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# WHAT DOES THE GULF THINK ABOUT THE ARAB AWAKENING?

ABOUT

By virtue of their confined political environments, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and their most important neighbours often remain impenetrable to domestic and foreign observers. And yet, the evolving politics of Peninsula countries, their relationship to one another and to the wider region, pose some of the most significant and unanswered questions for the changing geopolitics of the Middle East. Gulf politics are entering the most unpredictable and volatile era since their establishment.

Understanding these new trends as they unfold will be critical if Europeans and other international actors intend to rely on the Gulf states as financial and political partners in the region. In the coming decade, the Gulf states will be irrevocably caught between aging, archaic governing models and new political and social forces beyond their control. In bringing together commentary and analysis from those observing these countries from inside and out, this series sheds light on key political debates and developments in the Gulf that have wider resonance for the region and the world.

*Introduction by Fatima Ayub*

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This first issue of *Gulf Analysis* seeks to illuminate how the citizens and governments of the Gulf are interpreting and responding to the political upheavals of the Arab Awakening, which is often seen either as a moment of democratic transformation or of Islamist supremacy in the region. The Arab Awakening has refocused attention on a region in which international interest was declining. But if the fumbling Western diplomatic responses to the dramatic breakdown of Syria and lacklustre political engagement with the recurrent Middle East peace process are any indication, there is still little appetite for anything beyond a commercial engagement with a region that seems to produce nothing more than extremism, oil, and upheaval.

Though the Gulf is perhaps “too rich to revolt”, it has not proved immune to the contagion of political unrest. Accordingly, it is increasingly important to understand the fate that awaits the wider Gulf, encompassing Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen. The strategic importance of the wider Gulf region is partly to do with political geography and partly to do with its volumes of energy trade and sovereign wealth funds – a fifth of all global trade in both petroleum and liquefied natural gas transits through the tiny waterways of the Straits of Hormuz. The stability and reliability of the Gulf states, in particular of Saudi Arabia, is critical to that end. This concern, coupled with perennial anxiety over how to

limit Iran's regional power, also means that the Gulf is now home to some of the world's leading arms purchasers. In 2010 and 2011, Gulf states effected some of the largest arms transfers in history, buying tens of billions of dollars in weaponry as part of the ongoing *pas de deux* of maintaining an American security umbrella. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also has a close relationship with the EU: the GCC imports more from the EU than anywhere else and is the fifth-largest destination for the EU's exports. And Gulf states are also seeking to recalibrate their influence in the wider Arab world and the Far East through aid, commerce, and investment.

The Gulf is also expanding its soft power. Saudi Arabia, for example, has long cultivated alliances and loyalty through its funding of traditional media to propagate its reading of Islamic orthodoxy: just as in the 1980s it bought the loyalty of wartime proxies in Afghanistan, so today it funnels charitable donations to Syria and worldwide through religious institutions. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar have sought to burnish an image as savvy, modern, globalised states, sponsoring major international conferences and sporting events, making large global investments and employing hundreds of thousands of Western expatriates.

However, despite this increasingly global reach, political life and discourse remains opaque and inaccessible – largely the realm of an established elite – and governments have long seemed able to manage and quell dissent. Any move towards reform or political openness in the past came from top-down initiatives rather than from citizen demand. Although grievances proliferated about political disenfranchisement, corruption, and state abuse among a disproportionately young, literate, and informed population – in short, the drivers of the revolutions elsewhere in the Arab world – Gulf rulers seem keenly aware that responding to organized, citizen-led calls for change would set a dangerous precedent.

Given this profound discomfort with participatory politics, Gulf responses to the Awakening abroad have either been an exercise in political opportunism or damage limitation. The unexpected outbreak of revolutionary protests in Tunisia and Egypt left Gulf states unable to do much more than watch and wait warily. Most were reluctant to see Hosni Mubarak go, and the timely support of the Arab League for the military ouster of Muammar Gaddafi, too, was mainly predicated on general Gulf antipathy to the late dictator. In time, Qatar and the UAE would move to extend billions of dollars in foreign aid and private investments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, but serious questions remain about delivery on those commitments, especially those from Saudi Arabia. The Gulf has also moved to insulate Jordan from the tremors of political unrest, promising aid and closer political co-operation. First unsure of how to respond to Syria's uprising, the Gulf has now committed itself to supporting the violent downfall of Bashar al-Assad. But amidst the scramble to reorient their foreign policy, the Gulf states have overlooked the significance of the political moment for their own citizens.

Though Yemen had a managed revolution and Bahrain a stifled one, there are no imminent threats to the power of current Gulf governments. But at the same time, the Arab Awakening has created uncertain new dynamics in relationship between the citizen and the state that should not encourage a view that politics-as-usual will prevail in the Gulf. Certainly the narrative to which the peninsula's monarchies adhere is that their rulerships – by virtue of their tribal roots and historical authenticity – retain a pedigree of legitimacy that the fallen Arab republics never had. But in investigating political debates about domestic and regional events in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening, the articles in this first issue of *Gulf Analysis* – addressing Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain – offer a sharp corrective to this narrative.

In responding to the Awakening either as a dangerous moment of Islamist ascendancy, a sectarian provocation, or an opportunity for gaining new strategic footholds, Gulf governments are fundamentally misreading its implications for themselves in two key ways. The first of these lies in a failure to recognise how the political order of rentier states is now profoundly, irreversibly challenged. The old social contracts wherein patronage systems, flush with resource wealth, buttressed loyalty to leaders are slowly eroding. In their place is emerging a new awareness that citizens are political actors rather than passive subjects. The second critical misreading is suggested in the attitude of Gulf states in thinking that current models of managing dissent – through redistributing wealth, limiting outlets for political participation, undertaking glacial-paced reforms, or deploying conventional repression – remain a credible substitute for engaging with political grievances.

Nowhere are these lessons more vividly brought to bear than in Saudi Arabia, where Ahmed Al Omran describes how social media has opened the only genuine platforms for citizen awareness and debate that is beyond the reach of the state in ways that explode the myth of social quiescence and apathy. Though it remains difficult to gauge public opinion credibly in a country with no visible political opposition, public opinion polling, or civil society, the kingdom seems often out of step with the views of its citizens towards the Awakening. The looming question remains when and how citizens will transform this newfound mobilisation into a more visible and potent force for political change, the threat of which the kingdom seems keenly aware. Recently the government has sentenced leading human rights activists to lengthy jail terms, sought to restrict access to popular communications and social media technology, and re-inflamed tensions with its Shiite minority – a community long disenfranchised and which has been regularly protesting since 2011 – by arresting a leading cleric and threatening him with execution.

A geopolitical heavyweight caught unawares by the upheavals unfolding around and inside it, Saudi Arabia has either retrenched itself along sectarian fault lines or fallen back on policies that are meant to marginalise or buy off dissent at home and retain its geopolitical influence in a region where

democratically elected Islamists are politically ascendant. In response to the conflict in Syria – the region’s most tragic – Saudi Arabia has reverted to backing proxy groups with funds and arms to exert influence in a post-Alawite, post-Assad Syria that was for so long an ally of its especial nemesis, Iran. Still the most prominent Arab donor, Saudi Arabia has only partially delivered on billions of dollars in financial commitments to neighbouring countries, again underscoring ambivalence and uncertainty of response to the Muslim Brotherhood’s political successes in the broader region.

Next door, the as-yet untroubled kingdom of Qatar, seeing an opening to cultivate influence with new emerging powers in the region, is building a global profile as a political and financial leader. David Roberts discusses how Qatar’s ambitious regional role has developed with no reference point other than the personal vision of its ruler. The only country in the Gulf that has avoided any domestic upheaval, possessed of a tiny, wealthy citizenry and massive resources, Qatar is seeking to diversify its partnerships among post-transition countries so as to step out of the shadow of its giant neighbour, Saudi Arabia. With still-nascent state institutions, Qatar’s ability to sustain its present policies is uncertain. Though Qatar is cast as an exception to the rule, with no stirrings of domestic political discontent, this should not give rise to complacency. Qatar has witnessed dramatic changes to its demography, roughly doubling in size in the last decade, and its own rich citizens comprise only a tiny fraction of the population. It is expected to add as much as a million people to its population of two million as it imports an even larger labour force to host the 2022 World Cup. Accommodating these dramatic social changes is certain to pose serious challenges in the coming years.

Qatar’s hyperactive foreign policy of the last two years has also brought blowback, with popular opinion in the wider region turning against aid and investment practices that seem like little more than royalties for royalties. Even Qatar’s much-vaunted satellite network, Al Jazeera – once heralded as a new model of Arab journalism and critical debate – has witnessed a steady decline in viewership as the state-owned network increasingly reflects the closeness of the Qatari state to new Islamist governments. Its decision to lavish diplomatic and financial support on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood exacerbates the rifts between already divided opposition groups and widens the political fallout from the civil war.

Kuwait and Bahrain represent the most openly fractious countries covered in this issue. Mona Kareem investigates how new Kuwaiti political movements, inspired by Egypt’s revolution, found themselves stymied, with old sectarian divisions deepened and new demands for political rights undermined. Kuwait’s opposition parties boycotted the December 2012 parliamentary election and the government is steadily prosecuting more citizens for social media activism and public criticism of the government. Though the Kuwaiti ruling family appeared to flirt with democratic concessions in 2011, the experience of neighbouring Bahrain

has polarised Kuwaiti society and emboldened the state to discard any serious engagement with political reform.

Kuwait’s political crisis is acutely troubling. Once seen as the most open and liberal of the Gulf monarchies, it too is falling into the regional pattern of resisting citizen-led demands for change and assuming that repressive measures are an effective substitute for reform. Though protests against government policies brought tens of thousands of Kuwaitis into the street in late 2012, the state is unlikely to take serious steps to address complaints around corruption or the deprivation of civil rights for a large minority of residents. Dozens of activists have been prosecuted and imprisoned for criticising the emir, and in another move that signals hardening government attitudes, Kuwait ended a de facto moratorium on executions after six years, putting three people to death in March 2013. For the moment, the opposition is not escalating public pressure against the state, but neither is there any indication that the government is concerned with restoring a more open political climate.

