

PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION  
IN THE OIL MONARCHIES  
OF THE  
PERSIAN GULF

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## **Abstract**

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) represent a unique subset of the Arab world, with many common cultural, political, and economic characteristics. This research project is designed to assess the prospects for future democratization in these oil-rich monarchies. Contrary to many other Arab States, these nations have several advantages that bode well for future liberalization, including small, highly educated populations and vast resources. Several have young, progressive-minded rulers who are competing against each other regionally to be more modern and prestigious and enjoy increased influence. Further, these rulers face tremendous pressure to create jobs and opportunity for their extremely young population. Although most of the G.C.C. rulers will resist sharing power for as long as possible, there is every reason to believe that in order to survive they will have to allow greater political participation. And because they enjoy substantial legitimacy among the people, this opening is more likely to result in greater democratization, not radical Islamist takeover. To be fair, there is certainly a wide range of potential among these states: Oman and Saudi Arabia lag far behind their neighbors, while Kuwait and Qatar have gone farther than the others in increasing participation and accountability in their political systems. There is good reason to be optimistic about the prospects for democratization over the long-term for the G.C.C., a fact which should not be missed simply because they are traditional monarchies.

## **Introduction**

The prospect of democratization among the Arab countries of the Middle East has long been a topic of particular interest for both policy-makers and political scientists. For policy-makers, especially recent American administrations, this interest has been based on the belief that a more liberal and free Middle East would be better for U.S. interests. For many political scientists, the topic of interest has been the resistance of the region to the kinds of democratizations taking place in other parts of the world (Bellin 2004). Most of the comparative work on political change and democratization has either ignored the region or dismissed it as hopeless (Nonneman 2001). A great deal of the area studies work has been profiles of particular countries, with little general theorization. This disconnect has led to a kind of schism in the discipline, with scholars of democracy excluding the Middle East in their own theory-building, and with area studies experts largely ignoring theory in their case studies. This separation has benefited neither side and is part of why there is still so much work to be done.

Michael L. Ross addresses this problem implicitly by encouraging

scholars who study democracy to incorporate the Middle East into their analyses. Many 'global' studies of democratization have avoided the Mideast entirely. Influential studies by Przeworski and Limongi and Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi simply drop the oil-rich Mideast states from their database. There is, however, no sound analytical reason for scholars of democracy to exclude these states from their research, and doing so can only weaken any general findings. It also tends to marginalize the field of Middle East studies (2001, p. 328).

This paper is designed to integrate the best of what the democratization literature has to offer with particular cases and insights derived from the Middle East. Specifically, I will make a case for optimism: there is reason to believe that some Arab countries are likely to further

democratize in the coming decades. The six nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>1</sup> represent the most likely source of this change, and provide a unique set of cases to examine.

This argument is not without controversy, and many scholars take a different view. Many argue that hope is in short supply when it comes to prospects for change and improvement in Arab political systems. A long history of disappointment and backsliding has conditioned a healthy skepticism in the political science and policy-making community. A great deal of the disagreement among experts and scholars on this issue is rooted in the different approaches, variables, and theories used to analyze the Arab World. A key question is whether the region is suitable for comparison with other areas of the world. I argue that although the Mideast is sufficiently different to warrant exploring other, unique ways of studying its particular path to democratization, it is also useful to consider its progress (or lack thereof) within the traditional theoretical frameworks.

The key to this analysis will be in understanding the ways in which the Gulf monarchies are like each other and different from other Arab states. Considering them as a special subset of countries in the region is already standard practice among many scholars for this reason. These petro-monarchies have certain key features in common. They are first, ruled by absolute monarchs and governed primarily by the royal family. Second, they are (to greater or lesser degrees) dependent on oil production for their income. Third, they have small populations, and even smaller numbers of full-fledged citizens. Fourth, they are traditional in nature, with authority deriving from tribal culture and Islam. And fifth, they are all members of a single alliance, the Gulf Cooperation Council. Sulayman Khalaf notes that

the dominant features that underpin Arab Gulf societies are as one societal type far outweigh those that create diversity. To wit, they all share a similar climate and ecology, common history, language, demographic features, religion and

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<sup>1</sup> Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates

culture. Moreover, they found themselves recently possessing huge oil reserves. The export of this treasure has brought about great prosperity, which in turn has generated similar transformations, development, and challenges. . . .In less than half a century, oil wealth brought somewhat uniformly broad transformations to the Arab Gulf's entire way of life (2006, p.245).

All of these commonalities suggest that the G.C.C. countries are highly comparable, apples and apples, in other words, as opposed to the oranges of the rest of the region.

The path ahead for the Persian Gulf monarchies is neither preordained nor easily discernible. The end result may not be something readily recognizable to most democratization scholars. However, the argument to be made in this paper is that if democratization is likely to proceed anywhere in the Middle East, it will be in the G.C.C.; further, these countries are more likely to continue to reform, albeit slowly and gradually, rather than regress. The Gulf States have generated considerable excitement among democracy-promoters because of the increasingly important role that elections and parliaments play in these regimes (Stepan and Robertson 2003). This is not to say that the process will be even or without setbacks; recent history cautions against such blind optimism. Yet each of these countries is facing certain pressures and is armed with certain resources and options to deal with them. The potential for further reform is there, as are substantial pressures that these regimes will be forced to confront in the coming years.

## Review of Relevant Literature

One of the most vexing puzzles for policy-makers and political scientists alike has been the lack of any real democracy in the Arab world. Part of what makes the Middle East so unusual in this respect is that democratization and liberalization are increasing in every other area of the world. According to both Freedom House and the Polity IV project, every region of the world has shown marked improvement in average levels of democracy except the Middle East (Weiffen 2004).

This resistance to democratization has been characterized as a “democracy gap,” and scholars have offered numerous explanations for the region’s authoritarian entrenchment (Stepan and Roberston 2003; Karatnycky 2002). Some have focused on the commonality of Islam to all of these countries, positing that somehow the Islamic faith was incompatible with or detrimental to democracy (Sarsar 2000). These theories pointed to the assumed authoritarian nature of Islam, the all-encompassing nature of the religion (providing guidance for all aspects of life) and lack of separation between the religious and the political (Sarsar 2000; Karatnycky 2002). Additionally, to the extent that Islam is seen as a force in the subjugation of women, it conflicts with the establishment of full human rights necessary for democracy (Fish 2002). These arguments, which are rooted in the sort of cultural critique offered by Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” have been widely criticized and refuted by the majority of scholars (Huntington 1993; Anderson 2006; Zakaria 2004).

These counter-arguments focus one of the following--either that Islam *is* indeed compatible with democracy or that the trouble is not Islam but the *Arab* Islamic world. Brigitte Weiffen has argued that it is only a certain interpretation of Islam which has been useful in sustaining autocratic rule (2004). Mark Tessler and Eleanor Gao claim that there is a wide

variety of interpretation occurring within Islam, and that some of these interpretations even explicitly support democracy (2005). Fareed Zakaria argues that searching the Koran for clues to Islam's true nature is unhelpful because of all the inherent contradictions and historically-grounded guidelines. Rather, he makes the case that Islam actually has anti-authoritarian bent, citing the Prophet Mohammed's command to disobey any ruler who asks you to violate the Muslim faith (2004). He goes on to claim that it is in fact a lack of central clerical authority which has allowed radicals such as Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda to offer competing interpretations of Islam which are often the most hostile to democracy.

And yet, one scholar found a seeming connection between Islamist countries and lack of democracy. In his cross-national study of Islam and regime type, Steven Fish found support for the argument that Muslim countries are democratic underachievers (2002). He offers the subjugation of women as the key mechanism by which Islam inhibits democratization, although he acknowledges that this is due to misinterpretation of the scriptures of Islam (2002). Daniela Donno and Bruce Russett take issue with Fish's emphasis on cultural explanations for the democracy gap in the Middle East. In their 2004 article, "Islam, Authoritarianism, and Female Empowerment: What are the Linkages?" they replicate and modify Fish's tests and arrive at different findings and conclusions. While Fish's central point about Islamic countries being less democratic holds, Donno and Russett find evidence that it is Arab Islamic countries in which this finding is most robust. Indeed, a number of scholars and studies have pointed out that the non-Arab Muslim world has actually fared quite well with regard to democratization (Stepan and Robertson 2003). Zakaria has pointed out that of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, only about 260 million of them live in the Middle East. He cites Indonesia and India (more than 120 million Muslims) as an example of how Islam can coexist with democracy (2004). He also

agrees that it is clearly the Arab world with the problem: “of the twenty-two members of the Arab League, not one is an electoral democracy, whereas 63 percent of all the countries in the world are” (2004, p. 7). Additionally, opinion polls taken in the Arab world consistently show popular support for participatory democracy (Tessler and Gao 2005).

Also at issue is the nature of democracy itself. Does democracy mean the same thing in different places and across varied contexts? Is it historically and temporally grounded in the West and Euro-American experience? Are there absolute requirements or is the concept more flexible? There seems to be a normative consensus that democracy is a good form of government; the disagreement has been exactly what constitutes democracy (Diamond 2002). For example, is secularism necessary for democracy? It has been the path of the liberal democracies of the West, but this is not a given with regard to other regions.

Is democracy an “either/or” proposition, or are there degrees of democracy? A number of definitions have been offered, including Robert Dahl’s “polyarchy” (1971). His conception of democracy requires free, fair and competitive elections, as well as various personal freedoms, institutions, and organizations needed to ensure the spirit (not just letter) of democratic government. The measures used by Freedom House are essentially based on this type of definition (Fish 2002). Others have proposed more minimalist standards. Joseph Schumpeter’s definition requires only that the ‘principal positions of power are filled ‘through a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’” (1947, p. 269). However, more and more regimes are adopting the trappings of democracy (regular, competitive, multiparty elections) while neglecting or sabotaging the substance of democracy (Diamond 2002). This has led scholars to offer a number of new classification schemes for regimes which are not purely authoritarian or purely democratic. It has also engendered debate about the myriad ways in which democracy might

manifest itself in different countries: while pluralism is considered necessary for a modern Islamic democracy, secularism is not. Tessler and Gao's survey found that while support for democracy is widespread in the Arab world, only about half favor secular democracy. The other half prefer a system which is both democratic and guided by Islamic principles (2005).

In addition to debates on the definitions of democracy, many scholars have also emphasized the difference between procedural, electoral democracy and true liberal democracy. The first depends primarily on free, fair, and competitive elections. The second has proven more elusive, because it involves other aspects of society, such as rule of law, accountability, freedom of information and public debate, protection of minorities, and empowerment of women, among others. This difference is important to remember because most authoritarian regimes hold some sort of elections (Schedler 2002). Free and fair elections are necessary but not sufficient conditions for democracy. The result of elections in authoritarian regimes is often strikingly *illiberal* policies (Herb 2003). If elections are held before liberal society has developed, the prime beneficiary is often the Islamist opposition which is organizationally and operationally in the best position to capitalize on the opportunity (Ben-Meir 2006). To give an example, it was Kuwait's elected parliament which voted down the king's decree giving women the right to vote in 2005 (and then subsequently approved it two weeks later).

So what then is to be made of these hybrid regimes, which exhibit both authoritarian and democratic features? Some scholars have offered new terms such as "electoral authoritarianism," "pseudodemocracy," and "illiberal democracy" designed to represent the wide variety of forms non-liberal regimes can take (Diamond 2002; Zakaria 1997). Other analysts insist that "partial compliance with democratic norms does not add up to partial democracy. . . . If

the chain of democratic choice is broken anywhere, elections become not less democratic but undemocratic” (Schedler 2002, p. 41).

Another common path in the authoritarian regimes of the Middle East is for the regime to permit some political liberalization to occur while thwarting attempts to increase political participation and democratization. For the purposes of this discussion, keeping the two processes (liberalization and democratization) separate is important, for they represent two complementary yet distinct paths for regime manipulation or reform. Jamil E. Jreisat, Jr. (2006) cites Brynen, Korany, and Noble’s definition of liberalization as involving the

expansion of public space through the recognition and protection of civil and political liberties, particularly those bearing upon the ability of citizens to engage in free political discourse and to freely organize in pursuit of common interest

whereas democratization is the “expansion of political participation in such a way as to provide citizens with a degree of real and meaningful collective control over policy” (Brynen, Korany, and Noble 1995). This difference will figure prominently in the following discussions of present and future reforms in the Arab Middle East, because many countries are using liberalization as a way to manage pressures for democratization (Lucas 2004).

A number of different theories about how and when societies democratize exist in the comparative politics literature. Each specifies certain variables, conditions, influences, and pathways that lead a regime to become democratic. In the case of the Middle East, explanations have out of necessity focused on explaining why democracy has not occurred. The logic is that if the requisite conditions or variables are absent, democratization will not occur. Which factors are both necessary and sufficient, however, is a matter of great debate. In order to explain why the Middle East has not democratized, as well as why authoritarianism has persisted, scholars

have employed a number of different democratization paradigms. The major theories and their application to the countries of the Arab world are reviewed here.

The political change that took place across the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s has led to a large and growing body of literature. Most theories focus on either “prerequisites” for democracy (necessary conditions for democratization to begin) or “transitions,” which highlight the strategic choices of key actors, especially the regime elites and the opposition (Posusney 2005). Looking first at the transitions paradigm, for example, democracy can be expected to develop when regime hardliners and challengers come to see democracy as the best (or, least bad) option for furthering their interests (Posusney 2005). Thus, a focus on human agency and the behavior of key actors provides a theory for how and when democracy emerges. Largely based on research into the third wave of democratization, some have also suggested that splits within the ruling coalitions and opposition groups may help to determine the existence and form of political transitions (Lust-Okar, n.d.). Others like Juan Linz have pointed to the importance of leadership and its ability to create conditions favorable or unfavorable to democratization (1990). Much of this ties into the theories of mobilization, which emphasize the important role played by opposition leaders in creating and constructing the necessary vision and resources to force change upon reluctant elites.

