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European University Institute  
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies  
Mediterranean Programme

## **Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting**

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### **Problems of Succession in the GCC States**

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#### **Workshop 13**

#### ***Constitutional Reforms and Political Participation in the Gulf***

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## **Problems of Succession in the GCC States**

*Abdulahadi Khalaf*

### **Abstract**

The noted remarkable capacity of the Gulf ruling families to mobilise external and internal sources of power seems to have reached its limits. Gulf rulers also seem aware that they have lost the advantages associated with their special regional role throughout the Cold War era. The geo-political context within which they have operated has altered throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, decades of economic mismanagement, endemic corruption and wasteful expenditure have greatly reduced the basis of their infrastructural powers. The effects of fluctuating oil revenues have exasperated the financial woes of the Gulf monarchies and their domestic and foreign debts.

This paper is an attempt to put succession issues in the text of the emerging new order in the Gulf region. It also considers how this evolving situation may become more precarious in light of the unresolved succession issues in all the Gulf monarchies. Politically ambitious members of domestic elite groups as well as disgruntled factions of each ruling family may find in these developments new political opportunities to improve their political positions. The ruling families of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are already experiencing pains of searching for successors to their ageing monarchs. While Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, and most of its constituent Emirates, do not face immediate pressures of replacing their reigning monarchs, they must grapple with other fallouts of succession problems and family feuds. And, finally, there is Oman whose childless monarch, though relatively young, has yet to publicly name a successor.

# I

Gulf monarchies are facing some unprecedented demands for reforms that they cannot, this time round, afford to ignore. Uncharacteristically, the most vocal actors are several of the previously marginalized local elite groups that feel emboldened by the ramifications of political developments since 1990 and particularly since September 11, 2001. This paper discusses problems of succession in the GCC states and how they are likely to impact regimes' responses to domestic and foreign demands for political reforms.

The dilemma facing the ruling families are threefold. First, an apprehension that if they concede to demands for reforms, whether under the pressure of external forces or in response to demands by local elite groups, they will open the gates for a flood that may sweep away their regimes. Concessions would simply strengthen those external pressures and local demands. Second, a knowledge that procrastination is likely to be more dangerous if it leads to enraging the gradually expanding networks of domestic and foreign actors demanding change. Third, a lingering fear from the effects of any level of serious reforms on the cohesion of the ruling families themselves and, consequently, on their survival.

Ruling families in the Gulf have, in the past, been able to withstand other serious challenges including the ramifications of rapid modernisation, two decades of Pan-Arabism followed by another two decades of revolutionary Islamism.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the past five decades, the ruling families of the Gulf managed to navigate their regimes through wars, invasions, and border skirmishes; and the consequences of compounded economic failures. In spite of their chronic, and at times, intense disputes resulting, at times in a number of palace coups, the ruling families have remained united in the face of external and internal opponents. They were able to withstand domestic and external pressures emanating from those events. Their achievement is remarkable, considering that they also have managed to consolidate the legitimacy of their rule, and to retain the loyalty and support of their social power base. This achievement is evident in the fact that the survival of their regimes has never been seriously questioned.

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<sup>1</sup> See, further, Mark Heller & Nadav Safran (1985), "The New Middle Class and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia", *Harvard Middle East Papers*, Cambridge, Mass; Fred H. Lawson (1989), *Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy*, Westview Press; Jill Crystal (1995), *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; David E. Long (1997), *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida; F. Gregory Gause, III (2000), "The Persistence of Monarchies in the Arabia Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis", in *Middle East Monarchies*, ed. Joseph Kostiner, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers; Mamoun Fandy (2001), *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan; Mary Ann Tétreault (2000), *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Gulf ruling families' ability to withstand past challenges is partly due to their successful mobilisation of domestic and external forces. These forces also helped the ruling families build an expansive and modern infrastructure and adopt strategies that limited the consequences of modernisation on the political institutions and relations in their societies.

While past successes are notable, the current situation has several new elements and fresh challenges. The novelty in the post-September 11 world facing the ruling families is that they have to deal, for the first time, with the combined force of simultaneous pressures from external and domestic challenges. The ruling families in the Gulf seem conscious of the proposition that the survival of their regimes requires them to adjust to emerging realities. It is true that they managed to procrastinate in the face of the chain of events that swept the region since the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. But, they cannot hope that the strategy of procrastination will help wipe out current pressures including various regional ramifications of the war on terrorism declared by the Bush administration following September 11. In spite of their slow reaction, the ruling cores of the Gulf monarchies seem also aware that their regimes cannot continue to enjoy those privileges associated with their regional role throughout the Cold War era. What makes matters even more precarious is that the Gulf regimes are facing all these new challenges while their infrastructural powers are greatly reduced. Vagaries of the world oil markets and the fluctuation in oil revenues have exasperated the Gulf monarchies financial woes caused by decades of economic mismanagement, corruption and wasteful expenditures.

