

Prior to the outbreak of unrest in the Eastern Provinces, activists submitted petitions to the government,²⁵ likely anticipating that King Abdullah would receive them as he had as crown prince in 2003. They were wrong. While King Abdullah's government showed benevolence by announcing billions of dollars in social benefits in order to stave off economic-related unrest, it also violently intervened in Shiite protests. Participant arrests became commonplace, while the funerals of those protesters killed served as large-scale demonstrations, the likes of which had not occurred since 1980.

However, acts of violence were not exclusively committed by authorities. Although many detainees faced exaggerated charges, break-off elements of the Shiite opposition also embraced more violent strategies, including the use of firearms and Molotov cocktails. Like in Bahrain, Saudi security personnel and installations are often the primary, but not the exclusive, targets. In January 2014, for example, German diplomats came under fire (but were not wounded) in al-Awamiyah. Additionally, in January 2016, a bus carrying local Saudi Aramco workers was attacked as revenge for the execution of Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr. In the first half of 2017 there was a spike in Shiite violence, the targets of which were broadened to include civilian workers and public officials, and the weapons used expanded to include rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). This spike in activity was largely attributed to a controversial development project in al-Awamiyah, an opposition hub located in the Eastern Province's Shiite majority al-Qatif region.²⁶ Such incidents affirm that the violence continues and that the Eastern Province is neither stable nor particularly safe.

Simultaneously, there have also been several under-the-radar reconciliation attempts. Toward the end of February 2014, two Shiite clerics rejected violence in their Friday sermons and, the following month, signed a letter with eight others that “warn[ed] citizens and young people from engaging in violence and extremism orientation,” as it fails to “contribute [to] achieving

demands.”²⁷ On the government’s side, Shiite Dr. Lamia al-Brahim was named Director of Health Education in the Ministry of Health in May of that year, prompting discriminatory comments online that were widely denounced, including by the popular *Al-Riyadh* newspaper.²⁸ Additionally, there were reports that the Ministry of Interior launched an investigation into allegations of sectarianism by a Twitter user who accused Shiites “of being idolaters.”²⁹ The following November, the Council of Ministers approved the creation of a “supreme body” with a dedicated budget “for the development of the eastern region aiming at contribution to the overall development of the region and providing it with public facilities and services.”³⁰

These actions demonstrate that there is, indeed, governmental recognition that improving the conditions of the Shiite population and addressing their grievances would be a positive step for the kingdom. In addition to distancing Shiites from Iran, it would reduce the threat of renewed protests and violence and potentially alienate those who continue to engage in such behavior from their support base. The regime should have a special interest in doing so as well considering the potential domino effect of protests on other social groups, including women, liberal students and the unemployed youth, many of whom similarly feel that they are either subject to discrimination or simply want the government to attend to their needs.

Simultaneously, the Saudi government weighs the threats associated with formally recognizing Shiism. While Shiite protests in Saudi Arabia have, along with events in Bahrain, been among the most prominent and publicized expression of the Arab Spring in the Gulf monarchies, Saudi Shiites have yet to really endanger the stability of the kingdom. Rather, extremist Sunnis, who would decry such formal recognition of Shiism, present a potentially greater threat to the regime in that regard. The Sunni extremists are a key demographic that the government considers when deliberating any type of social reform, be it related to Shiites, women or youth.

Nevertheless, allowing the status quo with the Shiites to persist is dangerous given the ever-present risk of a renewed protest movement and a younger generation that may, like that in Bahrain but on a larger scale, embrace violence as a means of bringing about change.³¹ For now, the weapons of choice for more radical Shiites are small-arms, Molotov cocktails and at times RPGs, but the May 2015 foiled attempt to smuggle the powerful explosive RDX into Saudi Arabia from Bahrain underscores the potential for the scale and sophistication violence to escalate.³²

Chapter 6

Challenges of Succession – Saudi Arabia, Oman and Kuwait

Saudi Arabia

A central concern of the Gulf monarchies is how to keep the throne without sacrificing state stability. Classically, competition for power can beget instability, violence or even collapse of the state. In the modern Saudi state, a unique mechanism of succession has promoted stability within the Al-Saud family despite the vast number of princes. Ibn Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi state, created a linear to lateral succession process in which he named his son Saud as heir (linear), but determined that it would, from that point, be passed from brother to brother (lateral). Thus, the next eldest, Faysal, would succeed Saud. Just prior to his death in 1953, Ibn Saud extracted a promise from his sons that they would “beware of any disagreement which might be seen or known among the family and people,” and proceed with the pre-determined succession of Saud as king and Faysal as his crown prince.¹

Aside from the one contention between Saud and Faysal for power, until 2015, succession proceeded from brother to brother or, more precisely, from half-brother to half-brother. The current decade has been marked by the unprecedented transition of succession to Ibn Saud’s grandchildren. Although a far more complicated process than in the past, given the scores of grandchildren from numerous sub-branches of the family, there were, in reality, just a few princes who were positioned to enter the order of succession. In 2012, Muhammad bin Nayef (MBN) was named interior minister, the first time the post was held by a prince of his generation.² This put MBN squarely on the short list, which was formalized in April 2015 when King Salman appointed him as crown prince and his own son, Defense Minister

Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), as heir to the heir, effectively passing the torch to the third generation.

MBN's position as crown prince was not, however, long-lived. The following year, he was removed both as crown prince and interior minister, replaced by MBS and his nephew, Prince Abdulaziz bin Saud bin Nayef, respectively. Despite such dramatic change, the royal family presented a unified front: 31 out of 34 members of the Allegiance Council³ expressed their support for the appointment and the family, including MBN himself, publicly offered its oath of allegiance. Given that MBS is the son of the current king, consensus in the matter was particularly essential.

The precedent of succession in Saudi Arabia shows that aside from consensus, there are two key factors in determining appointment to power: position in government and associated family branch, as depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: High-Level Positions Held Prior to or upon Appointment as Crown Prince (CP) or Deputy CP⁴

Individual	Position(s)
King Faysal	Viceroy of the Hijaz, Foreign Minister, Prime Minister
King Khaled	Viceroy of the Hijaz, Interior Minister
King Fahd	Interior Minister
King Abdullah	Minister of the National Guard
CP Sultan	Defense Minister
CP Nayef	Interior Minister
King Salman	Defense Minister
Former CP Muqrin	Director General of Saudi Arabia's intelligence agency, Advisor and Special Envoy to King with rank of minister
Former CP MBN	Deputy Interior Minister, Interior Minister
CP MBS	Defense Minister

It is not coincidental that the vast majority of eventual kings held or hold the key positions of interior or defense minister. Although there is a large number of non-royals in the cabinet and at the higher levels of government, the Al-Saud regime has traditionally ensured that certain positions in the cabinet, primarily those relating to security, remain within the family. Perhaps most controversially, upon appointment as deputy crown prince, MBS had

only headed the Defense Ministry for a few months, taking over in January 2015 when his father became king.

Another element that has recently become an important factor in choosing successors is age. When MBN was initially appointed deputy crown prince, there was some speculation that the failure to name Prince Mutaib bin Abdullah, son of the late King Abdullah and minister of the National Guard, was an attempt to sideline his branch of the family. The underlying reason, however, may have been much less exciting: upon appointment in January 2015 as deputy crown prince, MBN was 55 years old while his cousin was turning 63 that March. This already meant that MBN would likely become king in his 70s, given that he would need to outlive King Salman, then 79, and then-Crown Prince Muqrin, then 69.

This concern was resolved first when MBN was appointed crown prince and then when MBS, currently in his early thirties, replaced him. The remaining sons of Saudi Arabia's founder, who until that point monopolized succession, are old. This meant that their projected length of rule would become shorter and shorter and the frequency of successions greater and greater over time, a scenario that does not promote regime stability. Appointing younger princes, on the other hand, addresses this issue, with MBS projected to have a decades-long reign. It also sends a message to the population, particularly its prominent youth bulge, that the kingdom is not only run by its elders. A crown prince who looks like, talks like and has similar concerns as the majority of the population is a politically prudent maneuver.

Despite the seemingly smooth transition, not everything is quiet among the Al-Saud aristocracy. As noted, there are countless princes, and although the majority do not hold top government positions (in fact, there are many who do not serve in the public sector at all), discontent among particularly younger princes may prove an acute issue going forward. In addition to potential competition over appointments, monetary allowances to members of the royal family decrease with each generation. According to a November 1996 US diplomatic cable published by Wikileaks in 2011, "stipends range from \$270,000 per month on the high end to \$800 per month for the lowliest member of the most remote branch of the family," with the largest funds allocated to any remaining sons and daughters of the country's founder. According to the cable, grandchildren are estimated to receive US\$19,000-\$27,000 per month, great grandchildren around \$13,000 and great-great-

grandchildren about \$8,000 – sums that have likely increased in the last two decades.⁵

There are two fundamental problems that stem from this system. First, family members whose lifestyle expectations are no longer met may become dissatisfied and opt to air that dissatisfaction publicly. In a rare instance of public protest, for example, 11 princes were arrested in early January 2017 for gathering outside a Riyadh palace to protest the government's decision to cease paying their utility bills. Much like the dangers of adjusting the social contract by reducing subsidies, changing the system of royal stipends can trigger backlash from among the royal family. Second, the system significantly burdens the budget and the numbers of princes and princesses are only growing. According to the cable, the allowances actually “provide a substantial incentive for royals to procreate since the stipends begin at birth.” It estimates that “the stipends system puts an annual drain of about \$2 billion on the \$40 billion government budget.”⁶

An additional problem is the danger of consolidating power in the hands of one or select family branches. While the absence thus far of any appointed deputy crown prince may be explained in terms of age – to continue avoiding frequent changes in leadership, MBS's heir should be of an even younger generation than his – there remains a lack of clarity on intra-family power sharing. In other words, any efforts to limit succession to King Salman or MBS's own family line may trigger discontent amongst the wider royal family. Looking to history, one of the reasons that discontent arose during the reign of King Saud was due to his attempts to marginalize then-Crown Prince Faysal and promote his children to positions of authority in lieu of his brothers.⁷ Thus, Saud's son Musaid replaced his half-brother Nawwaf as commander of the Royal Guard, his son Fahd was appointed minister of defense and his son Khalid was named head of the National Guard.⁸ Taken in context, some of the other factors that stacked the deck against King Saud were a dire economy and foreign policy crises that manifested in a costly war with Yemen, low oil prices and the first deficits in years.

In fact, a rare instance of public opposition arose in 2015 when *The Guardian* published two letters allegedly written by an individual described as “a senior Saudi prince [...] who [was] not named for security reasons.” The author, purportedly a grandson of the country's founder, claimed that King Salman's condition was not stable and that MBS is the de facto ruler of the kingdom which has caused anxiety amongst the second generation.

He therefore called for the other sons of the founder to come together and depose Salman:

We are calling for the sons of Ibn Saud from the oldest Bandar, to the youngest, Muqrin, to make an urgent meeting with the senior family members to investigate the situation and find out what can be done to save the country, to make changes in the important ranks, to bring in expertise from the ruling family whatever generation they are from.⁹

Despite the author's claim of widespread support from both within the royal family and Saudi society at large,¹⁰ it is unknown if such support exists. In addition, the fact that someone with such alleged support would remain anonymous brings his veracity into question. This is, in fact, another side effect of a colossal royal family: one prince may be just a lone voice of dissension among thousands.

Oman

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Oman's struggle with succession has little to do with intra-family disputes or an abundance of princes. Rather, the challenge is quite the opposite: Sultan Qaboos is unmarried with neither brothers nor direct descendants. In addition, he controls most of the key ministries himself, leaving few, if any, family members who have distinguished themselves by holding prominent positions or managing state affairs. Moreover, some of the more prominent positions not held by Qaboos, including the minister responsible for foreign affairs, are not held by members of the Al-Said family. Thus, there is neither a designated heir nor an obvious successor, except for As'ad bin Tariq, the son of Qaboos's now-deceased uncle and former prime minister, who was promoted to deputy prime minister for international relations in March 2017, a move that some see as indicative of Qaboos's succession preference.