The last of our essays examines the contentious case of Bahrain, a country where the majority of citizens who took part in the 2011 uprising still view their political struggle as part of the broader Awakening. Situated on a fault line between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Bahrain remains deeply polarised but not entirely paralysed. Justin Gengler argues that, despite Bahrain’s ongoing political crisis and the attempt of its ruler and neighbours to delegitimise popular demands for reform by painting them as sectarian exceptionalism, new modes of political co-operation and contestation have emerged in the wake of the island kingdom’s stifled revolution in 2011. Though the government has undertaken policies to naturalise non-Shiite nationals, gerrymandered electoral districts, and mobilised a loyal “Sunni” opposition, it has perversely managed to mobilise new co-ordination across groups with common grievances.

Prospects for ending the political standoff through a national dialogue launched in February 2013 offer slim prospects for a resolution, even if it were better managed. It is unlikely that Bahrain’s Shiite majority and opposition movements might be disposed to overlook the ongoing crackdown of the last two years in this reconciliation effort. But the starkest question is of how the monarchy, having inadvertently fostered a fragile consensus between aggrieved Sunni and Shiite communities for greater political participation, can credibly change course without fundamentally undermining its own hold on power. Reliant on Saudi largesse for its own financial stability, the Bahraini monarchy will ultimately change course only following a signal from its patron.

Overall, the Gulf monarchies have no decisive means of mitigating the irreversible rise of political criticism and discontent in their own borders. Major drivers of oncoming instability – namely the failure to diversify their economies away from energy reliance and an inability to provide employment to disproportionately young and growing populations – are accelerating. The high oil prices of the

last decade have allowed Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE to treble public spending the last five years, but this period of abundant wealth is predicted to taper off in the coming few years. In fact, at current rates of domestic energy consumption, Saudi Arabia itself is projected to become a net energy importer by 2030.

Over time, the super-rich Gulf states will find themselves increasingly unable to spend their way out of crises at home and abroad. In the short-term, governments continue to deploy once-reliable methods of retaining authority and marginalising dissent. But if Gulf states are alternately seeking only to capitalise on the rise of new Islamist actors or otherwise limiting their successes, they have fundamentally misread the implications of the Arab Awakening for themselves. Though it is in the longer-term interest of governments to provide a bolder response and vision to manage future instability, the archaic systems of power and bureaucracy in the Gulf are failing to acknowledge or confront their growing political and economic problems. All indications suggest that Gulf politics are entering the most unpredictable and volatile era since their establishment.

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# Saudi Arabia: A new mobilisation

Ahmed Al Omran

Saudi Arabia's politics have long been closed off to outside observers, leading many to conclude that the country is homogeneous and that as long as the government guarantees a certain standard of living its citizens will quiescently support its domestic and foreign policy. With the Arab Awakening, that notion was destroyed forever, both inside and outside the country.

While Saudi Arabia has not witnessed a mass protest movement akin to those that ousted Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and later spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, the country's newfound political dynamism is most visible on social media networks, which remain the primary vehicle for debate and dissent. Over the past two years, the intensity and tenor of Saudi debates on Twitter and Facebook have changed dramatically, with unprecedented levels of new criticism directed at the government. With more than four million active users out of a population of 28 million, Saudi Arabia has the largest Twittersphere in the Middle East and the country comes second to Egypt for Facebook usage.<sup>1</sup>

## Watching Tunisia and Egypt

When the people of Tunisia took to the streets in late 2010 demanding the overthrow of President Ben Ali, the Saudi government and state-controlled media reported events warily as they unfolded in the North African country. However, a divide between official and popular perceptions of the uprising revealed itself on the eve of 14 January 2011, when Ben Ali fled Tunisia for refuge in the Saudi coastal city of Jeddah. The Saudi government defended its decision to host him, claiming that Arab customs dictate that they offer help to those who appeal for it. In a statement carried by the state news agency, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal explained that this had been a long-time policy of the country, adding that hosting Ben Ali was conditioned upon his full disengagement from all political activities.<sup>2</sup>

But the government's decision to welcome Ben Ali sparked the ire of Saudi activists and bloggers. Exiled Saudi journalist Ebtihal Mubarak tweeted that she felt "ashamed and angry my country is sheltering the Tunisian dictator."<sup>3</sup> Another activist, Murtadha Almatawaah, noted the new social dynamics of political debates emerging in the country: "Saudi people are very upset [about the kingdom offering refuge to Ben Ali],

and what do Saudis do when they get upset? They turn to Twitter, change their Facebook pictures, and discuss it with their friends."<sup>4</sup>

By the time Egyptians called for protests on 25 January 2011, Saudis followed developments even more closely than those in Tunisia, which had taken most by surprise. Not only is Egypt geographically closer to Saudi Arabia, separated only by the Red Sea, but it is also home to approximately 500,000 Saudis who reside there, in addition to being a favourite tourist destination.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, once again, the Saudi government proved itself out of touch with public sentiment. At the height of the uprising, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud phoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to express his support in the face of the massive protests that began four days earlier. "No Arab or Muslim can tolerate any meddling in the security and stability of Arab and Muslim Egypt by those who infiltrated the people in the name of freedom of expression, exploiting it to inject their destructive hatred", the official Saudi Press Agency quoted King Abdullah as saying. "As they condemn this, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its people and government declare it stands with all its resources with the government of Egypt and its people."<sup>6</sup>

This response was in clear contrast to the many Saudis who took to social media to voice their support for the Egyptian people to end Mubarak's 30-year reign. Measuring public opinion in Saudi Arabia is difficult; there are no elections or reliable polls, protests are illegal, and traditional media is tightly controlled. Social media has thus become the only open arena for Saudis of diverse backgrounds and ideological inclinations to express their opinions on local and regional affairs. Except for the majority of conservative Wahhabis (who believe that rebellion against even unjust rulers is forbidden in Islam), Saudi men and women on Twitter and Facebook were near unanimous in their support of the popular efforts to overthrow the Egyptian president.

When Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011, the Saudi government unsurprisingly offered no recognition of the pro-democracy uprising that deposed him. The electoral successes of Islamic political parties in Tunisia and Egypt have been a cause of concern for the Saudi government, which has always viewed these movements with suspicion. Unlike its smaller neighbour Qatar, which has offered full support to these groups, Saudi Arabia has been markedly distant. Though the kingdom has pledged financial aid to Egypt, it has yet to deliver on its commitment. The Muslim Brotherhood is the only clandestine, organised political force in Saudi society and its rise to power in Egypt has pleased its sympathisers across the Red Sea.

<sup>1</sup> Khaled al-Ahmed, "Facebook users in Arab Countries", *Discover Digital Arabia*, September 2011, available at <http://www.ddarabia.com/infograph/facebook-users-in-arab-countries/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Saudi Arabia justifies its hosting of Ben Ali", Al Jazeera, 20 January 2011, available at <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/pages/db2870bo-ac70-4ad6-926b-3ad5d6182d3c>.

<sup>3</sup> Ebtihal Mubarak, 2011. Tweet. @EbtihalMubarak. 15 January 2011. Available at <https://twitter.com/EbtihalMubarak/statuses/26069621140365314>.

<sup>4</sup> Murtadha Almatawaah, "A lesson from Tunisia", *SaudiAlchemist.com*, 16 January 2011, available at <http://saudialchemist.org/2011/01/16/a-lesson-from-tunisia/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Saudi Ambassador to Cairo tells Okaz that the number of Saudis in Egypt is between 400,000-600,000", *Okaz*, 30 January 2013, available at <http://www.okaz.com.sa/new/Issues/20130130/PrinCon20130130568864.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Saudi king expresses support for Mubarak", Reuters, 29 January 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/29/egypt-saudi-idAFLDE70S08V20110129>.

## Starker sectarianism and doubt over Bahrain and Syria

The Saudi view is more complex on Bahrain, where protesters from the Shiite-majority population held large street demonstrations demanding reform from the Sunni al-Khalifa ruling family. While the Saudi government could be expected to protect Bahrain's monarchy, Saudi activists, who strongly supported the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, were noticeably cautious in expressing support for the uprising next door. The sectarian divide in Bahrain, as well as the Saudi government's conviction that Iran is backing the protest movement, have contributed to a sense of scepticism among many Saudis about the genuine objectives of the uprising. So when the Saudi government decided to send more than 1,000 troops to Bahrain very few spoke out against it.

The evolution of Saudi views on Syria is also more complicated. While the kingdom's staunch support for the Syrian rebels is now taken for granted, this has not always been the case. When Syrian protesters first took to the streets in mid-March 2011, King Abdullah phoned President Bashar al-Assad to express the "kingdom's support to Syria in the face of conspiracies targeting its security and stability", according to Syria's official SANA news agency.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi Arabia has had a long-standing policy of maintaining the regional balance of power and its initial support for the Assad government followed this line. But as the Syrian government escalated its crackdown on the protest movement, Saudi Arabia saw a chance to depose Assad, who remains one of two major Arab allies of Saudi Arabia's regional nemesis, Iran. Not only did the Saudi government openly condone protests against Assad in the fall of 2012, but it also called for the arming of the Syrian rebels, especially as the death toll rose, reaching the tens of thousands.<sup>8</sup> Recent reports provide the strongest evidence yet that Saudi-bought arms are now circulating among Syrian fighters.<sup>9</sup>

The citizens of Saudi Arabia have followed their government's lead in supporting the uprising in Syria, but with distinctly different motivations. While some of that support is based on a belief in freedom and justice, much of it is also rooted in sectarianism. Saudi clerics regularly encourage their followers to support the Syrian uprising against what they describe as a brutal Alawite regime; as an offshoot of Shiite Islam, Alawism is viewed by some Sunnite Muslims as especially heretical. *The Times* of London published a story in December 2012 about a Saudi judge who incited a number of youth to join the fight against Assad, and local media

have written about several cases of Saudi fighters who were killed in Syria over the past few months.<sup>10</sup> Extremist clerics broadcasting their views on religious channels are also known to use sectarian language when speaking about the uprising in Syria. Yet despite statements by a Saudi official last year that the government would shut down channels that "spread divisions", the government has done nothing.