At the outset, I must make clear three points. First, while each of the ruling families in the Gulf has its own form of family council, these councils wield no real power. Political powers exist outside the formal settings of these councils. Political powers, and the exercise of these powers, remain highly personalised and centralized around what I call the *ruling core*. This appears in different constellations. There can be a single unchallenged ruler, as in Oman, a coalition of rulers, such as in the UAE where Sheikh Zayed al-Nuhayyan of Abu Dhabi was, until his death, *primus inter pares*, or a coalition of siblings: among brothers such as in Saudi Arabia, between cousins as in Kuwait and Qatar, or between an uncle and his nephew as in Bahrain. Second, the issue of succession has always been a source of internal squabbling in all the ruling families of the Gulf. Saudi politics, for example have for more than five decades, been partly shaped by squabbles among senior members of the ruling family and their various

palace intrigues. Yet, the Saudi regime survived. Second, in spite of their current woes and worries, the Gulf monarchies do not face any major destabilization crises. They are indeed more stable than any of their immediate neighbours.

But, times are changing in the Gulf monarchies. Unusually very rapidly. Among the earliest indications of these changes was the withdrawal of American military personnel based at Prince Sultan Air Base and other locations in Saudi Arabia. The move did not negatively affect the US regional role, nor did it have any direct impact on Saudi security needs, since the US has simply redeployed its military forces to moved its naval, ground and air bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar. The America redeployment was significant more for its political symbolism than its direct political or military consequences.

To many of the region's political elites, be they loyal or opposed to the ruling regimes, the US appears to be behaving less and less as a partner and more and more as a patron. As such, it is perceived as having arrogated to itself the right to do whatever suits its interests, without considering the views of its regional allies and partners. From their perspective, America's own short-term interests appear to have assumed precedence over the interests of its allies in the region.

The novelty in the current situation that the ruling families are facing, for the first time, is the combined force of simultaneous pressures from external and domestic sources. In a recent article, Kenneth M. Pollack a former Director for Persian Gulf Affairs on the staff of the U.S. National Security Council, notes that that while most experts think that a revolution or civil war in any of the GCC states within the next few years is still unlikely, few say so now as confidently as they once did. Pollack writes

“In fact, even the Persian Gulf regimes themselves are increasingly fearful of their mounting internal turmoil, something that has prompted all of them to announce democratic and economic reform packages at some point during the last ten years. From Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to the emir of Qatar to the new king of Bahrain, the Persian Gulf rulers recognize the pressure building among their populations and the need to let off some of the steam. If the reforms do not succeed and revolution or civil war ensues, the United States might face some very difficult security challenges”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, “Once More Unto the Beach”, *Foreign Affairs*. New York: July/August, 2003, vol. 82, Issue 4. See also Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Prospects for Stability in Saudi Arabia in 2004”,

## II

I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that the stability of the Gulf monarchies is the outcome of two sets of sources of power – the external and the internal ones. Through mobilizing external and internal sources of power, Gulf ruling families have been able to, simultaneously, operate within two epochs – the modern and the pre-modern. And, they were able to utilize a range of unsimultaneous range of instruments of rule. In other words, Gulf rulers were combining what Michael Mann<sup>4</sup> calls the “*despotic power*” of pre-modern states and the “*infrastructural power*” of the modern state. Despotic power refers to the capacity to control the distribution of resources without interference from society. It is primarily a repressive power and involves the autonomy of the state from social pressures. The despotic power of the state is seen in the “range of actions that it takes without routine, institutionalised negotiation with groups in society”, while infrastructural power is seen as “the institutional capacity of a central state, despotic or not, to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions”. Infrastructural power refers to the ability of a state to get things done, to administer and regulate, and effectively exercise its authority and achieve its goals within society. Whether pursuing modern or pre-modern policies, the Gulf monarchies have maintained their capacity, in the words of Migdal to *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways.<sup>5</sup>

The price that ruling families have to put up with to insure the survival of their regimes includes their total reliance on the protective shield provided by Britain and later, the USA<sup>6</sup>.

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Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 19, 2003,  
[http://www.csis.org/burke/saudi21/040219\\_prospectsforstability.pdf](http://www.csis.org/burke/saudi21/040219_prospectsforstability.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Abdulhadi Khalaf, “What the Ruling Families in the Gulf Do when the Rule”, *Orient*, Volume 4, issue 3

<sup>4</sup> Michael Mann (1986), “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origin, Mechanisms and Results” in John A. Hall(ed.) *States in History*, London, Basil Blackwell, p. 113; See also Michael Mann (1993), *The Sources of Social Power: Volume I*, New York: Cambridge University Press,

<sup>5</sup> Joel S. Migdal (1988), *Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the third world*, Princeton, N.J.

<sup>6</sup> Since 1820, various agreements with representatives of the British crown provided the tribal chiefs, founders of the present Gulf ruling families, with protection and recognition as rulers. In exchange, all rulers acknowledged the rules of *Pax Britannica*. Britain confirmed, repeatedly, its commitment to the stability of the *status quo*. Discovery of oil, and the subsequent entry of the USA as an investor in the region’s oil industry and as a major consumer of its output, gave the region its special geo-strategic importance, particularly throughout the Cold War era. When Britain relinquished its role as a protector of the region, the USA stepped in and began gradually to establish its military presence. Among the United States’ priorities are to safeguard stability in the region and the free and unhindered flow of its oil at reasonable prices to international markets. This led the USA, following the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979, to assume a direct role in safeguarding the stability of the Gulf regimes and in guaranteeing their long-term survival. The eviction of Iraqi occupation forces from Kuwait in 1991 by a military alliance led by the USA is a case in point.