Simultaneously, all indications point to the leader's declining health. In November 2016, the sultan made his first public appearance in almost a year for the country's National Day (and his birthday);¹¹ two years earlier he was abroad for medical tests and missed both events. In fact, he was in Germany from July 2014 until the following March, and despite the official description of "medical tests" and his "good health," an unnamed diplomatic source quoted by AFP claimed that Qaboos had colon cancer.¹²

The health of the sultan is directly linked to regime stability as, in terms of Omani politics, Qaboos is Oman and Oman is Qaboos. His popularity is not accidental: he is viewed as responsible for the country's modernization and progress. In 1970, with the help of British intelligence, Qaboos seized power from his father, who was opposed to modernization and struggling to defeat the leftist Dhofar rebellion, which was backed by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDY), a movement closely linked to the Soviet Union. At that point, Oman had almost nonexistent infrastructure,¹³ well illustrated by its mere 10 kilometers of modern roadways.¹⁴ Modernization, an end to isolation and allocation of the country's revenue to the needs of the population granted Qaboos both popularity and legitimacy.

Qaboos also began to implement a neutral foreign policy, which is attributable in part to the majority population being neither Sunni nor Shiite and, therefore, largely separate from the region's religious struggles. In contrast to the other Gulf monarchies, Oman has good relations with Iran, having maintained a largely neutral position during the Iran-Iraq War and has frequently served as an intermediary between Western governments and Tehran, from helping secure the release of American hikers detained in Iran to hosting secret talks between Washington and Tehran prior to the public JCPOA negotiations. Qaboos's policy is geared toward promoting the country's stability: neutrality decreases the risk of involvement in conflicts and positions Muscat as an invaluable asset to major powers. This, and its relationship with Iran, also allows Oman to balance against the interests of Saudi Arabia, the GCC's major player.

That balancing though has prompted significant suspicion from its GCC counterparts. For example, in 2011 (and again in 2019), a UAE "spy network" was uncovered that targeted "the regime in Oman and the mechanism of governmental and military work."¹⁵ The UAE denied this and two months later, in March, Oman announced that the two countries had reconciled thanks to Kuwaiti mediation. Nevertheless, Theodore Karasik, then-director of research and development at the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis, argued that the incident was clearly an effort by the UAE to learn "more about Iran-Oman relations."¹⁶

At present, Oman's political future is dictated by a unique succession mechanism stipulated in Article 6 of the Basic Statute of the State, which effectively serves as the country's constitution. It states that the "Royal Family



Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said al-Said greets US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Beit Al Baraka Royal Palace in Muscat on January 14, 2019. Photo: Andrew Caballero-Reynolds, AFP/Getty Images

Council shall, within three days of the throne falling vacant, determine the successor to the throne.” However, if they are unable to come to an agreement,

The Defense Council together with the Chairman of *Majlis Al Dawla* [State Council], the Chairman of *Majlis Al Shura* [Shura Council] and the Chairman of the Supreme Court, along with two of his most senior deputies, shall instate the person designated by His Majesty the Sultan in his letter to the Royal Family Council.¹⁷

In a 1997 interview with Qaboos, Judith Miller of *Foreign Affairs* was told that the names of two successors were written “in descending order” and placed “in sealed envelopes in two different regions.” This is corroborated by reports suggesting that these envelopes are being stored in safes in Muscat and Salalah.¹⁸ There are, however, five names that recur in the context of succession.¹⁹ Of these, four are descendants of the former prime minister.

Some see As’ad bin Tariq, the sultan’s cousin who serves as deputy prime minister for international cooperation and the sultan’s special representative, as the natural successor. However, some speculate that As’ad’s son, Taimur bin As’ad is the favorite, demonstrated by the “public blessing” that Qaboos

issued upon his marriage. A 2007 US Embassy cable claimed that it was “widely believed that the match was made personally by the Sultan and that it markedly strengthened Sayyid Taimur’s position within his generation of the family.”²⁰ Given that Qaboos took over from his father, it is reasonable to suggest that the appointment of As’ad bin Tariq as sultan upon Qaboos’s death might pave the way for Taimur’s designation as his heir.

It is possible that the opacity of the succession process is intentional. Qaboos’s death would result in the first change of power since his father was removed in the 1970 coup and the first time that the process laid out in the Basic Statute of the State would be fulfilled. Thus, the absence of a clear successor may be intended to reduce the potential for infighting. In this context, there are reportedly 85 “legitimate heirs,” referring to male members of the Al-Said family whose parents are both Omani nationals.²¹ And although Qaboos’s preferences were inscribed in a letter, it seems more likely that the Royal Family Council would name the successor within three days: the less time that passes between his death and the new sultan’s appointment, the less likely a succession crisis and struggle for power, and thus the less likelihood there is for instability.

Oman’s future, and thus the future of its domestic and foreign policies, remain in question due to the fact that the heir is uncertain. Although Qaboos’s powerful personality and vast popularity would suggest that any successor would prefer to maintain his successful policies, this is not certain. Any shift could mean the potential loss of a stable, neutral mediator geographically positioned at the entrance to the Strait of Hormuz, through which much of the world’s oil passes.

Kuwait

The Al-Sabah family, which has ruled Kuwait since the 18th century, faced a significant succession challenge in 2006 when Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, the country’s third emir since independence, died. Although there was a designated crown prince, Sa’ad al-Abdullah al-Sabah, there was also a problem: Sa’ad was in poor health due to colon cancer. The sheikh’s ability to execute the duties of emir were questionable, so much so that the positions of crown prince and prime minister were separated in 2003,²² with Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah appointed as the latter.²³ In practice, this meant that, due to the illnesses of both the emir and the heir, the prime minister was the de facto ruler of Kuwait.²⁴

Sheikh Jaber's death then brought the issue of succession to the forefront. If Sa'ad was so ill that he could barely act in the capacity of crown prince, how could he effectively rule as emir? However, the issue was not as simple as Sa'ad abdicating in favor of the healthier Sabah, who was already effectively ruling the country. In Kuwait, the descendants of Jaber and Salim, two sons of Kuwait's seventh ruler Sheikh Mubarak bin Sabah al-Sabah, also known as "Mubarak the Great," alternate the position of emir. This agreement served to stave off intra-familial conflict. Thus, Sheikh Jaber was from the Jaber branch, Sa'ad from Salim and Sabah from Jaber. Removing Sa'ad would, as a result, allow descendants of the Salim branch to be head of state two terms in a row and potentially threaten this longstanding agreement.

According to Kuwait's constitution, the emir must take the oath of office "at a special sitting of the National Assembly."²⁵ Although Sa'ad was named emir after Sheikh Jaber's death on January 15, there were indications that he was so ill that he was unable to even take this oath. "His health [was] said to be so bad," wrote Hassan M. Fattah of *The New York Times*, "that members of Parliament are divided over whether to hold the swearing-in ceremony in private or shorten the two-line oath."²⁶ Meanwhile, local newspaper *Al-Qabas* published a front-page editorial calling for Sa'ad to voluntarily abdicate.²⁷

Although Sa'ad subsequently dispatched a letter to the National Assembly requesting a date be set for the oath of office, the cabinet invoked Law No. 4/1964 regarding succession, allowing the emir to be removed from power if he is incapable of ruling. The National Assembly then cast two key votes: on January 24, just over a week after Sheikh Jaber's death, they voted to remove Sa'ad from office for health reasons and on January 29 they voted unanimously to appoint Sheikh Sabah in his place.²⁸ Thus, despite intra-familial disagreements, the ruling family chose to "resort to constitutional procedures rather than to force or violence to resolve power struggles."²⁹

This scenario highlights the importance of the country's constitution and laws, its institutions that wield real power (e.g., the National Assembly, which played a key role in resolving the 2006 succession) and its independent court system. This is not to intimate that Kuwait is a democracy – it is not. The government is under the authority of the emir, not an elected body, who has the power to, among other things, appoint the prime minister and dissolve the National Assembly. At the same time, its government institutions enjoy more power than any other state in the Gulf. The constitution, for example,

endows the National Assembly with the power to remove ministers through a vote of no confidence and cancel decrees issued by the emir.³⁰

The National Assembly does not hesitate to exploit these powers, which often causes friction between the body and the appointed government. Thus, Kuwait has experienced several political crises directly relating to the powers of the National Assembly, including its dissolution seven times between 2006 and 2016,³¹ and disputes with the cabinet in 2011 that garnered multiple votes of no-confidence, three new cabinets and the resignation of the deputy prime minister. These events in 2011 were further stoked by the protests, leading to calls for the prime minister's resignation and condemnation of the country's widespread corruption. Then, in April 2014, Ahmed al-Fahad, who had resigned as deputy prime minister in 2011, published a video that allegedly showed evidence of a coup plot involving senior officials, former prime minister Nasser Muhammad al-Sabah and former parliament speaker Jassem al-Karafi among them. A news blackout was ordered and an investigation was launched, which ultimately determined that the tape was fake and had been tampered with.³²

This incident represented a rare instance in which an intra-familial dispute was publicly aired. The leadership's recognition of the scandal's potential to stir wider political instability was demonstrated by its order for the media blackout and its threat of legal action against newspapers that failed to adhere to the order. Still, the incident served as a reminder that although the 2006 succession crisis was resolved legislatively, behind closed doors the intra-familial disagreement between the Jaber and Salim branches regarding succession was far from resolved.

Rather than resuming the Jaber-Salem rotation, shortly after he became emir in 2006, Sheikh Sabah appointed Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah crown prince. Nawaf, like Sheikh Sabah, is a member of the Jaber branch. Nasser, the appointed prime minister (the same Nasser that was later implicated in the videotape plot), was also from the Jaber family line. And while the prime minister is not officially the heir to the throne, it is a very high-ranking position that provides the office-holder with the necessary experience for the role and thus places him in a position to be considered for the succession hierarchy. Notably, Jaber al-Mubarak, Nasser's replacement in 2011, hails from neither the Jaber nor Salim branches, but that of another brother, Hamad. It is certainly plausible that the appointment of al-Mubarak instead

of another member of the Jaber family line was an attempt to appease Salim's descendants.

Despite censorship laws, preventing the publicizing of intra-familial disputes has become increasingly difficult in the digital age. The gag order could not stymie coverage of the succession dispute of 2006, with Kuwaiti society eagerly turning to social and international media platforms to discuss and debate the scandal.³³ In fact, the widespread media attention given to the scandal serves as an example of the vast political impact of the digital age, and considering the unlikelihood that such future disputes in Kuwait and the region can remain private in the future, that impact will likely increase going forward.

Chapter 7

Virtual Protests

As revealed during and since the Arab Spring, the Gulf's younger generation is technologically skilled, expeditiously using social media and new platforms to fuel protests. These social networks have allowed political networks to leverage the power of the masses and generate a voice in the political domain, an arena long dominated by the royal families. Technology has helped generate fundamental change in two ways: first, it enables citizens to discuss taboo subjects and to effectively organize without any official leadership, thus making it difficult for authorities to neutralize them using traditional methods, e.g., dismantling or buying off the leadership. Second, technology changes the discourse from one centered around the individual to one centered around the masses, wherein crowdsourcing and virtual communities amalgamate to form a new outlook on an old circumstance.

In this age of rapidly shifting technology, the absence of street protests does not necessarily signal citizen contentment. In societies with tight restrictions on freedom of speech, the virtual world is sometimes the only space for opposition and criticism. Access to and use of technology and social media, however, is not an indication of broader societal modernization or liberalization. In the Gulf, as indeed around the globe, all sectors of society engage in these media. The virtual space is the domain of the old and the young, the liberal and the conservative, the common citizen and the royal family. In addition to providing a platform for opposition, it provides other platforms: citizens can communicate directly with government institutions and senior politicians or break with social norms, e.g., some Saudis use the virtual space to skirt severe restrictions on communicating with the opposite gender.¹

In 2017, reports on smartphone penetration in the Gulf ranked the UAE first globally at 80.6 percent and Saudi Arabia 17th with 65.2 percent, while

another report estimated Saudi smartphone penetration at 95 percent. It is difficult to gauge which of these two estimates was closer to reality due to data collection challenges on the topic, but either way, the figures indicate incredible rates of online activity. Nevertheless, at this stage, they are not surprising. In a 2013 study by PeerReach, Saudi Arabia ranked first worldwide in Twitter penetration.² That year the kingdom also had the highest number of YouTube users per capita in the world.³

As previously noted, the vast expansion of technology and social media translates to a parallel expansion in the variety of purposes for which they are used. In Saudi Arabia, for example, Sheikh Mohamed Al-Arefe has the largest number of Twitter followers in Saudi Arabia – over 21 million as of mid-2018. This is in addition to his 24 million followers on Facebook and over 1 million subscribers to his YouTube channel.⁴ A 2013 government survey found that 29 percent of Saudi Twitter subscribers use the micro-blogging site to “express their opinions” and another 20 percent “use the site to follow religious and creative celebrities.” It further noted that 24 percent of Saudis’ tweets “tackled general topics and issues of daily life,” while 20 percent addressed social issues and 14 percent religious topics.⁵ This demonstrates that social media have joined traditional channels, such as the mosque and television, in broadcasting religious messages. For conservatives and extremist organizations, they are today’s equivalent of the audiocassette: once the latest technology employed to spread ideas, including those of al-Qaeda, social media and encrypted messaging platforms now dominate the channels of communication.