## Saudis look inward for reform

In February 2011, various Saudi activists published three major petitions calling for reform. The first of these petitions, initiated by a group of young journalists and later known as the "Feb. 23 Youth Petition", was made public on the day of King Abdullah's return to Saudi Arabia after a three-month trip abroad for medical treatment. The petition called for "national reform, constitutional reform, national dialogue, elections and female participation", according to Mahmoud Sabbagh, one of its signatories.<sup>11</sup>

A few days later, more than 330 Saudi academics, activists, and businessmen called for the establishment of a "constitutional monarchy" in a second petition to the king entitled, "National Declaration for Reform".<sup>12</sup> The petition also criticised the inefficiency of Saudi's bureaucracy, religious fanaticism, and a widening gap between state and society, especially the youth. Notably, it warned the king that a continuation of the status quo could lead to disastrous and unacceptable consequences for Saudi Arabia.

The petition that attracted the most attention by far was called, "Toward a State of Rights and Institutions". Within hours after it was published online, in February 2011, the petition had been signed by thousands of Saudi citizens, some of whom were nationally recognised, such as cleric Salman al-Auda and long-time activist Mohammed Said Tayeb. Among other points, the petition called for the separation of the offices of the king and prime minister, an elected parliament with full legislative powers, and the release of political prisoners.<sup>13</sup>

Tawfiq al-Saif, a Saudi political analyst and one of the signatories, described this third petition as a "milestone in the history of contemporary Saudi Arabia." In an article that he wrote on the first anniversary of its publication, al-Saif explained why the third petition was especially significant. First, he pointed out, it was adopted by a wide segment of Muslim clerics who had opposed many previous calls for reform. By signing this petition, al-Saif argued, these clerics

7 "Saudi king expresses support to Syrian president", Xinhua News Agency, 29 March 2011, available at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-03/29/c\\_13802184.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-03/29/c_13802184.htm).

8 Martin Chulov and Matthew Weaver, "Saudi Arabia backs arming Syrian opposition", *The Guardian*, 24 February 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/24/saudi-arabia-backs-arming-syrian-opposition>.

9 "Croatia transit point for Syrian rebel arms: report", *Al Arabiya*, 9 March 2013, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2013/03/09/Croatia-transit-point-for-Syrian-rebel-arms-report-.html>.

10 Hugh Tomlinson and Iman al-Qahtani, "That judge incited our son to leave, to fight Assad in Syria. Now he is dead", *The Times*, 14 December 2012, available at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3630719.ece>.

11 Hassan Moustapha, "A letter from 'the youth' of Saudi Arabia to King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz", *Hassantalk.com*, 24 March 2012, available at <http://hasantalk.com/?p=492>.

12 A full translation of the petition can be found at <http://saudijeans.org/2011/02/28/saudi-reform-petitions/>.

13 More information about this petition is available at <http://saudijeans.org/2011/02/28/saudi-reform-petitions>. The Facebook page for this petition is available at <https://www.facebook.com/dawlaty>.

have become “democracy advocates”, a label they had rejected in the past. And second, more than 10,000 people signed the petition, an unprecedented number suggesting that the petition’s content resonated with a considerable number of Saudi citizens.<sup>14</sup>

## The emergence of limited public protest

Various Facebook groups appeared in Saudi Arabia after Mubarak’s fall calling for national demonstrations on a “Day of Rage”, scheduled for 11 March 2011, echoing the “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook group in Egypt that galvanised and organised the Egyptian protest movement. Given that the originators of the “Day of Rage” groups were anonymous, Saudi perceptions of the initiative ranged from scepticism to anticipation.

The group’s efforts were enough to make the government nervous. In the days leading up to 11 March, the Ministry of Interior reiterated its ban on street protests: “Regulations in the kingdom forbid categorically all sorts of demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins, as they contradict Islamic sharia law and the values and traditions of Saudi society”, a statement released by the Saudi Interior Ministry said.<sup>15</sup> The Council of Senior Ulema, the highest religious authority in the country, also reasserted soon thereafter that “demonstrations are forbidden in this country.”<sup>16</sup>

When the so-called Day of Rage finally arrived, very little rage was actually seen in the streets, reminding many that Saudi activism had yet to translate into real mobilisation. One man, Khaled al-Johani, protested alone in Riyadh’s Olaya Street in front of foreign media cameras only to be arrested hours later. Otherwise, the streets of the kingdom remained quiet, in large part thanks to the heavy presence of security forces in major cities. Pictures circulated from that day showing chains of police vehicles parked bumper to bumper on both sides of one of the main streets in the capital. More importantly, the effort to draw Saudi citizens into the streets for protests on a national scale also reflected a level of political naïveté. Whereas other Middle Eastern countries have a tradition of political opposition, often originating in colonial independence movements, the kingdom has no such history. The country had its first ever local elections in 2005, and political parties or civil society groups remain illegal.

The only protest movement in Saudi Arabia that took shape during the Awakening, and that continues to sustain itself, is led by the Shiite minority in the Eastern Province, who voice grievances against longstanding marginalisation and state discrimination. Protesters in Qatif first took to

the streets in February 2011 to call for the release of nine prisoners detained for over a decade for allegedly targeting US forces in a bombing in Khobar. Protesters later added political reforms and an end to discrimination to the list of their demands. The government reacted forcefully; the ensuing security crackdown has left at least 15 people dead and countless others imprisoned.<sup>17</sup>

Some suggest that the movement of their co-religionists in Bahrain inspired Saudi Shias to protest, whereas activists in Qatif say that their motives predate the wave of Arab uprisings. The rest of the Saudi population likely holds views reflective of the government, which has used state-controlled media to paint the movement in Qatif in sectarian terms, calling the protesters “rioters” who serve a foreign agenda. The Saudi government used the same justification to send its troops to intervene in Bahrain, where the al-Khalifa Sunnite dynasty was facing a challenge from its own Shiite community – a majority in the island kingdom.

Despite its ability to sustain itself so far, the protest movement in the Eastern Province has failed to attract supporters from other groups in the country even though they share some of the same grievances. This can be explained by the long history of mistrust between Sunnis and Shias, as well as government action to stop any collaboration between Sunnite and Shiite activists, explicitly warning the former that building an alliance with the latter will not be tolerated. Jeddah-based Sunnite activist, Waleed Abu al-Khair, for example, said that government interrogators have told him to stay away from Shiite issues and not express his support for them.

## Spending its way out of revolution?

In a political terrain as constrained as Saudi Arabia’s, these new lines of thinking, and the broader interest and support they generate, mark fundamental shifts in citizen engagement. Still, their appeals for reform seem to have fallen on deaf ears, leaving many to wonder if social media and online petitions are effective tactics. Instead of addressing the demands in these petitions, or even acknowledging them, the government has offered costly giveaways: in early 2011, King Abdullah announced a series of benefits, including \$10.7 billion in pay raises, job creation, and loan forgiveness schemes.<sup>18</sup>

Saudi spending has not been confined to its own borders. A report released by the International Monetary Fund in September 2012 said that Saudi Arabia pledged \$17.9 billion in aid to the region between 2011 and 2012.<sup>19</sup> According to

14 Tawfiq al-Saif, “A year on: a statement on “Towards a State of Rights and Institutions””, *Al Maqaal*, 1 March 2012, available at <http://www.almqaal.com/?p=1928>.

15 “Saudi Arabia imposes ban on all protests”, BBC News, 5 March 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12656744>.

16 “Saudi clerics condemn protests and ‘deviant’ ideas”, Reuters, 6 March 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/06/us-saudi-protests-clerics-idUSTRE72510220110306>.

17 Ahmed Al Omran, “Deaths Fuel Protest Movement in Restive Qatif”, *RiyadhBureau.com*, 14 October 2012, available at <http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2012/10/qatif-unrest>.

18 “Saudi king announces new benefits”, Al Jazeera English, 23 February 2011, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/2011223105328424268.html>. See also Ulf Laessing, “Saudi king back home, orders \$37 billion in handouts”, Reuters, 23 February 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/23/us-saudi-king-idUSTRE71M22V20110223>.

19 IMF Country Report, “Saudi Arabia 2012 Article IV Consultation”, International Monetary Fund, September 2012, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr12271.pdf>.

the report, the kingdom promised Egypt \$4 billion, Bahrain and Oman \$5 billion, Yemen \$3.6 billion, and Jordan \$2.65 billion. The Saudi government also pledged \$750 million to Tunisia, \$1.25 billion to Morocco, and \$340 million to the West Bank and Gaza. The IMF noted, however, that only \$3.7 billion of these pledges have been disbursed, again underscoring Saudi Arabia's wariness in extending support to new powers in the region. At an economic summit of Arab leaders in Riyadh in January 2012, Saudi Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz called for a minimum 50 percent increase in the capital of the Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, a fund that lends money for development projects around the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Still comfortably flush with petrodollars, the Saudi government reflects both a perennial desire to maintain stability through aid spending and uneasiness about support to actors it fundamentally dislikes.

## Reform: too little, too slow?

In late September 2005, King Abdullah announced that women would be given the right to vote and run in future municipal elections. The king also said that women would be appointed to the consultative Shura Council, a promise he made good on when he selected 30 women to join the council in January 2013. Still, Saudi activists say that the country's geriatric leaders are unable to keep up with their aspirations. When the king announced the names of the new Shura Council members, including the women, many took to Twitter to demand an elected parliament, saying that the current all-appointed council does not represent them. In early March 2013, the kingdom also sentenced two prominent human rights activists to ten years' imprisonment on charges of establishing an illegal organisation, but Saudi activists and intellectuals widely criticised the trial and verdict.<sup>21</sup> Street protests might still be illegal, but they have become a frequent occurrence, not just in the Shiite Eastern Province, but also in the capital Riyadh and the conservative Sunnite heartland of Qassim, where families of detainees who have been arrested during the country's anti-terrorism campaign over the past decade have been demanding the release of their loved ones.

For outside observers, it is sometimes easy to dismiss many of the developments of the last two years. But for a country that has long been politically stagnant, with a seemingly complacent and apathetic population, these changes indicate that Saudi Arabia's youth, who comprise 60 percent of the population, have become mobilised. Many of the factors that led to popular uprisings in other countries exist in Saudi Arabia: a youth bulge, high unemployment,

and a lack of freedoms and justice. The government has so far managed the discontent with financial appeasement and minor reforms. But these are temporary fixes, and without meaningful political engagement from the state, the demands of more politically engaged Saudis for reform of the government could well become more ambitious.