It also includes a reliance on a plethora of coercive measures, and occasionally, the use of brute force, to guarantee the stability of their rule. But stability and security of Gulf regimes are not, simply, an outcome of coercion and use of brutal force, or their reliance on foreign protection. Ruling families in the Gulf have utilized several other strategies to maintain the stability of their rule.

I contend that their ability to combine both powers, the Gulf monarchies has given their relations with their societies the distinct character that they have. Different types of states, writes Skocpol, give rise to various conceptions of the meaning and methods of “politics” itself, conceptions that influence all relevant groups and classes of a national community.<sup>7</sup> The potency and autonomy of their states, offer the ruling families in the Gulf the tools that enable them on the one hand to shape institutional structures of their societies and on other hand to pursue their own goals, either through transformative strategies, or through coercive actions in pursuit of maintaining public order. There is a strong state, in the sense of being capable of penetrating society, defining internal relations among its constituent elements, regulating social relationships, and determining how common resources are allocated.

The foundation of the ruling families’ asymmetric power relative to their societies constitutes, paradoxically, the very foundation of their vulnerability to external pressures. Oil revenues that have enabled each of these ruling families to dispense with the need to tax their subjects, and to allocate and distribute a considerable portion of these incomes in the form of employment, improved infrastructures, and various measures of social welfare <sup>8</sup>. At the same time, their own dependency on oil revenues, and subsequently on the USA as the custodian of regional peace and the ultimate guarantor of the free flow of oil to international markets, exposes these regimes to external pressures.

Without minimizing the role of several other factors, a number of students of the region have focused on the role of rent to explain the exceptional rise in the importance of the state’s role and the power exercised by the ruling families over society.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See, Theda Skocpol (1985), “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research”, in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, & Theda Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Nazih H. Ayubi (1995), *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East*, London, I.B. Tauris.

<sup>9</sup> Rent, an already problematic term in economics becomes more problematic when introduced to political sociology. Khan and Jomo (2000:5) define rent as “an income which is higher than the minimum which an individual or firm would have accepted given alternative opportunities”. One of the problems of this definition is that it is too inclusive. Many real world incomes, notes Khan and Jomo (2000) have the character of rent. These include “not just monopoly profits, but also subsidies and transfers organised through political mechanism,

Various sources of rent have facilitated moves by the ruling families in the Gulf to increase their own autonomy from their social bases while expanding the system of political patronage; assert their authority by expanding the state's "involvement in all socio-economic spheres", thus, inhibiting the rise of competing autonomous social power centres; enhance their sanctionary powers by expanding and modernizing their military, police and internal security apparatuses; forge inter-Arab alliances to enhance their stability.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, rent has facilitated the combining despotic powers of pre-modern states and the infrastructural powers of modern ones. Obviously, Gulf monarchies vary in the levels of this combination and the role it plays in securing stability.

One of the immediate consequences of its control of rent and its allocation is making loyalty to the royal family a socio-political imperative. Unlike many society/state relationships, what can be observed in the Gulf monarchies are relationships with two features. The first is the symbiosis between the state with the ruling family, where the state is much more than just an instrument of the ruling family. The second is making that symbiotic relationship a privileged sphere and off-limits to all other local social actors.

In the Gulf States, where rent is externally derived, the state became the main link and intermediary between the world capitalist order and the local economy and society. In its turn, the state promotes levels of dependency by citizens on its agencies, its welfare services and other facilities<sup>11</sup>. Within this relation of dependency, a citizen becomes "disinclined to act economically or politically on his own behalf, let alone seriously criticise the state". Citizens, including merchants, entrepreneurs and other business people, and become more pre-occupied with attempts to access the rent circuit than reaching to build a productive economy.

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illegal transfers organised by private mafias, short-term super profits made by innovators before competitors imitate their innovations, and so on. Mushtaq H. Khan & Jomo K. Sundaram, eds. (2000), *Rents, Rent-Seeking and Economic Development: Theory, and Evidence from Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. See also Giacomo Luciani (1987), "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework", in Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (eds), *Nation, State and Integration in the Arab world*. Vol. 2, *The Rentier State*, London, Croom Helm; Hazem Biblawi (1990), "The Rentier State in the Arab World", in Giacomo Luciani, ed., *The Arab State*, London, Routledge; Larbi Sadiki (1997), "Towards Arab liberal governance: from the democracy of bread to the democracy of vote", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1. See also, Michael Herb (2003), "No Representation without Taxation? Rents, development and democracy", Georgia State University, (unpublished paper, June 18, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Sadiki 1997, *ibid.*; Luciani 1987, *ibid.*; Biblawi (1990), *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Ayubi (1995), *op.cit.*, 224 et seq.

Moreover, financial independence offers the ruling family/state a considerable degree of relative autonomy from the specific interests of various domestic actors.

An immediate consequence of regime autonomy is the ruling family's nearly limitless power to change public policies, to reverse them, to select their allies, and to change requirements of political allegiances. Further, its autonomy has enabled the ruling family/state to create new social collectives and/or to dismantle and reassemble existing ones.

