

Immortal Monarchies? Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and the Arab Spring

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Background

On March 9, 2012, over 100,000 people (one fifth of Bahrain's citizens) took to the streets.¹ In relative terms, this is a much larger crowd than the number of people who demonstrated in the streets of Egypt before the overthrow of Mubarak. The House of Khalifa, however, did not fall. Moreover, while the regional uprisings shook the republics, not one monarchy was toppled. In Qatar, the world's richest country (in terms of per capita GDP), people had no reason to go into the streets. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), what remained of civil society was suppressed with a heavy hand. In Oman, the unrest – which in any case was limited – dissipated, and in Saudi Arabia, the protest was concentrated in the Shiite area and was channeled to the social networks. The ongoing protests in Kuwait, while not insignificant and with all its dangers, reflect a long tradition of civil activism and political protest. Only in Bahrain was there unrest on a large scale, fed by sectarian discrimination. To date, however, military intervention by Saudi Arabia and UAE has put an end to the emergency situation, even if it did not stop the unrest itself.

This article reviews the pressure faced by the royal families in the Gulf, and assesses their ability to withstand it. The main contention is that the relative stability of these states – which is not synonymous with immunity – is better explained through their economic capabilities, and to a lesser extent by cultural and religious factors, as well as factors pertaining to the character of their particular governmental system. Consequently, despite their oil-based wealth, given the range of pressures confronting them, the

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relative stability of several of the Gulf monarchies – especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait – is liable to be put to the test in the coming years.

Society versus State

Under the unwritten social contract in these rentier states, the regimes, which enjoy revenues from natural resources, grant goods and services to their citizens and do not impose any taxes whatsoever on them, but also grant them no political rights. Relations between society and state therefore remain subject to a principle in which the ruler takes care of his subjects, who agree not to take part in the government and consent to curtailed freedom of speech. The following statement about this dynamic is attributed to Saudi Arabian King Abdullah:

My people and I know very well what the deal is: they keep their hands off politics and accept my family as rulers, may Allah's blessing be upon them, and we take care of all their material and spiritual needs. All the petrodollars that the United States in its great generosity has paid me over the years for my oil can supply many needs: free education; medical treatment; generous housing subsidies, food, and fuel; and a guaranteed government job after they finish their studies, with a high salary and no need to bear any responsibility.²

The leaders of the Gulf states have distributed billions of dollars since the start of the upheaval in the Arab world precisely for this reason, and in effect are bribing their subjects. In return, they receive, or do not require at all, internal legitimacy for their rule. Arrangements of this type guarantee comfort and prosperity for the population and stability and order for the regimes, as long as the state manages to channel its oil profits into satisfying its people's needs. By the nature of the arrangement, any future disturbance to it could well prompt the people to ask for political rights that thus far have been denied them.

Despite economic and other advantages, several royal families have realized the need to begin implementing gradual changes in the existing political order. For example, a few days before the elections for the local councils (half of whose members are appointed to their positions and responsible for marginal matters only), Saudi King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and be elected in the next local elections, scheduled for 2015. He also decided that women would enter Majlis al-Shura, an exclusive institution founded in 1993, which lacks the authority to criticize

the government or enact laws, and in January 2013 published an order stating that 30 women would join the forum (out of 150 members).³ He remains determined, however, not to hold even partial elections for this council, whose members are appointed by him.

These measures are primarily cosmetic, but they nevertheless signal, both internally and externally, that the monarchs are willing to go a considerable distance in order to adapt to, and even anticipate, the rapid changes occurring in the region. The leaders of the countries themselves are not sure whether, when, and in what way the Arab upheaval will hit the Gulf in full force. For this reason, they are spending enormous sums for the purpose of taking the sting out of any potential popular uprising. Anxiety about more serious unrest in the future is not completely unjustified, since several of the elements behind the uprisings in other places, including the sectarian factor, are also present in the Gulf.