Notably, these high rates of Internet, social media and smart phone penetration do not necessarily translate into support for their unregulated use. This was made clear in a 2016 survey on media use in six Middle Eastern countries – Egypt, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE.

These viewpoints signify that Internet and social media access do not necessarily correspond to shifts in attitude toward what are often referred to as Western values, including freedom of speech and opposition to censorship. Thus, for example, the above-mentioned 2016 study reveals that concerns regarding “governments checking what [citizens] do online” declined that year in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁶

Social media thus constitute a double-edged sword. On the one hand, encrypted messaging applications and the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) and other technologies that mask IP addresses make complete

censorship and monitoring all but impossible. On the other hand, social media also provide governments with new monitoring tools to stay informed of protests, infiltrate groups on messaging platforms and monitor citizens deemed to be of concern. Shiite opposition groups in Bahrain, for example, frequently release social media messages noting the date, time and location of a planned march.⁷ In fact, Human Rights Watch's 2013 report states that the growing use of social media actually helps the Saudi government, as well as authorities in other Gulf states, to limit social protest.⁸ Although, as noted, it becomes more difficult for them to do so as the number of users grows, software systems that mine social media and trawl the deep web have also emerged. Blocking websites, even if accessible through VPNs, can also be a form of financial pressure on individuals and groups by significantly impacting advertising revenue.⁹ Moreover, Western technologies are often used to implement Internet censorship. Unsurprisingly, The Censored Planet project found a sharp increase in censorship activity following the October 2018 killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.¹⁰

Governments also often use their technology resources for more simple purposes: ensuring their own presence on those same social media outlets. Even if they cannot control the counter-narrative, they can at least be a part of and increase their share in the conversation. As of 2014, 85 percent of the 42 news sites operating in Saudi Arabia have an account on one or more social networking sites.¹¹ Many e-newspapers have also emerged and, like those in print, are often semi-official in nature – while not formally owned by the state, they maintain a pro-government line, are often affiliated with royal family members and in some cases receive financial backing from the authorities. Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Farhan Al-Saud, for example, is the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Saudi Research and Marketing Group (SRMG), which owns multiple well-known newspapers, such as *Asharq Alawsat* and the popular English-language *Arab News*. Similarly, the electronic-only *Sabq Online Newspaper* was described in a 2015 Freedom House report as an example of an online news site that receives financial support “in return for coordination between site editors and authorities.”¹² *Sabq*, meanwhile, maintains a presence on all major platforms, even Telegram, along with other mobile phone applications. As of May 2018, it also had over 13 million followers on Twitter and 2 million on Instagram. *Sabq*, like many other Saudi outlets, operates only in Arabic. There are very few English-language outlets (*Saudi Gazette*, *Arab News*) or

English-language versions (*Al-Arabiya*, *Al-Riyadh*), and those sites are not updated as frequently, nor do they provide the same content, as their Arabic counterparts. This indicates that the targeted audience is Arabic speakers generally, and Saudi citizens specifically.

Thus, the Gulf monarchies clearly recognize the importance of taking part in new-age media and their power to serve their own desired ends. However, online monitoring and strict cybercrime laws, discussed in greater depth in Chapter 10, demonstrate that authorities remain concerned with social media's use as a platform for protest movements, as witnessed during the upheavals. They understand that, with the groundwork already laid, moving from the keyboard to the street is not especially difficult should the people decide to do so.

PART III

Theoretical and Empirical Explanations for Regime Stability in the Gulf

Chapter 8

The Theory of the Rentier State

The resilience of the Gulf monarchy is most commonly attributed to its ability to exploit oil resources for political purposes. Oil-rich monarchs, the argument goes, buy off their citizens in exchange for political quiescence. They do so by using the revenue from plentiful oil and/or gas reserves to provide citizens with extensive social benefits. These benefits come at a high price: citizens accept the absolute rule of the monarch and denounce their rights to political representation. Rentier State Theory (RST), which captures this transaction, therefore postulates that the Gulf social contract was largely developed as a result of and is dependent upon oil and gas revenue.

More broadly, RST attempts to explain relations between government and society in countries where state revenue is primarily or exclusively derived from the export of natural resources, specifically by examining the mechanisms that allow these governments to rule in the absence of democracy. The referenced “rent” refers to the financial compensation obtained externally in exchange for the country’s natural resources – in the case of the Gulf monarchies, oil or gas. The rentier state then distributes a significant portion of those funds to its citizens, simultaneously exempting them from most or all forms of taxation. In exchange, the regime is freed from any obligation to provide its citizens with political or decision-making power. In other words, there need not be any civic representation when there is no taxation. However, as previously discussed, a system that distributes vast benefits serves to dampen entrepreneurship and, therefore, negatively impacts the rentier state economy on the whole.

Although well-known British economist David Ricardo was the first to develop the theory of rents in the early 20th century,¹ the notion of the rentier state first emerged in the 1970s amid the dramatic rise of oil prices. Hossein Mahdavy laid the foundations for the theory:

Rentier States are defined here as those countries that receive on a regular basis substantial amounts of external rent. External rents are in turn defined as rentals paid by foreign individuals, concerns or governments to individuals, concerns or governments of a given country. [...] A moment's reflection will reveal that oil revenues received by the governments of the oil exporting countries can also be external rents.²

Mahdavy further notes that the oil allows rentier states “to embark on large public expenditure programs without resorting to taxation and without running into drastic balance of payments or inflation problems that usually plague other developing nations.” This results in rapid expansion of the public sector, wherein “the government becomes an important – or even the dominant – factor in the economy.”³

Later, Hazem Beblawi expanded RST, further elucidating that in rentier states, the production of wealth involves only a small percentage of society, the government acting as the primary recipient of funds. Access to wealth, therefore, is limited to the ruling parties and the various groups with which they choose to foster familial or political connections. The remainder of the population, then, remains but a consumer of the wealth through the various allocation methods employed by the state. “Citizenship,” he postulates, “becomes a source of economic benefit.”⁴ Beblawi adds that the greater the proportion of wealth derived from oil and gas and the smaller the population, the easier it is to maintain stability in the rentier state.

Indeed, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, all the Gulf states have relatively small populations, although they have all faced relatively dramatic increases over time with the influx of foreign workers. Beblawi argues that the Gulf monarchies' distribution of expansive economic benefits and import of foreign workers discourages citizens from productive activity, thereby continuing their dependency on state benefits in perpetuity and thus largely failing to form an active middle class. In this way, the system creates what Beblawi terms a “rentier mentality,” which “embodies a break in the work-reward causation.” The citizen of the rentier economy receives a reward and maintains a share in the result, but does not necessarily participate in production.⁵ This is one of the main reasons for the slower economic growth of rentier states and difficulties in diversifying, even though they enjoy higher levels of income and plentiful natural resources.

On the flip side, the rentier system may breed political stability. Political stability is, at least in part, directly correlated with the standard of living that citizens enjoy. Since the citizens of the Gulf monarchies enjoy a particularly high standard of living, there has been little political uprising. This correlation particularly stands out upon examination of the protest period, during which citizens witnessed and understood the impact of changing the existing political order on socioeconomic life. Nearly two decades before the upheavals, Gregory Gause clearly drew this connection, arguing that oil wealth and the way in which it is used can explain how Gulf states have managed to weather the unrest they have faced over time – by maintaining and even raising the standard of living, the risk of an uprising is reduced.⁶

During the strife, the Gulf monarchs did, indeed, turn to their coffers and increase social benefits as a method of pre-emptively quelling potential protests.⁷ Their ability to do so was certainly facilitated by the high oil prices at the time. Thus, in early 2011, Bahrain gave approximately \$2,500 to each Bahraini family, Saudi Arabia presented a \$37 billion benefits package followed shortly after by a further \$93 billion package, the UAE allocated approximately \$1.55 billion for improved water and electricity infrastructure in the poorer areas of the country and later that year, Qatar announced a 60 percent salary increase for all citizens working in the public sector.

Although not foolproof – the allowance that was given to families in Bahrain, for example, did little to prevent protests – this strategy has delivered notable successes, the Gulf monarchies riding out the unrest, in part, due to their unique ability to swiftly slap on a financial Band-Aid. This was, of course, also not the first time they used this remedy. During Oman's Dhofar rebellion, for example, the sultan “directed a disproportionate percentage of government revenues to the Dhofar region [...] in part as economic appeasement. The construction of schools, hospitals, roads and other infrastructure ameliorated the underprivileged status in the south.”⁸

A related contributing factor to the muted effect of the protests in the Gulf monarchies was the citizens' interest in preserving their quality of life. As they witnessed violent conflicts break out in Yemen, Syria, Libya and Iraq, Gulf citizens were incentivized to maintain stability within their borders.

Difficulties arise, however, when the building blocks of this system erode and governments must either find additional methods of sustaining their end of the social contract or renegotiate it. The first and primary building block in the case of the Arab monarchy is the declining external rent received from

natural resources; as this diminishes, so does the government's ability to remain the primary economic driver while simultaneously limiting taxation. Particularly in the Gulf, where public spending rose significantly during prosperous times, this poses a threat to the subsidies and development spending that serves as the lifeblood of their social contracts.

However, as previously noted the Gulf monarchies recognize the unsustainability of the status quo and are seeking not only to diversify their economies and reduce public spending, but to correspondingly amend their domestic social contracts. Thus, Saudi Vision 2030 emerged, as did reductions in certain subsidies and GCC-wide agreements for a 5-percent VAT and selective tax. Importantly, a reduction in government spending and diversification of revenue sources does not necessarily amount to a disposing of the current system, but rather represents efforts to make it more sustainable. Social benefits, for example, have been modified but not revoked altogether.

The ideal position for the regional monarchs is to maintain the current social contract and corresponding political and economic systems even if another wave of unrest sweeps the region at a time when low oil prices may not allow for massive benefits packages to be dispersed. This could entail amending the social contract further in ways that expand, even if only slightly, restrictions on political participation and decision-making. Saudi Arabia created its own Shura Council in the 1990s, albeit with advisory power only. Perhaps these powers might be expanded in the future as a means of meeting such demands. For example, in response to the 2011 protest in Oman, the Shura Council was granted increased legislative power. The continuity of the social contract certainly requires the governments' taking on budgetary deficits in order to preserve certain benefits and finding alternate sources of revenue, such as the aforementioned taxes. Several of the Gulf states also require foreign workers to have local sponsors, which can provide many, even those not close to the royal family, an opportunity to benefit from these expatriates. In this way, citizens can receive a form of "rent" that does not first pass through the government.

As the social contract evolved in recent decades, Matthew Gray developed the notion of "Late Rentierism," which is essentially a more sophisticated version of RST that takes into account various additional parameters, including globalization, modernization, population growth, technological advancement, liberalization of trade and economic diversification efforts.

This idea divides the original theory of the rentier state into three phases, the third of which is late rentierism. In addition to addressing factors that did not exist when the theory was initially developed, late rentierism examines the rentier states' perceived new approach to managing rents and regime survival. Gray explains:

Defining the new rentier state [...] is a recognition that more active and entrepreneurial state capitalism can assist in providing state longevity, both through the derivation of new forms of wealth and as an alternative to politically risky neoliberal economic liberalization; and perhaps even a realization that oil is a finite resource with an ultimate, if unknown expiration date.⁹

Gray notes that rulers of the new rentier state “are not simply letting rents flow to society and hoping in earnest that this will sustain their rule.”¹⁰ Rather, the regime's recognition of the prevailing pitfalls will ultimately generate action that will contribute to the state's stability.