Khaldun Al-Naqeeb<sup>12</sup> suggest that the ruling families in the Gulf govern by means of unofficial corporates and by manipulating domestic social forces. Because they are officially not recognised, there is no formal body to represent these corporates. Yet, they are present in various institutions of the state: the government, municipal and other local councils, and, in the army and police.

The relative importance of any of these corporative bodies differs considerably from one Gulf state to another as well as from time to time in the same state. While the roles that corporates play differ considerably in the countries of the region and over time, they share two common features. First, no single corporate or social collective can survive politically and be able to safeguard the welfare of its members without the consent, or even active support, of a strong patron within the ruling core. Second, corporates do not constitute political platforms. Membership in a corporate does not bestow any form of entitlement to political power. Ruling families, in other words, are not required to treat any corporate as a political partner.

As a complex socio-economic construct, a corporate can be founded on any combination of economic, social, and political roles. Corporates provide a solid and reasonably stable basis for the relation between state and society in the Gulf monarchies. Yet, this relation varies in its rationale, forms and outcomes in one Gulf monarchy from another. The state-society relationship is extremely asymmetric, only moderated by an *appearance* of reciprocal dependency between the state/ruling family, on the one hand, and society/corporates, on the other.

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<sup>12</sup> Khaldun Al-Naqeeb (1990), *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a Different Perspective*, London: Routledge, Centre for Arab Unity Studies.

Individuals, whether merchants, entrepreneurs or members of other elite groups, provide another important *internal* source of power. These individuals are retained independently of their corporates, to be available whenever the regime feels the need for support to overcome an opposition movement. Yet, these individuals are consistently prevented from becoming power centres themselves and from co-operation horizontally. The ruling families in the Gulf have consistently and decisively pre-empted any co-operation across vertical confines among members of the elite groups. While elites have been discouraged from making claims on the regime as members of collectives, they have been encouraged to intercede, as intermediaries, on behalf of others.

Modern elites in the Gulf monarchies emerged within socio-political structures that are dominated by the ruling families - a dominance guaranteed by British protective agreements. Their right to claim a political role has never been a natural prerogative of their positions in their communities. Theirs is an assigned role and their status is bequeathed. They are selected to provide support and to advise rather than to represent. Individually, some intermediaries may have been powerful patrons of local networks, clans, villages or religious communities but they were not allowed to speak for the “people” as a whole. In spite of this, they are extremely useful political allies, and tools, of the ruling families. They have a large stake in sustaining the status quo. For, only through preservation of the system could they serve as patrons to the local, and often competing, networks on which their initial claims to elite status depend. To varying degrees, the ruling families have jealously maintained the system of intermediation. The dilemma of modern elites remains in their awareness of the shaky grounds on which they have been standing. The ruling family needs them, yet they remain dispensable. Elites that lose their political relevance have simply been excluded from the stratum of intermediaries, and are likely to lose much more than prestige.

Similar to the findings of Bianchi<sup>13</sup> on Egyptian state behaviour, we are confronted with powerful tactics of disorganisation and fragmentation which can partly be seen in delays to the emergence of a unified counter mobilisation, and in the promotion of the proliferation of weak and squabbling elites that can easily be manipulated or even discarded by the regime. Fragmentation, observes Bianchi, provides the regime with the ability periodically to disfavour leaders, replacing them altogether, or temporarily ignoring them. This ability also

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<sup>13</sup> Bianchi (1997), *op.cit.*, p. 24.

provides the regime with an effective tool of sanction against members of the elite who refuse to collaborate.

Sustaining the intermediary roles of individual members of elite groups has become an obvious political priority. The ruling families have been hard at work to readjust the ranks of their domestic support base - continuously rejuvenating these ranks by generating and co-opting new allies, and protecting old allies from falling out of grace.

Intermediaries are made up, vertically, of members of tribal, religious and confessional groups as well as according to wealth, kinship or regional backgrounds. As local reserve sources of power, competing intermediaries reinforce the regime's policies, including the preservation of vertical segmentation of society. Individually these intermediaries have been exchangeable, and, at times, even dispensable. As an informal institution, however, they provide certain limitations on the exercise of power. It does so not as much due to the strength of any individual elite, but rather because the exercise of power by the ruling families depends partly on convincing other social actors of the prudence of accepting and supporting the right of those families to exercise of power the way they see fit. Even an *appearance* of being supported by others serves the regime, through encouraging other external as well as internal sources of power to provide their own support or to withdraw their objections.

Let me reiterate that in spite of their important role, intermediaries are not bearers of the state in any of the Gulf monarchies. Unlike their predecessors of the pre-oil past, modern intermediaries remain largely a marginal political force. They also lack the political weight attributed to 'intermediary strata' by some students of contemporary Arab societies<sup>14</sup>. Their role is contingent on their perceived usefulness as links between state and society. Intermediaries are *ad hoc* leaders of their own corporates - whether they are the acknowledged leaders of their corporates or treated simply as representatives of those corporates. To be chosen as an intermediary does not infer a *permanent* position or status. To be assigned the role of an intermediary, whether for short or long periods, does not entitle one to political rights or privileges. Selection of intermediaries is a closely guarded prerogative of ruling core. In order to keep one's intermediary position, one is expected to acknowledge in deeds his/her own subordination to the regime.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ayubi 1995:176-77

Retaining suitable reserves of intermediaries puts a considerable drain on resources. But it offers the ruling core in each of the Gulf states ample opportunities to consolidate their position as the supreme patrons.