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<sup>20</sup> "Saudi urges 50 pct rise in capital for Arab lender", Reuters, 21 January 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/21/saudi-fund-idUSL6NoAQE9P20130121>.

<sup>21</sup> More information about the trial and charges are available at <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/03/11/saudi-arabia-release-jailed-rights-activists>. More information about the reception and response to the verdicts is available at <http://riyadhbureau.com/blog/2013/3/acpra-sentence>.

# Qatar: domestic quietism, elite adventurism

David Roberts

Only one country in the Arab world suffered no disturbances during the Arab Awakening: Qatar. Several Facebook groups were created with promised marches to the Emiri Diwan, but when the time came, the car park designated as the meeting point was empty, save for this author, curious to see if any Qataris would turn up.<sup>1</sup> Further mooted gatherings, apparent assassination attempts on the emir, and police “crackdowns” on “Qataris” protesting were also fabrications usually emanating from Syria or Iran.<sup>2</sup> Qataris themselves remain mostly unmoved by the uprisings and by their own country’s part therein.

The quietism of Qatari citizens stands in contrast to the hyperactivity of Qatar as a state. Since the current leadership in Qatar came to power in the early 1990s, Qatar has inculcated itself into a range of conflicts as a mediator (Darfur, Lebanon, Yemen), sought to boost relations with antagonistic sets of actors (Iran and America; Israel and Hamas), vastly expanded its network of embassies, and taken a place at the top table of international relations by virtue of its financial clout and its desire to project its influence in the region.

## Qatar’s untroubled social contract

There is no apparent link between the views of Qatari citizens and their foreign policy. While Qatar’s foreign policy is undertaken in the name of its people, there is no evidence that they have ever demanded, suggested, intimated, or wished for their country to be as prominent an international player as it has become. Equally, their reaction to the outcomes of Qatar’s foreign policy is largely muted.

The most common explanation offered for the apathy of Qataris, even in the most revolutionary of times, is that they are too rich to care. While rather dismissive, there is logic to this idea. Out of a population of 1.9 million people, Qataris account for fewer than 300,000.<sup>3</sup> The gross domestic

product per capita was over \$110,000 by the end of 2012, serving to benefit the vast majority of Qatari citizens, though they are outnumbered by expatriates by almost five to one. Citizens pay no income tax, receive free basic services, and are practically guaranteed employment and property.<sup>4</sup> Under such circumstances it is little wonder that Qataris themselves feel content and do not feel the need to protest, and as yet the country faces no credible threat of political instability from marginalised expatriates, most of whom have only arrived in the country within the last decade.

Yet the quietism runs deeper. Historically speaking, Qatar has played a minor role internationally. Relatively safe under the auspices of the Ottomans and then the British, for much of the first half of the twentieth century Qatari foreign policy was technically conducted from London. Subsequently, upon receiving independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, Qatar fell into the Saudi Arabian orbit, contentedly following Riyadh’s policy moves in the 1970s and 1980s in return for implicit guarantees of protection from its big brother. This relationship began to deteriorate substantially as a new Qatari elite came to the fore in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Relations troughed in 1992 and 1994, with border skirmishes on the Qatari-Saudi border and again when the son and crown prince took over from his Saudi-supporting father in 1995.<sup>6</sup> Counter coups in 1996, allegedly supported by Saudi Arabia, sent relations into deep freeze as Qatar sought a dramatic reorientation of its foreign and security policies. As Qatar began to remake itself, the wider peninsula provided slim pickings for a young country looking to carve out a unique identity. Pan-tribal and pan-religious links further complicated notions of a Qatari identity, leaving few religious, cultural, economic, societal, or political features specific to Qatar.

Consequently, the new Qatari elite has been assiduously filling in many of these blanks for decades. Foreign policy adventures, cultural jamborees, countless high-profile sporting events, and a real desire to implement meaningful education reform are all part of the tapestry crafting and propagating a new and unique identity for Qatar.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the government has relied on more traditional staples of state identity, such as burnishing the image of a former ruler of Qatar to construct a national historical narrative and promoting specific cultural traits to feed into its nation-building efforts.

1 “Facebook Page Calls for Removal of Qatar Emir”, Reuters, 24 February 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/24/us-facebook-qatar-idUSTRE71N36120110224>. One of the Facebook groups can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/revolution.in.qatar>. See author’s brief report on the Facebook non-protest: David B. Roberts, “News from Qatar Protest”, *The GulfBlog.com*, 16 March 2011, available at <http://thegulfblog.com/2011/03/16/news-from-qatar-protest/>.

2 “Report: Qatar’s Emir Escapes Assassination Attempt”, Fars News Agency, 5 September 2011, available at <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9006130212>. “Qatar’s Fake Protests: Round 2 (Including Online Smear Campaign)”, *DohaNews*, available at <http://dohanews.co/post/5894386800/qatars-fake-protests-round-2-including-online-smear>.

3 Qatar’s non-citizen population is largely of South and Southeast Asian origin (roughly 24 percent Indian, 16 percent Nepali, 11 percent Filipino, 5 percent Bangladeshi, 5 percent Sri Lankan, and 4 percent Pakistani. Thirteen percent of its population is comprised of non-Qatari Arabs, and another 7 percent of expatriates come from Europe, the US, and elsewhere. See Christina Paschyn, “Anatomy of a Globalised State”, *Think*, August 2012, available at <http://dohanews.co/post/31451090442/qatars-demographic-breakdown-a-glimpse-into>.

4 “Qatar’s Per Capita Income to Reach \$113,000”, *The Peninsula*, 15 April 2012, available at <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/business-news/190791-qatars-per-capita-income-to-reach-113000.html>.

5 “Examining Qatari-Saudi Relations”, *RUSI Newsbrief*, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 27 March 2013, available at <http://www.rusi.org/publications/newsbrief/ref:A4F71D67424EF9/#.UWKKToI8zEU>.

6 Gwenn Okruhlik and Patrick J. Conge, “The Politics of Border Disputes on the Arabian Peninsula”, *International Journal* 54, no. 230, 1999. “Qatar Says Saudis Seized Its Border Post”, *The New York Times*, 2 October 1991, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/10/02/world/qatar-says-saudis-seized-its-border-post.html>.

7 David B. Roberts, “Punching above Its Weight”, *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2011, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/12/punching\\_above\\_its\\_weight](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/12/punching_above_its_weight). See Qatar’s Doha Film Institute as a key example of its cultural promotion, available at <http://www.dohafilminstitute.com/filmfestival>. On Qatar’s education revamping, see Gail L. Zellman et al., *Education for a New Era: Design and Implementation of K-12 Education Reform in Qatar* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 2007).

So while every country, including Qatar, has dissenters, the majority of Qataris seem pleased that their little country, previously known for little more than being unknown, is today known around the wider region and world for mostly positive reasons. The issues that have caused the most public anger and debate in recent years have not stemmed from foreign affairs but from domestic matters often related to perceived Westernisation of the education system.<sup>8</sup> The Qatari elite, therefore, has an almost entirely free hand when it comes to foreign affairs.

## Seeking security and strategic footholds

Preserving Qatar's security is the central tenet of Emir Hamad bin Khalifah al-Thani's vision. In conjunction with his long-term confidant, Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, the emir makes every single strategic and foreign policy decision of any importance. Qatar is a small, intrinsically defenceless country that is exceedingly rich in hydrocarbons, sandwiched between two regional behemoths with which Qatar has had historically antagonistic relations in a wider region that has seen three wars in three decades. Until now, the destruction of Kuwait in 1990 and 1991 – another small country at the mercy of much more powerful neighbours – serves as a vivid parallel for Qatar and animates many of the government's foreign policy objectives.

The history of Qatar is one of seeking alliances with powerful entities to temporarily assuage basic security concerns. With this in mind, the emir has set about diversifying Qatar's dependency and making Qatar significant to a gamut of important states. Qatar plays host to the US' Central Command military bases and has attempted to serve as a political interlocutor between the Taliban, Hamas, and a range of "Islamist" groups around the region. As the world's largest liquefied natural gas exporter, Qatar is a major energy supplier to and investor in key European and Asian states.

Understanding Qatar's sizable post-Mubarak investments in Egypt under this rubric makes sense too; Qatar has no ideological connection to bolster, but seeks to support what it sees as a centrally important, re-emerging power in Middle East politics. Thus far, Qatar has lent the Egyptian Central Bank \$4.5 billion, granted the government at least \$500 million, involved itself in a \$3.7 billion refinery deal outside Cairo, pledged over \$500 million towards various real estate deals, and undertaken agreements to invest up to \$18 billion in total in the coming five years.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Qatar granted Morocco a shared \$5 billion aid and investment package, and gave Tunisia a \$1 billion low-interest loan, pledged to invest

in a \$2 billion refinery deal that began before the Awakening, and took a 90 percent stake in Tunisianna, the state-owned telecommunications operator.<sup>10</sup>

Qatar's heavy investments are not undertaken on a religiously or personally inspired whim. Instead, these diverse relations are designed to counter basic security concerns – to call for the cavalry should another war break out and threaten Qatar – and, through economic diversification evidenced in investments across North Africa and particularly in Europe, America, and Asia, are designed to assure its economic security as well. Simultaneously, by pushing for changes in education and branding itself as a Western-friendly, business savvy location, Qatar is again boosting economic diversification and facilitating its transition to a knowledge-based economy. That Qatar is a Wahhabi country is largely irrelevant – this has not significantly shaped the country's foreign policy to date. Rather, obtaining security and not pursuing some quasi-religious mandate is the central concern for the emir; something that is manifest in Qatar's foreign policy.