What do these ideas about democratization tell us about why the Middle East has not democratized, and why authoritarianism in the region has remained so robust? One reason why transitions have not occurred has been a lack of motivation on the part of Arab leaders. The authoritarian regimes of the Middle East have proven remarkably resistant to pressures for reform. Additionally, these regimes have been very adept at ensuring the fragmentation and weakness of opposition groups, who are therefore not in a strong position to challenge them

(Cook 2005). Having established the institutions and rules of the game in these authoritarian regimes, elites are able to manipulate the system to best serve their interests. They regularly deny many important political freedoms, especially the freedom of the press and assembly. This makes it all that much harder for any substantial challenger group to emerge and threaten the rulers. In other words, when it comes to agency theories, Middle Eastern autocrats are not motivated to change and opposition groups are too weak and divided to pose a real threat.

The transitions paradigm is not without its critics. Thomas Carothers, in an article entitled “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” attacks some of the assumptions of the theory; for example, the notion that any country moving away from dictatorship must be also moving toward democracy (2002). Transition theorists tend to see democratization as a single path, and while a particular country may progress or regress, the paradigm assumes linear process. Carothers argues that transitionists also wrongly overvalue elections for their own sake, minimize the importance of the specific cultural and economic conditions of the country, and mistakenly assume that these countries are fully-functional states. These misunderstandings, he claims, help explain why the transition paradigm so drastically overpredicts democratization, and also why so few countries have lived up to the hopes of the third wave transition scholars (Carothers 2002). Indeed, Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger have argued that the poor fit of the transition paradigm and the Middle East is largely why Arab countries have been neglected from the general theoretical literature (2004). For this reason, Frederic Volpi believes that any democratization (or lack thereof) in the Muslim world is “more meaningfully presented as a *sui generis* phenomenon rather than as an instance of Latin American or Eastern European ‘third wave’ democratization” (2004, p. 1062).

Other scholars have turned to modernization theory, which instead focuses on the necessary economic, cultural, and social conditions for democratization to occur. Modernization theory posits a link between economic development and political development: as societies modernize and undergo industrialization, they are more likely to become democratic (see Lipset 1959 or Inglehart 1997). The higher living standards resulting from modernization lead to a number of important changes, such as the development of a middle class, increased openness and participation, rising levels of education, and ultimately more accountable and representative government. Richard N. Haass argues that “market-based economic modernization helps usher in elements of democracy—the rule of law, transparent decision-making, the free exchange of ideas—which in turn sustain and accelerate economic growth” (2003, p. 146). Whether they explicitly endorse all the implications of modernization theory or not, many scholars implicitly accept many of its premises. For example, studies of democracy in the Middle East often look at variables such as per-capita and median-income, urbanization, women’s rights, telecommunications availability, education, and employment statistics. All of these are essentially proxies for various aspects of modernization theory. A number of studies have found links between some of these factors and level of political openness in a society, even in the normally problematic Middle East (The World Bank 2003; Hofheinz 2005; Winckler 2002; Ross 2004; Ross 2001; Donno and Russett 2004; Fish 2002; Tessler and Gao 2005; Stepan and Robertson 2003).

Overall, however, the research on modernization theory is inconclusive. Low levels of education and literacy have not blocked progress towards better participatory governance in Africa and South Asia (The World Bank 2003). Alan Richards points out that India has proven to be a thorny exception to the development equals democracy rule, and that current levels of

education and urbanization in the Middle East are “certainly high enough to guarantee a vibrant democracy—if the critical barriers can be overcome” (2005, p. 32). The history of Western democratization has shown the importance of a viable middle class in modernizing societies. Vickie Langhor, however, disputes the conventional wisdom that middle classes will lead to voter moderation and political openings. She points out that several Arab countries have middle classes, and when given the opportunity they often vote for conservative Islamic parties—not liberal reformers (2002).

Perhaps the most effective critique of modernization theory is that many countries in the Arab World are not poor. In fact, some of the Gulf monarchies are very wealthy. And yet, these countries have not experienced the kind of liberal transformation modernization theory associates with rising wealth and living standards. In response to this discrepancy, rentier theory has emerged to explain why rich, petroleum-based economies do not conform to the expected democracy and development paradigm. Rentierism is one of the main contributions by Middle East scholars to the general social science literature (Anderson 2006).

The central idea of rentierism is that in an oil-based system, the primary function of the state (as opposed to in normal economies) is distributive, not extractive. Oil rich states do not need to tax their populations for income; rather, they have independent, outside sources of revenue which they have sole discretion in spending. A number of propositions emerge from this framework. Because citizens of petro-states pay no taxes (and indeed benefit from nearly cradle to grave welfare in some cases) they have no grounds upon which to make demands for political participation. This is essentially a “no representation without taxation” argument, and is expected to result in a politically inactive and quiescent population (Okruhlik 1999; Crystal 2005). For those who would be inclined to oppose the regime, there are many options available

to the state due to its oil largesse and independence. Opposition elements may be bought off, co-opted, or coerced into submission. Population loyalty is likewise purchased with state jobs, security, free healthcare and education, and other benefits reserved for citizens (Gause 1994). Additionally, the nature of oil-based economies is such that other economic interests are weak and have no large base of support. The economy is dominated by the state, not economic and business elites. The result of all these factors is the overwhelming security of the regime. With the freedom, power, and independence oil revenue provides, the rulers of these countries have been able to minimize opposition and maximize the regime's security. Oil serves as a kind of lubrication when societal pressures begin to mount.

A number of scholars have tried to quantitatively test the propositions of rentier theory. The most widely cited scholar on this topic is Michael Ross and his 2001 study "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" Ross used pooled time-series cross-national data from 113 states between 1971 and 1997 to test three hypothesized mechanisms for oil impeding democracy. The three mechanisms were a) rentierism, whereby low taxes and high spending reduce pressure on the regime to democratize, b) repression, by which governments spend extensively on domestic security to suppress dissent, and c) modernization theory, which points to the failure of the workforce to modernize, making them less likely to demand reform (Ross 2001). His results lend support to all three mechanisms, and he argues that the interaction of the three may lead to a "resource trap" (2001). His argument is not deterministic; rather, he claims that oil or other vast mineral wealth makes it more difficult for a country to democratize. Some states were lucky enough to have established democracy before the discovery of oil, such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Norway. Others have managed to make the difficult transition to democracy despite the oil curse, namely Indonesia and Mexico. The situation remains, however,

that for the vast majority of countries, oil wealth has proven to be deleterious to both democratic reform and economic development (Schubert 2006).

In a related article, Ross also tests the effect of taxation on representation. He finds that it is not higher taxes per se that cause people to demand more representation, but rather higher taxes without a commensurate increase in the level of services (2004). Weiffen argues that it is the confluence of oil wealth and Islamic culture which produce the most anti-democratic pressure. Her quantitative analysis confirms that the combination of oil wealth and Islam produces a higher anti-democratic effect than either alone or even added together. It is the interaction effect between the two which makes democratization so difficult (2004). Indra de Soysa argues that empirical evidence for mineral resources being a curse is quite strong, and her findings show that oil resources and dependency accurately predicts lower levels of physical integrity rights (2005). A number of other scholars have also found evidence to support the rentier argument, including Kristopher W. Ramsay (2006), Kevin K. Tsui (2005), Ricky Lam and Leonard Wantchekon (2002), Benjamin Smith (2006), and Leonard Wantchekon (2002).

Rentier theory is not without its detractors. Michael Herb has argued that even people who don't pay taxes can still be expected to want good and prudent governance, and that "the formula 'No representation without taxation,' needs a decent burial (1999, p. 259). Gregory Gause III has also supported the idea that citizens of oil-wealthy regimes also want some accountability in their government; he also claims that these trends are increasing. According to Gause, this is due to an increase (since the 1970s and 1980s) in the size and role of the central government, and a younger generation which is starting to take social benefits as a right of citizenship, not a generous gift from the regime (1994). Gause concludes that rentier regimes (especially in the Gulf States) will likely face even greater pressure in the future, and the

depoliticization of the population (proposed by rentier theory) is unlikely to last indefinitely (1994).

Gwenn Okruhlik is also a critic of rentier theory, mainly because it seemingly ignores or neglects the role of human agency. She argues that just because a country is rich in oil does not mean it will have a quiescent population; rather, “oil states often foster their own civil opposition because of the way revenues are deployed” (1999, p. 295). She argues that “no necessary link exists between the accumulation of wealth and a particular social outcome” (1999, p. 295). For her analysis, she attempts to integrate rentier conditions with personalistic rule to explain the political outcomes of oil-rich states. She points out that the governments of the G.C.C. monarchies have opposition groups, in contrast to the expectations of rentierism that they would not (1999). However, for the most part these groups are weak, divided, and ineffective agents of opposition to the government. She also argues that inequality in the distribution of oil wealth benefits both creates an opposition and provides them with the necessary resources to oppose the government (1999). What she fails to note is that the most dramatic inequality in distribution occurs between citizens and non-citizens (often foreigners). Members of the non-citizen out-group have virtually no rights or privileges, and they are often foreign laborers who are striving to send money back to their home country. These people are unlikely to develop or sustain any real resistance to the regime. Rather, by bestowing benefits so generously upon legitimate citizens, the regime may create a stronger sense of solidarity and attachment to the ruler.

There are still other theories about how and why democratization occurs, and why it has not occurred in the Arab world. One such theory points to the weakness of civil society in the Middle East. Based on the work of Alexis de Toqueville and Robert Putnam, some scholars have argued that liberal democracy requires a strong and active civil society, and therefore the

persistence of authoritarianism can be explained by a weak or absent civil society (Lust-Okar n.d.; The World Bank 2003). However, there is disagreement as to whether civil society is both necessary and sufficient. For example, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan argue that civil society is tremendously helpful but not enough on its own to produce democratic transition. They claim that for that to occur, civil society needs to be transformed into “political society,” which they define as “that arena in which the polity specifically arranges itself to contest the legitimate right to exercise control over power and the state apparatus” (Linz and Stepan 1996, p. 8). In other words, while civil society may be capable of destroying a non-democratic regime, only political society can produce democratic transition and consolidation (1996). This transformation has largely not occurred in the Middle East, due in great part to the repressive policies of the state. In order for civil associations to play the helpful role they have in other transitions to democracy, they must find a way to engage a state-dependent middle-class and develop a stronger base of power capable of challenging the state (Kamrava 2005).

Others have claimed that perhaps civic associations in “non-democratic settings [do not] foster the same attitudes toward democratic governance and social capital that they do in democracies” (Lust-Okar n.d.). The logic here is that in a non-democracy, citizens fail to develop the necessary attitudes and trust required for a functioning, pluralistic democracy. On the other hand, Nicola Pratt has argued that the reason why Arab societies have not democratized is not because civil society actors do not support democracy, but because they cannot agree on what democracy should look like or how to create it (Pratt 2007). Pratt believes that civil society must wage a “war of position” against authoritarianism, challenging its socioeconomic, ideological, and institutional structures (2007, p. 189).

Many scholars have defined civil society so as not to include political parties (Stepan 1988). Langhor makes the argument that the rise of single-issue advocacy groups, rather than political parties, has impeded democratization in several liberalizing Arab regimes (2005). In other words, the key secular opposition in these countries is not the politically vital party but rather a more politically neutral NGO. The impotence of political parties in the Arab World has led Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid to suggest that because they stand no chance of capturing power, they are not functionally different from issue-oriented civil society groups (and ought to be treated as such) (Posusney 2005).

The above argument points to the difficulty of studying civil society in the Arab context. This lack of consensus is but one of the problems with the civil society thesis for studying democratic change in the Middle East, according to Sean L. Yom (2005). He claims that any growth of civil society is more likely a function of autocratic strategy rather than a threat to it. “Arab states have leveraged a cyclical strategy of liberalization-repression to control swells of civic activism” and remain “robust in their will and capacity to repress” (2005, p. 1). While he believes that civil society is still an important topic for study, he cautions against prescribing it as a cure for the autocratic ills of Arab societies. He also points to the failure of civil society organizations to mobilize substantial support throughout society and to work together in coalitions for mutual benefit. Finally, he draws attention to the difficulty of accounting for the rise of Islamist organizations and their implications for theories about (secular) civil society. Because Islamist parties fail to fit the traditional mold of other civil groups, many analysts ignore their potential. Yom’s argument is that Arab civil society is fundamentally different and more complex than most scholars assume, and is therefore the civil society thesis is bound to fail if applied to these countries (2005, p. 8).

While a great deal of resources and energy has been spent by the West, especially the US, on supporting civil society groups across the Middle East, the results have been uneven at best. According to Carothers, the international aid community has relied on a relatively standardized institutional checklist for promoting democracy in various countries—judicial reform, civil society assistance, civic education, support for political parties, and strengthening of parliament, to name a few (Carothers 2002). Stephen Cook offers a critique of this limited approach.

‘The reason that the promotion of civil society, economic development and sanctions have not led to political reform in the Arab world’ he argued, ‘is that none of them addresses the real obstacles to change in the region: flawed institutions’ (2005, p. 94).

Whether in democracies or autocracies, a new generation of scholars (often labeled the “new institutionalists”) has argued for the importance of institutions in determining and conditioning political outcomes. In short, institutions matter (Lust-Okar 2005).

Institutions include both formal organizations and informal rules and routines that structure political activity. This can mean everything from electoral rules to tribal customs in society. Institutions vary across countries, and thus require careful attention to their unique role in each context. In the Arab world, for example, a common way of organizing society is along traditional familial lines, with networks of patronage and kinship linking the government to the people, and the people to each other. These specific arrangements affect and influence the way in which a society evolves politically. While authoritarian regimes demonstrate less respect for the rule of law than democracies, they are still shaped by very real and important institutional features. The nature of opposition in a given country depends largely on the rules imposed upon its formation and operation by the government (Lust-Okar 2005). Whether through coercion or cooptation, authoritarian regimes have become quite adept at influencing the nature of opposition

groups as well as their relations among themselves. This directly affects the potential for cooperation among opposition groups, thus also affecting their potential impact.

It is perhaps this ability of regimes to influence potential opposition forces which has helped prevent substantial democratization in the region. It is no coincidence that autocratic rulers of the Middle East enjoy vastly more power than any oppositional groups. As Ellen Lust-Okar and Amaney Ahmad Jamal point out, “the formation of electoral institutions depends on the preferences and power of the actors involved, and more powerful players can force the creation of institutions that suit their preference” (2002, p. 346). Because institutions shape political outcomes, Arab governments can largely prevent or minimize any major threat to their rule. As such, institutions are an important part of the puzzle of the absence of democracy in the Arab world.