For most of the time, the ruling cores of the Gulf monarchies have demonstrated their remarkable acumen in maintaining balance among intermediaries whether recruited from traditional or modern corporates. They have also shown that their ability to contain moves by ambitious newcomers. Oil, particularly since the oil boom of the mid-1970s, provides sufficient resources to continue recruiting additional intermediaries from nearly every social background. The entrepreneurial sector, for example, which was a major beneficiary of oil-boom investments, provided the ruling families with a new, and relatively modern, source of intermediaries. Advancement within this sector has been personal and based on political loyalty and acumen, rather than tribal or ethnic backgrounds. Project contracts, big and small, have been awarded largely for political loyalty. Those entrepreneurs whose loyalties were in doubt simply lost their access to contracts. Being in the good books of the ruling core and other senior members of the ruling family adds some considerable push to a business venture. Regular attendance to the weekly *majlis* of one or more of these potentates confirms one's status and credibility as a member of an influential elite group.

### III

Twenty-seven years ago, Michael Hudson<sup>15</sup> observed that 'political legitimacy' is the central problem of government today in the Arab world is political legitimacy. Among the GCC states the problem is more acute than it has ever been. The ruling families find themselves grappling with the emerging geo-strategic parameters of post-Sept. 11 world. They find themselves under real and unprecedented pressures to adjust to new conditions and demands put forward by their western patrons. The move from the safety of being privileged, almost cocooned, allies of the United States into a being on of its international liabilities, occurred swiftly and publicly. The United States managed to wage its campaign in Afghanistan, launched its '*war against terror*' and invaded Iraq without even engaging any of these

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Hudson *Arab Politics: the search for legitimacy*, New Haven, Yale University press 1977

regimes in serious consultations. This is a far cry from the cajoling they received from the United States and its western allies on the eve of the war to liberate Kuwait in 1990-91. The sudden and swift marginalisation of their regional role confirm to all, and particularly to local elite groups, how vulnerable have the Gulf monarchies become. The evolving regional order, following the fall of Saddam Hussain's regime in Iraq, may further exacerbates this vulnerability.

The noted remarkable capacity of the Gulf ruling families to mobilise external and internal sources of power seems to have reached its limits. Gulf rulers also seem aware that they have lost the advantages associated with their special regional role throughout the Cold War era. The geo-political context within which they have operated has altered throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, decades of economic mismanagement, endemic corruption and wasteful expenditures have greatly reduced the basis of their infrastructural powers. The effects of fluctuating oil revenues have exasperated the financial woes of the Gulf monarchies and their domestic and foreign debts.

Statements by leading members of these families repeatedly indicate a growing awareness that of the need to introduce some real, albeit painful, reforms. Indeed, concrete measures have been taken in all the six states – measures varying from introducing written constitutions that extend citizenship rights to women, initiation of economic restructuring programmes with the aim of diversifying the economy and relaxing the state's role in the economic spheres, to dealing with the chronic problems of the *bidoons* and guest workers. These reforms may go a long way in shielding the regimes from falling. They may even provide the ruling families with new means to establish their legitimacy.

Politically ambitious members of domestic elite groups as well as disgruntled factions of each ruling family may find in these developments new political opportunities to improve their political positions. They witnessed their regimes downgraded from being allies of the US into a position of daily reprimand by American officials. The rapid shifts is most evident in the case of Saudi Arabia whose nearly six decades of 'special relationship' with the USA has turned, in the aftermath of September 11, into a mutual liability. Both governments have gone to great lengths to limit the fallouts of their continued relationship on their own domestic audience. Most spectacular of the measures taken in this direction is ending US military presence in Saudi Arabia and the redeployment of American military personnel to Qatar and

elsewhere in the region. This, admittedly dramatic move, did not satisfy the more radical Saudi opposition groups, while it seems to have encouraged other opposition groups and prominent members of Saudi elite groups to attempt to exploit to their advantage the widening rift between the Saudi royal family and its American political benefactors.

The urgency of the situation has already forced even the most reluctant of the Gulf rulers to conclude that the required political and economic reforms must go beyond the customary cosmetic changes. Reforms in Bahrain since 2000 could provide a model for the kind of measures that do not require the ruling families to give up any of their privileges, including their control over economic resources and political institutions as well as their command over the armed forces and the security apparatuses. But the Bahraini model could also be viewed as nothing more a set of costly measures to buy time and delay the inevitable. Indeed, the Bahraini model, while reducing symptoms of political stagnation in the country, it has generated already new problems including moving to public domain palace intrigues among various faction of the ruling family.

The Gulf ruling families may see the blessings of promising or actually introducing reforms particularly as measures to appease domestic and external critics, but could also see the new problems that reforms could generate. The most immediate of these may be summed in a suitable reformulation of Huntington's king's dilemma<sup>16</sup> - how to can a Gulf ruling family introduce reforms without endangering its own cohesion or disturbing balance of powers among its own factions. This is a real dilemma. While each ruling family reluctantly seek, through reforms, to guarantee the survival of its rule, it must be also seek to adopt suitable measures to maintain its own cohesion.