Of course, the best-known face of Qatar's soft power is the satellite television network, Al Jazeera. As the central Al Jazeera funder, the Qatari state is increasingly faulted for promoting the Brotherhood's interests over and above those of ordinary people demanding political reform. Initially, viewers greeted this coverage favourably, especially as Al Jazeera's English and Arabic channels out-scooped and out-covered most other outlets. However, less than two years later the tide has turned, and now Al Jazeera is widely seen as a mouthpiece for the Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup> Yet this is a sentiment that has developed over time: after initially hesitating over whether to cover the Tahrir Square protests, once Al Jazeera understood their significance the station covered them assiduously, just as it did with the rebellion in Libya, from the beginning, and as it continues to do in Syria. But reports are emerging confirming anecdotal evidence from Al Jazeera's Doha-based staffers that the channel is losing its audience share because of its uncritical Brotherhood coverage.<sup>12</sup> Al Jazeera English did manage to air at least one documentary on the Bahrain crackdown, *Shouting in the Dark*, but nothing similar was shown on Al Jazeera Arabic. Rather than blaming Saudi's implicit gag order, however, Al Jazeera and Qatar's growing critics point to the country's acclaim for the Brotherhood across the region, which they say, has left little airtime for anything else.

8 "Ursula Lindsey, "Debate Arises at Qatar U. Over Decision to Teach Mainly in Arabic", *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 February 2012, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Debate-Arises-at-Qatar-U-Over/130695/>.

9 "Qatar Doubles Aid to Egypt", *The New York Times*, 8 January 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/09/world/middleeast/qatar-doubles-aid-to-egypt.html>. Regan Doherty, "Economics, Politics, Underpin Qatar Aid to North Africa", Reuters, 16 August 2012, available at <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/16/egypt-qatar-idINL6E8JD7IT20120816>.

10 Tony Arnold, "Qatar Offers Tunisia \$1bn Loan Assistance", *The National*, 3 August 2012, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/the-national/conversation/industry-insights/economics/qatar-offers-tunisia-1bn-of-loan-assistance>. "Qtel Buys Further \$360 Mil Stake in Tunisian Telco", Reuters, 2 January 2013, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/02/qatar-tunisia-telecoms-idUSL5E9C22BE20130102>. Borzou Daragahi, "Qatar: Reviving a Tunisia Refinery Plan", *Financial Times*, 14 May 2012, available at <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-briefs/2012/05/14/qatar-reviving-a-tunisia-refinery-plan/#axzz2MftHG4v>.

11 For critiques of Al Jazeera's recent coverage, see Sultan al-Qassemi, "Breaking the Arab News", *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2012, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/02/breaking\\_the\\_arab\\_news](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/02/breaking_the_arab_news). Alexander Kuhn, Christoph Reuter, and Gregor Peter Schmitz, "After the Arab Spring: Al Jazeera Losing Battle for Independence", *Spiegel Online International*, 15 February 2013, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/al-jazeera-criticized-for-lack-of-independence-after-arab-spring-a-883343.html#spRedirectedFrom=www&referrer=>.

12 "Printemps Arabe: La Baisse D'audience D'al Jazeera En Chiffres", *Lakome*, 27 February 2013, available at <http://fr.lakome.com/index.php/monde/449-printemps-arabe-la-baisse-d-audience-d-al-jazeera-en-chiffres>.

## Managing new regional realities

Seen through this prism, Qatar's sometimes-curious policies are rendered more reasonable. Trying to ascribe political or religious affinity between the Qatari leadership and the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, will not work. The two are not natural bedfellows and there is no natural mutual inclination for support. Instead, their relationship is based on a web of personal contacts established over the decades, as Doha became host to a variety of actors, often of a Muslim Brotherhood persuasion. Doha's direct links include Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Brotherhood's most prominent ideologue and a resident in Doha since 1962; Ali al-Sallabi and his brother, who played key roles in the delivery of aid and arms to the opposition during the Libyan crisis; and Khaled Meshal, secretary general of Hamas and a long-time visitor and sporadic resident of Doha.

The policy of hosting a variety of exiles has a long pedigree on the Qatari Peninsula stemming back centuries and has so far proven to be a savvy political move. This is not to say that Qatar's policy of hosting exiles is purely motivated by power dynamics, for there is little to be gained from hosting the former wife of Saddam Hussein and some of his children and at least one of Osama bin Laden's sons. But the Brotherhood represents a significant proportion of Arabs who have recently been enfranchised. Early and considerable support of this group is a sensible tactic to try to boost Qatar's support in this demographic, which is likely to have a significant say in the Arab world for decades to come.

This pragmatism is also displayed in Qatar's reaction to the unrest in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. In these instances, Qatar follows Bismarck's dictum that "politics is the art of the possible." Several offers of quiet mediation in the Bahraini case were resoundingly rejected. Then, upon seeing the vociferous "red line" reaction of Saudi Arabia to the situation, Qatar had no choice but to avoid the issue and obey the geopolitical realities to which it is beholden.

Furthermore, in private conversations with the author, members of the Qatari elite and citizens alike have expressed contempt for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, seeing it as overzealous in its political approaches, and while the Qatari role in Syria is broadly supported, some question whether Qatar is involving itself in a potentially explosive issue given the increasing violence and overspill of that conflict with non-state actors and their use of asymmetric tactics. Similarly, most Qataris do not agree with the elite's attempts over the years to secure relations with Israel. Though these policies arouse some antagonism, rarely do these concerns become overly animated. Without a disenfranchised Qatari minority in the country agitating for change and with ample wealth to keep the most generous welfare state in the world going for generations to come, the chances for domestic ructions are slim.

It remains to be seen how Qatar manages its ambitions internationally. With still-nascent state institutions and a tiny population, Qatar lacks the maturity and capacity to build and communicate effective policies at home or abroad, creating considerable distrust and suspicion at times.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Qatari support for the Brotherhood, while it serves to secure – temporarily at least – the backing of various Brothers around the region, it simultaneously diminishes support from those less than enamoured with the rise of such Islamists. And though it has attempted to grasp a political foothold as an international mediator or interlocutor, its success in delivering on these ventures has been limited.

The only thing that will change Qatar's international approach going forward is the personalised nature of Qatar's politics. Without the driving force of the emir or the foreign minister, sooner or later Qatar will enter a new, unknown era. Thus far, there is little evidence to suggest that the successors to these roles would be as interventionist as Qatar has proven to be in recent decades. Equally, as the traditional centres of power – Riyadh, Cairo, Baghdad – re-emerge, without the leading dynamism of Qatar's current elite, Qatar will revert to a role more traditionally befitting its size. Nevertheless, its bold foreign policy will ensure that Qatar remains a disproportionately influential country well into the future.

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<sup>13</sup> A recent multi-million Euro investment in Paris' suburbs, for example, reveals the degree to which Qatar lacks a public diplomacy dimension to its foreign policy. With no explanation from the government as to why it made the investment, French politicians came up with their own reasons, all critical of Qatar. "Marine Le Pen Dénonce Les 'Investissements Massifs' Du Qatar En Banlieue", *Le Parisien*, 13 January 2013, available at <http://www.leparisien.fr/flash-actualite-politique/marine-le-pen-denonce-les-investissements-massifs-du-qatar-en-banlieue-13-01-2012-1810042.php>.

# Kuwait: between sectarianism and revolution

Mona Kareem

For Kuwait, a country of three million whose foreign policy is largely conditioned by the spectre of hostile relations with Iraq, the outbreak of revolution in Tunisia seemed too remote an event to take seriously. But it soon became clear to the Kuwaiti government and citizens that the Arab Awakening was contagious. Egypt provided a new spark to Kuwait's own nascent opposition movements, spurring disenfranchised minorities to take up the banner of protest to demand reforms at home, while Bahrain's ongoing political crisis further galvanised and polarised Kuwait's political scene. Once uncertain of how to manage the wave of political discontent, Kuwait's government has opted for repression, an approach that is likely to hold only in the short term.

## Tunisia and Libya: too far away

Just weeks before the uprising in Tunisia, Rachid al-Ghannouchi, the founder and leader of Tunisia's Ennahda movement, visited Kuwait. In a meeting with Kuwaiti Salafist leader Hakem al-Mutairi, al-Ghannouchi spoke of the impossibility of having a revolt in Tunisia, saying that "the liberation of Palestine was more probable than a revolution in Tunisia."<sup>1</sup> He must have been as surprised as anyone when popular protests toppled Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, prompting, for the first time ever, Tunisia-dominated news coverage in the Kuwaiti press. Kuwaiti authorities and citizens alike welcomed Ben Ali's demise, less for a belief in democratic change and more for his government's position on the Second Gulf War in which Kuwait was alone among Arab states in its support of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

Kuwait's view of the revolution in Libya was similar. Gaddafi was not a popular figure in Kuwait, also due to his opposition to the Second Gulf War, and therefore, no Kuwaiti protested his fate. However, there was a distinct difference in the government's response. In April 2011, Libya's National Transitional Council announced that Kuwait would aid the rebels with \$181 million to fight Gaddafi, though Kuwait's own government was reluctant to acknowledge openly the support it was giving to the new interim government.<sup>3</sup> From

the opposition's side, Libya was held up as a cautionary tale. Kuwaiti opposition MP Musalam al-Barrak made this controversial statement: "The ruler who fights his people will end up like Gaddafi."<sup>4</sup> The statement was taken as a threat to Kuwait's own leaders.

## Egypt: the first spark

During the 18 days of Egypt's uprising in early 2011, the Kuwaiti government, while remaining silent on events as they unfolded, instituted a new ban on protests against Mubarak that clearly targeted Egyptian nationals living in Kuwait in an effort to preserve the good relationship the two governments had maintained up until that time. For example, in April 2010, the Kuwaiti government deported 17 Egyptians for demonstrating in support of Mohammed el-Baradei.<sup>5</sup> A further 19 Egyptians were deported, even after Mubarak's ouster, in November 2012 for fundraising for el-Baradei's al-Doustour party and the youth movement in Egypt, reflecting also an effort to pre-empt any possible discontent within Kuwait's own borders.<sup>6</sup> The Kuwaiti government had good reason to be nervous about the outcome of Egypt's unrest and how it would affect Kuwait's own population; according to official figures, Egyptians comprise the largest Arab community in Kuwait, numbering 453,000 people.<sup>7</sup> The ruling family in Kuwait was unhappy with Mubarak's ouster, but managed to remain diplomatic. Some media outlets in Kuwait, meanwhile, mourned Mubarak's departure, calling him a hero for his decision to send Egyptian troops to fight in the Gulf War.<sup>8</sup> A few days after Mubarak forcibly resigned, the government accepted the changed reality and pledged formal support to the new Egypt.