Sectarian Spring

The popular uprising in Bahrain erupted shortly after the revolutions began in Tunisia and Egypt, but media interest faded. Nonetheless, low-keyed protest by the Shiite majority (which constitutes some 70 percent of the population) against the Sunni royal family continues steadily. The demonstrations take place regularly, usually in Shiite villages outside the capital city of Manama, and not infrequently escalate into severe violence.

The Iranian revolution had no substantive impact on the tiny island country, due in part to the fact that the Shiites living in Bahrain are politically far from a homogenous group. Some are of Arab origin, while others identify mainly with the religious establishment in Najaf and not Qom. The House of Khalifa, however, frequently uses the Iranian threat and allegation of a “Shiite plot” in order to postpone substantial governmental reforms. Accusing Iran of attempts to destabilize the country, for example, helps the royal family obtain support and patronage from Saudi Arabia, which also fears Iranian influence over the Shiite population in its territory and the possible consequences of the fall of a Sunni royal house in the Gulf. For its part, the Shiite community accuses the Khalifas of practicing a system of political apartheid and systematic discrimination. Demands by the opposition (which is divided by internal disputes) include a constitutional monarchy, fair elections, separation of powers, and an equal distribution of resources.⁴

Bahrain's geographical proximity to Iran and its delicate ethnic balance have made it an attractive target for Iranian involvement. Difficult periods of tension between Iran and Bahrain since the Islamic Revolution, mainly concerning Tehran's support for opposition Shiite organizations, attempted subversion, and territorial demands, have regularly fueled suspicion about Iran's intentions. Following the violent events in Bahrain in the spring of 2011, armed forces from Saudi Arabia and UAE were sent into Bahrain (Kuwait sent ships to secure Bahraini ports) under the flag of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Some of these forces have remained on the island in order to maintain the tiny monarchy's stability.

Iran continues to attack the Saudi Arabian "occupation," and to undermine both Bahrain's sovereignty and the legitimacy of the "national dialogue." The Khalifa royal family accuses Iran of sending terrorist groups to attack strategic sites on the island, including the King Fahd Causeway connecting Saudi Arabia to Bahrain, and the Saudi Arabian embassy in Bahrain.⁵ In any case, instability in Bahrain has again highlighted the depth of the Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Iranian conflicts and their key role on both sides of the Gulf. This fear of Iran has led the Bahrain royal house to grant citizenship to as many Sunnis as possible (even among the Syrian refugees) in an attempt to even the balance between the two communities in Bahrain.⁶ The West is also concerned that free elections in Bahrain will produce a pro-Iranian

parliament that will oppose the presence of United States military forces on the island and will support Iran's policy. This explains the US administration's relatively mild response to the regime's repressive measures.

Riyadh was concerned that the protest in Bahrain could spread into eastern Saudi Arabia, where the kingdom's Shiite minority is concentrated and where violent incidents have occurred since the spring of 2011. The Shiites remain a security problem for Saudi Arabia, not only because of their geographical proximity and the ideological affinity of some to Iran, but because they are located near the world's largest oil reserves. While still crown prince, King

Abdullah took a number of measures to ease the tension with the Shiite minority, including the announcement of a "national dialogue," and even permitted the entry of a number (six) of Shiite dignitaries into the Majlis

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al-Shura. The Saudi Arabian royal house, however, did not go so far as to recognize the Shia role in Islam, and refrained from granting the Shiites equal rights. The result is that the basic discrimination against the Shiite population in the kingdom remains unchanged, and surfaces from time to time.

The eastern district remains unsettled, despite the royal house's attempts to use force and economic inducements to keep it calm. The protest movement, which is made up entirely of young people, was invigorated when Saudi Arabian forces entered Bahrain. It held mass demonstrations in which several were killed and hundreds were arrested and imprisoned, many without trial. The funerals of those killed became a show of force not seen in the district since the Islamic Revolution.