Gray's late rentierism is seen by many as a last-ditch effort at reviving a theory with few legs left to stand on. In their view, despite the high correlation between rentierism and political survival in the Gulf monarchies, there are external factors that bring Rentier State Theory's conclusivity into question. In 2001, for example, Michael Ross wrote that it is difficult to draw such conclusions regarding the social contract in the Middle East since most of the regimes are authoritarian and rule by force, regardless of their wealth in resources and their level of rent.¹¹ In other words, the social contract may be a spurious variable to begin with considering the regime type gives little room to verify the correlation drawn.

Critics of the rentier model also argue that such a system existed prior to the discovery of oil, although it was expanded and certainly facilitated by wealth. Indeed, even Beblawi notes that the “long tribal tradition of buying loyalty and allegiance [was] now confirmed by an *état providence* [welfare state], distributing favors and benefits to its population.”¹² One of Saudi Arabia's original “rents,” for example, were fees collected from the thousands of pilgrims who visited Mecca and Medina. Onley and Khalaf point out that leaders in the pre-oil era used these funds to provide “protection, justice and assistance” and prevent tribes from shifting loyalty.¹³ Even France and Britain adopted the custom of buying loyalty in the Middle East during the Mandate period when they awarded land to tribal leaders in Syria and

Iraq to secure their fealty.¹⁴ However, the fact that a version of the rentier system existed prior to the oil era does not mitigate its explanatory value in the rentier economy. Rather, it increases it by adding an element of history and tradition to the system.

Nevertheless, the theory of the rentier state is primarily an economic model that largely ignores the non-financial benefits that are provided by states to their citizens, including security and national identity. The theory is also unable to explain the structural differences between the Gulf states: it cannot, for instance, explain why Kuwait has an elected parliament with limited but clear power, while the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are absolute monarchies. The theory also does not account for potential non-economic threats to regime stability. Although one of the factors late rentierism addresses is the overall concept of newly emerging threats, the theory is not well placed to explain why, say, Qatar and Oman have divergent strategic approaches to Islamist militancy and Iran.

It is necessary to look at political history, cultural nuances and unique interests, as well as other factors, to understand the differing economic and social systems found among the Gulf monarchies. Rentier State Theory is not sufficient. Likewise, alone, the rentier system cannot ensure stability going forward, and these additional factors play key roles in the future of the social contract and thus the state.

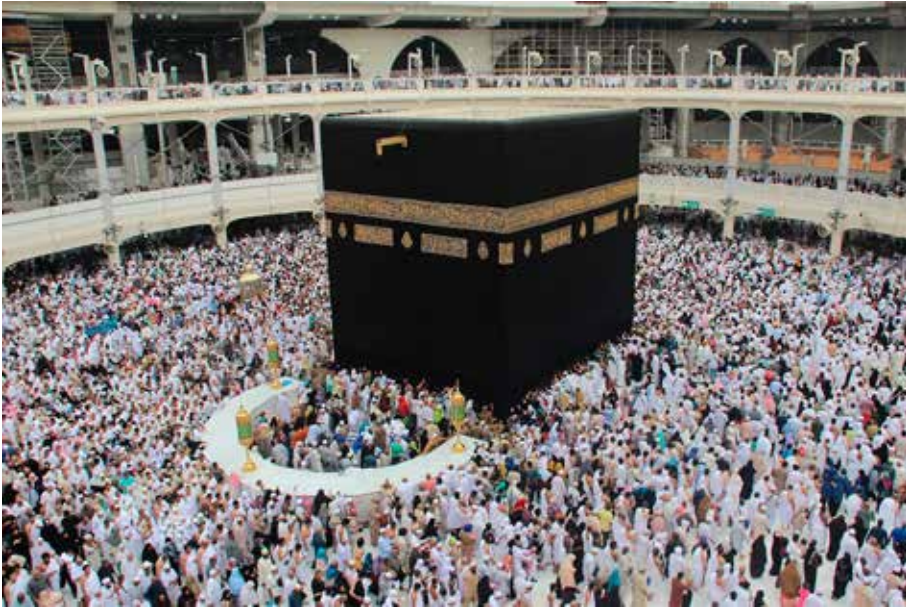
Chapter 9

Religion, Tradition and Government

Alongside rentierism are largely non-economic but significant factors that contribute to the stability and the continuity of the Gulf monarchies, foremost among them religion and tradition, a royal family at the helm of government and efforts to co-opt existing and future opposition. This chapter addresses these pillars, upon which the Gulf states rely to maintain legitimacy and support from the population.

Saudi Arabia serves as an optimal example of the importance of religion to regime continuity. As noted earlier, one of the key sources of its legitimacy is the historical pact between the Saudi state's founder and the leader of the Islamic reform movement that would later become known as Wahhabism. Territorial expansion was justified on religious grounds, with the Al-Saud family taking on the role of military and political leader and the descendants of Al-Wahhab the primary religious authority.¹ Saudi Arabia is also home to Islam's two holiest sites. One of the king's titles – "custodian of the Two Holy Mosques" – emphasizes the link between the ruler and Islam. While the royal families of other Gulf monarchies may not have this sort of historical pact or Mecca and Medina on which to derive legitimacy, they too are careful to preserve their image of religious adherence. In addition to bolstering legitimacy, this image serves as a tool to blunt religious-based opposition. History, however, reveals the erroneous argument that all religiously or tribally legitimate regimes indeed survive. Those in Libya, Yemen and Iraq all fell despite having one or both of these characteristics. Therefore, there must be additional factors contributing to a stability steeped in political culture.

Alongside religion is the importance of the monarchies' place in local history and tradition. Although not royalty in the way much of the world is accustomed and which has become a staple of the Gulf monarchies, the notion of a ruling tribe or family has always dominated the region. In



The Ka'aba in Mecca during the Hajj season in 2003. Photo: "Al-Fassam," on flickr. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/al-fassam/107142512/>

addition to the historic concept of the Islamic caliphate, the modern Saudi state is actually the third iteration of such a regime, its predecessors initially emerging in the 18th century. In Oman, the current Al-Said ruling family also first came into power in the 18th century, but the Ibadi imamate existed long before then. While many of the smaller states first appeared in their modern form in the 20th century with the end of colonial rule, their current formation does not negate the history of traditional tribal and familial rule in the Arabian Peninsula. The ruling families are, in other words, tribal leaders-cum-modern monarchs.

Scholars tend to agree, pointing to the unique roles that the monarchies have traditionally held. Michael Hudson, for example, argues that the exceptional continuity of the Arab monarchies is evidence that the establishment's legitimacy is a result of the alignment between the modern Gulf monarchy and the sociocultural values it espouses.² Daniel Brumberg claims that certain monarchs remain at some distance, even if only perceived, from the political arena, so as to be seen as "legitimate and effective arbiters of competing social, economic, religious, and ideological interests."³ Victor Menaldo, moreover, in his discussion on the monarchical political culture, includes tribal culture as a contributing factor, noting that, "in MENA countries

where settled agriculture has historically been difficult, if not impossible, tribal social structures have been more likely to survive. By extension, so have monarchies.”⁴

The legitimacy that the monarch derives from tribal tradition crucially depends on the people’s access to the leadership. In the Gulf, this manifests in various ways, most obviously through the *majilis*, or special council, in which any citizen is able to petition the ruler or, in many cases, another member of the royal family and representative of the ruler. David B. Ottaway of *The Washington Post* describes this process using a 1981 case under then-Riyadh Governor and current King Salman:

[E]ach petitioner came up and presented his complaint. Some were scrawled on a crumpled piece of paper and barely legible, others neatly typewritten by a professional scribe. After handing them over, each kissed the prince on the right shoulder and then retreated to his seat without saying a word. The prince sat down in his straight-backed chair and read the 40 or more petitions. As he finished each one, he called out the name of the owner and dispatched him with a messenger to deal with the complaint.⁵

Ottaway described many of the issues brought to the *majilis* as “mundane,” with the solution often necessitating only a referral to the proper ministry.⁶ Yet this deep-rooted tradition tells the country’s citizens that they have a direct line of communication to their leaders. And it is not just the direct line that is important, it is the personal attention they receive and the tangible results that materialize. A diplomatic cable leaked from the US Embassy in Riyadh noted that the body tasked with doling out stipends to royal family members was also responsible for the “fulfillment of financial promises made by senior princes [...] to average Saudis, most likely during a *majilis* when numerous Saudis personally approach and petition senior leaders.”⁷ This “desert democracy,” as it has often been termed, also allows members of the ruling family to keep their fingers on the pulse of the country. Furthermore, addressing individual needs helps reinforce perceptions of the royal family as impartial brokers between the people and the government, even if the latter is comprised of other members of the same royal family.

Other types of petitions, such as those involving political demands, can also be submitted to the *majilis*. As previously noted, the submission of two petitions was one of the instigating factors that led then-Crown Prince

Abdullah to establish the National Dialogue in 2003. The *majilis* operates alongside more formal government institutions, which allow access to leadership in different ways, including the National Assembly/Parliament or Consultative Council. Although the consultative councils are often only advisory in nature with no legislative power, the fact that the ruler consults with the council, which is intended to be representative of his subjects, still serves the purpose of connecting the monarch with his subjects.

However, it is not only the citizens who potentially pose a risk to regime stability, but also other members of the ruling family. Michael Herb argues that the dynastic nature of the Gulf monarchies and the ability to disperse power among its members is an important factor. He maintains that wealth, among other factors, led to the creation of numerous positions, including in the private sector, that were awarded as consolation prizes. Under such circumstances, a rogue family member would find it difficult to organize a coup given that relatives would likely prefer to side with the incumbent ruler rather than risk their positions. Herb notes that the Gulf states adhered closely to this intra-family social contract, while many monarchies that fell, e.g., Libya, did not.⁸

The royal family's involvement in nearly every aspect of Saudi life also contributes to regime stability. The thousands of princes and princesses not only serve as ministers and deputy ministers, they are also advisors, businessmen and women, students and soldiers – integral components of society. While their appointment to official positions limits the likelihood of intra-familial protest, it simultaneously may also spur discontent. A prime example is the military, a force behind numerous historical coups. In addition to a royal family member often heading the military, many princes serve, usually in the officers' corps. Particularly for those whose stipends are insufficient to maintain their desired standard of living, a military coup may be seen as a viable option.

Another way to deter intra-familial opposition is to publicly demonstrate the dangers of family members doing as they please. For example, in October 2016, a Saudi prince was sentenced to death after he pleaded guilty to fatally shooting someone during a brawl.⁹ Years earlier, in 2004, a Saudi prince narrowly avoided similar execution for murder following a last-minute pardon at the request of the victim's father.¹⁰ In January 2017, Kuwait executed a prince for the 2010 murder of his nephew.¹¹ In addition to sending a message to members of the royal family, such actions proclaim to citizens: no one is

above the law. In the words of an Al-Saud family member in a *Newsweek* opinion piece following the aforementioned October 2016 execution:

The case of the late Prince Turki will serve as an important reminder to members of the royal family, especially the younger ones, that no one in the kingdom is immune from the law, and it will also give the Saudi public increased confidence that justice will continue to be applied equally to all in practice and not just in theory.¹²

Such proclamations do not endow the monarchy with the ability to do as it pleases without repercussion. In many instances, with the notable exception of Oman, given Sultan Qaboos's unique circumstances, the existence of a single figure as head of state does not mean that consensus among the ruling family is irrelevant. Saudi Arabia is a particularly good example in this regard, with the ruling family's displeasure and concern with the kingdom's future a key factor in reducing former King Saud's power and then forcing his abdication to Faysal. Appointment to higher-level positions and, subsequently, involvement in decision-making, is one of the methods that can be used to maintain approval and support, particularly among senior princes. In line with this, Herb adds that the royal family's interest in maintaining their positions and quality of life incentivizes them to choose the best-suited candidate to become ruler, given their vested interest in preserving the family's rule.¹³ A capable leader will ensure their continuity of power, while one less capable may threaten it. In a sense, the royal family has co-opted itself.

