Kings, Emirs, and Shaykhs: The Survival of Traditional Regimes in the Persian Gulf

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During the early 1980s I was asked to give a briefing for the head of the Toyota auto company and other enterprises. It was just after the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat and during the height of the Iran-Iraq war, so regional instability was much on the mind of everyone.

After I finished my talk, Mr. Toyota asked a question in Japanese which was quickly translated. "This is all very interesting," he responded, "but what we really want to know is the date on which the Saudi monarchy will fall."

Before I could answer, the head of the delegation said, "We know the date and are willing to tell you but first we would like to renegotiate our fees." I think he was joking, though it was not the most tactful thing to say.

When I did answer, I explained that the Saudi monarchy was very strong and likely to survive for a long time to come. Almost 30 years later, I see no reason to change that assessment.

If you had told experts in the mid-1960s that a half-century later every king and emir then ruling in the Persian Gulf would still be there, most would have been astonished. After all, these regimes seemed representative of a bygone, even medieval, era. Surely, modernity would sweep them away. Certainly, militant Arab nationalists-backed up generally by the regimes in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq-were eager to do so. After 1979, the radical Islamists in Iran and their local sympathizers worked hard to foment revolution.

Yet all these regimes are still in power, in Bahrain and Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Indeed, in broad terms, these regimes are flourishing and none of them faces the threat of imminent overthrow. They have joined together in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) so it is possible to refer to these six countries collectively as the GCC states.

It would be easy to say, of course, that this political stability is due to wealth from petroleum and natural gas, a treasure even more precious when one compares the large amount of income to the relatively small population of these states. But that is misleading.

First, this very wealth has made these countries the target for blackmail, direct assault, and internal subversion. After all, they have weathered the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian attacks on tanker traffic, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the U.S.-led overthrow of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, the challenge from al-Qaida, and much more. No region of the world has been through more upheavals than this one.

Second, wealth does not merely promote stability; it also undermines tradition and the status quo. This is especially true when vast amounts of money, material goods, as well as modern ideas and methods pour into these countries. Nothing could be more destabilizing to such conservative, religious, and traditionalist societies than an extremely intense dose of modernization, probably stronger and more intensive than that faced by any other countries in history.

Third, at times oil prices dipped far lower thus turning the GCC states' surpluses into deficits when their high internal spending is taken into account. Not all has been rosy economically for them by any means.

Thus, these regimes deserve high marks for managing their situations well and, of course, these rulers know their societies far better than foreign observers who would advise them to do things differently. The price, certainly, has been an absence of democracy, a failure to expand rights, and the continuation of women's status as second-class citizens generally. In exchange, the citizens of the GCC states have gained much higher living standards, though that doesn't mean that poverty has been altogether banished, especially in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to all this, the GCC states have to handle a difficult diversity in their populations. This is of two types. On the one hand, each of these countries has a very large proportion of non-citizen foreigners living on their territory as "guest workers". This sector is kept docile by rotation, sending out longer-term residents and bringing in new ones; of course by the rich financial rewards in comparison to what they'd be earning at home, and repression.

There has never been a single instance in which this large population has threatened the host country's political stability. Perhaps the closest was when the large Palestinian minority in Kuwait was accused of collaborating with the Iraqi occupation army and was almost totally deported with little trouble. Palestinians have never been allowed into Saudi Arabia in very large numbers, presumably to forestall trouble from radicals among them.

On the other hand, and more problematic, has been the different groups among the local citizen population. Bahrain has a Sunni ruling group and a much larger Shia majority, which has led to friction in the past. Kuwait boasts both Sunni and Shia communities which have gotten along in relative peace.

The Saudis, whose Wahabi faith is austerely Sunni and explicitly hostile to Shiism, have a Shia minority of about 15 percent, concentrated in the strategic Eastern Province. There have been attempts to appeal to this group by Tehran-connected Islamist radicals, featuring the fact that Iran is a country where Shias rule.

While the other GCC states have seen only sporadic terrorism—Oman defeated a Marxist revolutionary war back in the 1970s—Saudi Arabia defeated a serious threat from al-Qaida. That group, it should be remembered, was created by Usama bin Ladin for the purpose of overthrowing the monarchy. At times, Saudi counterterrorist forces have evidenced considerable incompetence but overall they performed effectively and stamped out the attempted insurgency.

Since 2003, the GCC states have had to deal with a new set of problems. The overthrow of the Iraqi regime removed the old Iraqi threat but also augmented the Iranian one, made even worse by Iran's drive for nuclear weapons. In addition, the sight of another Shia-led state next door worried the Sunni-dominated states lest revolt spread or Iraq would become an Iranian client.

How did the monarchies deal with this situation? Most immediately, they exported some of their own extremism to Iraq, encouraging young men to go there to fight against the Shias. This got rid of potentially troublesome Islamist-oriented youth while also undermining the Shia power which seemed to them to be so dangerous. Ironically, of course, this put the GCC states on the same side as Iran's ally, Syria, providing funds and fighters to kill American soldiers in Iraq, not to mention Iraqi Shia civilians. From their own standpoint, however, it worked rather well.

Another way of exporting terrorism, albeit less deliberate, was the decision of Saudi terrorists to attack Western targets, most symbolically demonstrated by the fact that almost all the September 11, 2001, terrorists were Saudis. Al-Qaida, as mentioned above, was originally an organization designed to foment revolution within Saudi Arabia but which has directed almost all its energy elsewhere.

Finally, Saudi doctrine has encouraged the idea that terrorism against Muslims is bad but terrorism against non-Muslims is quite acceptable, almost recommended. These stratagems may have done a bit of damage to the kingdom's international image but have not had any significant costs.