A final theory that purports to explain the absence of democracy in the Middle East (specifically in the monarchic regimes) has been offered by Herb (1999). He distinguishes between two types of monarchy: those in which the royal family forms a ruling institution, and those in which the monarch rules alone. In the first type, which he labels “dynastic monarchy,” members of the ruling family control all the major offices and ministries, and have solid mechanisms for power distribution and dispute resolution, especially regarding succession. In the second type, the monarch enjoys absolute power and independence from the royal family. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are examples of the former, while Iran under the Shah represents the latter. Herb’s theory, backed by persuasive case studies, is that dynastic regimes are more stable and resilient than personalistic ones (Nonneman 2001). He points out that no dynastic regime in the Middle East has been toppled by revolution, while all of the absolute monarchs have been ousted (Herb 1999, p. 8-9).

Herb constructs a compelling case for how the specific strengths of dynastic monarchies have enabled them to survive and even thrive despite rising pressures for reform. As he puts it, “the institutions of dynastic monarchism incorporate incentives that drive individual princes and shaykhs, in their pursuit of power, to take actions which contribute to the maintenance of family domination over the state” (1999, p. 45). In other words, the ruling family makes sure that every member has a stake in the system, so that success comes from working together to resolve differences internally. Herb argues that this mechanism for managing competition and differences among family members is what has made these regimes so strong and able to survive where so many other monarchies have fallen. A regime which can withstand rising pressure for reform is one which can resist democratization. Thus, monarchy is not an odd historical anachronism in the Middle East, but a key explanatory factor in its political development.

While many scholars acknowledge the contribution made by Herb’s theory, dynastic monarchism is not unproblematic. As Gerd Nonneman points out, “the case is not watertight,” citing the misfit of countries like Jordan and Morocco and Herb’s dismissal of both rentier theory and the policy choices made by rulers (2001, p. 156). Russell E. Lucas also notes that both dynastic monarchism and rentier theory fail to consider the likely beneficial effect of small population, with the idea that a smaller population is easier to control (2004). Yet despite these criticisms, Nonneman acknowledges that “no examination of Middle Eastern monarchies can henceforth afford to ignore Herb’s contribution” (2001, p. 156).

All of these theories for when, why, and how countries democratize offer some key set of variables or conditions as more important than others. Each of the above purports to explain why democratization has proceeded apace across every area of the world save the Middle East. This paper does not aim to resolve these disputes. Rather, it will examine a specific subset of

Middle Eastern cases: the petro-monarchies of the Persian Gulf. A short summary of each of the six states will provide context for the discussion to follow. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that despite their seeming conservative and traditional nature, the monarchic regimes of the Persian Gulf represent the best hope for peaceful transition to more representative and participatory government in the Arab World.

According to the preceding arguments, the possibility of democratization in the Gulf monarchies is dim indeed. And yet, there are quite a few scholars who believe that if democracy is to take root anywhere in the Arab world, it will likely be first in the G.C.C. states. Scholars have begun to take note that some of the most impressive reforms and political openings have, perhaps ironically, taken place in what many would consider the most conservative and anachronistic of regimes, the Gulf monarchies (Rubin 2006). There has been a wave of democratic reforms and increased political participation throughout the Gulf, but most dramatically in Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait (Kechichian 2004). Although the future of democratization in the G.C.C. remains uncertain, there are many positive signs that profound changes might occur.

According to Klein et al., “this is a decade of change in the Gulf region. Today you see new policies in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, but there are more to come” (2000, p. 11). In sum, there are many aspects of the Gulf monarchies which make them uniquely well-suited for the project of democratization, and there is good reason to be optimistic about their future.

## **The Six Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.)**

### **Bahrain**

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island situated in the Persian Gulf near Saudi Arabia. Bahrain has been ruled by the al Khalifa family since 1782, when it captured the island from Persia. It was governed as a British protectorate until the 1920s. The al Khalifa are Sunni Arab rulers of a majority Shia country (60-70% of native Bahrainis) (Bahry 2000). Its small population of 708,573 also includes 235,108 non-nationals, mostly foreign workers who send their earnings back to their home countries (CIA 2007).

Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa has been king of Bahrain since the death of his father in 1999. Since acceding to the throne, Sheikh Hamad has revived elections for municipal councils and instituted a number of reforms. His first act was to release political prisoners, allow the return of exiles, and eliminate emergency laws and courts. In 2001, he offered a new National Charter designed to create a constitutional monarchy with a partially elected parliament. Voters of Bahrain (all men and women over age twenty) approved the charter by a wide majority, but were ultimately disappointed in the pace and incompleteness of the reforms (Freedom House 2007). Women were voting and standing as candidates for the first time, and although no women won, the king appointed six to the advisory chamber. And yet the Sheikh's commitment to improving democracy in Bahrain underscores an awareness of the popular basis of monarchic authority (Kirby 2000). Since then, progress toward greater openness and political participation has been mixed. Formal political parties are still banned, but some other charitable and professional groupings are allowed. There is still substantial discontent among the majority Shia population, some of whose groups boycotted the recent elections.

Bahrain has the smallest petroleum reserves of any of the G.C.C. countries, so it is actively pursuing the diversification and privatization of its economy to reduce the country's dependence on oil. Bahrain was the first Gulf State to develop comprehensive labor reform for developing the skills of its own workers. In August of 2006, Bahrain and the US signed a free trade agreement, the first between the US and a Gulf state.

### Kuwait

Kuwait is a desert kingdom located at the north end of the Persian Gulf, roughly the size of New Jersey. It has been ruled by the al Sabah family for more than 200 years (prior to 1961 under British protection). The current ruler, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah took over the throne in 2006. Kuwait is the only Arab state in the Gulf with an elected legislature; the National Assembly also enjoys substantial independence from regime control, though it has been shut down by the ruling family on several occasions (Polity IV 2003). The greatest crisis in Kuwaiti history occurred when Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded the kingdom in August of 1990, whereupon the royal family was forced to flee. Since returning to power in 1991, the al Sabah family has permitted increased participation in governance. The parliament has successfully blocked legislation proposed by the government (most notably suffrage for women prior to 2005) and forced the resignation of government ministers (Freedom House 2007).

Kuwait is a small, wealthy nation with about 10% of the world's proven oil reserves, with oil exports accounting for almost 90% of state income (Freedom House 2007). About half of its 2.5 million people are non-nationals (or native non-citizens) (CIA 2007). Kuwait is arguably the most modern and most open society in the Persian Gulf area; the government allows some open criticism and debate on politics, and both men and women can own property and establish businesses (Freedom House 2007). According to Herb, the system in Kuwait is "not democracy,

but neither is it absolutism: it is akin to the constitutional monarchies of nineteenth-century Europe” (Herb 1999, p. 168).

### Oman

The modern history of Oman begins in 1970, when Qabus bin Said Al Said overthrew his conservative, isolationist father in a bloodless palace coup. The Sandhurst-educated Sultan Qaboos launched an extensive modernization program designed to improve Oman’s infrastructure, educational system, government, and economy. His reforms began to pay off by the 1980s, when a dramatic spike in world oil prices permitted the government to create the necessary structures of a modern state and improve the quality of life of the Omani people. Considering the challenges Oman faced, its progress has been remarkable. J. E. Peterson notes that

Oman has accomplished as much or more than its fellow Gulf monarchies, despite starting from scratch considerably later, having less oil income to utilize, dealing with a larger and more rugged geography, and resolving a bitter civil war [the Dhufari rebellion] along the way (2004, p. 125).

By the 1990s, this socioeconomic progress was accompanied by measures increasing political participation and constitutional reform. In 1991, Sultan Qabus created the 59-seat (later 83) Consultative Council, with appointed members giving their opinions to the king. Then, in 1996, he transformed the Council into an elected body, though only a small section of society was allowed to vote until 2003, when all male and female Omanis were granted suffrage. Since then, women have won seats in both houses of the parliament. Still, the Council has no legislative powers and the sultan retains absolute control over government and issues laws by royal decree.

Oman has made great strides in economic reform as well. Oil generally represents about 75% of Oman’s revenues, though its reserves are relatively small and dwindling (Freedom House

2007). As a result, the government has made an effort to diversify the economy, liberalize its business practices, and reduce its dependence on oil exports (Freedom House 2007). Oman joined the World Trade Organization in 2000 and signed a free trade agreement with the US in 2006. It has also hosted US military forces for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite all the great changes and improvements in Oman in the last 30 years, there are other problems on the horizon. Peterson notes that Oman's very young population largely does not remember the hard times before 1970, and are not as complacent as their fathers' generation. Rather, they are concerned about "rising levels of unemployment, dwindling natural resources—most significantly, water—Oman's future after oil, and what will happen when the heirless Sultan Qabus passes from the scene" (Peterson 2004, p. 126). Some have even argued that Sultan Qabus "may be the last of the sultans," and that he is preparing the country to become some sort of republic (Kechichian 2004, p. 44). In any case, much will depend on how Oman's political system handles the uncertainty and challenges of the next few decades. And yet, there is reason to be hopeful. Joseph A. Kechichian claims that "over time, the sultan, or perhaps his successor, will probably emerge as the first constitutional monarch on the Arabian Peninsula" (2004, p. 44).

### Qatar

Qatar is a peninsula jutting out from Saudi Arabia into the Persian Gulf, where the al Thani family has ruled since 1916—although Qatar has only had its independence since 1971. As in Oman, the king was overthrown in a bloodless coup by his son. Following his accession in 1995, the new Emir, Khalifa bin Hamad al Thani, began a new program of reform and modernization (also similar to the case in Oman). Unlike Oman, however, Emir Hamad is still relatively young (56) and likely to be in power for quite a while. He took two important steps

toward greater openness when he dissolved the Ministry of Information and launched the satellite news network al Jazeera in 1996. Al Jazeera has become one of the most respected Arab news sources, and its success has greatly increased the profile of the tiny nation around the world. In fact, Qatar has attempted to act much larger than its size as a key player and broker in international affairs (Bahry and Marr 2005).

The emir has maintained that democracy is the way forward for his country (Ford 2006). In 1999, women were given the right to vote and stand for office; Qatar also had the Gulf's first female minister. The emir's wife, Mozah bint Nasser al Misnad, has played an important role in improving conditions for Qatari women (especially education) and setting an example for modern Gulf women (Bahry and Marr 2005). In 2002, the emir sponsored the creation of a draft constitution, later approved by 97% of voters, which widened the space for political participation while maintaining the al Thani's position as absolute rulers (Owen 2000).

Economically, Qatar has fared rather well due to substantial oil reserves. Oil and gas (some of the largest liquid natural gas (LNG) reserves in the world) together account for more than 70% of government revenues (CIA 2007). Though it has secure resources for at least the next few decades, Qatar has also worked to liberalize and diversify its economy. It ranks 35<sup>th</sup> in the world in per capita income (\$ 29,800); among the six G.C.C. states, it is second only to the United Arab Emirates (CIA 2007)<sup>2</sup>. Its small population also means that despite the burdens of financing a full welfare state, the Qatari regime also has enough excess funding to pursue other development projects. One of the most notable is called Education City—a 300\$ million dollar branch campus which attracts top quality Western universities from around the world, enabling Qataris to enjoy high quality education without having to go abroad (Ford 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> 2006 estimate

## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an oil-rich, conservative monarchy, home to two of Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. It has been ruled by the al Saud family with support from the al Wahhab clergy since 1932, when the kingdom was created. The current king, Abdullah, officially ascended in 2005 when then king Fahd died; in reality, he had been de facto ruler for several years. The discovery of vast oil reserves in the 1930s marked the beginning of the tremendous oil wealth which was to propel the traditional kingdom onto the world stage.

Indeed, one can hardly speak of Saudi Arabia without mentioning its vast petroleum wealth. Its oil fields represent one quarter of the world's proven reserves, and Saudi Arabia is the world's largest exporter of petroleum (CIA 2007). Though certainly not large by world standards, Saudi Arabia's population of about 27 million (with 5.5 million non-nationals) is much larger than the other G.C.C. states (CIA 2007). Despite its greater oil wealth, the larger population size and the expensive lifestyle and size of the Saudi royal family have led to an overall lower standard of living for most people. Its per capita GDP, at just \$13,600, is the lowest of all the G.C.C. kingdoms (CIA 2007).

Saudi society is governed by one of the most conservative schools of Sunni Islam (Wahhabism). There is no freedom of the press, religion, or assembly, and women are denied many basic rights (most notably, driving). Saudi Arabia has no formal constitution; it claims the Koran as its sole guide and Sharia as its law. As noted by organizations such as Freedom House and others, the Saudi regime is highly repressive and permits no direct criticism of the al Saud family (Freedom House 2007).

The stationing of US troops in Saudi territory during and after the first Persian Gulf War proved to be a source of great unrest in the kingdom. A series of reforms in the 1990s, including

a newly appointed Consultative Council and provincial governments, were instituted to address a series of petitions and memorandums from both religious and secular opposition groups. The Council was later given the power to debate and study laws proposed by the king, as well as issue recommendations. While the king may limit debate and ignore the council's advice, he rarely does so. Usually some sort of accommodation is reached between the two sides (Kapiszewski 2006). However, the power and influence of the Council should not be overestimated.

The impact of the 9/11 attacks on Saudi Arabia were profound. Not only were 15 of the 19 hijackers Saudi nationals, so was the mastermind, Osama bin Laden. Many al-Qaeda members were also Saudi, and they were enjoying growing influence in the Kingdom (Kapiszewski 2006). In response to growing internal and external pressure (as well as a series of terrorist attacks), King Abdullah made moves to crack down on radical Islamists in the country and address calls for further reform. There was some easing of media censorship, a series of dialogues with high-ranking officials, and discussion of having some limited form of elections. The first elections in Saudi history were held in 2005 for municipal council. Women were not allowed to vote and only certain men were. Only half the seats were open for election; the other half were still appointed. Candidates had to be screened by regime officials and the government had to give final approval to the results (Freedom House 2007). Still, the elections represented a significant experiment for a society with no history of representative government. In addition, the government approved National Society for Human Rights became more active and outspoken in 2006, proposing an HIV patient bill of rights and calling for judicial reform to ensure fairer sentences (Human Rights Watch 2007).