Al-Alam, the Iranian Arabic television channel popular among the Shiites in Saudi Arabia, frequently calls for demonstrations, heightening Saudi fears about Iran's intention to destabilize the kingdom. In response to the unrest, the Saudi Arabian authorities declared they would use an "iron fist" to break the protest, and accused "foreign hands" – a code name for Iranian involvement – of exacerbating the tension. Spouting the narrative in which the Shiites are a fifth column helps the royal house maintain a large degree of legitimacy – an accepted way of uniting its ranks and preventing internal criticism.⁷ It is possible that improving the Shiite community's living conditions and arriving at something like a social covenant might help the House of Saud, because other opposition groups, encouraged by the Shiite struggle, are liable to escalate their own protest. The two million Shiites in Saudi Arabia (about 10 percent of the population) have never threatened the kingdom's stability. Continued unrest, however, is liable to lead some of them to become more active and more violent.

Various Manifestations of Protest

The protest in the Gulf is naturally expressed in different ways, depending on the circumstances and the pressures in each country: full scale street riots in the relatively poor Gulf states, Bahrain and Oman; and mostly moderate intellectual opposition via the internet in the wealthier countries, such as UAE and Saudi Arabia. In all these instances, however, the regimes have responded with strong repressive measures, thereby undermining their legitimacy. In some cases, the regimes used mercenaries, carried out preventive arrests, interfered with the legal systems, and interfered in civil society activities. The authorities also resorted to the Quran to justify the ban on protests and the demand that the people obey their leaders. Only

Qatar has so far managed to avoid the use of repression, mostly due to the extreme wealth enjoyed by its 250,000 citizens, and possibly also as a result of its different stance amidst the regional turmoil (i.e., actively supporting extremists in many countries undergoing unrest).

The Gulf monarchies have established police states and sophisticated censorship methods. In that, they do not differ from other Arab regimes. They rely on some degree of indifference on the part of the international community to their systematic violation of human rights for the purpose of obtaining guaranteed regional stability (it is estimated that there are thousands, if not more, of political prisoners in those countries). Reality shows a high percentage of unemployment in the Gulf states. There are concentrations of poverty and dwindling resources, and countries have largely failed in their attempt to diversify their economies in order to reduce their dependence on oil. Furthermore, there is a modern, well-networked and better educated population of young people unwilling to live any longer by the old rules. These young people openly express their repudiation of the status quo, mostly online, and in many cases feel solidarity with the protest movement in the Arab street.

The Key to the Stability of the Monarchies

The Gulf monarchies present favorably in an examination of the situation in the Arab world, as they provide their people with stability and welfare. In comparison to Assad and Qaddafi, even the worst of the Gulf regimes “look good” (though they may present as less attractive if some of the new Arab Spring regimes are successful in the long term). The failure of the revolutions to meet the popular expectations, improve the standard of living, and increase citizens’ participation in the political process has muted the momentum of the Arab Spring, and has therefore removed, if only temporarily, the threat of political upheaval to the Arab monarchies in the Persian Gulf.

The Gulf states are also adept at demonizing their enemies by labeling them a fifth column receiving foreign support, or calling them Islamic extremists and terrorists. This strategy enables the rulers to appear to most of their people and the international observers as supporters of the status quo, and therefore as preferable to any unknown and risky alternative. Despite penetration of the population by the forces of progress and better communication between people, along with better access to education, the Gulf elites remain effective at cooption, and more than once

have marshaled opposing forces under the regime's banner. The future opposition movements, however, are liable to prove a more formidable obstacle. The growing internal pressures (including dwindling resources, soaring unemployment, and controversial subsidies), combined with the rise of new forces not readily subject to cooption (social networks and satellite television), are likely to make many in the Gulf feel strong enough to openly criticize their rulers. The uncontrolled exposure of people to foreign media through the internet and satellite TV is especially difficult for regimes like the Saudi royal house, whose conservative character is essential to its stability.