Regarding their own security, GCC states have pursued a balanced approach. Here, it is useful to recall the history of how the kingdoms have maintained their security. Gulf regional politics functioned as a triangle in which two powerful states—Iraq and Iran—confronted the half-dozen weak ones.

Before the Iranian revolution, when the Shah was in power and a radical Arab nationalist Iraq wanted to overthrow the Arab kingdoms, Iran was their protector. Once the Islamist revolution happened in Iran in 1979, Iraq became their protector against that country and doctrine, most obviously during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Increasingly, since the 1970s, the United States increasingly entered the picture as an external protector.

Once Saddam decided to attack Kuwait in 1990, it was clear that neither Tehran nor Baghdad could be counted on and the United States became even more important. True, there were negatives to dependence on a non-Muslim state whose policies often made it unpopular, but the GCC states did not hesitate when their survival was in question, as seen in the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis.

In theory, during the post-Saddam era, the United States, with European help, should have been a satisfactory pillar whose power could balance off the continued Iranian threat. The GCC states also opposed Iranian ambitions to a degree which, given their usual caution, was relatively high. The willingness of Saudi Arabia to confront Iran's ally Syria, over Lebanon, was notable. It might be noted that Syrian and Iranian backing for Hizballah was seen in Riyadh as another example of Shia expansionism.

The strategic problem for the GCC states, however, is that the United States has shown itself to be weak, both in general and in confronting Iranian-Syrian influence, especially under the administration of President Barack Obama. The president spent his first year seeking engagement with Tehran which, whatever its other implications signaled to the GCC states that they were partly on their own. They adjusted their strategy to include a larger measure of getting along with Iran and appeasing it. After all, Iran was much closer to America and much more willing to use violence. If Iran was going to emerge as the leading—and nuclear—power in the Persian Gulf they would have to adjust to that situation to ensure their own survival.

Thus, on one hand, the GCC states would be delighted to see the United States block Iran from getting nuclear weapons or even to see Israel attack and destroy such facilities, but they will keep a low profile publicly to avoid trouble. If Iran gets nuclear weapons, the Saudis might try to get some of their own though the likelihood of a serious Saudi effort to buy such weapons is often exaggerated.

Consequently, given all these problems, the question of how these regimes have survived with such apparent ease a modern world and regional atmosphere that is so hostile to them should be one of the most-studied issue in contemporary political analysis. The foundation of this success is their considerable traditional legitimacy and their massive financial assets. But that's not all.

Internationally, as has been noted above, the use of a balance of power has been central. They have sought a protector against the most threatening force while also employing appeasement of the most dangerous local power in order to reduce the size of the threat. What is most notable about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in this regard is that it came in the face of strenuous GCC, especially Kuwaiti

but also Saudi Arabia, efforts to keep Baghdad happy. This factor made the attack all the more enraging for the GCC countries, and most of all the Saudis.

What is the secret of the kings and emirs in terms of domestic survival? The use of money to satisfy and co-opt people plus the calculated use of repression have been mentioned. In addition, however, a very important choice has been to slow rather than accelerate reform. A conventional analysis by Western observers would be to urge more rights, change, and democracy in the belief that these would be stabilizing forces.

But the contrary is true. To go too fast—to go even at a moderate speed—would antagonize the powerful conservative forces in these societies, most notably Islamic clerics who mostly support the regimes but who would switch to the revolutionary Islamist side if they thought their rulers to be impious.

Going too fast would have been the main domestic danger to these regimes and even though their rejection of reform entails more oppression, from a regime interests' standpoint they have been clever to do so. (One might have an interesting discussion on whether they learned from the Iranian shah's eagerness to bring social change to his country as a cause of the revolution there.)

Hand in hand with that approach was the continuation of the traditional foundation of the regimes' power. Of course the Saudi and other royal families have often provided an example of corruption and dissolution that runs quite contrary to their desired image of piety and traditional tribal virtue, yet enough family members have behaved properly—or at least have kept their vices fairly secret—to avoid undermining their prestige irreparably.

It should also be emphasized that none of these are "one-man" dictatorships, in contrast to many nominally left-oriented dictatorships in the Third World. The royal families are large, members are distributed as watchdogs to many key posts (including in the military), and enough commoners are brought into the power elite (albeit in subordinate roles) to provide a lot of safeguards against a coup or revolution.

Some of these royals are very capable people and so while it certainly happens that incompetents are put in place due to their lineage, this problem is kept limited. Similarly, the family has some autonomy in choosing the monarch, allowing for the most feeble or incompetent to be discarded despite their seniority.

The regimes have also made good use of both repression and corruption. As Machiavelli taught, these tools can be well or badly used.

Repression, to be most effective, must focus on real threats rather than a generalized intimidation which increases social resentment to the point of revolt. (This is another mistake made by the shah.) Moreover, oppositionists must be given an escape valve that allows them to change sides, an action which is a most profitable one in the GCC states. At the same time, though, punishment must be severe enough to intimidate any but the most determined revolutionaries prepared to sacrifice their lives. The GCC states have been very effective in adjusting their blend of repressive and cooptive policies.

A similar point can be made regarding corruption. If corruption is used to the benefit of too narrow a group, it provokes tremendous resentment. But if it is spread widely, then it will be a positive force for stability, not only buying off key elements yet also giving many others the hope that if they support the regime and behave such riches could come to them also. It should also be noted that business is largely tied to the ruling family while intellectuals and professionals are largely tied

to the state bureaucracy, limiting the growth of a completely independent class which sees its interest in conflict with that of the rulers.

The bottom line, then, has been that the GCC rulers have shown a strong sense of survival and maneuverability which has allowed them to survive well into the twenty-first century. There is no strong reason to believe that they will not continue to do so in decades to come.

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