I must hasten to two cautionary notes. First, I do not doubt that ruling families of the Gulf would find a number of short term measures to overcome most of the pressing troubles facing them. To this end, they can draw on their own past experiences and their capacity to mobilize at least some their external and domestic sources of power. Second, that for more than two centuries, i.e. since the establishment of *Pax Britannica* in the region, there have not been any credible external threats to regime stability in the gulf. With the exception of invasion of Kuwait in 1990, all credible threats to stability in the region has been domestic, and among

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<sup>16</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, Political Order in Changing Societies, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, p. 177.

these the most enduring are those generated by factional politics within the ruling families themselves.

This precarious situation may become dangerous in light of the unresolved succession issues in all the Gulf monarchies. The ruling families of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are already experiencing pains of searching for successors to their ageing monarchs. While Bahrain, Qatar and most of UAE's constituent emirates, do not face immediate pressures of replacing their reigning monarchs, they must grapple with other fallouts of succession problems and family feuds. And, finally, there is Oman whose childless monarch, though relatively young, has yet to publicly name a successor.

In the following I shall briefly outline how these unresolved issues emerge in each of the six Gulf monarchies.

### **Bahrain**

The ruling family of Bahrain, al Khalifa can pride itself on the way it has, hitherto, managed its internal affairs. For the past eight decades, discord, competition over resources and other forms of wrangling over power have not affect the cohesion of the family.

Ever since the last palace coup of 1923, outward consequences of family disputes have been limited to the forced departure of the defeated siblings from the public scene. Formal and informal rules of agnatic primogeniture have regulated succession and reduced the risks of palace coups by disgruntled royals.

While rules of succession, detailed in the 1973 and 2002 constitutions, may have reduced the risks of open conflicts due to factional disputes over resources and offices, they did not totally eliminate them. Disputes among competing factions of the al-Khalifa, remain a common feature of political life in Bahrain. While most of these disputes are arbitrated within the al-Khalifa Family Council, some are brought to public knowledge.

The ambitious reforms undertaken by Sheikh Hamad, now king of Bahrain, since assuming power in 1999, included measures to reduce squabbles within his ruling family and to position himself as the supreme authority failed to undermine the power base of other factions within the al-Khalifa. This has not been an easy task.

There are ominous signs that Hamad have failed to dissuade faction leaders within the ruling family from continuing wrestling with each other over political positions and economic rewards. The most important of these factions, and by far the most resourceful, is led by the King's own uncle, Khalifa bin Salman, the country's prime minister since its independence in 1971. King Hamad continues to cohabit with his uncle who continues to wield nearly unlimited power over the kingdom's political and financial institutions. Cohabitation between the king and his uncle did not prevent their respective factions within the family to contest each other for contracts and government positions. While squabbles are not likely to develop into anything more dramatic turn and endanger the regime's own stability or survival, they are corrosive. What may be damaging is the evolving disagreement over the prime minister's plan to appoint his own son as his successor in the post of prime minister. Once this carried out, these plans could institutionalise the ruling family's split, and create new spaces for political alliances with other social forces and actors from outside the al Khalifa and its traditional allies.

### **Kuwait**

Succession problems in Kuwait is more acute than anywhere in the region. Both the reigning Amir and his crown prince are too frail, almost incapacitated, to perform the duties of their respective offices. Kuwait succession issue is complicated by a stipulation in constitution of the country restricting the right to rule to one branch of the al-Sabah, descendants of the Shiekh Mubarak Al Sabah, founder of the current emirate. This constitutional stipulation confirms three generations old arrangement designed to put and end to factional strife. In practice, however, the simple stipulation translates into a complex, and informal, procedure regulating alternating power between branches of descendants of Shiekh Mubarak's two sons, Salem and Jaber.

As a temporary measures taken to limit the damage to the ruling family's cohesion, the Amir own 74-years old brother, Sheikh Sabah, has taken over many of the responsibilities of both the Amir and the crown prince. But this arrangement is contested by prominent members of

the ruling family. And, considering the age of Sheikh Sabah, this arrangement does not provide a long term solution. Indeed, it may be ominous if perceived as a step towards robbing the Al Salem faction, for the second time, of its rightful turn to the Amirship.

There are indications that the question of succession has already divided the country over who is more suited to reign. The large number of contenders to the two top positions among young and not so young Al-Sabahs, may stir serious troubles for the regime and for the country. The publicly acknowledged discord within the ruling family has prompted a Kuwaiti newspaper, *al-Rai al-Aam*, to issue an uncharacteristically frank reprimand for the ruling family's inability to settle its differences. Recognising these 'differences' as threats to regime's stability and survival, the Kuwaiti daily urged the family to "exert an exceptional effort to put an end to the black ideas ... and black practices".<sup>17</sup>

In certain ways, the split within the Kuwaiti ruling family may be good for the future development of the country. Article 4 of the constitution gives the parliament a role in the process of selecting a ruler. Law makers may approve with a majority vote the choice of heir apparent nominated by the Amir, or, select one heir apparent of list of 'at least three of the descendants of late Mubarak Al-Sabah' nominated by the sitting Amir.