## United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) is a loose federation of seven sheikdoms, each led by a hereditary monarch. The seven emirs constitute the Supreme Council of Rulers, with the emirs of Abu Dhabi and Dubai holding the positions of president and vice-president respectively, due to their territories' superior wealth. Though never a formal British colony, the U.A.E. (then known as the Trucial States) was protected and represented internationally by the United Kingdom until 1971. The current president, Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan, took over upon his father's death in 2004.

Each sheikh governs his emirate by decree and with absolute power, although traditions such as right to petition and consultation also exist for citizen complaints. Freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and religion are significantly restricted: there are no political parties and no fully democratic institutions. However, in 2006 the government did approve the formation of the first human rights organization in the country, the Emirates Human Rights Association (Human Rights Watch 2007). The legislative council can review legislation but not veto it; however, half its seats are elected and women are allowed to vote and run for office (one woman won a seat in 2006).

The U.A.E. is a wealthy oil state and enjoys significant trade surpluses, largely due to its successful economic diversification efforts. U.A.E. citizens enjoy the 5<sup>th</sup> highest per capita GDP in the world (\$49,700 est.) even though only about 30% of GDP is still based on oil and gas output (CIA 2007). The government has worked hard to increase jobs for Emirati citizens, encourage tourism, develop a modern infrastructure, and attract foreign investment (especially in the high tech sector). The U.A.E. is well-known for its lavish spending on massive development projects like the Palm, a beach community composed entirely of man-made islands.

There are some problems facing the Emirates in the years ahead. The economy relies on the back-breaking labor of imported foreign workers, many of whom live in deplorable conditions with little pay and even less rights. Income distribution is uneven even among citizens, with the majority of wealthy Emiratis clustered around Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Walters, Kadragic and Walters 2006). Environmental degradation and water scarcity also pose a threat to potential growth. Critics have argued that its educational system does not adequately prepare its graduates for modern jobs. This is partially based on a lack of demand, as many citizens can make a good living serving as the native silent partner for foreign businesses (required by U.A.E. law) (Walters, Kadragic and Walters 2006). This has created a “debilitating anti-entrepreneurial torpor” which is not easily overcome in a population accustomed to living well without working hard (p. 5).

## **Chapter 1: Advantages of the G.C.C. Governments**

The term “constitutional monarchy” in today’s parlance is generally used to refer to a “democracy decorated by a monarchy” such as in England. And yet, another definition of the term from the historical literature would include monarchies with constitutions and elected parliaments that have “not wholly usurped the monarch’s power to determine the composition of the ministry” (Herb 2005, p. 171). This second definition is more relevant to the oil states of the Persian Gulf. Despite their continued, seemingly anachronistic existence, little explicitly comparative work has been done to study the process by which absolute monarchies become constitutional monarchies, which in turn become fully parliamentary (Herb 2005). Part of the problem, according to Herb, is that most political scientists studying past transitions tend to “assume parliamentarism and identify democratization with the enfranchisement of the male working class” (2005, p. 171). He claims that this approach has hobbled our understanding of the Arab constitutional monarchies, where the process has been the opposite, with voting rights often proceeding full control over the cabinet (2005). Among Middle Eastern scholars, there has been some work recently that argues that monarchism can facilitate democratization in the Arab context (Herb 2005). The theory behind this work is that monarchy has certain features and characteristics which make it uniquely capable of handling the challenges and risks associated with transitions to democracy.

One of the main arguments for optimism is the unique properties of monarchism itself. A number of scholars have posited that monarchies are likely to be the most successful at adapting and reforming without the risk of being overthrown. The corollary to this is that because they face less risk in opening political space, they are more likely to do so. A major reason for the

flexibility and strength of these monarchies is tied to ideology, or more specifically, the lack of ideology. As Barry Rubin notes, the monarchs of the Gulf

never achieved a form of calcified modernization as Arab nationalist dictatorships. The conservative monarchies proved to be more flexible than the ideologically set, Soviet-style mobilization states unwilling to share power with anyone (2006, p. 77).

Rather, because their regime and right to rule are not wedded to a specific ideology, they can adopt selective reforms as they see fit, without challenging the basis of the system. Essentially, they are free to adopt whatever policy they want, whereas Arab republics are often based on one-party rule and nationalist populism.

This flexibility has contributed to regional stability, allowing Gulf regimes to ride out the unrest and upheavals of the greater Middle East. As Shafeeq Ghabra points out,

this is due to respect for social pacts, social rules and family balances. There is an ability to reconcile conflict internally between one faction of a family and another, even in the ruling family itself. This has contributed to a “wisdom of government” which has distinguished Gulf systems from many other Arab revolutionary “republics” (Klein et al. 2000, p.12 ).

There is a certain irony to the fact that successful reforms of the Middle East have been “remarkably rare and highly concentrated in the Persian Gulf monarchies; . . . [the most] politically reactionary of Arab states . . . have now become the most progressive” (Rubin 2006, p. 77). Indeed, many scholars believe that the G.C.C. states may be in a far better position than other Arab regimes to contemplate the kinds of changes democratization would require (Kirby 2000). Specifically, “Arab monarchs have more institutional and symbolic room to improvise reforms than do Arab presidents, who are invariably trapped by ruling parties and their constituencies” (Brumberg 2002, p. 66). By not basing their rule on “the rhetoric of revolution and ill-conceived economic policy” but rather agreed-upon traditions and cultural values, they can contemplate reform without fear of “evisceration or abolition” (Kirby 2000, p. 10).

Monarchies can, and often do, encourage pluralism (*ta'addudiyya*) whereas republics require uniformity to maintain their power (Lucas 2004).

Another reason why monarchs are more willing to use political liberalization as a survival strategy is that they are better able to control the outcome of increased participation. Many have experimented with free elections for parliaments with limited authority. Also importantly, opposition in the Gulf States is largely a loyal one; they do not call for overthrowing the current regime (Crystal 2005). Rather, because these monarchs enjoy substantial legitimacy and for the most part rule quite benevolently, opposition forces have mostly been content to work with the system and within proscribed limits. Therefore, a monarch contemplating such an opening has less to fear from the opposition than a republican leader such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Partial democratization in the G.C.C. is unlikely to lead to an Islamist takeover; in fact, parliamentary life has promoted moderation among Islamists (Herb 2003). Rather, active parliaments and free elections can lay the foundation for a freer and more democratic Gulf region (Herb 2003).

One could make an argument that the reason these regimes are so willing to try limited experiments with democracy is because they are confident that the end result will not be democracy. Fair enough. But as Jill Crystal points out, what rulers intend and what actually happens may be two different things.

Even if rulers are driven by a range of self-interested and non-democratic impulses, their reforms make take on a life of their own and democratic transitions may occur despite rulers' best efforts to contain reform. Indeed, in most cases historically, democracy happened by accident, despite the best efforts of authoritarian rulers to control liberalization. Reforms raise expectations. There is no reason to believe the current democratic opening may not develop an unintended momentum in the Gulf as well with first appointed, then elected officials pushing for more public debate. It is quite possible these openings can have a continuing cascade effect on each other (2005, p.9).

Gulf monarchs enjoy substantial loyalty and legitimacy among their people. For each of the G.C.C. states, historical tradition is a tangible, important source of legitimacy—their monarchies represent a connection to a rapidly-receding past. This is further reinforced by royal benevolence in the spending of oil revenues (Kamrava 1998). This legitimacy among the population (especially among powerful tribes) has been the key to the stability of the region’s kings (Kamrava 1998). And yet, there is growing recognition by Gulf kings that they need to secure legitimacy in a more popularly-based, democratic manner if they are to remain in power (Kumaraswamy 2006).

There has been substantial progress toward greater participation and openness in the Gulf monarchies. According to Owen H. Kirby, “Political change is now occurring in the monarchies,” and in many ways the monarchs themselves are leading the way (2000, p. 11). As Zakaria notes, “on virtually every political issue the monarchs are more liberal than the societies over which they reign” (2004, p. 2). Part of this trend is due to the relative youth of some of the monarchs—Qatar and Bahrain have made some of the most impressive reforms, and they are also ruled by the two youngest monarchs, King Hamad and Emir Hamad, respectively. Both rulers were educated abroad at Sandhurst Military Academy in England, and both have only been in power since the 1990s (see table 1).

**Table 1** G.C.C. Monarchs, Ages, Dates of Ascension, and Education

	Ruler	Age	Ascension	Secondary Education
Bahrain	King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa	38	1999	Sandhurst, England
Kuwait	Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah	78	2006	Local education
Oman	Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said	67	1970	Sandhurst, England
Qatar	Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani	55	1995	Sandhurst, England
S.A.	King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud	83	*2005	Local education
U.A.E.	President Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nuhayyan	59	2004	Local education

\*de facto ruler since 1995

In a speech in Doha at the 7<sup>th</sup> Forum for Democracy, Development, and Free Trade, in 2007,

Emir Hamad of Bahrain said

I have to affirm that the region's march toward democracy, development and the age of free trade, even if it is slow at times, will go on and be completed because it is guided by man's instinctive desire for freedom and his endeavor for progress and advancement. The Arab citizen will not depart from the course taken by all those who achieved freedom.<sup>3</sup>

For his part, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa of Qatar has said,

We have simply got to reform ourselves. We're living in a modern age. People log on to the Internet. They watch cable TV. You cannot isolate yourself in today's world. And our reforms are progressing well. In a tribal country like Qatar, however, it could take time for everyone to accept what we've done. But change, more change, is coming (Miles 2005, p. 75).

The combination of youthful, more liberal rulers and the regional trend towards reform has led some to argue that "it is not unreasonable to consider the hypothesis that recent developments represent a break with the past and signal the emergence of new political tendencies in the Arab world" (Tessler and Gao 2005, p. 93). Still, youth is not everything, and even old dogs can learn new tricks. It was after all 78 year old Emir Sabah of Kuwait who granted women the vote by royal decree. All the G.C.C. monarchs have shown an impressive capacity for adapting to new circumstances. In fact, Kirby argues that it is still too early to write off the "Old Guard" in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., where reform is proceeding more slowly due to local considerations—but it is surely occurring (2000). In 2003, facing pressure at home and abroad, then Crown Prince Abdallah invited a group of reform advocates, including Shias and women, to participate in a "national dialogue." Although their demands represented a challenge to the ruler's absolute power, Abdallah considered and replied to several of their concerns. Another effect of this discussion was the decision to hold municipal elections (the country's first-ever) in 2005 (Nakash 2006).

An important change that has occurred in recent decades is the extent to which democracy is discussed and seen as a desirable goal. The younger generation of rulers in the

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.diwan.gov.qa/english/the\\_amir/the\\_amir\\_speeche\\_73.htm](http://www.diwan.gov.qa/english/the_amir/the_amir_speeche_73.htm)

Gulf States has talked a great deal about how and when their countries might become democratic. The emir of Qatar, for example, has said that his “hope is to see Qatar as a democracy before I leave” (El-Nawawy and Iskandar 2002, p. 82). There seems to be recognition, at least among some of these regimes, that a transition to a more democratic society is inevitable, perhaps even desirable. The foreign minister of Qatar has said regarding reforms that “either you open the door or they break the door” (El-Nawaway and Iskandar 2002, p. 117). Many would argue that these regimes have merely adopted the language of reform to appease international and domestic pressure. And yet, whether they are sincere or not, they have established democracy as the model or goal for their countries. Indeed, across the Middle East, the discourse of democracy has become widespread.

Thanks in part to the rise of new media such as Al-Jazeera, there is active debate within Arab countries about democracy and pluralism. A new paradigm has emerged in which in order for a ruler to be seen as legitimate internationally, he must at least pretend to favor democracy. In many ways, the holding of elections in the Gulf States have been the result of this need by the ruler for international approbation based on domestic support. And whether these kings truly intend it or not, their citizens may begin to take them seriously. They may actually begin to expect and even demand that the rulers live up to their rhetoric. This is a good sign; the more people talk about democracy, the less foreign a concept it will become. Despite arguments that this is merely cynical lip-service designed to appease foreign governments, a case can also be made that even discussing democracy is granting it legitimacy. And if democracy is an ideal form of government, then absolute monarchic rule is inherently flawed. Even if these regimes do not mean the words they say, they may be forced to abide by them.

## Chapter 2: Advantages of G.C.C. Societies

Quite apart from the inherent political features of monarchies, the six G.C.C. states have other unique properties related to their people and culture which may prove advantageous for future transitions to parliamentary democracy. The many commonalities shared by the people of the Gulf are part of the reason why it makes so much sense to treat them as a special subset of the larger Middle East region. They enjoy unique demographic, financial and cultural traits that I will argue, make them better suited to democratization than their Arab neighbors. In short, democracy, if it truly takes root in the Gulf kingdoms, will do so in quite fertile soil.

One important way in which the G.C.C. states are different from other Arab states as well as other Arab monarchies is population size. All six of these monarchies have small populations and relatively high per-capita incomes. Saudi Arabia is certainly the largest, though its population is remarkably small (20 million) given its vast territory. And though its per capita income is lower than the others, its revenues are substantially larger as well. Overall then, these monarchies have been blessed with vast resources and small populations. In fact, the six G.C.C. states have the highest per-capita GDP in the entire Arab world (see table 2)—the U.A.E. is ranked fifth in the world, ahead of even the United States. This is advantageous in a number of ways.

**Table 2** G.C.C. GDP per capita

	GDP per capita
U. A. E.	\$49,700
Qatar	\$29,800
Bahrain	\$25,800
Kuwait	\$23,100
Oman	\$14,400
Saudi Arabia	\$13,600

Source: CIA 2007

First, this ratio of wealth to population generally tends to reduce the risks of reform and make its ill effects more manageable (Policy Brief #8 2002). Second, as Larry Diamond has noted, there is a striking correlation between population size and regime type, such that countries with smaller populations are much more likely to be liberal and democratic (Diamond 2002). This may be a function of the “small is pluralistic” effect, which enables the monarchies to embrace pluralism rather than perceive it as a threat (Lucas 2004, p.111). It is partly because of their intrinsic pluralism that monarchies, Nonneman argues, find it easier than other authoritarian regimes to adopt adaptive strategies (such as selective liberalization) without risking overthrow (2001). Also, due to their higher quality of life, these states attract a large number of foreigners, who comprise nearly a third of the total Gulf population (see table 3). In Qatar this figure is likely as much as 80% (Dresch 2006). This has been called “de facto multiculturalism” (Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006, p. 3).