The success of the Egyptian revolution breathed new life into Kuwait's own opposition groups. While Kuwaitis had protested against government policy before – for example, in 2006, a group of young liberal bloggers started a successful protest campaign to demand a change in electoral districting – there was not, until 2010, a popular movement that was capable of mobilising the public for more substantial change. The Fifth Fence, founded in late 2009 by a small group of young Kuwaitis, marked a first attempt to mobilise their compatriots towards political action focused on government accountability. Nominating a professor of law, Obaid al-Wasmi, to lead them, their first activity was a demonstration against former Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah for corruption. At the time, al-Wasmi, later elected to parliament in February 2012, was in jail after having been

4 Adel Khayyat, "He Who Fights His People Will Face Gaddafi's Destiny", *Kuwait News*, 5 September 2012, available at <http://www.kuwaitnews.com/parliament/24524-2012-09-05-20-29-59>.

5 "Kuwait 'deports supporters of Mohamed ElBaradei'", BBC News, 11 April 2010, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/8614519.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8614519.stm).

6 "Egyptians Deported from Kuwait for 'Political Activism'", *Ahram Online*, 19 November 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/58594/Egypt/Politics-/Egyptians-deported-from-Kuwait-for-political-activ.aspx>.

7 Hamad al-Jasser, "2/3 Kuwait Population Foreign, Half from Indian Subcontinent", *Al-Monitor*, 2 April 2012, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2012/04/two-thirds-of-the-kuwaiti-popula.html>.

8 Ashraf Omeran, "We Do Not Defend Mubarak, but We Refuse Seeing Him Humiliated", *Al-Ahram*, 16 May 2011, available at <http://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/71228.aspx>.

1 Hakem Al-Mutairi, "The Roots of Revolution in Tunisia", 5 November 2011, available at [http://www.dr-hakem.com/Portals/Content/?info=TnpZMUpstjFZbEJoWjJVbU1RPTordQ==.jsp#\\_ftnref1](http://www.dr-hakem.com/Portals/Content/?info=TnpZMUpstjFZbEJoWjJVbU1RPTordQ==.jsp#_ftnref1).

2 "Kuwait Says it Respects Tunisian People's Choice", *Arab Times*, 16 January 2011, available at <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smld/414/ArticleID/164412/refTab/36/Default.aspx>.

3 Dahlia Kholaf and Donna Abu-Nasr, "Kuwait Is Giving \$181 Million to Fight Muammar Qaddafi, Libyan Rebels Say", *Bloomberg*, 25 April 2011, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-04-24/libya-s-rebels-pledged-181-million-from-kuwait-syria-rounds-up-hundreds.html>.

beaten by riot police for taking part in an “illegal gathering” in December 2010 to protest ongoing violations of the constitution.

In March 2011, following the ouster of Mubarak in Egypt, the Kuwaiti opposition and various youth groups organised a protest against al-Mohammed al-Sabah, who had become a popular target for Kuwaiti grievances.<sup>9</sup> Though the numbers at the time did not exceed a thousand protesters, they were nevertheless significant for attracting hundreds more than previous protests. In the “Dignity Marches” that took place throughout the country in late 2012, tens of thousands of Kuwaitis turned out, largely to protest against Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah’s decision to change the electoral law without the permission of parliament or the constitutional court.

## The Bedoon marched first

The Bedoon community, long-time inhabitants of Kuwait who have historically been denied citizenship, was the first in Kuwait to be inspired by the Arab Awakening.<sup>10</sup> They organised their first protest a week after Mubarak was forced from the presidency, provoking significant consternation within Kuwaiti society. The press and public responded with racism and insults, characterising the Bedoon as traitors for protesting and defaming the image of Kuwait. The reaction, though, was unsurprising in a country routinely criticised for its human rights violations against migrant workers and minorities.

The Bedoon roughly account for 105,000 of 1.2 million Kuwaiti citizens.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being denied citizenship, the Bedoon have no rights to public education, healthcare, or employment.<sup>12</sup> From the outset of protests in 2011, riot police cracked down on the Bedoon with tear gas, beatings, and arrests. It was not until 2012 that riot police decided to be equally heavy-handed with other Kuwaitis. But it was the struggle of the Bedoon that created a platform for the activism needed to expose police violations that occurred during protests and to mobilise and report on these events in the media. The first political conviction of 2013 in Kuwait was of a Bedoon activist named Abdulhakim al-Fadhli. He was sentenced to two years in jail for organising illegal protests and attacking a policeman.<sup>13</sup>

In the months following the start of the Egyptian uprising, opposition leader Musalam al-Barrak used Tahrir as his reference to call for protests in Kuwait. Al-Barrak, who is now awaiting trial on charges of defaming the emir, was the first politician to speak openly in support of the Egyptian revolution. He not only voiced support for it but also adopted similar rhetoric, calling for a revolution for dignity and accountability. Prime Minister al-Mohammed al-Sabah, accused of paying off several newspapers and TV channels to undermine the parliamentary opposition, was the target yet again, and al-Barrak called upon Kuwaitis to have the courage to face him. It was during this time, in the spirit of Tahrir, that the opposition renamed the square in front of parliament, where they had been staging their protests, Sahat al-Erada (The Square of Popular Will).

## From Tahrir to Lulu to Erada

While the Egyptian revolution re-energised the opposition with new tactics and inspiration, Bahrain’s uprising rocked Kuwaiti politics to their core. On the one hand, opposition Islamist and conservative members of parliament have voiced no support for Bahrain’s protests that erupted in *Dawwar al-Lulu* (Pearl Roundabout) and refuse to recognise the legitimacy of Bahraini grievances against the ruling al-Khalifa family. On the other hand, the Bahraini uprising has stirred heated debates among ordinary Kuwaitis, whose opinions are largely divided along sectarian lines. Media outlets, such as Al-Watan TV (privately owned by a member of the royal family), have fulminated against the Bahraini uprising and hosted Kuwaitis of both sects to condemn it. Jimaan al-Harbish, a parliamentarian from one of Kuwait’s largest tribes and the front man of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, for example, denounced Bahraini Shias for being “traitors” and openly supported the intervention of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) troops in Bahrain.<sup>14</sup>

When the GCC’s Peninsula Shield troops invaded Bahrain, Kuwait was expected to send a contingent but suddenly backed off. Officially, not many details were given about the involvement of each country. However, it was widely understood that the emir changed his mind after an urgent meeting with Kuwaiti Shia leaders who advised him that the move would damage the ruling family’s otherwise good relationship with the country’s Shiite minority (with the exception of the Iran-Iraq War, when state security targeted Shias, who responded with armed resistance).

<sup>9</sup> Eman Goma, “Kuwaiti protests on Tuesday aim to remove PM”, Reuters, 7 March 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/07/oukwd-uk-kuwait-protests-idAFTR7262LS20110307>.

<sup>10</sup> The title Bedoon is derived from bedoon jinsiyya, meaning “without nationality”. The Bedoon are Kuwaiti residents who, for various reasons, did not register as citizens when the country first began enforcing nationality and citizenship laws in the mid-20th century. Citizenship laws have become progressively more restrictive in the last 50 years, excluding the Bedoon from the rights and privileges accorded to nationals.

<sup>11</sup> “Prisoners of the Past: Kuwaiti Bidun and the Burden of Statelessness”, Human Rights Watch, 13 June 2011, available at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/06/13/prisoners-past-0> (hereafter, “Prisoners of the Past: Kuwaiti Bidun and the Burden of Statelessness”).

<sup>12</sup> “Prisoners of the Past: Kuwaiti Bidun and the Burden of Statelessness”.

<sup>13</sup> “Two Bedoon Activists sentenced to two years in jail and ‘deportation’”, Bedoon Rights, 12 December 2012, available at <http://www.bedoonrights.org/2012/12/12/two-bedoon-activists-sentenced-to-2-years-in-jail-and-deportation/>.

<sup>14</sup> “MP Jimaan Al-Harbash comments on the events in the Kingdom of Bahrain”, Al Arabiya TV, 16 March 2011, available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1oPVXAwMao>.

## Sectarian polarisation

The year 2008 marked a major shift in Kuwait's sectarian-political landscape, setting the scene for today's standoff between those Shias loyal to the Kuwaiti government and the Sunnite opposition. In February, Adnan Abdul-Samad and Ahmed Lari, two Shiite MPs affiliated with the Popular Bloc, the leading opposition bloc in parliament, attended a funeral for Hezbollah militant Emad Mughaniya, whom Kuwaitis blamed for the hijacking of a Kuwaiti plane and the killing of two of its passengers in 1988. As a result, the Popular Bloc promptly expelled the two men from its ranks, questioning their loyalty to their country.<sup>15</sup> This incident signalled increasing tension between the country's Sunnite and Shiite populations, the latter of whom constitute 30 percent of the country's 1.2 million citizens. Feeling threatened, Shiite leaders have largely turned to the government for support in exchange for political loyalty.

Fast forward to 2011, when Bahrain's uprising got under way and observers would notice a further deepening of sectarian schisms in Kuwait because of it. From the opposition's perspective, the ruling family and the prime minister's alliance with the Shias is by default an alliance with Iran. While this is one of the primary lenses through which the opposition sees Bahraini discontent, Popular Bloc leaders have avoided making overt statements to this effect. Though they did not dare challenge the emir directly, Salafist MPs put forward a request in March 2011 for Prime Minister al-Mohammed al-Sabah to explain his decision not to send troops to Bahrain. Al-Mohammed al-Sabah responded that it is the emir who sets the country's foreign policy, implying that a criticism of the policy was a criticism of the emir.<sup>16</sup> But this did not necessarily silence dissent. In the course of 2011, tribes, Islamists, and mainstream Sunnis aligned themselves against both the Bahraini uprising and al-Mohammed al-Sabah. In contrast, many Shias stood behind the emir and his prime minister, seeing no contradiction in supporting the Bahraini uprising while opposing political reform at home.