The Gulf monarchies also enjoy support from foreign powers as a result of their strategic geopolitical positioning. The US Fifth Fleet is stationed in Bahrain, and the US Central Command sits in Qatar. The Gulf monarchies are among the world's leading producers of oil and gas, and their territory contains the largest proven oil and gas reserves. The price of instability in the Persian Gulf for the West is therefore far higher than the price of regime changes in Tunisia or Yemen, or even Libya and Syria. The result is that continued repression of the Shiites draws only a weak response from Washington and the West. For the autocratic rulers in the Gulf, the formation of an internal and external coalition of support through the use of oil revenues reduces the cost of repression and the chances of international opposition.⁸ In this context, several of the Gulf states are exploiting their connections in the global energy market to create a web of international connections for the purpose of increasing the number of international companies and countries with an interest in maintaining their stability in the long term.

Oil money is central, but it does not tell the whole story. The monarchies are indeed perceived as a more natural and legitimate form of government in the Arabian Peninsula.⁹ The societies in the Gulf are to a large extent tribal in nature, which makes it easier for the rulers to maintain contact with their subjects. In Saudi Arabia, this is done through the Majlis – tribal councils. A representative of the royal family usually takes part in tribal conferences of this kind, through which people convey their requests. As a rule, an individual's access to the ruler is greater than in a non-tribal society.¹⁰ In general, in a tribal monarchy, loyalty is first of all to the king and the royal family, and only afterwards to the nation state. Some of the monarchies also maintain a distance from the political theater, which contributes to their legitimacy. For example, Sultan Qaboos of Oman can fire one of his

ministers in response to public criticism (in contrast to the Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family holds the majority of important positions). For this reason, the monarchy has become a synonym for stability, and in countries that have undergone upheaval, such as Libya, there is a lively discussion of the possibility of making the country a (constitutional) monarchy.¹¹

The tribal character of societies in the Gulf, the dynastic tradition, and the religious legitimacy claimed by several of the regimes (in the case of Saudi Arabia, it is “custodian of the Holy Places”) make it easier for the royal families to hold the reins of government, even if it does not guarantee it. The size of some of the families and their presence in all spheres of life also facilitate the preservation of stability (although the size of the Saudi Arabian royal family involves many dozens of princes in the struggle for leadership, which also has a negative effect on royal succession and governmental stability).¹² In addition, religious leaders, a potential source of criticism, have been co-opted and operate under the sponsorship of, and subordinate to, the king. The religious establishment serves the state and gives religious legitimacy to its leader. The result is that a religious monarchy finds it easier to cope with radical Islam than a secular republic.

Monarchs thus have a certain advantage in comparison with republics, because they can more easily wrap themselves in Muslim and tribal tradition.¹³ The royal houses themselves, however, are not confident about the continuation of their rule. For this reason, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states have spent billions on reforms (from cash grants and wage hikes to development projects and job creation). The logic is simple: people with economic security do not revolt, and those who do revolt can be effectively condemned. Libya can be cited as an example, in which Qaddafi was driven from power, despite the oil riches he enjoyed, perhaps because he did not invest his petrodollars in appeasing sectors that constituted potential opposition.¹⁴ In addition, not all monarchies are oil-rich. Bahrain has exhausted its oil reserves, and Oman’s oil production is relatively modest (about 900,000 barrels of oil per day). However, the other monarchies have come to their aid. It is possible that without the massive assistance flowing to Jordan, in part from the Gulf states, the regime there would have difficulty surviving economically.¹⁵

Conclusion

In view of the continued regional upheaval, the question of the viability of the monarchial regimes remains timely. Even if predictions about the

stability of regimes are difficult, perhaps impossible to make, it can be stated that the greatest threat to the stability of the Arab regimes in the Gulf is disruption of the rentier arrangements, in part by a steep and sustained drop in oil prices. The Gulf monarchies have withstood the convulsion mainly because most of them float on a sea of wealth that enables them (to some extent) to buy off their internal opponents and win external support. Indeed, a monarchical character did not help several Arab monarchies – Egypt, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya – survive the second half of the twentieth century.