**Table 3** G.C.C. Population Data for Citizens and Non-Citizens

	Population	Non-citizens	Percent (%) of Population Non- Citizen
U. A. E.	4,444,011	*2,738,000	62
Qatar	907,229	**725,783	80
Bahrain	708,573	235,000	33
Kuwait	2,505,559	1,291,354	52
Oman	3,204,897	577,293	18
Saudi Arabia	27,601,038	5,576,076	20

Source: CIA 2007

\* Human Rights Watch 2007

\*\* Estimated based on given percentage

Third, a large pie divided fewer ways means that the government can use its oil money to subsidize a very comfortable lifestyle for its citizens, who are then less likely to be opposed to the regime and its policies. By directly providing important services such as education, healthcare, and social welfare the state creates a citizenry both dependent upon it and loyal to it (Sarsar 2000). And these services are generally only available to citizens, thus excluding huge

numbers of resident foreign workers, making the population functionally even smaller. All of this is not to say that these countries must or necessarily will become democratic because of their demographic and financial positions—rather, it represents a distinct advantage for the G.C.C. when and if they do progress toward democracy.

Given the vast oil wealth and royal control over revenues, it is unsurprising that corruption would be an issue for the Gulf States. Indeed, corruption is an extremely pervasive phenomenon across the entire developing world, and the Middle East is no exception. What might be somewhat surprising is that it is the rich oil kingdoms which represent the least corrupt of all the Arab states.

**Table 4** G.C.C. Corruption Perceptions Index Score and Regional Ranking (2003-2006)  
Corruption Perceptions Index  
(CPI) Score and Regional  
Ranking

	2003 Score	2003 Rank	2004 Score	2004 Rank	2005 Score	2005 Rank	2006 Score	2006 Rank
U. A. E.	5.2	5	6.1	2	6.2	2	6.2	1
Qatar	5.6	3	5.2	5	5.9	3	6	2
Bahrain	6.1	2	5.8	3	5.8	4	5.7	3
Kuwait	5.3	4	4.6	7	4.7	7	4.8	6
Oman	6.3	1	6.1	1	6.3	1	5.4	4
Saudi Arabia	4.5	8	3.4	8	3.4	8	3.3	8

Source: Transparency International 2003-2006

As table 4 shows, the six G.C.C. states are consistently ranked among the least corrupt in the Arab world. Oman, in particular, stands out as the least corrupt Arab state for several years running. Transparency International’s highly respected Corruption Perceptions Index ranks countries from 1.0 to 10.0, with 10.0 being the least corrupt and 1.0 being the most. For a sense of perspective, consider the U.S.’s score for 2006, 7.5, which ranks 18<sup>th</sup> in the world. The

U.A.E. fares only slightly worse at 31<sup>st</sup> in the world, still well above average. The figures for 2005 show that as in 2006, the U.A.E., Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman held the top four spots regionally. This means that these four countries are all perceived as being less corrupt than, for example, Egypt or even South Korea. This seems to show that a country can be rich and ruled by a monarch and still benefit from good governance and lower levels of corruption. While the picture is less rosy for Kuwait and even more so for Saudi Arabia, they are still near the top of the list regionally. Kuwait, at a respectable 6<sup>th</sup> among Arab states, trails only Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia at 8<sup>th</sup> is still ahead of Morocco, Algeria, Syria and Yemen. The point to be taken from these statistics is that over all, the six G.C.C. states are among the least corrupt in the Arab world, despite having vast mineral wealth and monarchs with absolute power. If corruption is a signal that a state is not functionally adequately, then the relatively low levels of corruption in the G.C.C. suggest that a fairly capable state apparatus is doing a better than average job of managing the country. This bodes well for the future prosperity and stability of these regimes.

Much ink has been spilled on the relationship between Islam and democracy. Specifically, some scholars have argued that the two are fundamentally incompatible. In a series of public opinion studies conducted in the Arab world in recent years, one of the central findings has been the remarkably high degree of popular support for democracy (Tessler and Gao 2005). This support is strong in both absolute terms and relative to other regions of the world. In fact, large majorities in Arab countries, including supporters of political Islam, prefer democratic a democratic system for their countries (Tessler and Gao 2005). In assessing the prospects for democratization in Arab states, it is important to consider to what extent the public desires and supports such change.

And to the extent that Islam influences Arab opinions, the evidence is that it is often supportive toward democracy. As Abdelwahab El-Affendi points out, “Muslim communities have responded positively both to democracy and to most aspects of liberalism. Limits on state authority, the separation of powers, and constitutionalism in general, have traditionally found strong support in Muslim circles” (2003, p. 36). Diamond agrees, and notes that “the growing body of public opinion survey evidence shows that Muslims desire democracy pretty much to the same degree that people of other faiths do, particularly when we control for education and income” (Diamond 2004, p. 1). Furthermore, Tessler’s surveys have shown little evidence for a relationship between religious attachment and support for democracy (Diamond 2004).

Although the vast majority of Muslims possess favorable attitudes toward democracy, this is not without reservations. Especially in the Gulf monarchies, people often take a long view on potential reforms. Many believe that the best way to proceed is slowly and cautiously—the chaos and instability of rapid political change concerns many citizens. Rather, the current attitude in the Gulf States favors slow and incremental change to minimize this risk of chaos. They believe that a slower process would provide an opportunity to “reduce resistance to democratic ideals, eventually win over skeptics, and prevent a serious backlash that could stifle future progress” (Ben-Meir 2006, p. 329). In many ways, this cautious approach may make the reforms needed for democratization more palatable to rulers and ruled alike. In so far as popular support helps in the transition to democracy, “the Arab world is ripe for change” (Tessler and Gao 2005, p. 93).

In contrast to the idea that democracy is somehow fundamentally alien or foreign to Arab Muslims, a more careful study of Islamic culture and history reveals traditions which are highly democratic. In particular, the tradition of consultation, or *shura*, is frequently cited by Muslim

liberals as proof of Islam's democratic nature. The Koran explicitly recommends that the ruler should consult with the people, lest his rule be characterized as *istibdad*, or despotism (Lewis 2005). Who it is he should consult varies, but it generally includes the powerful and influential members of society, such as clergy, landowners, and members of the elite. While this is certainly not the equivalent of one man, one vote, it does point to the fact that Islam and Islamic tradition call for a government to be in some manner accountable to the people.

Bernard Lewis explains that the Islamic ideal of governance calls for a new leader to be “chosen,” which does not exactly mean “elected.” “Rather, it refers to a small group of suitable, competent people choosing the ruler's successor. In principle, hereditary succession is rejected by the juristic tradition” (Lewis 2005). Despite this, in the G.C.C. monarchies, succession is nearly always determined to a great extent by heredity. But as Lewis points out,

the element of consent is still important. In theory, at times even in practice, the ruler's power—both gaining it and maintaining it—depends on the consent of the ruled. The basis of the ruler's authority is described in the classical texts by the Arabic world *bay'a*, a term usually translated as ‘homage,’ . . . but a more accurate translation would be ‘deal,’ in other words, a contract between the ruler and the ruled in which both have obligations (2005, p. 42).

It is this interpretation of *shura* which allows many fundamentalists to accept the idea that Islam is not opposed to democracy (Filali-Ansary 2003). The idea that Islam favors a consensual relationship between rulers and ruled is not a new one, but it is being used in a new way to promote better governance in the Islamic world.

In the Gulf States, the tradition of consultation is a fundamental part of the political bargain between the regime and the people. In Kuwait, for example, the practice of *diwaniyya*—a regular gathering of men who meet socially in each others' homes to discuss public issues—is tolerated if not encouraged by the regime (Nonneman 2001). It is this tradition of consultation that is in evidence in each country's Parliament, sometimes referred to as a *Majils* (advisory

council), or even in Saudi Arabia, as *Shura*. It has become an accepted principle in recent years that while the king is largely free of legal or constitutional checks on his power, he must (at least appear to) respect the opinion and will of the appointed and popularly-elected members of Parliament.

The tradition of consultation has other advantages for Gulf societies as well. They frequently provide an important forum for discussion and a mechanism for popular input into the regime's decision-making process.

Where these institutions are more than window dressing, such as in Kuwait, they demonstrate that the regime is accessible to the people and reduce the sense of political alienation created by the ruling family's domination of politics. Even where they are weak, they suggest that the ruling families are willing to go outside their own ranks when weighing decisions (Byman and Green 1999, p. 78).

Over the last few decades, these parliaments have generally been expanded, and more members are now elected than before. "The parliaments of the Arab monarchies are not mere facades" (Herb 2003, p. 189). Still, it would be incorrect to suggest that the advisory councils of the Gulf States represent a major check on royal power. They are, however, growing in relevance and influence, albeit slowly, and if the trend continues they are likely to become increasingly powerful.

Another advantage for the Gulf States is that through formal and informal consultation mechanisms and forums, they are able to put themselves in closer contact with the needs and feelings of their citizens.

To varying degrees, all Gulf ruling families and elites offer access to their citizens by holding regular, but informal meetings wherein citizens can air their complaints, petition for redress of grievances, or otherwise try to influence local and national politics. . . . By attending local gatherings and simply keeping their doors open, ruling families generally have access to public opinion (Byman and Green 1999, p. 79).

This serves two important purposes. It allows the regime to anticipate public reaction to various policies, and also helps them monitor and address levels of opposition and discontent before they get out of hand.

The local gatherings, informal talks, and weak legislatures bolster regime claims that they respect, and listen to, the voices of the citizenry. Indeed, the one-to-one contact with the ruling families generates a sense of common identity between the rulers and the ruled (Byman and Green 1999, p. 79).

Despite the autocratic nature of their regimes, Gulf monarchs primarily rule with strong popular support and loyalty. It is imperative to their legitimacy and the political bargain they have established that people feel connected to country and king. “Alienation, both moral and political, is reduced by the Gulf leaders’ public identification with the *zeitgeist*” (Byman and Green 1999, p. 77). Their relatively benevolent nature and willingness to keep channels open for their citizens set them apart from the Arab republican regimes of the region.

In his comparative study of monarchies from the Middle East and Europe, Herb found that monarchies which made a peaceful transition to parliamentarism were overwhelmingly associated with free and fair elections. In other monarchies, which failed to make the transition (many of whom saw their monarchs toppled), the political system was characterized by substantial government manipulation of elections which undermined public confidence in the legitimacy of the entire system (Herb 2005). What can this correlation tell us about the Persian Gulf monarchies?

If democratic values and principles are to take root in the Gulf region, they will need to be understood and embraced by the people. Luckily, Gulf citizens are increasingly experiencing one of democracy’s most important features: relatively free and fair elections. And though certain problems exist with regard to total enfranchisement, the Gulf monarchies can claim to have some of the most transparent and legitimate elections in the Middle East.

Elections in the G.C.C. are often marred by restrictions on campaigning and organization, voter disenfranchisement, and problems of under-representation. However, “the absence of direct government manipulation of elections in the Arab monarchies . . . offers a good deal of encouragement, and there can be little hope for the eventual achievement of parliamentarism if this tradition is not maintained” (Herb 2005, p. 187). Whereas elections in other Arab states are often of questionable fairness (e.g. Egypt) or non-existent (e.g. Syria), Gulf elections, when they occur, tend to be seen as open and at least procedurally fair (Herb 2005).

Some might argue that the reason why Gulf monarchs do not interfere in elections is because they do not feel threatened by their own parliaments, no matter what its composition. This may be true. But the inherent value in elections lies in more than simply filling seats in a parliament. As Marsha Pripstein Posusney argues, holding elections

foregrounds the principle that citizens have a right to self-selected political representation. Polls that are carefully controlled by governments can still provide a forum for diverse segments of society to publicly debate their collective future, as well as new opportunities for political mobilization. In addition, even legislatures with limited power often become the focus of press attention, so an opposition presence in parliament can provide a means for critics of the ruling regimes to promote their arguments via the official media (2005, p. 92).

The end result of elections, even to a parliament of limited authority, is that they expand the arena of public debate, accustom people to democratic principles, and set a precedent for the legitimate basis of governance. All of which is not to say that elections create democracy. Rather, than elections can help to improve the prospects for further democratization.

Although some would scoff at the toothlessness of Gulf parliaments, they are not merely facades (Herb 2005). In fact there is quite a range, from Saudi Arabia’s entirely-appointed Consultative Council to Kuwait’s entirely-elected Parliament. In many ways, Kuwait’s parliament has been a model for the Gulf; it is the most contentious and active of all the G.C.C.

councils, and it has finally given women the franchise and allowed them to run for office. It has substantial power vis-à-vis the executive, exercising a strong negative constraint over the government and its composition. “Since 1992, the Kuwaiti parliament has used its powers to force ministers from office and to influence the choice of new ministers” (Herb 2005, 176). In fact, the Kuwaiti parliament did just that in March of this year, when Health Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah al-Sabah, a member of the royal family, was forced to quit following accusations of mismanagement and incompetence (BBC News 3/4/2007). The parliament has also forced through election reform designed to curb the government’s ability to buy votes. As Herb puts it, “although there is nothing inevitable about further progress toward parliamentarism in Kuwait, it is perhaps here, among the Arab monarchies, where such progress would be least surprising” (Herb 2005, p. 189).

Every developing country at some point finds itself grappling with how to adjust to the unsettling changes associated with modernization. No other region, however, has experienced the kind of transformation the Gulf monarchies have undergone. Not so long ago these states were economic backwaters: the discovery of oil led to the development of a modern state. Today the region enjoys some of the highest standards of living in the Middle East. Literacy rates have skyrocketed in a short time, and a modern infrastructure of roads, airports, cell phones and internet access has grown up seemingly overnight (Willoughby 2006). And despite undergoing such massive change in a short amount of time, these regimes have been among the most stable of all the Arab States.