Like Bahrain, Kuwaiti Sunnis and Shias are divided along sectarian lines in their support for Syrians. Kuwait's Sunnite Islamists, for example, demanded that their country support the Syrian rebels unconditionally, while Shiite MPs drew attention to the Syrian government's proposals for reform. After a protest in August 2011, Kuwait announced that it would not, like other Arab countries, expel Syria's ambassador.<sup>17</sup> But following the Popular Bloc's victory in the January 2012 parliamentary elections, MPs adopted a non-binding resolution calling on the government to arm the Syrian opposition and to sever diplomatic ties with

Damascus.<sup>18</sup> Currently, as Kuwaitis struggle to navigate their own political crisis, the government has consented to a collective GCC decision to cut diplomatic ties but has otherwise maintained a cautious distance from the civil war in Syria, focusing its efforts instead on humanitarian support.<sup>19</sup> This has not stopped private Sunnite donors in playing an important role in funding opposition actors.

## The emir turns back

In an effort to appease the opposition, the emir accepted the resignation of al-Mohammed al-Sabah and replaced him with the outgoing prime minister's cousin, Defence Minister Jaber al-Mubarak, in November 2011. Yet tensions only grew. The opposition took the prime minister's resignation as a clear victory, and they cemented their gain less than three months later when they won the majority of seats in the February 2012 parliamentary elections. But in June 2012, the constitutional court declared the four-month-old parliament illegal, stating that the emir's decision to dissolve parliament in November 2011 was unconstitutional, consequently rendering the February 2012 elections void, and ordered the reinstatement of the 2009 parliament.<sup>20</sup>

As part of this new approach, following the dissolution of parliament, the emir pledged \$250 million in aid to Bahrain, which was viewed as an attempt to reconcile with the ruling al-Khalifa family and its Saudi guard.<sup>21</sup> More importantly, however, Kuwaitis interpreted this move and a worsening security crackdown on the opposition to mean that their government had been granted a free hand by the US, its foremost international supporter, to repress domestic dissent. Once keen for Kuwait to maintain its image as the most democratic state in the Gulf, the US has been reticent in criticising the new wave of repressive measures, leading many to conclude that it has opted for stability over democratic change.

In the second half of 2012, new protests came to life, co-ordinated by an anonymous Twitter account called Karamat Watan (Dignity of the Homeland). The marches were a response to the emir's decision to change the voting law in an attempt to make the elections easier to manipulate. These dignity marches ended up being the biggest in the country's history and were met with widespread repression, which reached its peak in the last three months of 2012. However, the government's strong-arm policy backfired, prompting

<sup>15</sup> "Kuwait MPs expelled for mourning Mughniyah", Al Arabiya News, 20 February 2008, available at <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/02/20/45901.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Kuwait MP files to grill top diplomat over Bahrain", Al Arabiya News, 30 March 2011, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/30/143561.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "Kuwait has no plan to expel Syrian ambassador", Al Arabiya News, 7 August 2011, available at <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/07/161239.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Kuwait MPs press for arming Syrian opposition", *Ahram Online*, 1 March 2012, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/35764/World/Region/Kuwait-MPs-press-for-arming-Syrian-opposition.aspx>.

<sup>19</sup> "UN hails Kuwait's efforts to assist Syrian refugees", *Kuwait Times*, 15 February 2013, available at <http://news.kuwaittimes.net/2013/02/15/un-hails-kuwaits-efforts-to-assist-syrian-refugees/>. Some reports have claimed that the Kuwaiti government has helped to arm the Syrian opposition, but the government has denied this. See "Kuwait: We Did Not Arm the Syrian Opposition", *Al Rai*, 25 February 2013, available at <http://www.alraimedia.com/Article.aspx?id=416869>.

<sup>20</sup> "Kuwait protest at court ruling dissolving parliament", BBC News, 27 June 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18606540>.

<sup>21</sup> Mohammad al-Enzi, "Kuwait, Bahrain sign USD 250 million grant agreement", Kuwait News Agency, 3 September 2012, available at <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2260457&language=en>.

MPs to attack the emir personally. Al-Barrak's challenge to the emir, "we will not allow you", for example, became a chant in many protests.<sup>22</sup> In a bid to mobilise even larger numbers against the emir, the opposition went so far as to claim that Peninsula Shield troops were planning to invade Kuwait to protect the government, though there was no real indication of an impending military intervention. Despite the chaos, the emir called for elections in December 2012, which the opposition decided to boycott. Voter turnout was significantly lower, and the Shias won 17 of 50 seats to become the largest bloc in parliament for the first time.<sup>23</sup>

Public criticism of the emir has resulted in the arrest and trial of dozens of activists, politicians, and Twitter users for defaming the emir. While an amended election law and a compliant parliament appear to have strengthened the emir's hand against the opposition, they have also ensured further confrontation.<sup>24</sup> Though Kuwait has not witnessed dramatic changes to its political system in the aftermath of the Arab Awakening, there is an unmistakable new social mobilisation. Thus far, Kuwait's government is not moving towards reforms, but seeking limited compromise to prevent an escalation of instability and violence.

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<sup>22</sup> "Violence erupts after Barrak sent to prison", *Kuwait Times*, 1 November 2012, available at <http://news.kuwaittimes.net/2012/11/01/violence-erupts-after-barrak-sent-to-prison-moi-blames-instigators-mislem-freed-on-bail-writer-warns-saudis-uae/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Black, "Kuwait election turnout shrinks after opposition boycott", *The Guardian*, 2 December 2012, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/02/kuwait-election-turnout-opposition-boycott>.

<sup>24</sup> Mona Kareem, "New Parliament Marks A Setback for Kuwait", *Al-Monitor*, 14 December 2012, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/kuwaitparliamentsetback.html>.

# Bahrain: a special case?

Justin Gengler

Since December 2010, those in Bahrain who seek to discredit the country's ongoing struggle for reform have repeated the mantra that "Bahrain is different" – in other words, that it must not be likened to the upheaval elsewhere in the region. While influential satellite news networks, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, report on the "revolutions" in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, they speak merely – and far less frequently, if at all – of "events in Bahrain" or of Bahrain's "crisis", a generic problem that might denote a political scandal or a natural disaster. As most other Gulf publics struggle with how to interpret and react to the Arab revolts as largely outside observers, Bahrainis continue to be divided, and influenced by divisions abroad, over whether theirs rightly counts among them.

In late November 2012, this author was invited to speak at what was, according to Bahrain's largest state-sponsored newspaper, *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, "a suspicious meeting in Doha."<sup>1</sup> This shady gathering was, in fact, a public symposium on the country's ongoing political crisis organised by the Brookings Doha Center, the Qatar-based affiliate of the well-known American think-tank. At what was the first open discussion of the Bahrain uprising to take place in neighbouring Qatar since its onset in February 2011, the panel ultimately convened without the participation of Bahraini officials or citizens, who had been duly dissuaded from attending by the government's pre-emptive media campaign.

As it happened, however, the prominent Saudi journalist selected in place of the missing Bahraini panelists, Jamal Khashoggi, aptly summarised the government's view of the unrest, and indeed, that of leaders and many ordinary people across the Arab Gulf region. He advised, "Someone needs to convince the Bahraini opposition that they are not part of the Arab Spring [...] They believe that if the Egyptians can have a total victory, why can't we? If the Libyans can have a total victory, why can't we? [...] But Bahrain is different: [...] the society is divided between Sunnis and Shias."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, Bahrain cannot be part of the genuinely populist and democratising Arab Awakening, because its opposition is not a national movement representing the general will, but a sectarian movement serving a sectarian agenda.

## Sectarianism as political strategy

To the casual observer, the popular uprising that started in Bahrain on 14 February 2011 might seem to represent the nightmare scenario for the rulers of this tiny Persian Gulf kingdom. For more than two centuries since their 1783 conquest of the island, the ruling al-Khalifa tribe has relied upon economic patronage, political manoeuvring, and military domination to secure its continued minority rule in the face of a larger and ethno-religiously distinct indigenous population. Now, it appeared, the al-Khalifa family and their Sunnite tribal allies would have their comeuppance, as the country's Shia-led opposition threatened, like in Tunisia and Egypt, to "bring down the regime".

However, the spontaneous mobilisation of Shiite citizens demanding fundamental social and political change, including a "modern constitutional monarchy" (pledged but quickly abandoned by King Hamad bin Isa following his 1999 succession), was precisely the contingency for which Bahrain's leaders had long prepared.<sup>3</sup> Even as King Hamad spoke the language of conciliation and reform throughout the 2000s, the state undertook and expanded a series of preventative measures meant to ensure its survival in the event that the king's reform initiative failed to deliver political stability. Bahrain's voting districts were redrawn to dilute Shiite representation in the newly re-established but toothless parliament. Shiite citizens were disproportionately excluded from sovereign ministries and remain entirely disqualified from police and military service. A programme of selective naturalisation continues to reshape Bahrain's demographic balance, with tens of thousands of Arab and non-Arab Sunnis having been granted citizenship over the past decade.<sup>4</sup> Today comprising around 60 percent of a citizen population of only 600,000, Shias will likely become a minority if present rates of immigration continue.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, and most destructively of all, the state has actively cultivated anti-Shiite sentiment among ordinary Sunnite citizens using precisely the type of sectarian narrative propagated in the wake of the 14 February uprising. Reinforced by the experience of post-2003 Iraq, this depiction of emboldened foreign-backed Shias aims to deter the ruling family's traditional Sunnite support base from articulating or acting upon their own considerable political grievances for fear of unwittingly enabling the Shiite-led opposition and its presumed backers in Iran. By

<sup>3</sup> Abdulhadi Khalaf, "The Outcome of a Ten-Year Process of Political Reform in Bahrain", *Arab Reform Brief No. 24*, 29 December 2008, available at [http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB.23\\_Abdulhadi\\_Khalaf\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/ARB.23_Abdulhadi_Khalaf_ENG.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Mazen Mahdi, "Leading Bahrainis call for halt to naturalisation", *The National*, 11 May 2009, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/leading-bahrainis-call-for-halt-to-naturalisation>.