Like co-optation, exclusion is a technique that has been used to create a stark separation between the people and the state – another source of legitimacy. This exclusion is made possible by the social contract, as oil revenues have allowed for a more expansive agreement between the ruler and the ruled. Joseph Kostiner named this state system in Saudi Arabia "Faysal's Order," after King Faysal who essentially created it in the oil era. Faysal's Order was meant "to introduce a reformed, technologically developed but conservative order."¹⁴ On that basis, it promoted policies of either co-optation or exclusion of all social groups that could threaten the regime. These included the average Saudi citizen, tribal leaders, the *ulema* and the growing middle class largely comprised of university graduates. In other words, Faysal's Order allowed for clear distinctions between those who were decision-makers – the royal family – and those who were not –

everyone else. However, “everyone else” was given something or several things in return:

The ultimate ‘cradle-to-grave’ benefits were intended to satisfy all strata of society and, in exchange, the Sa‘udi people would forgo demands for political representation and participation in decision-making. In addition, new initiatives of the expanded and increasingly centralized government bureaucracy, whose goal was to reach the entire population, necessarily reduced the influence of tribal leaders. The creation of direct routes to the government that no longer required a middleman, for example, eroded their traditional responsibilities and sources of authority. Thirdly, this same pursuit of expansion and centralization also allowed for a growing number of individuals and factions to be brought further into the existing and expanding bureaucracy. This placed them into more clearly defined roles and a formal hierarchy, of which Faysal and the royal family remained firmly at the top. Finally, Faysal’s increased emphasis on education not only provided the Sa‘udi populace with free schooling, but also sought to reward new graduates, particularly those returning from western universities, with administrative positions within the government.¹⁵

Yet, even as Faysal’s Order contributed to stability by firmly entrenching the royal family’s position, it was not without flaw. Declining oil prices, as noted, made the hefty requirements of the social contract too heavy to bear, and ultimately required restructuring of the social contract wherein new taxes were introduced and subsidies cut. In addition, later attempts to appease the religious establishment backfired, evidenced by its support for the Afghani jihad. Technology, too, has provided a voice to rogue actors, from preachers who are not part of the formal establishment to university graduates who have studied in the West and attempt to bring some of its culture back home. Moreover, while the Al-Saud may have provided its citizens with financial perks, therein upholding its side of the contract, it failed to address their other, deeper demands, e.g., the average Shiite’s quest for greater religious and political autonomy.

The royal family’s participation in government in and of itself has drawbacks. If a ruler is not satisfied with a certain family member in a key

position, removing him may not always be easy and requires consideration of its potential knock-on effects. Thus, even if King Abdullah II of Jordan can fire four prime ministers without destabilizing the Hashemite regime, in Bahrain, the king would need to fire his uncle; in Qatar, his cousin; and so on. This can be especially problematic in times when a cabinet reshuffle is necessary to assuage public anger. While there are multiple non-royal cabinet members who can certainly be moved around in the case of public pressure, any inability to make certain personnel changes reduces the ruler's ability to maneuver in the face of various threats.

For example, the 2011 Bahraini protests called for the removal of the king's uncle as prime minister, a position he had held since before the country's independence. Although there are certainly inherent problems with arguing the counterfactual, it is not unreasonable to suggest that, had the king met this demand, he may have had more leeway to address other complaints and the ability to empower the crown prince, who was seen as more open to reform. Thus, the structural characteristics of a government replete with royal family members, while adding to stability on the one hand, can detract from it on the other.

Mohammed bin Salman adeptly understands this power dynamic. Bruce Riedel makes a compelling argument for why the controversial crown prince of Saudi Arabia still needs his father. He holds that MBS remains dependent specifically on his father's legitimacy in order to retain his position as heir apparent. "As long as King Salman is on the throne," states Riedel, "the chance of an inside-the-family coup is unlikely. Salman has legitimacy. He is also not brain dead or incapacitated. He is more involved and important than the Western media suggests."¹⁶ On that basis, Riedel predicts that, if King Salman lives for another decade, a lot may change in the kingdom. Conversely, "If he died tonight, all bets are off," both for the future of the crown prince and the state.¹⁷

That lack of legitimacy is apparent in the young crown prince's harsh domestic crackdowns. MBS has surely cultivated a deep network of foreign allies in recent years, yet his position internally remains only superficially secure, a danger that he then plays up to justify domestic crackdowns to external allies.¹⁸ The crown prince's recent crackdowns though, prominently his alleged hand in the Khashoggi killing, may compromise the efficacy of that alibi – there is only so much despotism democratic governments can ally themselves with without losing legitimacy.

The successful governance of the Gulf royal families is especially astounding when compared to the region's republics that fell after attempting to incorporate their own families in the governance structure. Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Hafez al-Assad in Syria, Ali Abdullah Salah in Yemen and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya all sought to pass control on to their sons and place other family members in positions of power. However, the Arab Spring proved that "presidential monarchies" are anything but stable. Of the five presidents who fell from power or whose regime floundered, Mubarak, Qaddafi and Salah certainly planned to pass the reins on to their sons, and Hussein apparently intended to do the same. Only al-Assad's son managed to take over from his father, although the ongoing civil war in Syria demonstrates that this seeming exception cannot quite be deemed successful. Ultimately, in the wake of the Arab Spring, a number of the region's historically monarchical governments fell – in Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Iran. Therefore, it is not just a familial hierarchy that contributes to the stability of the Gulf monarchies. It is also not just the form of government. Nor is it just religion, tribal tradition, the social contract, or policies of exclusion and co-optation that alone account for the survival of the Gulf monarchies. Rather, it is a combination of all of these factors, and others.

Legitimacy is actually a difficult concept to measure, particularly in the absence of comprehensive surveys and guarantees of truthful responses, the latter of which can be difficult to obtain in countries with strict controls over media and harsh punishments for opposition. Moreover, while it is true that a rebellion stands as evidence that a ruler has lost legitimacy in the eyes of at least some of the population, Bahrain's ruling family remains in power despite the 2011 uprising. Conversely, the absence of rebellion does not necessarily equate to the presence of legitimacy. An absence of rebellion always exists before there is one. Just ask the Shah of Iran.

Chapter 10

Intimidation and Oppression

The Gulf monarchs use their vast wealth to maintain their respective social contracts, thereby pacifying citizens and buying calm. But what is the price of that calm? According to one estimate, during the first half of 2011 alone, the Gulf states spent \$150 billion to suppress dissent.¹ This vast sum of money was used to raise salaries, build housing and provide other benefits. But these financial inducements were not relied upon exclusively to convince people to leave the streets, as in Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain, or to discourage them from flooding the streets, as in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. Rather, financial incentivization was balanced with intimidation and repression, as well as the bolstering of expensive and sophisticated methods and resources of monitoring and censorship.

The “stick” at the end of the “carrot” is similar to that of police states in other parts of the world. Censorship laws, advanced methods of monitoring, forcible dispersion and arrests of protesters, silencing of authentic social and civil organizations and, at least in the case of Bahrain, recruitment of foreign nationals as security services are all commonplace.² Gulf studies do not sufficiently emphasize the coercion imposed by the region’s monarchs, perhaps because uprisings are typically repressed before the use of force is even seen as necessary. A June 2018 article in *The Economist* cuts right through the recent religious and political reform efforts in Saudi Arabia and the wider region, pointing out that the new policies have been accompanied by increased authoritarianism at home:

At home Prince Muhammad has developed a taste for repression. The number of executions has risen. More dissenters are in jail, among them, perversely, women who campaigned to drive. Everything, it seems, must be a gift from the Al Sauds: the name of the country, the oil bounty and now the right to drive

a car. He has also adopted the view that all Islamists, even the non-violent offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, are as grave a menace as Sunni jihadists and Shia militias. Thus, the Saudis and Emiratis are leading a counter-revolution against the Arab upheavals and the hope of democracy. Sadly, America has all but given them carte blanche.³

Even if a popular political uprising is improbable under these circumstances, the governments certainly prepare themselves for that eventuality. According to a 2010 report from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), countries in the “Near and Middle East” have the highest median number of police officers globally at 435.5 per 100,000 people. Bahrain and Kuwait, however, far surpassed this, at 1,867 and 1,065, respectively.⁴ The rare instances of forcible interventions at demonstrations, arrests of protesters and opposition figures and harsh sentences shed light on the extraordinarily strict laws that severely constrain political action in the Gulf monarchies. Protests are usually illegal or restricted to certain locations and/or require permits that can easily be denied. All allow for security forces to intervene, either because demonstrations are broadly barred or because a particular demonstration was not authorized. As a result, the Kuwaiti government could, for example, allow protests at the French Embassy in January 2015 against the publication in France of a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad, and at the Russian Embassy in December 2016 against the events in Aleppo, Syria, but disperse one in March 2015 that called for the release of political prisoners and various reforms because some participants broke the rules by attempting to march toward the Parliament building.

Other forms of civil disobedience face similar consequences. In Dubai in 2013, the break-up of a labor strike – a relatively uncommon phenomenon in the country given the illegality of unions and strike actions – resulted in the deportation of a number of workers. In March 2015, police peacefully resolved a protest of construction workers that was described as a misunderstanding regarding overtime payments. *Arabian Business* was sure to note that the workers “could face deportation if a case was taken against them,” but that the employer involved decided not to do so and thus they would “not face any sanctions.”⁵

Strict limitations on freedom of speech serve the same purpose of coercion. In Oman, although the sultan ultimately conceded and offered pardons, a

number of individuals calling for political reform online were arrested in 2012 for “insulting the sultan.”⁶ In Kuwait in March 2015, protesters took to the streets to demand the release of former MP Musallam al-Barrak (who received the greatest number of votes in the country’s history in the February 2012 elections), who was imprisoned for offending the emir at a rally speech; al-Barrak had proclaimed: “We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy.”⁷ This was followed by the July 2016 sentencing of Kuwaiti MP Abdul-Hamid Dashti to 11 years and six months in prison for insulting Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, as well as his own country’s judiciary.⁸ Such arrests are common across all of the Gulf monarchies, but they are not limited to national figures. In May 2015, an Emirati court found five foreign nationals guilty of attempting to besmirch the state by spreading insulting images of the symbols of the country.⁹

Any disparagement of Islam and religious figures is also off limits. In Saudi Arabia, one of the better-known cases is the 2012 arrest of blogger Raif Badawi, who created a website called “Free Saudi Liberal,” with the purpose of criticizing Islam and the country’s religious establishment. In May 2014, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes, along with a fine of 1 million SAR (at the time, approximately \$266,000). By January of the following year, Badawi had received his first 50 lashes.¹⁰ This punishment, however, was not particularly surprising. Strict limitations on free speech are not out of the ordinary. In fact, in April 2011, soon after the Arab Spring began spreading across the region, Saudi Arabia’s then-King Abdullah issued multiple royal decrees with amendments to the November 2000 Press and Publications Law barring publication of anything under seven listed topics, which included “anything that violates Islamic Shariah rulings or laws in force, [...] anything damaging to the country’s public affairs,” as well as anything affecting the reputation or dignity of, or slandering or personally insulting, the Grand Mufti of the kingdom or members of the Board of Senior Ulema, or dignitaries of the state or any of its employees, or any person of ordinary standing or any legal person.¹¹

There is no reprieve from these strict laws, even in the virtual world. Although anonymity capabilities have certainly improved, cybercrime legislation, which exists in all six GCC states, often mimics the restrictions placed in other spheres. For example, the UAE changed its 2006 law on cybercrimes in November 2012. Article 24 prohibits any online content that “would promote or praise any programs or ideas which would prompt riot,

hatred, racism, sectarianism, or damage the national unity or social peace or prejudice the public order and public morals.” Article 29 bars the same, adding, “with intent to make sarcasm or damage the reputation prestige or stature of the State or any of its institutions,” as well as any royal family members, political figures or symbols.¹² Two years later, in September 2014, Qatar passed a new cybercrime law that, among other things, forbids anyone from “creat[ing] or shar[ing] online content that’s deemed harmful to the country’s ‘social values’ or ‘general order’.”¹³ Ironically, the only loosening on counter-establishment narratives exists when it is countering another establishment’s narrative. As self-exiled Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi explained in an interview to *The Economist* just a few months before his brutal killing, “Sometimes the government plays a very interesting game, in which you are allowed to criticise or debate an issue in another country but not your own.”¹⁴

To uphold these laws, the Gulf monarchies have increasingly turned to technology companies in the United States and the West to service their censorship needs. As Jared Malsin of *The Wall Street Journal* points out, “Authoritarian governments in the Middle East are increasingly adopting a version of China’s approach to online censorship, walling their citizens off from swaths of the internet and denying access to popular websites.”¹⁵ While the Gulf certainly lacks a large domestic technology industry capable of furnishing these policies, deep packet inspection from US companies have made the blocking, monitoring, redirecting and altering of Internet traffic available to them.¹⁶ Ironically, the very technological advances that have been used as platforms to open up these countries through virtual dialogue and protest have now been tailored as platforms to control these social movements. The Internet has therefore, in effect, become an anti-democratic force in the Gulf States and the wider region.