The transformation from desert nomadic tribes to modern urbanites has certainly not been without its strains. “The spread of new ideas, new forms of communication, urbanization, literacy, and other sources of change disrupted the rhythms of daily life and social hierarchies”

(Byman and Green 1999, pp. 22-3). All of the Gulf monarchies tread a cautious path on issues of social change, trying not to offend the sensibilities of its more traditional citizens. Social issues are often bitterly contested, and have provoked bitter opposition among the population. When King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced that he was in favor of allowing women to drive, it was the clergy and traditionalists who forced him to abandon the idea. And yet, if there is an identifiable trend among the region's rulers and people, it is generally the opposite: a cautious but pronounced embrace of all the opportunities the modern world has to offer. The youngest generations of the Gulf are now much more globally aware and connected than their parents and grandparents. "They are already well able to decipher political realities and are sophisticated at spotting propaganda. Unlike their parents, they have an internationalist outlook and a rights-based mentality" (Miles 2005, p. 386).

One major aspect of this modernization has been the proliferation of information sources, a substantial opening to the world that has transformed many areas into cosmopolitan and pluralistic urban centers. The spread of internet cafes and satellite television has made it nearly impossible for regimes to censor as they once did. Indeed, most traditional forms of censorship are being gradually abandoned. In their wake has sprung a new generation of Arab teenagers who are technologically savvy and "they are fast learning to expect the same opportunities has their Western friends, with whom they keep in touch via email and the Internet" (Miles 2005, p. 386). Most of the recent progress in the Middle East in the protection of certain fundamental freedoms has occurred in areas which have seen increased information flows; in many ways, satellite television is a force for protecting human rights (Windsor, Gersham, and Kramer 2006).

Setting aside the particulars of modernization theory, which has its flaws and does not transfer very well to rentier states, the changes occurring in the Gulf do suggest a trend toward

the pluralism and openness that democracy requires. Indeed, the current generation of Arab youth in the Gulf States is among the most modern and free in the Arab world. They will come of age with an understanding of all the variety the world has to offer, socially, politically, and economically. It will likely become increasingly difficult for the monarchs of the region to postpone democratic reforms indefinitely. The burgeoning youth population will be demanding better economic results, better governance, and better opportunities. They will be less likely to see the welfare state as royal benevolence and more likely to see it as a fundamental right. The regimes will have to work hard to satisfy the expectations of what will before long be an overwhelming majority of their populations.

### **Chapter 3: Domestic Pressure for Reform**

In addition to the many positive aspects of Gulf monarchies which make them more hospitable to democratic reforms, there are also certain negative conditions which will affect their prospects for democracy. Gone are the days when G.C.C. monarchs could depend upon an uneducated, uninterested, and isolated population for acquiescence to their absolute rule. The rapid modernization of Gulf societies has meant that more than ever before, these regimes are facing increasing pressure from their people to be more accountable and more democratic. Rentier theory predicts that as long as the oil money keeps flowing, people will gladly sign over their destiny to their king. And yet, over the last decade, despite rising oil prices, Gulf citizens have become increasingly assertive and discontented with their governments. There is reason to believe that if and when democratization begins to take place in earnest, it will be because the Gulf people have convinced their kings that it is in their kings' interest to open participation and share the burden of governance. And the pressure these regimes will face is very likely to increase in the coming years.

Sclerotic regimes that cannot generate jobs and hope at a faster rate than the population is growing cannot persist indefinitely. And the market-oriented reforms necessary to unleash economic growth are unlikely to occur without democratic change, because unless governments have much greater political legitimacy, they will not have the nerve, and the autonomy from the decades-long accumulation of vested interests, to take bold and difficult steps. There is a demographic time bomb ticking in the Middle East, and it is going to sweep away a lot of Western-leaning regimes sooner or later unless real reform gets going (Diamond 2004, p. 3).

If one of the advantages enjoyed by the Gulf States is their vast oil wealth and small populations, then anything which threatens that balance is cause for concern. One possibility would be a downward slide in oil prices, leaving these countries with a much smaller pie to share among the same number of people. This seems far less likely than a situation in which oil prices

remain roughly the same but the number of people increases. Indeed, as in most of the developing world, the Gulf emirates have extremely high birth rates (see table 5). The higher the birth rate, the less money, benefits, and jobs there will be to go around. Another danger, especially acute in Saudi Arabia, is that those frustrated by the lack of jobs and low living standards will be more receptive to radical Islamist groups and terrorism (Fox, Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006).

**Table 5** G.C.C. Populations Growth, Birth, and Death Rates

	<b>Pop. Growth Rate</b>	<b>Birth Rate<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Death Rate<sup>2</sup></b>
U.A.E	3.997%	16.09	2.16
Kuwait	3.561%	21.95	2.39
Oman	3.234%	35.76	3.78
Qatar	2.386%	15.56	4.82
Saudi Arabia	2.060%	29.10	2.55
Bahrain	1.392%	17.53	4.21

Source: CIA 2007 (est.)

<sup>1</sup> births/1,000 population

<sup>2</sup> deaths/1,000 population

Compare these numbers with the birth rates for other countries. In the U.S., a modern Western nation, the birth rate is a mere .894%. But even in other developing countries, the birth rates are lower than the G.C.C.. India, for example, is only 1.606%, whereas Egypt is only 1.721%.

Therefore, we can expect the population of these small kingdoms to grow at a faster rate than even many developing countries. It is important to note that the G.C.C. countries have some of the lowest death rates in the entire world—lower by far than even the Western industrialized nations. The U.A.E. in particular, has the lowest death rate in the world. Canada, for example, that bastion of low violence and universal healthcare, has a death rate of 7.86, and the ice-covered country of Greenland has a rate of 7.93. It is sufficient for now to note that the populations of the G.C.C. states will continue to rise fairly rapidly for the foreseeable future

Across the world, there are certain demographic patterns associated with developing societies, and others associated with developed ones. Generally speaking, modern Western nations tend to have older populations, while developing third-world countries tend to have younger populations. Each has its own problems: rich Western nations must support ever larger numbers of retirees, straining their welfare systems. In developing countries, the problem is how to provide enough jobs and opportunity for the large numbers of young (especially male) citizens. The six G.C.C. states all have very young populations (see table 6) and high growth rates, making it ever more difficult to accommodate the need for employment and security of each new generation.

**Table 6** G.C.C. Population Age Distribution

	<b>Age Distribution (%)</b>		
	0-15 yrs.	15-64 yrs.	over 65 yrs.
U.A.E.	20.6	78.5	0.9
Saudi Arabia	38.2	59.4	2.4
Qatar	23.1	72.9	4.0
Oman	42.7	54.6	2.7
Kuwait	26.7	70.5	2.8
Bahrain	26.9	69.5	3.7

Source: CIA 2007

These societies are heavily weighted toward the younger age groups; in Saudi Arabia and Oman, children 15 and under represent roughly 40% of the entire population. Indeed, “seventy percent of the people in the Gulf are under the age of 25. Sixty percent are under the age of 21. About 50 percent are under the age of 15. That says a lot about the coming of a new generation” (Klein et al. 2000, p. 11). All of these children (the men, specifically) will be expecting jobs when they graduate. The small numbers of those over age 65 is also telling; consider that same number in the U.S., which is 12.6 percent. Given the low death rates and fairly high life expectancy (ranging from 73 to 77, compared with 78 for the U.S.), it is clear that it is not that these Gulf

kingdoms have no older people. Rather, they represent a much smaller percentage of the total population because there are so many young people. The median age of the population also shows the preponderance of youth in these states. In the U.S., the median age is 36.6 years old. But in the six G.C.C. countries, the number is lower (see table 7).

**Table 7** G.C.C. Population Median Age

	<b>Median Age</b>		
	Total	Male	Female
Oman	18.9	21.5	16.5
Kuwait	26.0	27.9	22.4
Bahrain	29.7	32.7	26.1
Qatar	31.9	37.3	23.1
UAE	30.1	32.0	24.5
Saudi Arabia	21.4	22.9	19.6

Source: CIA 2007

And as table 8 shows, the demographics are heavily weighted towards young men:

**Table 8** G.C.C. Sex Ratio by Age Distribution

	<b>Sex Ratios (male/female)</b>				Total
	at birth	under 15	15-64	over 65	
Saudi Arabia	1.05	1.040	1.314	1.110	1.196
U.A.E.	1.05	1.047	2.743	1.849	2.190
Qatar	1.05	1.040	2.211	2.887	1.852
Oman	1.05	1.041	1.419	1.260	1.238
Kuwait	1.04	1.037	1.771	1.691	1.526
Bahrain	1.03	1.021	1.372	1.084	1.255

Source: CIA 2007

Young men want good jobs and the ability to start and support a family. Unemployment, therefore, is a substantial source of discontent. Whereas unemployment rates are quite low in Kuwait, the U.A.E. and Qatar (2.2%, 2.4%, and 3.2 %, respectively), they are much higher in Saudi Arabia (13%), Bahrain (15%), and Oman (15%) (CIA 2007).<sup>4</sup> “High unemployment, particularly among young university graduates, is considered one of the most dangerous socio-

<sup>4</sup> Estimates are based on the following years: UAE (2001), Kuwait (2004), Qatar (2006), SA (2004), Bahrain (2005), Oman (2004)

political phenomena in any given regime, especially autocratic regimes” (Winckler 2002, p. 635).

In the 1990s in response to high unemployment and falling oil prices, the Gulf governments were forced to adopt certain privatization measures (Winckler 2002, p. 635). The high unemployment rates for citizens are not due entirely to an actual shortage of jobs; rather, Gulf nationals prefer lucrative public sector jobs, and refuse to take lower-paid private sector jobs (Klein et al. 2000). This has meant that the oil kingdoms have had to import cheap labor from south-east Asia to do the jobs its own citizens would not. So long as oil revenues were high and populations small, Gulf governments were able to provide jobs for most of their citizens. This balance is threatened by the increasing size of Gulf populations. The government cannot afford to give generous public sector jobs to all citizens indefinitely. Bahrain, for example, will need to find jobs for 100,000 new workers in the next decade, which will be double its current labor force (Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006). Ultimately, some of the workforce must be shifted to the private sector, which currently favors expatriate workers who are paid far less than nationals. This withdrawal of government benefits would represent a fundamental change in the political bargain of “no taxation, no representation” (Winckler 2002, p. 636). Essentially, the current system of government subsidizing the wealth and lifestyles of nationals is untenable. “The large youth populations of the Gulf expect high-paying, undemanding government jobs while regimes have fewer resources with which to satisfy them” (Byman and Green 1999, p. xiv). And it is unclear how the Gulf States will “provide schooling, medicine, employment and growth in a society that is experiencing such a high rate of population growth” (Klein et al. 2000, p. 11).

What will Gulf governments need to do in the future to address this demographic reality? Some have already begun the task of shifting nationals to the private sector. To accomplish this, they have provided incentives for hiring nationals and attempted to increase the cost of foreign labor (through visa fees, e.g.) (Klein et al. 2000). Abdelali Jbili argues that they should also reduce the wage differential between public and private sectors, perhaps by extending public sector benefits to private sector national workers. He also claims that the educational system in the G.C.C. states must be reformed to better train and prepare college graduates for the realities of the private sector economy. Finally, he suggests reducing government hiring while increasing unemployment benefits (presumably to help cushion the transition for those affected workers) (Klein et al. 2000).

In the coming decades, Gulf governments will be faced with increasing demands for services and employment that they cannot meet. The rise in oil prices in recent years has bought the regimes some time to work out a long-term solution. Reform, on the order of increased privatization, greater openness to foreign investment, and better regulation of the labor market, will become necessary (Klein et al. 2000). As the government withdraws from its dominance of the economy, it will create greater space for entrepreneurship and innovation. This economic opening will expose Gulf residents to global forces and influences, force them to compete in the world market, and ultimately result in more private initiative and new sources of wealth for the population. The result of all this may well be the thriving, independent middle-class which has historically been the basis for vibrant civic life and a force for democracy (Karatnycky 2002).

All of this will not be without some discomfort. Citizens of the G.C.C. states are accustomed to a high standard of living with minimal effort or achievement. As Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa put it,

“Gulf nationals have variously developed quite luxurious lifestyles while producing few goods exportable to other regions of the world except for petroleum products” (2006, p. 40). Government largesse and domination of the economy has produced a system that reinforces idleness and suppresses initiative (Karatnycky 2002). A good gauge of the high quality of life enjoyed by Gulf citizens is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI). The six G.C.C. states have the nearly the highest scores in the Arab world (see table 9).

**Table 9** Arab States Human Development Index Scores and Rankings (2004)

	World Rank	Regional Rank	HDI Value	HDI Level
<b>Kuwait</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.871</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.859</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Qatar</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0.844</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>U.A.E.</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0.839</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Oman</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0.810</b>	<b>Medium</b>
Libya	64	6	0.798	Medium
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0.777</b>	<b>Medium</b>
Lebanon	78	8	0.774	Medium
Jordan	86	9	0.760	Medium
Tunisia	87	10	0.760	Medium
Iran	96	11	0.746	Medium
Pal. Territory	100	12	0.736	Medium
Algeria	102	13	0.728	Medium
Syria	107	14	0.716	Medium
Egypt	111	15	0.702	Medium
Morocco	123	16	0.640	Medium
Yemen	150	17	0.492	Low

Source: UNDP 2006 (Iraq excluded due to having no HDI value)

\*2006 Report contains Human Development Index (HDI) values for 2004

Thanks in large part to state-funded social services, such as education and healthcare, Gulf residents live higher quality lives than most of their Arab brethren. And they have done so without having to exert much effort. The challenge to Gulf regimes is to transition their population from dependency to productivity while maintaining political stability. It’s a tall order. While asking for sacrifices and adjustments from their citizens, these regimes may be

forced to offer something in return. And such concessions may well include greater participation in governance and better protection of individual rights.

For those who subscribe to modernization theory, rising education levels are a necessary part of a broader social process which leads to democracy. Education is certainly important: an articulate and informed public is better able to organize and communicate with each other and the regime, and thus better equipped to promote democratic reforms. Education is also the key to job growth and economic success. And yet, although literacy rates have risen across the Arab world, schools are not necessarily preparing students to succeed in the new global economy (Haass 2003). In many Arab countries, schooling is predominantly rote memorization and reinforces certain prejudices and biases against women and minorities (Rubin 2006).