The Arab monarchies in the Gulf are therefore not exceptions because they are monarchies. They enjoy a geopolitical treasure that earns them the “loyalty” of their people and the strategic attention of external forces. The monarchies have stored substantial reserves for a rainy day (Saudi Arabia’s reserves are estimated at \$700 billion), but a substantial and sustained drop in oil prices (which could result from a significant flow of American oil into the markets, for example), without material reforms in the subsidies granted to subjects, will make it difficult for them to meet the needs of the growing population, keep the promises made since 2011, and preserve their current political structure in the long term.

At first glance, the Gulf principalities appear stable, at least in comparison with the region as a whole. By utilizing a variety of internal and external survival strategies, the regimes in power, which were already labeled anachronisms in the second half of the preceding century, have managed more or less to maintain their stability. The political arrangements behind these autocratic states, however, are coming under growing pressure, with considerable sections of the population challenging the ruling elites. A balanced policy composed on the one hand of willingness on the part of sultans and emirs to open the political system in response to what the times require, and on the other hand the public’s willingness to settle for half of its aspirations, can aid the monarchies in their quest for survival.

The Gulf monarchies have so far demonstrated their ability to weather the winds of change that brought about the upheaval in the region. Except for Bahrain, where the ethnically motivated unrest refuses to fade, the Gulf monarchies have so far not had to face significant threats to their stability, and have not found it difficult to handle the isolated protests in their territory with a combination of repression and benefits. The past four years have proven again that oil wealth remains an effective tool for maintaining stability.

Notes

- 1 "Mass Pro-Democracy Protest Rocks Bahrain," *Reuters*, March 9, 2012.
- 2 Nachum Shiloh, "The Faisal Order in Saudi Arabia in the Test of Time," from *The Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula: States and Societies in Transition*, eds. Uzi Rabi and Shaul Yanai (Tel Aviv University: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 2014), p. 43.
- 3 Habib Toumi, "Saudi King Appoints 30 Women to Shura Council," *Gulf News*, January 11, 2013.
- 4 "The Manama Document: Bahrain Road to Freedom and Democracy," a joint document by opposition political societies, Bahrain, October 12, 2011.
- 5 "Iran Denies Role in Bahrain Unrest, Urges Respect for Human Rights," *Reuters*, April 22, 2014.
- 6 Youseff Harb, "Bahraini Monarchy Manufactures Demographic Changes," *al-Akhar*, April 5, 2014.
- 7 Christopher Davidson, "The Arab Sunset: The Coming Collapse of the Monarchies," *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2013.
- 8 Gregory Gause, "Kings for All Seasons: How the Middle East Monarchies Survived the Arab Spring," Brookings Doha Center, Analysis Paper No. 8, September 2013, and Matthew Gray, *Qatar: Politics and the Challenges of Development* (Boulder, CO, 2013), ch. 7.
- 9 Yoel Guzansky, "The Gulf Monarchies: Is Spring Far Behind?" in *One Year of the Arab Spring: Global and Regional Implications*, eds. Yoel Guzansky and Mark A. Heller, Memorandum 113 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2012), p. 47.
- 10 This subject was raised at the 38th annual conference of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Association of Israel on June 5, 2014 in a panel dealing in the politics and economics of the Persian Gulf states; presented by Nachum Shiloh, with the participation of Michael Eppel, Onn Winckler, Yoel Guzansky, and Rachel Hoffman.
- 11 "Libyan Foreign Minister Calls for Return of Monarchy," *al-Monitor*, April 7, 2014.
- 12 Yoel Guzansky and Miriam Goldman, "Too Many Saudi Princes," *National Interest*, December 7, 2012.
- 13 Gabriel Ben-Dor, "Patterns of Monarchy in the Middle East," in *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000), pp. 71-81.
- 14 Marc Lynch, ed., "Arab Uprisings: The Arab Monarchy Debate," Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), December 2012.
- 15 Onn Winckler, "From Political Spring to Economic Winter: What Lies Ahead for the Non-Oil Arab States?" *The New East* 52 (2013): 9.