Therein, the Gulf monarchies are able to limit dissent and opposition activity through a combination of strict laws and punishment mechanisms. They do not necessarily need to respond harshly in all instances, but rather create a situation in which the vast majority of citizens would consider the risk of challenging the law greater than any potential reward. Vague laws – e.g., those that beckon questions such as: what can be considered harmful to the country’s general order or national unity? What constitutes an insult to the state’s symbols, royal family, or leaders? How do you define an insult to Islam? – only contribute to this atmosphere of uncertainty and fear.

Freedom of speech is not only limited on the individual level. Political parties are often banned and political entities, which are permitted to operate in some Gulf states, as well as other organizations, often face intense scrutiny and pressure and are sometimes outright banned. For example, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and in July 2016, Bahrain dissolved the country's largest Shiite opposition group, al-Wefaq. In March 2012 in the UAE, just prior to a visit by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, authorities shut down the US-financed National Democratic Institute, which had also come under scrutiny in Egypt. The German Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is affiliated with the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (the party of Chancellor Angela Merkel), was also ordered to close. The official reason given pertained to violations of or failure to obtain required licenses.¹⁷

If these strict laws are any indication of brutality in the face of political movement away from the regime, the military forces that the Gulf states have amassed in order to combat such movement are an even greater manifestation of that ferocity. Such militant forces are not always homegrown. In a May 2011 exposé in *The New York Times*, Mazzetti and Hager revealed the inner workings of the Emirates military expansion in the months leading up to the Arab Spring. Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and de facto ruler of the UAE Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan hired Erik Prince of the controversial firm Blackwater and paid nearly \$530 million to form an 800-member battalion of foreign troops, many of whom were Colombian, to “conduct special operations missions inside and outside the country, defend oil pipelines and skyscrapers from terrorist attacks, and put down internal revolts.”¹⁸ The plan, as the documents referenced in the article demonstrate, was that these troops would be deployed should the Emirates face any of various forms of unrest, including “pro-democracy protests like those sweeping the Arab world.”¹⁹ The UAE's outsourcing of such operations to foreign soldiers proved a vital solution to the problem of a potential domestic uprising: “Muslim soldiers, Mr. Prince warned, could not be counted on to kill fellow Muslims.”²⁰ This example of the extent to which the Emirates has gone to preserve power, joined with the Saudi and UAE 2011 intervention in Bahrain, paints a very stark picture of what things would look like had further force proven necessary to quell a domestic uprising in the Gulf monarchies during the Arab Spring.

Despite the illegalities under US law associated with Prince's activity, the US showed little frustration or willingness to stymie his activity. In fact,

as Mazzetti and Hager further discovered, the US knew about the UAE's strategy and kept silent. One Obama administration official who was aware of the operation stated: "The Gulf countries, and the UAE in particular, don't have a lot of military experience. It would make sense if they looked outside their borders for help... They might want to show that they are not to be messed with."²¹ Under the Trump Administration, the Gulf monarchies have been met with an even more lax approach to their domestic policies.

The indifference of the US and the international community to their systematic violations of human rights has allowed the Gulf states to proceed in this manner unabated. Most Western governments would disagree with this characterization, but their responses to these violations too often come in the form of rhetoric, as opposed to concrete action. Thus, while the EU Parliament passed a resolution calling for an EU-wide arms embargo on Saudi Arabia in response to the kingdom's intervention in Yemen, it did not compel the member states to individually do so. And although former US President Barack Obama held back certain arms sales to Bahrain on the basis of human rights concerns, President Donald Trump has not only reversed this stance in practice, but hinted to a new policy position: in early May 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that conditioning "national security efforts on someone adopting our values creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests."²² Behind this statement is the simple desire of the United States government to preserve regional stability, halt Iranian expansion and access these countries' economies and oil. While the US may be aiming for energy independence, the continued flow of oil out of the Gulf states is necessary to maintain stable pricing and global stability.

Chapter 11

External Support

In order to fully address regime stability, external support, that is, the foreign assistance channeled to the Gulf states in a variety of forms, must also be discussed. The US first entered the region via Saudi Arabia during World War II, which erupted shortly after the first oil exports departed the kingdom.¹ Britain was already firmly ensconced in the region at the time, providing support to the Ibn Saud government and holding the smaller states as protectorates. The US, however, was initially hesitant to intervene, as seen by its refusal of at least one request by Britain for the US to help allay its financial burden in the kingdom, but ultimately reversed course, recognizing the importance of oil discoveries there.² While it is true that the US had its own extensive reserves, their sufficiency and staying power was called into question by the scale and scope of WWII and the reliance on oil and oil products for the war effort. Prior to this, Britain provided subsidies to Ibn Saud and his government, while the California-Arabian Standard Oil Company (CASOC, a precursor to Saudi Aramco)³ provided loans based on projected future royalties.⁴ These, however, proved insufficient and then the US became involved and provided assistance through the Lend-Lease initiative.⁵

This initiative marked the beginning of a shift in US-Saudi relations that ultimately led to the US largely replacing Britain in Saudi Arabia and, following independence, in the other GCC countries as well. A period of mass decolonization began in the years following WWII and coincided with the Cold War, creating dozens of new countries that were to either be Western allies or fall behind the “Iron Curtain.” The Gulf states chose to ally with the US and Western Europe and were therefore granted concrete financial and military assistance.



US President Donald Trump joins dancers with swords at a welcome ceremony ahead of a banquet at the Murabba Palace in Riyadh on May 20, 2017. Photo: Mandel Ngan, AFP/Getty Images

The further development of these relations would ultimately lead to what became known as the American defense umbrella that involved, among other things, the formation of national armies using US weapons and trained by US forces stationed at regional US bases. As part of this unofficial agreement, the US was also positioned as the bulwark against revolutionary states in the region. Its role in this regard arose again in response to the potential of a nuclear Iran, with then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating in 2009 that “[i]f the US extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it is unlikely Iran will be any stronger or safer.”⁶ Although some argued that Clinton was proposing the creation of such an umbrella, it is more accurate to interpret her statement as an extension of the existing system.

The existing system has been greatly expanded under the Trump Administration, most especially with the May 2017 declaration of a \$110 billion sale of arms to Saudi Arabia and an additional \$350 billion in sales over the next 10 years. The unprecedented (potential) sale has implications that extend from the power dynamics at play in the US-Saudi relationship to the US footprint in Saudi regional decision-making. Seeing as Saudi Arabia is positioned to procure weapons from Russia or China as alternatives to

the United States, some claim that President Trump was purposefully easy on the kingdom regarding the Khashoggi affair so as not to harm the deal, and thereby the additional jobs and financial gain he touted as the purpose of the deal, despite the Saudis having yet to conclude a single major arms purchase under the deal.⁷ Moreover, Saudi Arabia's protracted war in Yemen using those weapons has left US fingerprints on the more than 6,872 civilian deaths and 10,768 wounded (as of November 2018) there, the majority by Saudi Arabia-led coalition airstrikes, according to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). At the time of publication, the US and Saudi Arabia's joint interests in economic cooperation and stopping Iranian expansion are dictating the relationship, most other issues holding little sway over it.

Despite the central role of the US in the Gulf's stability and security, Britain never completely exited the picture. In the October 2015 ceremony to set the cornerstone of its new naval base in Bahrain, then-UK Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond explained that the event

mark[ed] a watershed moment in the UK's commitment to the region. The presence of the Royal Navy in Bahrain is guaranteed into the future, ensuring Britain's sustained presence east of Suez. The new facility will enable Britain to work with our allies to reinforce stability in the Gulf and beyond.⁸

The Gulf states' close relationship with the US and Europe have in fact triggered accusations that they are puppets of the West generally, and the United States specifically, an allegation promoted by al-Qaeda's founder and perpetuated by IS and other Islamist groups. These relationships continue despite differing values and human rights records due to the West's interest in protecting the global flow of oil, ensuring stability of the Gulf states and providing a counter-balance to expanding Iranian influence. As then-UK PM David Cameron explained to the BBC in 2012 when questioned on the response to protests in Bahrain: "Bahrain is not Syria."⁹

However, it is not just the US and other Western allies that provide support to the Gulf monarchies. Friends within the region also play key roles. One early example is that of Oman in the 1970s, when multiple countries aided the sultan in quelling the Dhofar rebellion:

In 1973 the shah of Iran [...] dispatched ground forces (eventually numbering more than 3,000) and air units to Dhofar to assist the sultan. Oman received annual financial aid of about \$200 million from Abu Dhabi to assist military and civil development projects and about \$2.4 billion from Saudi Arabia. [...] Britain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan provided training in military schools for armed forces personnel. The UAE and Jordan occasionally provided troop units for guard duty in the north, thereby releasing Omani units for service in Dhofar.¹⁰

In 2011, Bahrain was on the receiving end of regional assistance. Authorities suppressed the protests in great part with the help of GCC Peninsula Shield Force, the image of Saudi troops and Emirati policemen famously crossing the King Fahd Causeway to enter the country capturing that moment. Although the declared purpose of the regional assistance was to provide security for sensitive installations, with time it became apparent that foreign forces were also participating in day-to-day operations, in a seemingly more permanent fashion than first presented. In March 2014, just over three years after the protests began, an Emirati policeman was one of three people killed by an IED that detonated while security forces intervened in a protest in Daih, a town located west of Manama – evidence of their presence years beyond the purported threats for which they were deployed.

Regional external support also came to Bahrain and Oman in the form of financial support from the GCC. As previously noted, in 2011, the two countries received an aid package of approximately \$20 billion (\$10 billion each) to address the wave of protests through job creation and social benefits. In October 2018, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE signed another \$10 billion aid deal with Bahrain.¹¹ Seeing as Bahrain is the Arabian Gulf's frontline against Iran, the success of those aid packages will prove a vital factor in the GCC's ability to counter Iranian subversion.¹²

A sturdy economy – even if it has become less sturdy with the suppressed oil price – can also be used to “buy” regional friends. Sudan serves as a good example: in September 2014, following a period of warming relations with Iran and increasing tensions with Riyadh, Sudan ordered the closure of Iranian cultural centers and the expulsion of the staff at that in the capital. This came less than a month after reports emerged that Qatar had provided the Central Bank of Sudan with \$1.22 billion in credit guarantees during the

president's visit to the country that July.¹³ Similarly, some two months after Khartoum's August 2015 announcement that Saudi Arabia had provided its Central Bank with \$1 billion in deposits,¹⁴ Sudan sent troops to support the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. The following January, amid a rift between the Gulf states and Iran over Saudi Arabia's execution of prominent Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, Sudan followed the kingdom and cut ties with Iran.

This regional support has also extended beyond the oil-rich monarchies to Jordan as it potentially faces a second Arab Spring. In June 2018, a proposed income tax law prompted massive protests in Amman. Almost immediately, Saudi Arabia hosted a regional summit at which it, Kuwait and the UAE pledged \$2.5 billion to the Jordanian monarchy.¹⁵ This support, albeit financial versus militaristic in nature, is geared toward the same purpose: preserving regional calm. As an anonymous Jordanian official quoted by *Al Jazeera* pointed out, "The passing danger of the Arab upheavals and the ascendance of Mohammed bin Salman to the top of the leadership in Saudi Arabia resulted in Jordan feeling marginalized or even neglected by Saudi Arabia, which traditionally backs Jordan."¹⁶ Thus, Amman used to its advantage the protests and resultant fears of an uprising to galvanize the financial support of the region's oil barons, "and it worked," as the official said.¹⁷ Moreover, Adnan Abu Odeh, former chief to the Royal Court under the late King Hussein, said, "the Saudi leadership view these developments as a serious threat that might be contagious."¹⁸

Beyond assistance to regional partners, Gulf countries have also worked together to politically isolate one of their own. In furtherance of their blockade of Qatar for its subversive pro-Iranian policies, five GCC countries had purportedly planned to invade Qatar in the summer of 2017: "Several months before the Gulf allies started pushing for the sheikh's ouster," Alex Emmons reports, the US' "Tillerson intervened to stop a secret Saudi-led, UAE-backed plan to invade and essentially conquer Qatar," a report Emmons states is corroborated by one current member of the US intelligence community and two former State Department officials.¹⁹ Emmons points out that the purported invasion raises questions about the interventionist tendencies of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, two of the US' closest allies and weapons clients: "In recent years, both countries have demonstrated a willingness to use military force to reshape politics in the Gulf, intervening in Bahrain to suppress an Arab Spring uprising in 2011 and waging a three-year, US-

backed war that has devastated Yemen.”²⁰ By isolating one of its internal partners, invading Qatar would simply follow this policy line.