If education is to play its part in bringing about a better informed and more politically active populace, and if Arab citizens are to prosper in this new century, then the educational system itself must be reformed. Some of Gulf States have made tremendous progress in improving the quality of learning available to their people. Qatar has gone perhaps the farthest in modernizing education; the emir and his wife have made it a national priority and spent billions on the project. They have worked to bring to Qatar local branches of American universities, including Cornell University, Virginia University, Carnegie Mellon, Texas A&M (among others), as well as a joint Rand Corporation-Qatari think tank (Miles 2005). Many of these branches are located in Qatar's "Education City," a 2,500 acre development which integrates all levels of education and first-rate resources for researchers, creating a kind of hub for new knowledge. Tuition at these elite American schools is paid for by the Qatari government, and having these local branches helps students avoid the need to study abroad to receive a high-quality education.

Because it is difficult for Qatari women to study abroad on their own, the presence of American schools and the improvements in the local universities have made it possible for women to enjoy the same access to first-rate education that males receive. It is in part due to this benefit that women make up the majority of university students in Qatar, although they also outnumber males in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as well (see table 10) (Pollock 2007). “Literacy gaps between men and women in the Gulf States are moderate or even non-existent—a condition that might provide a substantial advantage for possible future democratization” (Fish 2002, p. 34).

**Table 10** Arab States Female University Enrollment (%) (2005)  
Female University Enrollment, 2005

<b>Kuwait</b>	70	%
<b>Qatar</b>	68	%
<b>Bahrain</b>	68	%
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	58	%
Tunisia	57	%
Algeria	57	%
Lebanon	53	%
<b>Oman</b>	51	%
Jordan	50	%
Palestinian Territories	50	%
Morocco	45	%
Iraq	36	%
Yemen	26	%

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

Progress is being made in the other G.C.C. States as well. Bahrain has created a new polytechnic school and is working to improve the level of vocational training to prepare workers for the private sector. Oman has sought to position itself as the destination of choice for information technology study, and has launched a new IT school and IT research and business center. Kuwait has partnered with UNESCO to revamp its secondary school system. It seems that most of these governments appreciate the need to improve their education systems so that

they meet the needs of their modernizing population. If they are able to do so, the result will be a better informed and educated populace able to compete in the world and potentially be a force for change in their countries.

There are dangers ahead for regimes that fail to solve the education problem. When students must leave their country to get a quality education, they are exposed to a wide variety of new influences. And while sending students abroad may be a short cut for a country with inadequate educational opportunities, there is perhaps another substantial danger. Students who return from abroad “often bring back destabilizing political ideas—expectations for liberalism, egalitarianism, or government transparency—that can threaten regime legitimacy” (Byman and Green 1999, pp. 18-19). Once exposed to a wider, freer world, many students may expect the same back at home—an expectation that Gulf regimes will have to confront.

The rentier thesis predicts that citizens of oil monarchies will be politically disengaged and complacent so long as the government continues to subsidize their high standard of living. The Gulf States, however, are not without opposition and discontent. Even people who are generally supportive of their government have an interest in good governance and policy. It is hard to imagine why a Gulf citizen should care any less about the quality of his or her government than a citizen of any other country. To be fair, the levels of anger and frustration in the oil states have most likely been somewhat muted by the benefits of oil wealth. But it would be a mistake to assume that the people of the Persian Gulf do not have grievances and concerns. There is reason to believe that addressing the discontent in their countries may prove to be a major challenge for the G.C.C..

What are the sources of discontent in the petro-monarchies? Some are demographic, and include issues such as unemployment and the large numbers of foreign workers. Others are

economic, and are concerned with economic growth and opportunity. Social issues continue to be a source of discontent, with some impatient at the slow pace of change, and others outraged at the dramatic changes that have transpired. Finally, a growing number of complaints relate to political rights and governance. Across the board, people are pressing their governments to be more transparent and inclusive. In spite of the predictions of rentier theory, there is substantial dissatisfaction among Gulf citizens on a variety of topics. For example, the 2003 Kuwaiti elections and the establishment of nominated legislative bodies in Saudi Arabia were both the direct result of pressures from below (Kumaraswamy 2006). While this pressure may not result in the types of violence that would lead to a regime being overthrown, discontent may pose a growing threat to the stability and continued prosperity of the G.C.C. states unless the rulers can find a way to address their citizens' concerns.

The demographic issue in particular is likely to be a troublesome one for the region. Even if oil prices remain high, the burgeoning youth population will strain the resources of even the richest states. The youth are dependent on the government for jobs, education, healthcare, and prosperity. A government which fails to meet these expectations will face substantial resentment. The younger generation no longer sees such benefits as gifts from the regime, but as "virtual birthrights" (Byman and Green 1999, p. 14). The discontent arising from a reduction in their standard of living would be even worse if they simultaneously saw royals continuing to live lives of opulence and privilege, which they are extremely likely to do (Byman and Green 1999, p. 15). Gulf citizens have tolerated the lavish lifestyles of their rulers as long as they were satisfied with their own living standards. If the people's situation is to decline (as it likely must), then they may prove profoundly less tolerant of the prerogatives of their monarchs. Saudi Arabian royals, in particular, are notorious for their conspicuous consumption. Most of Saudi

Arabia's perhaps 20,000 royals receive a stipend ranging from thousands to millions of dollars each month. Royal family members are also increasingly dominant in lucrative government contracts and businesses—a situation that has not gone unnoticed by less well-connected and wealthy businessmen in the kingdom (Byman and Green 1999, p. 16).

Another issue which has been a source of discontent is the exclusion of Shia groups in several countries. Shia unrest has been the most violent in Bahrain, where despite being a majority of the population (70%), they have been excluded from power and underrepresented politically. In response to intense pressure, including a domestic “uprising” that lasted through most of the 1990s, Bahrain has undertaken a series of reforms. When the new king ascended in 1999, he granted amnesty to political prisoners, abolished state security courts, and allowed greater freedom of assembly—all of which culminated in a new National Charter approved by 98% of Bahraini voters in 2001 (Byman and Green 1999). In short, the King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, a younger and more progressive ruler than his father, has attempted to address the country's economic and social unrest by increasing political participation. While the reforms have not been without problems (such as some Shia groups boycotting elections), this strategy seems to be a fairly successful one. It has a number of implications: a) when faced with mounting discontent, the government has responded positively by granting greater rights and freedoms, b) it demonstrates an unmistakable trend toward greater democracy, and c) such a strategy may be successful in other countries. That the king considers such a response a good option in the face of opposition bodes well for future reforms.

## Chapter 4: Economic Pressures for Reform

The demographic challenges that the G.C.C. monarchies will face in the coming years make it essential that economic growth and health be maximized. In general, oil-based economies suffer from a lack of privatization, diversification, foreign investment, and economic openness; this is true of the Gulf monarchies to greater and lesser degrees. All of these problems must be addressed if Gulf economies are to be capable of sustaining their rapidly increasing populations. Fortunately, some progress has already been made. And while market economies are most closely associated with democracy as a regime type, the relationship is not entirely determinative. Rather, certain types of economic features are more conducive to the opportunities and challenges presented by democratization. “To the extent that economic variables make certain kinds of regime outcomes more likely, the prospects for the Gulf are relatively positive” (Crystal 2005, p. 6).

There are some who would argue that because oil prices seem likely to remain high for the foreseeable future, there is little motivation for the Gulf regimes to reform economically. Thomas Friedman has said, “Give me \$10-a-barrel oil, and I will give you political and economic reform from Moscow to Riyadh to Iran” (Friedman 2006, *World is Flat*, p. 564). And in the past, it is true, lower oil prices (as in the 1990s) did seem to pressure these regimes to pursue at least economic, if not political reforms (Winckler 2002). But there is some reason to believe that the Gulf monarchs have learned their lesson and despite the current glut of petroleum wealth, they have begun planning for a future without oil (Ford 2006). The inescapable truth for all six of the G.C.C. monarchies is that their oil supplies will not last forever. Some, like Bahrain, have essentially already run out (only an estimated 35,000 barrel

per day). What's more, future revenues are unlikely to be able to rise fast enough to keep up with the mounting socio-economic pressures.

Fortunately, the monarchs of the Gulf States are aware of this eventuality and seem to be making attempts to develop strategies to increase investment and growth. In order to succeed, these plans must include strengthening their private sectors so that so that they can provide jobs for the burgeoning population and tax revenues to the central governments. And tax revenues, as opposed to oil revenues, will likely require greater government accountability, a good omen for further reform.

When a country bases its economy on a single source of revenue, such as oil, it generally fails to develop any other effective and productive sectors. Sometimes referred to as Dutch Elm Disease, such a condition makes any economic system structurally weak and vulnerable to market fluctuations (Russell 2003). In the Gulf kingdoms, a lack of a diversified economy has also meant that most jobs were either provided by the state or directly engaged in processing and exporting the oil. But oil-related jobs are generally taken by foreigners—either because they are too menial for locals or because they are too sophisticated and require foreign management. An unbalanced economy cannot provide the same benefits a fully diversified one can—benefits that will become increasingly necessary in the Gulf region.

In order to diversify, countries must be willing to invest in building up new industries (including infrastructure and worker training). Without such a base for development, the long-term forecast for these regimes is not promising. Mustapha Nabli, the World Bank's chief economist for the Middle East and North Africa, has argued that part of the problem is that current high overall levels of economic growth have masked the instability of the system. This means that their growth is essentially false, ““Because you have an increase in public

expenditures which is multiplying and creating jobs but this cannot sustain itself as such” (Ford 2006, p. 48).

Some progress is already being made. U.A.E. seems to be leading the way “among the sister Gulf polities in economic diversifying beyond petroleum extraction” (Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006, p. 7). The Emirates have successfully marketed themselves (particularly Abu Dhabi and Dubai) as a modern, cosmopolitan business center connected to the global network. In Dubai, for example, “the focus has been on the Internet and media cities, large real estate and tourism development schemes, shopping festivals, Emirates Airline, and the industrial and transshipment facilities in Jebel Ali and Port Rashid.” As Kirby puts it, “the emirates are leading the Gulf Arabs in the race to build a viable economic basis for the day when the bottom falls out of the oil industry” (2000, p. 8). One effect of seeking to establish themselves as a center for business and tourism has been to create a de facto pluralism as people from across the world flock to the Emirates for work and play. Other countries are beginning to follow their lead. Dismantling the rentier state will take time, but it should be encouraging to those hoping for political reform that the process has begun.

As previously noted, the private sectors in oil economies are very weak. This is proving to be an increasingly important problem as Gulf regimes struggle to accommodate the needs of their citizens for good jobs. Their reliance on foreign-workers is not a strategy for future success. As Jbili puts it, “These countries need a healthy dose of privatization” (Klein et al. 2000, p. 6). Government ownership is as little as 45% in the U.A.E., but up to 70% in Kuwait. Progress is being made, but Jbili argues that they must also broaden the scope of this reform and accelerate privatization initiatives (Klein et al. 2000). The Prime Minister of Kuwait has even said that the country must stop hiring citizens in the public sector because it is a drain on

resources. Further, most of those who work in the civil service are unnecessary (Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, al-Mutawa 2006).

The emir of Qatar has been proactive in his efforts to bring Qatar's economy into the modern era. He is said to govern less like a monarch and more like a CEO. He has already turned a number of public institutions, such as the postal service, over to the private sector (Miles 2005). Other G.C.C. states are making tremendous strides as well. The implications of greater private sector productivity and economic involvement for the region are encouraging.

Privatization enables greater entrepreneurial activity and individual wealth creation—and is necessary for the development of an independent middle class. And as Zakaria points out, “a genuinely entrepreneurial business class would be the single most important force for change in the Middle East, pulling along all others in its wake” (2004, p. 17). Such a group would have interests independent of the state and would be able to force the regimes to be more transparent and inclusive. The economic success of a country's private sector requires that the state establish genuine rule of law, openness to the world and access to information (Zakaria 2004, p. 16).

Historically, these forces have been a part of successful transitions to democratic rule.

In addition to diversifying their economies and promoting their private sectors, the Gulf monarchies will need to increase foreign investment if they are to meet the challenges of the future. In many ways, they are far better positioned for this than other Arab regimes, because amid the chaos and violence of the Middle East they are virtual islands of calm and tranquility. The successes of Dubai and the other emirates has inspired “current attempts elsewhere in other Gulf Arab states to attract foreign investment by liberalizing investment regimes and establishing free trade zones with sophisticated communications and transportation facilities” (Kirby 2000, p. 8). If increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) requires anything, it is above all openness and

fairness. Investors should feel confident that their interests will be protected and that their business can function effectively. For a long time, investment in the Gulf region was made difficult by onerous laws requiring that a citizen of the kingdom be at least part-owner (especially in Saudi Arabia). Now, efforts are being made to lift this requirement and streamline the process for investing and buying into the local market. In short, the same improvements that would increase FDI in the Gulf monarchies would also improve the overall quality of governance and strengthen the rule of law.

A further advantage is that the more standardized the Gulf economies the more easily they will be able to integrate into the global economic system. With an eye to improving their situation vis-à-vis the industrialized world, all of the six Gulf monarchies have become members of the World Trade Organization. And as Haass puts it, “Membership in the World Trade Organization promotes both economic and political liberalization” (2003, p. 147). It certainly requires that signatories work to create greater transparency, stability, predictability and application of the rule of law in trade matters. In addition, Bahrain has a bilateral free-trade agreement with the U.S., and Oman has signed one as well. All of these efforts mean that Gulf economies are increasingly open to and involved in the larger global market. This bodes well for their economic development as well as the future of their political reform efforts.

Weiffen argues that “if economic restructuring and/or political opening are initiated, modernization and related social change will surely increase political mobilization and arouse demands for political participation in the long run” (2004, p. 364). The more room the state makes for private business and investment, and the more it improves its standard of governance, the more political room will exist for newly empowered actors (such as entrepreneurs, the middle class, etc.). Haass explains it well:

Market-based economic modernization helps usher in elements of democracy—the rule of law, transparent decision-making, the free exchange of ideas—which in turn sustain and accelerate growth, though this path need not be sequential. When political and economic freedom work hand in hand, democratization allows the young to voice their aspirations while reinforced economic growth gives them hope for a future of greater opportunity and prosperity (2003, p. 146).