Until now, selection of the Amir or crown prince has been a strictly family affair. This may change. While the parliament did not have to play its special role in the past, its 50-members may find them soon be called upon to settle the ruling family's dispute over who will be the next Amir. In theory, this would give all political actors, outside the al-Sabah, a considerable, and constitutionally sanctioned, political space to build coalitions and to extract concessions in exchange for supporting one of the competing factions or a particular candidate.

## **Qatar**

The Qatari constitution (2004) is less restrictive than its Bahraini counterpart in upholding the principle of primogeniture. While proclaiming that rule 'shall be hereditary within the Al Thani family' and by the male successors of current Amir, Shiekh Hamad, articles 8 leaves to the discretion of the Amir to select a heir apparent among his sons. Before appointing his

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<sup>17</sup> *al-Rai al-Aam*, 27 November 2004

Crown Prince, the Amir is not required to do more than consult the ruling family and other notables in the country.

These stipulations to guarantee an orderly process of succession do not fit well parts of the Al Thani family's own history which is laced with palace coups and counter coups. Sheikh Hamad himself seized power from his father in 1995. The deposed father repeatedly tried to stage a counter-coup, of which the most spectacular, in 1996, leading to the arrest of scores of co-plotters and sympathizers within the armed forces and ruling family.

Neither coup nor countercoups are aberrations in Qatar's political history. Indeed, every ruler one of its rulers since 1949, power after the forced abdication of a predecessor. However the ruler of Qatar made an unexpected move when he announced his decision to discharge his son and the crown prince and to replace him with a younger son. There is no credible official explanation for the move although speculations and rumours are many. One of these refers to the ambitions of the former Crown Prince and to Shiekh Hamad's apprehensions of his son's ambitions. The 2003 coup put the ruler of Qatar, in the unique position of having staged two successful coups – one against his own father, in 1995, and another against his son in 2003. In addition, both coups put Qatar in the unique position among Gulf monarchies where the reigning monarch must watch out for coup attempts by either his own father, his own son or both.

## **Oman**

Articles 5 and 6 of the Omani Basic Law of the State of 1996 entrust the Ruling Family's Council with nominating to the throne "a male descendants of Sayyid Turki bin Said bin Sultan". The successor to the throne shall be a Muslim, of sound mind, and the legitimate son of Omani Muslim parentage. of sound mind". If the Ruling Family Council cannot agree within three days of the throne falling vacant on the choice of successor, the task is given to the Defence Council who "shall confirm the appointment of the person designated by the Sultan in his letter to the Ruling Family Council". These cumbersome stipulations affirms Qaboos alleged eccentricities and his unique position among the rulers of the Gulf.<sup>18</sup> Further,

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<sup>18</sup> Mark N. Katz, "Assessing the Political Stability of Oman" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (September 2004)

J.E. Peterson, suggests another source for the Omani ‘uniqueness’. The Omani ruling family Al Said, compared to other Gulf families, is small and without influence on the ruler. “There is no inner circle of family members who must be consulted on every significant decision and their consensus obtained”.<sup>19</sup>

Since assuming power in 1970 following a palace coup against his father, Qaboos concentrated all powers in his own hands. His central role in the state is evident in the number of offices he personally holds. In addition to being the Head of the State and its prime minister, a combined position long held by Saudi monarchs, Sultan Qaboos also holds the defence, finance, and foreign affairs portfolios, and he is the Chairman of the Omani Central Bank.

During the past thirty four years of his reign Qaboos has succeeded in establishing himself as the supreme authority in his country. Indeed he has eliminated most credible threats to his *personal rule*. This legacy may not be as auspicious to members of the Omani ruling family whose future may be the least secure among the gulf monarchies. Tribal interests, particularly in Dhofar province, may seek to position themselves for the post-Qaboos era.

### **Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi Basic Law of Saudi Arabia (1992) stipulates that rule passes through the sons of king Abdul Aziz, the founder of the kingdom, and ‘the sons of sons’. Beside lineage, two additional qualifications are stipulated. The proposed candidate must be ‘the most upright’ among descendants of king Abdul Aziz; and ‘he must receive allegiance’ in accordance with the established tradition. The Basic Law, however, does not outline the proper procedures for deciding who is the ‘most upright’ among sons and grandsons of king Abdul Aziz, nor does it outline the proper procedures for to carry out the act of allegiance.

The Saudi Basic Law’s stipulations for succession are evidently not workable for long considering the age of current Crown Prince and the age of his other brothers standing in line to become kings of Saudi Arabia. They also constitute a source for open conflicts among

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<sup>19</sup> J.E. Peterson. “The Nature of Succession in the Gulf (2001).” Online edition from [www.JEPeterson.net](http://www.JEPeterson.net) (posted February 2002)

competing factions within the royal family and among their supporters and allies in the country.

It is difficult to draw clues from past experience. Official spokespersons portray the process of succession as a clear-cut case of passing the throne from one brother to another. But the surviving sons are ageing, and the grooming of members of the second generation of princes is a contentious and divisive process. The historical record shows that due to festering family rivalries, each of the four sons who succeeded Abdelaziz took a different route to the throne. King Faisal staged a palace coup against his brother King Saud and replaced him. Faisal himself was assassinated. Only King Khaled died of old age, making way for King Fahd. The problems of succession could become more complicated when the Saudi royal family begins to seriously ponder over selecting 'an upright' candidate from amongst the hundreds of grandsons of King Abdul Aziz. The names of a number of these have already been put forward by their own powerful fathers.