These regional tactics, however, are not unique to the Gulf monarchies. The al-Assad regime in Syria would certainly have fallen were it not for the massive infusion of financial and military support from Iran and its proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah, and later from Russia. This logic can also work in the opposite direction, that is, under circumstances in which the withdrawal of support leads to collapse. For example, then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen resigned under the threat of GCC withdrawal and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was overthrown as the US and other Western allies largely watched in silence. In fact, there are some scholars who point to external support as one of the main drivers of survival in the Gulf and the wider MENA region.²¹ Conversely, others argue that US pressure applied to Mubarak regarding human rights and democracy in Egypt ultimately assisted in his downfall by simultaneously causing a more resistant response from the regime and preventing US intervention during the 2011 protests.²²

The Gulf states do not survive solely because of external support and regimes do not fall solely due to its absence. External support tends to be constrained by various factors. For the West, particularly in the 21st century, domestic and international support are often necessary to justify intervention in a foreign country. Thus, the US invaded Afghanistan with the support of NATO, marched into Iraq with a coalition of countries in 2003 and again in 2014, while the Libya theater involved NATO, the UN and the Arab League. Regionally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE did not intervene in Bahrain individually, but on the “mandate” of the GCC. Ultimately though, while external powers can certainly assist in promoting national stability, their ability to intervene in a domestic conflict is often contingent on other factors, such as legitimacy and, therefore, are not guaranteed. Thus, even if the US may have tacitly supported Bahrain’s forcible response to the wave of protests via inaction in both word and deed, the presence of its military base in Bahrain did not translate to a physical intervention of assistance.

Chapter 12

“Divide and Conquer”

Creating a fifth column narrative about an element of society is another tactic that Gulf states have used to increase domestic and regional cohesion and to inhibit opposition. For Saudi Arabia, this alleged fifth column is the domestic Shiite population who are seen as incomplete Saudis and, in times of crisis, a threat – a rhetoric implemented to unify the Sunni majority.

This narrative need not encompass the entire Shiite minority population to be effective. Toby Matthiesen claims that this strategy is not only the reason that protests in Saudi Arabia were not more intense, but that it is one of the main reasons that the Al-Khalifa family has remained in power in Bahrain.¹ It is not the Shiite majority population as a whole that is portrayed as a fifth column in Bahrain, but minority elements within it that are described as operating under orders of “foreign entities,” a codename for Iran and its proxies.

While such narratives are often exaggerated and exploited for domestic purposes, they are not necessarily devoid of truth. As noted in Chapter 5, in March 2017, the US sanctioned two individuals affiliated to the Bahrain-based Shiite militant group al-Ashtar Brigades, which received “funding and support from the Government of Iran.” The sanctioning announcement further designated Bahrain a state “where Iran has provided weapons, funding, and training to militants.”² An April report in *The Washington Post* further elaborated, reporting that Western governments have become less skeptical regarding accusations of Iranian involvement, for reasons that include “an increasing willingness to share evidence and seek outside scientific analysis to convince Western governments of the seriousness of the problem.” According to the report, the evidence presented to the United States shows clear links between Iran and Bahrain-based militant groups.

As one unnamed official explained, “‘Bahrain sometimes overstates the facts [...] But this is real’.”³

However, even if based on a partial truth, the divide and conquer strategy is successful when employed where the existence of a “fifth column” can justify a government crackdown on legitimate opposition and its refusal to implement reform. In Saudi Arabia, much of this rhetoric derives from official circles, including the formal religious establishment and education system. This is evident upon analysis of some of the *fatwas*, or religious judgments, from the kingdom’s Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas, and from Abd al-Aziz ibn Baz individually, who formerly headed the Board of Senior Ulema and, in 1993, was named Grand Mufti. In the *fatwas*, many of the descriptions of Shiites revolve around accusations that they engage in *bid‘ah*, or forbidden innovation, and *shirk*, that is, the practice of idolatry or polytheism.

Thus, in one Permanent Committee *fatwa*, the Bohras, a small denomination within Shiite Islam more commonly referred to as Dawoodi Bohra, a sect primarily based in India and Pakistan, was described as *kafir*, or disbelievers, because they prostrate themselves to someone or something other than Allah.⁴ In another decree, Ibn Baz declared that, “Shiites contain many sects and every sect has forms of Bid‘ah.” He then noted that the “most dangerous of these [Shiite] sects is that [...] following Khomenei [of Iran].”⁵ In yet another, Ibn Baz offers advice to a 23-year-old Shiite woman from Kenya who submitted a question regarding marriage. He then adds:

I advise you and your like to stop following the doctrine of Al-Baharah or any other sects of Shiites, because they contradict the Islamic way called by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in many aspects. Therefore, you must renounce them and follow the way of Ahl-ul-Sunnah wal-Jama‘ah (adherents to the Sunnah and the Muslim mainstream). [...] I implore Allah to guide this sect and all other deviant sects to the way of truth.⁶

A considerable number of these *fatwas* reappear in official and semi-official Saudi media outlets. Matthiesen notes that the polemical language used in these decrees declined under former Crown Prince and King Abdullah, including during his National Dialogue initiative, but, beginning in 2009, there was “a marked resurgence of sectarian writings and statements” in the media and elsewhere.⁷ Joshua Teitelbaum disagrees only on the timing of this

resurgence, pointing to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the fall of the Sunni regime there as a turning point despite the National Dialogue, the ascension of King Abdullah, and even the first municipal elections in 2005. "Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003," he explains, "and the ensuing alteration of the regional balance of power in favor of Iran, Saudi Arabia has looked at the world through an Iranian and Shiite prism." While the emergence of a Shiite government in Iraq was warily observed from Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies, many Shiites viewed the Hussein regime's collapse as a liberation.⁸

Select reporting supports Matthiesen and Teitelbaum's argument. In 2006, for example, Saudi Shiite cleric Hassan Saffar told the *Los Angeles Times* that "'Saudi Sunnis are defending Iraqi Sunnis, and Saudi Shiites are defending Iraqi Shiites'." Another local author explained that Sunnis "criticize the Shia, accuse them of being loyal to an outside party, attack their religious beliefs and say they don't have an interest in the stability of their countries."⁹ In fact, this precise accusation arose during an April 2006 Al Arabiya interview with Egypt's President Mubarak: "There is no doubt that Iran has influence over the Shiites," he alleged. "The Shiites are always loyal to Iran. Most of them are loyal to Iran and not to the countries in which they live."¹⁰ Teitelbaum further points out that the outbreak of war between Israel and Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah later that year simply added fuel to the fire, with the Saudi government and some of its Shiite population coming out on opposing sides. While the Saudi government was not overtly pro-Israel, they were certainly anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iran.¹¹

In a 2011 discussion on Saudi Arabia's response to the Arab Spring, Madawi al-Rasheed claimed that the royal family acted immediately to deepen the Sunni-Shiite rift in the kingdom so as to unite the Sunni population and mitigate the threat of opposition. In addition to citing the successes of sectarianism in suppressing the Bahraini pro-democracy movement, al-Rasheed points to the intervention of the Peninsula Shield Force as sending a message not only to Bahrain's Shiite population, but to the Saudi Sunni majority whose, "government [w]as a protector against Shia conspiracies and foreign agents allegedly acting in the name of Iran."¹² She further explains that state media "described calls for protest as a foreign attempt to cause chaos, divide the country and undermine its security."¹³ One report from the Saudi Press Agency described "a group of instigators of sedition,

discord and unrest” as acting “at the behest of a foreign country seeking to undermine the security and stability of the homeland.”¹⁴

In this way, the Saudi government is able to divide and conquer. By creating a common enemy – Iranian-backed Shiites – that inspires enough fear and has enough support, authorities are able to clamp down harshly to address the threat and dissuade the majority population from organizing to assert its own demands. The monarch’s ability to divide and conquer is bolstered by a long-standing tradition of state-sanctioned sectarian policies and rhetoric, control of the media narrative, a very real fear of Iran and its destabilizing actions and the fear of unrest in a province responsible for the country’s oil wealth. Iran’s actions in Syria and Iraq have certainly contributed to the regime’s ability to successfully implement the divide and conquer strategy domestically over the years.

Yet, this is, in fact, one of the causative elements that Matthiesen and Teitelbaum’s argument does not sufficiently address – it does not consider the possibility that the fifth column rhetoric is used first and foremost to frame a genuine fear of Iran and thereby legitimate corresponding policies that justify, for instance, the Saudi intervention in Yemen, and that the regime’s ability to suppress opposition is but a positive side effect, rather than the primary goal. Moreover, while focusing on Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the argument fails to examine countries where sectarian tension is limited, e.g., Kuwait, where relations between the Sunni and Shiite populations are largely considered to be good, as well as Oman, where confrontations between the Ibadi, Sunni and Shiite populations are virtually nonexistent.

In the cases of Kuwait and the UAE, it can perhaps be argued that, although the Shiite fifth column is not relevant, other groups occupy that role. Most notably, as the unrest intensified, the Muslim Brotherhood increasingly took on this role, particularly once its candidate won Egypt’s June 2012 elections. That October, for example, the UAE’s foreign minister warned against the group and suggested that Gulf countries should work together to combat the threat: “The Muslim Brotherhood,” he declared, “does not believe in the nation state. It does not believe in the sovereignty of the state.”¹⁵ The UAE’s crackdowns, therefore, targeted a number of individuals from Al-Islah, an Islamist movement affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, that had been active in the country since the 1970s. Its members are presumed to comprise the majority of the 94 individuals put on trial in 2013 accused of “belonging to a secret illegal organization [...] which aims to oppose

the basic principles of the State's system of government in order to seize power, as well as with contacting foreign groups and entities with the aim of executing this plan."¹⁶ In this case, the foreign groups and entities were not Iran, but Egypt, even if the sentiment and strategy is the same. Still, the theory fails to take into account the unique circumstances of other countries, including Bahrain. The Muslim Brotherhood may be the fifth column in the UAE, but in a Shiite majority country such as Bahrain, more conservative and Islamist Sunni political societies are, in fact, allies of the ruling family.

One real fifth column that the Gulf monarchies increasingly need to address is radical Islamist Sunnis. As discussed in Chapter 4, Saudi Arabia confronted the domestic emergence of al-Qaeda in the early aughts with a successful counter-insurgency campaign that killed a number of its members and drove others out of the country and into Yemen, where AQAP was formed. And, while this group certainly remains relevant (e.g., in July 2012 they staged an attack from Yemen against the Sharurah border crossing in Saudi Arabia's Najran province), they represent more of an external threat than an internal one. IS has successfully replaced it as an internal threat: although there appear to be increasing numbers of foreign nationals involved, the proportion of Saudi nationals involved in IS-related arrests and attacks underlines the threat to the kingdom from its radicalized citizens. This may not be unique to Saudi Arabia, but other Gulf states have neither the number of attacks nor the number of nationals who have traveled abroad to conflict zones that the kingdom does.

All Gulf monarchies recognize the importance of embracing a counter-narrative to radical Sunni Islamism at this juncture. Thus, *fatwas* have been issued, centers to counter extremist messaging set up and coalitions created. The irony is that, amid all the rhetoric describing Shiite elements as agents of foreign countries seeking to destabilize their countries, the greater threat comes from disenfranchised, Sunni citizens who seek to commit attacks, including on those same Shiites demonized by the government, on the orders, and with the help of, foreign IS leaders.

Conclusion

Gulf Monarchical Survival Is Not Unidimensional

A debate that began decades ago and that was reinvigorated in the wake of the Arab Spring centers on which form of government – republic or monarchy – epitomizes greater survivability and adaptability in the Middle East. As outlined in this memorandum, the oft-voiced opinion that republics are the more stable regime type has most certainly been diminished, if not obliterated, in the post-Arab Spring era. However, that does not automatically accord preference to the monarchy. As elucidated in the preceding chapters, the monarchy is not devoid of its own challenges, several of which can, and sometimes do, strike at the core of the regime’s stability. Yes, the monarchy certainly demonstrates structural factors that contribute to its stability, but in great measure it is the interplay of agency – in the case of the protests, each Gulf monarchy’s decisive response to the wave of unrest – that determined outcomes. There are clearly sources of internal and external instability in the monarchy, but there is also evidence, at least until now, that those sources of instability can be mitigated through effective policy management and implementation.

