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Political Islam in the Persian Gulf

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A recent survey published by the Pew Research Institute claims that a majority in the Middle East supports making sharia the law of the land. Though definitions and approaches vary concerning which aspects of Islamic law should be included and to whom they should apply, the survey shows that a significant majority would prefer seeing closer ties between politics, governments and Islam, and believes that the Koran and the Hadith have something to say about the organization of society and government. These survey results should come as no surprise to anyone. The proponents of political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, their satellites and similar movements, have proved the groups are quite popular and extensively involved in the regional upheavals and their ramifications.

The Arab Gulf States look stable, at least in comparison with the rest of the region. Nonetheless, the political and economic structures at the base of these autocratic nations are experiencing pressure, as significant segments of the population challenge the regnant elites. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman have faced various opposition movements in the last few years. In most of these cases, however, the movements failed to spread and tended to represent very narrow population segments. Thanks to a range of internal and external survival mechanisms, the regimes have succeeded in maintaining stability.

The fact that the religious component has become more pronounced is nothing new in the region. Yet the conduct of some of the monarchies clearly indicates an increased concern regarding threats by political Islam to their existence. Examples range from the ongoing trial of some 100 members of al-Islah, an organization identified with the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE, who were arrested over the past year (beforehand, the authorities had announced the arrest of “a cell of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood” training locals in overthrowing the regime), to the dismissal of the Kuwaiti parliament elected in February 2012 and influenced by Islamist and quasi-Islamist elements. Qatar, on the other hand, although not controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, supports and identifies with the movement (Yousuf al-Kardawi has made Qatar his home since the 1960s; while he doesn’t hold an official title in the movement, he is widely recognized as the Brotherhood’s supreme religious and ideological authority).

To this point, the comparison with events in the countries affected by the regional upheaval serves the monarchies. These events help the rulers convince their subjects they are better off honoring the unwritten agreement underpinning these states: the government provides and subsidizes most services and in exchange the citizens refrain from demanding political participation. But in the long run, the success of the new regimes in Egypt and Tunisia is liable to reduce the monarchies' appeal and portray them as leaders who are opposed to democracy. Furthermore, though the monarchs have promised many constitutional changes, very few were actually implemented. Next time, promises will probably not suffice, and the monarchies will have to show a roadmap for political reforms going far beyond lip service.

The specific concern regarding supporters of political Islam touches on the fact that they offer an alternative to existing governmental structures, combining a political framework with religious legitimacy. Political Islam is an alternative system (Western democracy is that as well) in competition with the existing systems, and it integrates Islam into the state (like the connection between the al-Saud family and the Wahabi religious establishment) while also threatening the existing order. In other words, because of its religious component, and because many movements promote democratic elections and participate in them, political Islam offers a concrete, attractive alternative to the current leadership, with a proven track record of being capable of toppling governments in nations such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Even though Islamist leaders have, out of necessity, demonstrated pragmatism until now, it is by no means certain this approach will last. It is reasonable to assume the Gulf States will persist in the foreign and internal policies they have implemented since the start of the Arab Spring in an effort to prevent unrest, neutralize threatening elements, stabilize their regimes, and try to influence Islamist elements in other states as much as possible. The fact that Saudi Arabia provides aid to Egypt while simultaneously trying to keep the Muslim Brotherhood out of the official coalition of the Syrian opposition, and helps Jordan in its battle against the movement, is a fine example of this dual attitude.

Nonetheless, such a policy towards Islamist elements – such as the UAE's call for combined Gulf State action against the Muslim Brotherhood, in contrast to Qatar's support for the movements and its satellites – causes occasional tension among the Gulf States and cracks in the façade of unity created by the Arab Spring (manifested, for example, in across-the-board opposition to Gaddafi and Assad). Such disagreements could become a problem for anyone interested in forming a united front against a common enemy. An example of this is the difficulties besetting the American administration in its attempt to form a united Sunni front. Despite the general support given to Assad's opposition, the states are experiencing difficulties agreeing on which elements within the Syrian opposition they are going to support.

In general, the Gulf States are not getting much out of the Brotherhood's successes. In Saudi Arabia, this suspiciousness is fed by the competition and tension between the Wahabi school of thought and the Brotherhood, manifested by many years of mutual

attacks. It is true that in the 1950s and 1960s many Muslim Brotherhood supporters found refuge in the kingdom from Arab nationalism, but the Saudi royal family has always maintained reservations about the movement (e.g., not allowing the Brotherhood to establish a branch on Saudi soil) and has frequently criticized it quite sharply in public. This criticism was especially clear in light of the Brotherhood's support for the invasion of Kuwait and, as well, in the post-9/11 era. In the Syrian context, while the Saudis are interested in Assad's fall as a way to weaken Iran, they are also afraid – even if this is not stated publicly – of the rise of extremist Islamist elements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which could lead to the formation of a green bloc of nations led by such Islamist groups.

As part of the attempt to curb political Islam, the monarchies have carried out preventive detentions, interfered in the legal system, and undermined civil society activities as much as possible. The regimes are also using the Koran to justify the protest bans and the demand that citizens obey their rulers. The revolutions in the region, however, have not only given hope to the Gulf States' citizens and to local movements working for political reform, but have also made it difficult for the regimes to continue portraying their opponents as the people's enemies rather than activists, regardless of their Islamist agenda.

Even if a unified Gulf States front forms to oppose the Muslim Brotherhood or similar movements representing some version of political Islam, this does not ensure immunity against the popularity of such movements. The Islamist movement's failures could, however, help the monarchies persuade their subjects that the alternative is both unattractive and unsustainable. As of now, the question, "Where would you prefer to live – here or there?" remains a convincing argument, especially given Egypt's difficult situation. On the other hand, a possible success of the Islamist movement would present a viable alternative to the Gulf's political status quo. In fact, the Gulf monarchies would probably prefer a successful secular democracy to a similar success achieved by Islamist leaderships, because in the former, the religious legitimacy they fear would be conspicuously absent.