<sup>5</sup> Justin Gengler, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf* (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2011). This range represents the 95 percent confidence interval for a mean estimate of 57.6 percent, obtained by a nationally-representative survey of 435 Bahraini households undertaken by the author in 2009. For a recent empirical examination of the question of political naturalisation in Bahrain, see Sarah Chayes and Matar Matar, "Bahrain's Shifting Sands", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 13 February 2013, available at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/13/bahrain-s-shifting-sands/fg62>.

<sup>1</sup> Anwar 'Abd al-Rahman, "جوردا ياف دوبريم عاقل" ("A Suspicious Meeting in Doha"), *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, 1 October 2012, available at <http://www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com/12610/article/52849.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Political Situation in Bahrain One Year After the Independent Commission of Inquiry", Brookings Doha Center, 28 November 2012, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2012/11/28-political-bahrain-commission>.

equating political dissent with sectarianism, terrorism, and national betrayal, Bahrain's rulers have so far averted the emergence of a political opponent far more dangerous than disaffected Shias: a cross-cutting coalition of citizens bound by shared reform demands rather than shared communal identity. Paradoxically for Bahrain's leaders, this sectarian strategy has proved too effective, begetting unforeseen and potentially transformative consequences far beyond those of an energised Shiite opposition. Having once been mobilised to stem the tide of mass protests in February and March 2011, now many of the government's Sunnite supporters are loath to return to the political sidelines, fearful of being relegated again to their traditional role as a loyal opposition force.

While several Western public relations firms compete to communicate the government's message abroad, the state has used its near-monopoly on print and broadcast media to frame the debate at home.<sup>6</sup> Bahrain's only opposition newspaper was temporarily suspended for being accused on state television of publishing false stories and photographs in April 2011 during a three-month period of martial law. Its two co-founders were arrested, with one dying in custody of torture.<sup>7</sup> Presenters on state-run television casually describe demonstrators as "traitors" and "terrorists" and, at the height of the uprising and ensuing security crackdown, even solicited the public's help in identifying those believed to be "guilty". Meanwhile, hard-line dailies, such as the Royal Court-sponsored *Al Watan* (The Nation), condemn not only opposition members — *Al Watan* refers to Bahrain's largest Shiite political bloc, al-Wifaq, as the "Bahraini Hezbollah" — but anyone, including its staunch allies, the United Kingdom and the United States, who would dare question the state's security response.

For nearly a decade, since the 2002 reintroduction of parliament, political representation of Bahrain's Sunnite community has fallen to three groups — two associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis, respectively, and the third with the tribal allies of the al-Khalifas — whose collective agenda has consisted primarily of blocking legislation proposed by the opposition. The post-February period has seen these timid and largely unrepresentative groups thrust aside, however, in favour of grassroots coalitions headed by a new cadre of charismatic leaders. While nominally pro-government, groups such as the populist Gathering of National Unity and the more youth-oriented Sahwat al-Fatih maintain a more ambivalent relationship with the state.<sup>8</sup> No longer content to be mere obstructionists, Bahrain's new Sunnite factions today demand their own seats at the negotiating table, complicating efforts to broker a political

settlement and, perhaps more significantly, endangering the narrative that Bahrain's reform movement is a one-sided, sectarian affair.

Even if the state has largely succeeded in averting outright co-operation between Sunnite and Shiite opposition groups, its deliberate mobilisation of Sunnite citizens has raised the once-unthinkable possibility of political co-ordination between Sunnite and Shiite citizens attempting to achieve the same goals. For this reason, the government has especially targeted those calling for joint action to redress shared grievances — grievances such as widespread corruption, land exploitation, a shortage of affordable housing, unsustainable naturalisation, and a lack of political accountability. Ebrahim Sharif, the jailed Sunnite head of Bahrain's largest secular political party, Wa'ad, was among the first opposition leaders arrested in March 2011 after delivering a forceful speech with this message. Wa'ad itself was temporarily disbanded, its headquarters raided by police and set ablaze.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, two years on, secular and Islamist Sunnite movements continue to press for a greater role in political life, presently taking part in government-opposition talks from which they would, prior to the uprising, surely have been excluded. Beyond further undermining the notion of Bahraini exceptionalism, such a development evidences a complex dialectic. Even as Bahrain's Sunnis reject the legitimacy of their uprising for its roots in the Shiite-led opposition and would deny it a place in the Arab Awakening, like all citizens, they wish to benefit from the unprecedented political opening afforded by it, with an eye to renegotiating their onerous bargain with the ruling family. For all their accusations of sectarianism and Iranian interference, then, one wonders whether Sunnite political actors truly would like to see the political clock turned back.

## Political solidarity or foreign interference?

The sectarian competition to define Bahrain's own uprising has fundamentally shaped citizens' perceptions of and interactions with other participants in the Arab Awakening, both governments and populations. Most significant, and divisive, in this regard is the subject of Saudi Arabia, whose surprise military intervention exactly one month into the uprising spurred Bahrain's rulers to forcibly end mass protests and marked the beginning of a months-long crackdown characterised by widespread arrests, torture, and other collective, punitive reprisals against Bahraini Shias.<sup>10</sup> The latter continue to view the Saudi-led operation, which also included the participation of much smaller contingents from other Gulf states, as no less than a foreign invasion and

<sup>6</sup> "PR Watch: keeping an eye on the Kingdom's PR", Bahrain Watch, 23 November 2012, available at <http://bahrainwatch.org/pr>.

<sup>7</sup> *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 23 November 2011 (rev. 10 December), available at <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf>, p. 225 (hereafter, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*).

<sup>8</sup> Justin Gengler, "Are Bahrain's Sunnis Still Awake?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 June 2012, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/25/are-bahrain-s-sunnis-still-awake/caoa>.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Leigh, "How the Bahrain Regime Wants to Erase its Bad Memories," *Time Magazine*, 18 March 2011, available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2060367,00.html>.

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive account of this period, see *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* cited in note 7.

occupation and connect it to Saudi Arabia's suppression of its own Shiite revolt in the oil-rich Eastern Province. For their part, Bahrain's Sunnis have embraced and even glorified Saudi interference in this case as "brotherly" assistance. The subsequent outpouring of support has manifested in a frequent show of Saudi flags at pro-government rallies.

Yet, while perhaps sympathising privately with the similarly embattled Shias of Saudi Arabia, Syria, and elsewhere, opposition groups in Bahrain have not become involved in — indeed, have actively distanced themselves from — these external conflicts. Already accused of promoting a transnational sectarian agenda, formal political parties like al-Wifaq have been reluctant to give their detractors additional ammunition. Quite apart from this sensitivity, moreover, both the formal opposition as well as the more localised village coalitions that comprise Bahrain's youth-oriented street movement are simply too focused on waging their own respective battles to expend much energy fighting those of others.

Sunnite groups, on the other hand, while expressing daily outrage over sectarian-inspired "interference" in Bahraini affairs (but not, predictably, with Saudi intervention), have shown far less concern over the reverse case. In August 2012, for example, a parliamentarian from the Salafist bloc, al-Asalah, posted on Twitter photos of himself and two other members, including the group's former leader, breaking the Ramadan fast with armed members of the Free Syrian Army. The purpose of the visit, he explained on Twitter, was to support "the falcons of al-Sham" against "the hated Safavids" — that is to say, the hated Shias.<sup>11</sup> Other Sunnite causes have included the spring 2011 uprising of ethnic Arabs in Iran's Khuzestan Province and, more recently, the Sunnite protests against the government of Nouri al-Maliki in Iraq.

Rather than appeal to or identify with co-sectarians, then, Bahrain's formal and informal Shiite opposition groups have sought instead to reach out to fellow "democrats" using personal networks and social media campaigns to draw attention to Bahrain as a case of Western-countenanced political repression. Local activists and human rights groups have, inter alia, engaged with the United Nations and other international bodies, organised legislative inquiries in the US and the UK, and liaised with the leaders of successful revolutionary movements in other Arab Awakening countries.

Seeing the danger in this counter-narrative, Bahrain has worked hard to undermine it. Once targets for arrest and deportation, foreign journalists and researchers are now barred from the country altogether, while prominent Bahraini activists have been refused entry into Egypt at the presumed request of the Bahraini government.<sup>12</sup> An award-

winning documentary on the 14 February uprising produced by Al Jazeera's English language division sparked outcry among government supporters and a minor diplomatic spat when it aired in August 2011. Bahrain's foreign minister subsequently declared on Twitter, "It's clear that in Qatar there are those who don't want good for Bahrain."<sup>13</sup>

## Bahrain, the exception?

In the end, however, what is "good" for Bahrain is generally good for Qatar and the rest of the Arab Gulf states, none of which have an interest in countering the notion that sectarian politics — rather than genuine and widespread democratic aspirations — underlies Bahrain's conflict. Beyond its narrow local purpose, this explanation also promotes a range of broader regional aims. In the first place, sustained accusations of Iranian sponsorship of Shias in Bahrain and throughout the region not only delegitimises these groups domestically, but they heighten feelings of insecurity among other predominantly Sunnite Gulf populations, dampening their appetite for change and marshalling popular (if perhaps not elite) support for a Saudi-led project of greater politico-military integration among the Gulf Cooperation Council states.

At the same time, and even more important for Gulf monarchs, the notion of Bahraini exceptionalism helps obfuscate the larger trend of popular political mobilisation evident across the region — in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE — since the beginning of the Arab Awakening. That Bahrain is merely a unique and isolated case rather than part of a larger bottom-up push toward political reform in the most autocratic part of the Arab world is a message that Gulf leaders are eager to sell to citizens and Western patrons alike.

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Gengler, "Bahraini Salafis Fighting the Infidels Wherever They Find Them", *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*, 6 August 2012, available at <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/bahraini-salafis-fighting-infidels.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Egypt bars entry to Bahraini dissident", Reuters, 27 August 2012, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/27/us-egypt-bahrain-deport-idUSBRE87QoDS20120827>.

<sup>13</sup> Khalid bin Ahmad al-Khalifa, 2001. "نه رح سبل ريح ديري ال نه لكاهه رطق ي ف نا حراولنا نم...", Tweet. @khalidalkhalifa. 5 August 2001. Available at <http://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa/status/99281312271183872>.

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