At the outset of the Arab Spring – even before it struck the Gulf – the region’s monarchies publicly expressed their opposition to the movement as they perceived it as a direct threat to their interests. This voice of opposition in turn undermined the monarchies’ legitimacy, serving only to underscore the movement’s accusations of their opposition to change and revealing the anachronistic organization of the ruling class. In immediate terms, the Gulf monarchies were able to fortify their rule through socioeconomic incentivization, thus creating circumstances in which society had more to lose by politically organizing to overturn the regime. But, as elucidated

earlier, upping the terms of the social contract is not a sustainable model of survival. In the long term, a more balanced policy, based on the willingness of the kings and emirs to open up the political system, on the one hand, and the willingness of the public to be satisfied with only limited partnership, on the other, is likely to bolster monarchical legitimacy and, thus, survival.

In recent history (the Arab Spring included), Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman all faced various political opposition movements within their borders. Yet in the vast majority of those cases, the opposing movements failed to achieve a broad base of support and tended to represent only narrow segments of local populations. By implementing a strategy peppered with “carrots” and “sticks,” and focused both internally and externally, the monarchies have managed to avert the potential threats to regime stability imposed by opposition movements. In fact, it can be argued that the bottom-up revolutionary nature of the unrest was turned on its head in the Gulf and is now dominated by a top-down “revolutionary” movement guided and controlled by the leadership.¹ However, the political and economic structures upon which these autocratic regimes stand face growing pressures. Those pressures, combined with the potential for political challenge to the ruling elite, create circumstances in which the Gulf monarchy still remains vulnerable.

Added to these pressures are the challenges the Gulf monarchies now face regarding changes in the global oil economy. As emphasized throughout this memorandum, the “rents” that they receive in exchange for their vast oil resources are perhaps the most notable contributing factor to their stability, as they are used both internally to pacify domestic opposition and externally to obtain international support and partnerships. Still, oil does not capture the whole story. There are other factors that contribute to regime stability, including the religion-tradition-government triad of governance and the “fifth column” propagandized narrative. Even these seemingly disconnected explanations ultimately rely on oil revenues for their power differential. Without oil, it is doubtful whether these sources of traditional and constructed legitimacy would prove sufficient to prevent feuds within the ruling elite, between the royal houses and the tribes and religious establishments and between the monarchies and their subjects.

Since the start of the protests, the Gulf states have doled out billions of dollars in exchange for political calm, spent in forms ranging from direct cash subsidies and wage hikes to job creation and development projects.

The logic behind the strategy of increasing the cradle-to-grave benefits is simple: most members of society are unwilling to bite the hand that feeds them. And those who are willing to do so face iron-fist policies and are immediately classified as terrorists or an Iranian fifth column. In this war of survival, the structure of the monarchy does not necessarily provide the regimes of the Gulf any apparent advantage. Rather, the monarchies' upping their stake in the social contract has bought societal abstention from politics and thus regime survival. Bribery to the point of passivity combined with draconian practices has ensured the silence of opponents.

So, even though oil revenues are a principal explanation for regime survival, their presence does not guarantee regime survival. Looking to the past and present of the Middle East, rulers such as Muammar Qaddafi of Libya and the Shah of Iran fell despite their countries' oil wealth, while others, whose countries are devoid of oil, such as Jordan and Morocco, have managed to survive. The Gulf monarchies have endured because they have had a number of survival tactics available to them, and they have used them to their full advantage. All of these tools, surveyed in detail throughout this study, remain at their disposal now as well. The question is whether they will prove sufficient and be used efficiently in order to ensure stability going forward.

There are no guarantees of this; indeed, supplies are dwindling and demand is rising. The oil wells are not coming up dry, but the sustained low price of the commodity has demanded higher production rates for lower returns. Moreover, the population is growing, in some areas of the region at higher than average global rates. The current subsidy policies are therefore unsustainable in the long run.

Such economic disquiet tends to stir otherwise-muted social and political issues. As the economic burden of the social contract increases, ethnic and social rifts may deepen. Opposition groups both domestically and regionally would then be able to exploit the social polarization to gain momentum and increase their influence. Nevertheless, it is highly doubtful that the Gulf monarchs will take the opportunity to reform social and political structures to avert these potential dangers, especially in view of the relative calm that prevails at this time. Rulers do not willingly give up power, and it appears that since the protests, the region's rulers have in fact further tightened restrictions on freedoms of speech and information and bans on opposition activities to fight the tides of change. These draconian laws were passed in

the name of combatting terrorism and cybercrime, yet they have been used all too often to stifle and imprison non-violent demonstrators.

For example, on May 19, 2018, just six weeks before women were granted driver's licenses in Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's most prominent women's rights activists were arrested on grounds of seeking to undermine the security and stability of the state and erode national unity. These arrests may seem paradoxical in light of MBS's social reform agenda. Yet, as Lori Plotkin Boghardt of the Washington Institute notes, they represent the regime's efforts to balance the need for economic and social reform with its strategic interests: "Punishing (and deterring other) independent activists and potential critics represents a parallel tactic – not a conflicting one – to the [national security] campaign, from the leadership's perspective."²² The regime is fully aware that due to the suppressed oil prices, the potential for popular opposition movements to rise is worrying, and considering the country's vast youth population, it must engage in economic and social reform if it is to survive. The key challenge, she explains, is, then, "balancing how fast the kingdom needs to change to survive economically with how much change will be tolerated by society."²³ The arrests having taken place almost simultaneously to the change in driving policies is therefore no accident.

The social polarization in the Gulf that requires such careful balancing has been reinforced by an anti-democratic narrative that pervades much of the region's elite, if not much of society. The elites, who enjoy preferential treatment from the regime, naturally support the status quo and view democracy as a threat to their status. Many among them, and broader society as well, associate democracy with economic weakness. This view is partly fueled by the gap between the economy of Kuwait, which has a relatively strong parliament, and the much stronger economy of Dubai, which has no parliament at all. Moreover, many in all societal strata of the Gulf view democracy as a result of the violent intervention of foreigners – "colonialists" – who are keen to impose Western values on them, values that they perceive as inappropriate to the culture and tradition of the Arabian Gulf.

The social, political and economic destabilizing forces that have been at play in the Middle East since early 2011 have created a fragile and unsustainable reality in the Gulf. This "new normal" represents a complex challenge to policymakers and scholars alike. It is difficult to predict the ultimate outcomes of the Arab Spring in the region, but for now it is evident that the shockwaves the movement sent have fundamentally changed the

behavior and political weight of the Gulf states. As the traditional Arab centers of political power have been weakened, a vacuum has been created that the Gulf states have filled, positioning themselves as key regional players. As of yet, there is no sign that there may be a return to what was. There is no end in sight to the violence in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the bankruptcy in Egypt or the instability in Libya and Lebanon. Under these circumstances, it is only natural that the Gulf monarchies will grow in influence as they represent, at least for now, an island of stability in a sea of chaos.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to claim that the resilience the Gulf states have demonstrated since the start of the protests guarantees their long-term stability going forward. On the contrary, they face a ticking time bomb in the form of a young, educated and globally connected generation with numerous economic and political expectations for its future. That generation, born into a period of economic prosperity, expects the same cradle-to-grave benefits that their parents and grandparents have enjoyed, but with the added social and political progress that they desire and know they can demand. As the economic circumstances in the Gulf states worsen, the regime's balancing act becomes more and more difficult to successfully perform. Although many of the region's monarchs are increasingly focusing on diversifying their economies away from oil, they are not prepared to face the mounting socioeconomic challenges of the system as it exists in an era of instability.

If oil retains the highest explanatory value in examining the resilience of the Gulf monarchies, then Rentier State Theory appears to still be the most convincing and relevant in a theoretical capacity. So far, the petrostates of the Gulf have largely maintained regime stability. The question then arises as to why the rentier bargain proved ineffective in Bahrain. The simplest explanation is the most plausible: Bahrain is relatively poor in oil and gas. It has already used most of its energy resources and depends massively on economic support from its patron, Saudi Arabia. Out of fear that the riots in Bahrain could have a spillover effect into its own territory, Saudi Arabia came to Bahrain's aid, sending boots on the ground to stabilize the situation and enlisting the support of the UAE in the task. It should be noted that the determination of the Bahraini security forces to quell the riots was due in great part to the fact that it is home to many foreigners who had no connection to the demonstrators.⁴

Looking then outside the Gulf, some point to Libya as proof that RST can no longer account for the outcomes in petrostates. Indeed in Libya, Qaddafi was deposed despite the country's large oil reserves. But the correct conclusion to draw from his fall is not that the rentier model is necessarily insufficient, but rather that rentier state structure is not enough. Within that structure, leaders need to use their agency to invest oil revenues wisely by first and foremost honoring the social contract. Moreover, it should be noted that due to the external intervention of NATO in the Libyan Civil War, it is difficult to attribute outcomes solely to the rebels.

Outcomes such as those in Libya and the region's republics also had important spillover effects in the Gulf. Rather than stirring further uprisings though, they served to deter the citizens of the monarchies from going down the same failed path of their neighbors. Therefore, the royals owe their stability in part as well to the failure of the Arab Spring. Fully cognizant of the oppressive force that they would be met with should they decide to rebel, the citizens of the Gulf decided, to an extent, to support the prevailing regimes and thereby reinforce the stability and prosperity that the monarchs could afford to them through socioeconomic incentivization. The cost to society is of course a continued democratic dearth, but it would appear that at this stage, the citizens are willing to pay the price.

The monarchs are ever-aware that it is ultimately the balancing of a bargain that keeps them in power. While of course legitimacy of rule retains explanatory power in examining the survival of the monarchies, alone it cannot fully account for the resilience the regimes have demonstrated. The monarchical establishment embodies and holds dear the values of the region's religious and tribal culture and therefore the idea that it enjoys legitimacy on those bases is still valid. However, royal legitimacy did not ensure the survivability of other Arab monarchies in history, such as Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. The rulers of the Gulf monarchies are fully aware that their titles alone do not guarantee their role and, therefore, they engage in a careful balancing act between providing for the people on the one hand, and implementing and executing harsh and oppressive policies on the other, all in order to reinforce their positions.

Going forward, that balancing act will be put under further pressure. The royal houses of the Gulf will have to maneuver between implementing economic and social reforms and maintaining the existing political order, between advancing society and preserving conservative religious institutions,

and between prioritizing domestic challenges without sacrificing the effective management of regional conflicts, particularly that with Iran. Although they are smaller in scale, the domestic opposition movements that arose in the Gulf during the Arab Spring truly challenged the monarchies. They failed to achieve their goals because the royal houses successfully balanced all of those tasks. It is not clear that the protesters will necessarily succeed in the future as those tasks continue to mount. It is certainly possible that citizens will demand greater influence in the social, political and economic realms of the state, and will come to view their leaders as obstacles. The voices of and on behalf of women, the younger generation, religious minorities and the peripheral population should not be underestimated. Pressures from and on behalf of these groups are expected to intensify over time, especially as oil revenues continue to decline. Until now, the Gulf monarchs have benefited from their countries' oil economies, monarchical political structuring and religious and tribal social mores. No longer can they rely on the economic, political and social institutions of yesterday to ensure their roles for tomorrow.

Notes

Notes to the Introduction: The Revolution that Has Yet to Manifest

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Notes to the Conclusion: Gulf Monarchical Survival Is Not Unidimensional

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Predictions of the end of monarchic regimes can be traced back more than half a century, when studies first claimed that due to their “anachronistic nature” monarchies would not withstand the tide of modernization.

On balance, the Gulf States, with the exception of Bahrain, have managed to avoid the scale of unrest that reached most of the region’s republics in the last decade. In fact, several Gulf monarchs consolidated their domestic, regional and international power even amid the upheaval. But the monarchies are confronting several challenges, among them the need to rewrite the social contracts between the rulers and the ruled.

This study surveys competing explanations for the resilience of the Gulf monarchies, enabling us to establish a framework of analysis to understand outcomes thus far, specifically as they relate to the exceptional resilience of the region’s monarchies when compared to its republics.

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