Yet, the situation may not be hopeless. The regime is not facing an immediate danger while there are enough horizontal heirs to the throne. It may be possible for the Saudi royal family to continue to select future kings and crown princes from among the aging sons of king Abdul Aziz. But it could thrust the kingdom into a period of instability due to frequent royal turnover. Indeed, this may even generate additional threats to the royal family's unity. Unresolved, the problems of succession could divide the country into a de facto federation of fiefdoms allocated to powerful factions among al- Saud.

## **UAE**

The UAE constitution of 1996 leaves it to each of the seven constituent emirates to provide for formal and informal rules of succession. It is in this indirect fashion that the Federation's stability could seriously be influenced by how each of the seven royal families manage their internal affairs. It is also this that makes the problems of succession in the seven constituent emirates of UAE a microcosm of all the problems that plague the ruling families in the rest of the Gulf. Each of the seven ruling families of the seven federated emirates has its own set of problems. Some of these problems are no more than bickering among siblings, others are more complicated and could, if unchecked, influence the contours of regional politics. Indeed, the future stability of the federation will be seriously influenced by the ways in which

each of the constituent emirates resolves its succession problems. Past episodes, including the 1986 bloody coup in Sharja, do not provide room for optimism.

More recently, in mid-June 2003, power struggle in within the ruling family of Ras al-Khaimah took a dramatic turn when sheikh Saqr, ruler of the emirate, decided to relieve his son the crown prince from his duties. The deposed crown prince was replaced by one of his younger brothers. Palace intrigues and coups are not uncommon in the history of al-Qassimi branch that rules Ras al-Khaima. Sheikh Saqr himself became a ruler in 1948 following a coup against his own uncle. Yet, the short-lived, crises that ensued illustrated not only how precarious is the cohesion of the ruling family of Ras al-Khaimah. It also exposed the vulnerability of UAE's political structures to the unpredictable consequences of palace intrigues- even those which occur in one of the marginal emirates. Rival factions within the ruling family of Ras al-Khaima solicited support from different quarters in the emirate itself, the federation, and beyond. The deposed crown prince was blamed for allegedly encouraging anti-U.S groups in the country and for opposing American recent war against Iraq. His supporters, on the other hand, highlighted his credentials as a nationalist and a reformer citing his public calls for political and civil rights. Intervention by anti-riot forces commandeered from Abu Dhabi helped put a quick end to the ensuing street scuffles between local police and supporters of the former crown prince. Abu Dhabi's rapid response may have reduced the risks of a prolonged conflict and may have discouraged intervention by neighbouring states in favour of squabbling factions of the Ras al-Khaima's ruling family.

Problems of succession may turn more dramatic in Abu Dhabi, the largest and most important emirate in the federation. Following the death, in November 2004, of Sheikh Zayed, the UAE president and ruler of Abu Dhabi, his eldest son, Sheikh Khalifa, the emirate's crown prince since 1969, assumed power. The new ruler of Abu Dhabi was elected by his fellow rulers of the six emirates to replace his father as the President of the UAE. The transfer of power has been smooth and reportedly uncontested.

Upon acceding power, the new ruler of Abu Dhabi appointed his half-brother Mohammed as Crown Prince, Deputy Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, and Chairman of Abu Dhabi Executive Council. In the latter capacity, the new Crown Prince will be the *de-facto* prime minister of the emirate, running its day-to-day affairs and controlling its finances. These appointments are significant as they consolidate the power of the new Crown Prince and his

four full-brothers, collectively known as sons of Fatima, who control most key positions in the Emirate. Shiekh Khalifa bin Zayed may soon find that his power is restricted and his office is ceremonial. On the other hand Abu Dhabi's own 'Sudairis' may decide to take over and stage a palace coup replicating what their own father did in 1966. Unlike palace coups in the smaller emirates of the UAE, an Abu Dhabi coup could trigger far more dramatic consequences including the dissolution of UAE itself.

## IV

Internal discord within the Gulf ruling families has been a recurring feature of politics in the region. The protective shield provided by Britain and later by the US has prevented these family disputes, including those with bloody outcomes, from threatening the survival of any of their regime or having enduring effects on the stability of the region. External patronage, both colonial and post-independent, is the most important of the factors affecting stability and durability of these regimes. It is, I contend, the foundation of the ruling families' asymmetric power relative to their societies. Other factors include oil revenues which enabled each of these ruling families to allocate and distribute a considerable portion of these incomes in the form of employment and improved infrastructures.

In the past, responses by each of the ruling families to these external calls for reform were influenced by calculating how any measure of reform is likely to affect the balance of power in each ruling family. Such calculations have tended, in the past, to favour procrastination. But this is not a viable option under the conditions of the evolving regional new order. Under this, the royal families are finding themselves forced to deal, for the first time, with the demands put, equally incessant by their domestic opponents as well as by the United States, long assumed to be the protector of the *status quo* in the region. Family discord, including those related to succession, may limit the options available to the conservative factions with the Gulf ruling families for manoeuvre. On the other hand, these squabbles may encourage domestic reformers together with disgruntled members of the ruling families themselves, to utilize the perceived weakness of the Gulf ruling families as a result of losing their external protective shield.