## Chapter 5: External Pressure for Reform

The Gulf monarchies do not exist in a vacuum. They are exposed to substantial pressures by international enemies and allies who would prefer that they at least appear more democratic, if not indeed become so. As Saad Eddin Ibrahim notes, the Gulf monarchies are currently leading the newest cycle of liberalization, whereas the Arab republics are falling behind (Ibrahim 2005). This is due at least in part to growing domestic and external pressures. It is in fact the convergence of domestic discontent and Western pressure that has tipped the balance against the more conservative forces, giving the impetus to the indigenous supporters of reform.

In the case of the Gulf States, Ibrahim argues that September 11<sup>th</sup> marked a turning point in U.S. policy toward the region. What emerged was a consensus among the Western powers (especially the U.S.) on the need for socio-political reform. Democracy, it was suggested, is the antidote to the frustrations that breed terrorism. In Saudi Arabia, where 15 of the 9/11 hijackers were from, U.S. pressure led the al Saud to reduce their support for reactionary, anti-Western religious groups and call for greater tolerance and acceptance (Fox, Mourtada-Sabbah, and al-Mutawa 2006). The result of the increased U.S. emphasis on human rights and liberalization is that “talk about political reform and democracy is rife even in the Gulf monarchies where such issues had been taboo” (Ottaway and Carothers 2004, p. 23). So long as the U.S. continues to pressure the G.C.C. rulers to move their countries closer to a true constitutional monarchy, these kings will feel obligated to undertake at least some reforms in order to satisfy its ally.

The main idea behind the “bad neighborhood” thesis is that what happens in one country affects other countries nearby. Accepting this premise, however, does not require one to adopt a fatalistic attitude toward the potential for democracy in the Gulf region. Rather, there is reason to believe that successful reform in one G.C.C. monarchy may resonate in another, and that as

Zakaria puts it, “success is infectious” (2004, p. 18). There is good reason to expect that advances and innovations in one state may lead to greater calls for reform in its neighbors, leading to a kind of reform cross-pollination. Each country’s experiments with democratic institutions and laws can serve as model and inspiration for reformers across the region.

While the idea of cross-pollination and neighborhood influence is likely valid across a variety of regions, it is especially pronounced in the Gulf States. In addition to the pressure coming from the U.S. and other Western governments, the Gulf monarchies also face pressure for reform from their neighbors.

The Gulf States have significant influence on each other. This is, after all, one cultural lake with many tribes and families stretching across borders and with many G.C.C. nationals (more than the governments would like to acknowledge) discreetly possessing multiple G.C.C. passports (Crystal 2005, p. 5).

In addition to this cultural cross-pollination, the political systems of the six Gulf kingdoms are remarkably similar, owing in large part to their influence on each other.

As Michael Herb has argued, the particular form of monarchical power in the Gulf organized around sovereign ministries, that is, the distribution of specific powerful ministries guaranteed to members of the ruling family, initially pioneered in Kuwait and quickly adopted by all its monarchical neighbors. Kuwait also pioneered the use of elected bodies on a significant scale and these too were copied throughout the Gulf. Kuwait’s long history of reform has certainly made it easier for reformers in other states to move forward. The extension of suffrage to women was perhaps partly an element of that competition. Qatar was unwilling to expand contestation but it could outdo Kuwait in expanding representation. The extension of suffrage in Qatar, Bahrain and Oman was a factor putting pressure on the Kuwaiti leadership to do the same. Qatar might not allow as much debate over its own policies as some other states, but it could, through al-Jazeera, give the appearance of allowing substantial debate, opening the way for al-Arabiyya and other stations in the region. *Reforms in each state raise the bar for others* (Crystal 2005, p. 5). (Italics added)

As each state tries some new reform or policy, the effects are widely observed. And when some change goes well, it is more likely to be tried elsewhere. It is no accident that the Gulf kingdoms have evolved similar political features. A look at when each country established

its constitutions and legislative bodies gives a sense of the connectivity of the six states (see tables 11-14). Equal voting rights for women show a similar trajectory, spreading from country to country over a rather short period of time. And while Saudi Arabia may be a tougher case, it is likely that the trends in the other five states will result in increased pressure on the al Saud to improve their dismal record on women's rights and expand recent experiments with limited municipal elections.

**Table 11** G.C.C. Date Women Given Right to Vote

<b>Date Women Given Right to Vote</b>	
Qatar	1999
Bahrain	2002
Oman	2003
Kuwait	2005
U.A.E.	*2006
Saudi Arabia	not yet

Source: CIA 2007

\* In 2006, men and women voted in a limited election. No law yet.

**Table 12** G.C.C. Date Constitution in Effect

<b>Constitution in Effect</b>	
Kuwait	in effect since 1962
U.A.E.	interim 1971-96; permanent in effect since 1996
Bahrain	(1973-5); in effect since 2002
Qatar	in effect since 2005
Saudi Arabia	Basic Law since 1992 (royal decree)
Oman	Basic Law since 1996 (royal decree)

**Table 13** G.C.C. Date Legislature Established

<b>Date Legislature Established</b>	
Kuwait	1963
U.A.E.	1971
Bahrain	(1972-5); 1992, expanded 2002
Qatar	1972; planned expansion fall 2007
Oman	1981, expanded 1991, 1997
Saudi Arabia	1996, expanded 1997, 2001

**Table 14** G.C.C. Type of Legislature and Composition of Members

	<b>Type of Legislature</b>	<b>Elected</b>	<b>Appointed</b>
Kuwait	Unicameral	50	15
U.A.E.	Unicameral	20	20
Bahrain	Bicameral	40	40
Qatar	Unicameral	30	15
Oman	Bicameral	82	48
Saudi Arabia	Unicameral	0	120

## **Conclusion: Prospects for Democratization**

Rentier theory would suggest that there is little hope for democratization in the G.C.C. States. So long as these states can depend upon vast oil riches, they will face no overwhelming pressure to reform or democratize. What rentier theory neglects, however, is the importance of human agency. Monarchs are motivated by more than money: they also crave international legitimacy and respect. These values cannot be purchased; they must be earned. Further, a desire to leave a legacy of reform, stability, and prosperity might lead a ruler to contemplate changes not foreseen by rentier theory. Thus, while rentierism is a valid theoretical concept, and does in many ways account for the poor democratization record of the Middle East oil states, it is not purely deterministic. Rather, it will vary from country to country. Some leaders will be content to use their wealth to postpone democratic reforms which would challenge their power. Others may be interested in leading the way to a more just and democratic society, using their oil wealth to ease the transition. Therefore, while oil wealth may inhibit some normal pathways to democracy, it does not preclude the possibility of democratic transition.

The problem with most of the available theories of democratization is that they are based on the experiences of specific regions at specific times. Thus, they are not entirely applicable to the oil monarchies. One can accept some of their premises and concepts without fully embracing their predictions. Modernization theory, for example, is based on sound principles. People who are wealthier and better educated tend to be more democratic. And the pressures for change occurring in the Gulf States come in large part from a new generation of youth who are aware of the world and have embraced its interconnectedness. But where modernization offers a clear trajectory based on

increasing wealth and industrial production, it is of limited usefulness in an area that does not fit neatly into its paradigm. Therefore, modernization is of use in understanding overall trends toward “modernity” in the G.C.C., but does not necessarily offer any predictive insight.

The role of Islam in these and other Middle Eastern societies is profoundly important and in many ways unique. Islam has cultural, political and religious implications that make it more than a personal faith. This is not to defend the old canard that Islam is incompatible with democracy: it is not. Rather, to acknowledge that religion in the Arab Muslim world is not necessarily the equivalent of religion in other areas of the world. This means that analyses of the region must have as their basis an appreciation of the uniqueness of these societies. Any attempt to apply Western-based theories of democratization to the Middle East must account for the unique role of Islam in these countries. And yet, very few do.

It is easy to be cynical when talking about democratization in the Middle East. The region has become a graveyard for the hopes of countless democracy promoters and activists. And in many states, such as Egypt, Syria, and Libya, this will likely be the case for quite some time. And yet, it is in perhaps the most unlikely places that the seeds of future democratization may exist. In a world of republics, the number of monarchies has dwindled substantially, the majority concentrated in the Middle East. For too long policy-makers and scholars alike have ignored or marginalized the rentier monarchies of the G.C.C.. They are substantially different than other Arab countries, and even than other Arab monarchies (like Jordan and Morocco) due to their oil wealth and close common ancestry and culture. For a long time, the rest of the Arab world had looked down on the G.C.C. states for being overly traditional, backward—certainly

not cosmopolitan or sophisticated like Cairo or Beirut. But in recent decades, something has fundamentally shifted in the Gulf States and within the Arab region. Suddenly these conservative, traditional regimes have become dynamic, progressive and focused on the future. And the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf are doing all of this on their own terms.

To be fair, the states of the G.C.C. are not created equal. In many ways, Kuwait far outstrips the others when it comes to parliamentary strength, freedom and political rights. Bringing up the rear are Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., whose experiments with reform have been extremely limited. On the score of economic reform, however, the U.A.E. leads the pack—blazing a trail toward global economic integration and influence that is a model for other Gulf States. In short, each state is finding its own way at its own pace. But make no mistake, change is occurring—albeit slowly and sometimes imperceptibly. As Kirby notes,

In all the monarchic states, a debate on difficult issues is occurring; movement, however incremental, is taking place. This is proof of the capacity of the monarchic system to change and an indication of the monarchies' confidence and their ability to see how their own interests are interwoven with those of the state. The debate is occurring to some degree in every Middle Eastern monarchy . . . (2000, p. 10).

And as Tessler and Gao put it, “it is possible to have a meaningful discussion about whether the glass is half full or half empty in some of these countries” (2005, p. 84).

As the kings of the petro-monarchies confront the new century, they face a time of increasing change and modernization. There are mounting pressures on a number of fronts which will make further maintenance of the status quo impossible. Each monarchy faces a stark demographic fact: Gulf population growth rates are overwhelming economic growth rates. The entire rentier system depends upon the state providing jobs and good lives for its citizens. And yet, due to high birth rates and the increasing expectations of the youth, these states are in a

fundamentally untenable position. Something has got to give. The stability of their rule has rested in large part on public complacency and traditional sources of legitimacy. But as the bargain between ruler and ruled breaks down, a new *modus vivendi* must be found. This pressure will most likely lead the regime to offer more political participation and freedom in exchange its continued rule.

In addition to the rising pressures of their people's expectations, the Gulf monarchs also bear in mind that the only way forward for them economically is to develop a sustainable system. This means they must work towards greater diversification, privatization, and make their economies attractive to investors. In short, they must join the global rules-based economy and conform to international standards. This means giving greater power and freedom to native entrepreneurs, loosening tax and investment regulations, streamlining business procedures, and encouraging individual effort and wealth creation. In many ways, these reforms are easier and less threatening than the needed political reforms, and regimes are likely to pursue these first. The likely effect, intended or not, will be the creation some sort of independent business class. The more people who have interests separate from the state, the greater the accountability they will demand. In the end, the reforms that produce better economic results also favor greater political openness and participation. "The places that offer the best prospects for democracy are those where there is a process of gradual change in the direction of freer institutions. Democracy usually evolves out of a movement toward freedom" (Lewis 2003, p. 219).

The countries of the G.C.C. will face more than just domestic pressure in the coming years. The United States and the West are increasingly pushing for at least the appearance of greater democracy. And while this may not produce substantive reforms, it does at least prevent some of the more egregious forms of repression and control. More important, perhaps, than even

U.S. influence is that of the neighborhood. Gulf States and peoples are remarkably interconnected, and each is aware of what is occurring elsewhere. Reform in one country (especially if it succeeds) creates pressure for reform in all the others. This means that even the more recalcitrant regimes cannot postpone reform indefinitely.

The good news for the Gulf monarchies is that unlike their Arab neighbors, they have a number of advantages that make democratic reform less destabilizing and more likely to succeed. Whereas in some Arab republics, rulers face substantial resistance at every turn by radical Islamists—Gulf Islamists are generally more moderate and content to work within the system and with the monarch. Rather than being the only opposition, they are only one group among many. Therefore, a monarch essentially can implement top-down reforms as needed without too great concern. Monarchs can adopt virtually any position without worrying about betraying a founding ideology, and can co-opt opposition platforms if necessary. Further, they have small, well-educated populations who will likely support gradual reforms and greater openness. And they will increasingly expect a say in how their country is governed, even if this doesn't include overthrowing the monarchy. In his survey of democracy throughout the world, Kechichian has found that

Ordinary Gulf citizens were routinely verbalizing some of their anxieties, insisting on the need for openness, both on internal matters as well as key foreign-policy issues.

'Democracy' is developing throughout the area, and while some G.C.C. ruling families have faced the will of their electorates, progress is painfully slow. Still, there is every reason to believe that the process itself will continue to empower G.C.C. citizens to gradually assume a greater share of the burden of governance (2004, p. 53).

Despite these advantages and pressures, change will not occur overnight. These are still in many ways traditional societies that cherish stability and prosperity. Neither Gulf citizens nor

Gulf monarchs want to see great unrest or instability in the name of democratization. When asked, people in the region say they want “slow and incremental change to reduce resistance to democratic ideals, eventually win over skeptics, and prevent a serious backlash that could stifle future progress” (Ben-Meir 2006, p. 329). Rather than bemoan the slow pace of change in the region, analysts and scholars would do better to look at what is happening and why. While proceeding slowly may seem to serve the interests of the absolute monarch, it may also serve the cause of long-term democratization. Rather than focusing on how democratization has proceeded in other regions of the world, the scholarly community would do well to pay attention to the unique (and possibly new-paradigm-creating) trajectory and progress occurring in the Gulf States. Here, in the Persian Gulf region,

The evolution of greater power and responsibility of representative institutions is a distinct possibility. Middle Eastern monarchies will not follow the same path toward constitutional monarchy as did their European neighbors. However, if representative institutions win political battles in shaping policies, over time inertia for their greater power may emerge. . . . The future of democratization in most Middle Eastern monarchies lies not in spectacular regime collapses or social revolutions. Rather, budget debates, confidence votes of cabinets, and the questioning of ministers are the likely paths toward the evolution of greater democratization in monarchical authoritarian regimes (Lucas 2004, p. 117).

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