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## **KINGS FOR ALL SEASONS:**

HOW THE MIDDLE EAST'S MONARCHIES  
SURVIVED THE ARAB SPRING

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## BROOKINGS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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No Arab monarchy has fallen during the Arab uprisings, and only one – Bahrain – has had a regime-shaking crisis. These regimes, written off for decades as anachronisms, weathered the region’s political storm better than their republican neighbors. The scholarly and expert reactions to this, however, have been off the mark. Claims that monarchies are uniquely and inherently more stable or that, at the other extreme, their fall is only years away misread the situation. For somewhat more prosaic reasons, the Arab monarchies are here to stay.

The real story of monarchical longevity in the Arab Spring is the strategies these regimes have utilized to stay in power. Monarchies are, in fact, little different from other authoritarian regimes that work to ensure their own survival. Claims of the Arab monarchies’ special cultural legitimacy tend to be ahistorical and circular, and there is little to suggest these systems’ superior performance. Rather, the Arab monarchies have deployed their ample hydrocarbon wealth to blunt popular demand for reform; even the kingdoms that are comparatively resource-poor have been backstopped by their wealthier allies. And each Arab monarchy has maintained a powerful supporting coalition of domestic interest groups, regional allies, and (typically Western) foreign patrons to buttress regime stability.

Of course, the particulars of this common strategy differ by country, as does the nature of the monarchies themselves. The Arab monarchies can be best understood as two institutional types. In Morocco and Jordan, kings rule as individuals. In the Gulf Cooperation Council states, it is extended families that govern; in these dynastic monarchies, the monarchs are part of a larger corporate ruling body. (Oman somewhat

straddles this dichotomy.) This distinction has helped determine the monarchies’ reaction to the region’s uprisings – it is more difficult for a king to sack a prime minister when they are cousins, for example – as well as the possibilities for reform.

All the monarchs have felt new pressures for democratizing political reform. The global democratic wave of the last thirty years has finally arrived in the Arab world, supported in part by many Islamists’ growing acceptance of democracy as the preferred system for an Islamic state. Even the monarchies that have thus far successfully resisted reform are facing increasingly mobilized populations. A regional demonstration effect puts real stress on the Arab monarchies, and the practice of Arab democracy has special resonance in some of these societies. The democratic participation of Salafis like Egypt’s Nour Party, for example, may inspire Saudi Arabia’s own Salafis to abandon their political quietism and agitate for a more active role in governance.

Still, these regimes are basically stable. Those who predict the imminent fall of the Arab monarchies point to real contradictions and problems within these monarchical systems. They fail, however, to demonstrate how these challenges actually translate to regime collapse. Every generation since World War II has heard predictions that Saudi Arabia is not long for this world. The latest round of obituaries seems inspired by the Arab uprisings, but the problems analysts identify were around long before 2011; if the monarchies were primed to fall, why not at the height of regional instability? Even the Bahraini monarchy, which was genuinely shaken by popular mobilization, managed to survive. Of the most commonly cited threats to the monarchies’ survival, only a sustained dip in oil prices would be genuinely problematic.

This seems years off, however, and even then the monarchies' immense stores of wealth will likely sustain them.

The monarchies' survival, especially amidst regional turmoil, should be understood as a sign of strength, not weakness. It is an indicator that their underlying sources of strength and control are intact – which is basically good news for the United States. For the most part, the monarchies share American policy goals in the Middle East and cooperate with the United States on military, diplomatic, and intelligence issues. They are vital and dependable allies.

Of course, America's rhetorical commitment to democracy in the region does open Washington up to accusations of hypocrisy over its cozy relations with its royal allies. This tension is greater with the dynastic monarchies than with the individual monarchies. When Washington talks to the kings of Morocco and Jordan about democracy, it is not fundamentally threatening. These kings can make, and have made, concessions to elected parliaments without substantially changing the nature of their regimes. The same cannot be said of the dynastic monarchies. When the United States talks about democracy to the kings of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain or the emir of Kuwait, it is implicitly saying that they should abandon their primary constituency – their own extended families – and transfer power to elected commoners. Those same extended families could be expected to vigorously resist this sort of radical change.

The United States's prioritization of stability in the region has led it to support what it sees as the best long-term guarantee of that stability: gradual democratic reform. But in the short term, democratic change can be destabilizing, as we have seen in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. A real American push for democratization in dynastic monarchies could undermine the stability that extended family rule has given those countries. Moreover, in each of these countries, Washington has an agenda that goes beyond domestic political

reform; real interests related to oil, Arab-Israeli peace, military cooperation, and intelligence-sharing are all at stake. And as America's Iraq experience teaches, American intentions can differ radically from the actual results of U.S. action. As America works to promote political reform in the Middle East, then, the facts argue for a very cautious – and humble – country-by-country approach with America's Arab monarchical allies.

# INTRODUCTION

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Amid regional upheaval, the strange case of the Arab monarchies has elicited some equally strange reactions. The strangeness, of course, lies in the fact that no Arab monarchy has fallen during the Arab uprisings and only one (Bahrain) has had a regime-shaking crisis. These regimes, written off for decades as anachronisms, weathered the storms much better than their republican neighbors, where four leaders lost power (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen) and one is holding on by his fingernails (Syria).

The strange reactions take two forms. Some argue that monarchy as a regime type gives rulers unique cultural and institutional tools for holding on to power. These explanations ignore the checkered history of monarchy in the Middle East and misunderstand the political strategies that have allowed these regimes to survive. The second strange reaction to monarchical stability is the “just wait a minute” argument, that the monarchies are on the verge of falling anyway and thus their survival does not really need to be explained at all. This reaction at least has the virtue of not buying into monarchical propaganda about the regime type’s “legitimacy” or “cultural authenticity.” However, predictions of imminent collapse are just bizarre, given how many crises the remaining monarchies have navigated in the past. It is startling how success can be taken as proof of impending failure. In this regard, the prophets of monarchical doom join a long line of analysts who have incorrectly predicted the fall of the Jordanian, Saudi, and other monarchs.

The real story of monarchical longevity in the Arab Spring is not about either impending collapse or unique kingly survival mechanisms; rather, it is about the strategies these regimes have utilized to stay in power. Those strategies differ by country. Some monarchies

rely heavily on hydrocarbon wealth; others have fewer resources to deploy. All have built coalitions of support among domestic, regional and international actors that have buttressed them against challenges. Both those coalitions and the political strategies the rulers have pursued to build them, however, are different in different cases. Monarchy in and of itself does not dictate a particular path to regime survival.

Moreover, it is important to recognize that the Arab monarchies themselves represent two different institutional types. In Morocco and Jordan, kings rule as individuals. In the Gulf Cooperation Council states, it is extended families that govern; the monarchs are part of a larger corporate ruling body and their power depends on political balances within their families. (Oman somewhat straddles this dichotomy, with Sultan Qaboos monopolizing power, but theoretically in the name of the extended Al Said family.) Prospects for democratizing political reform differ substantially in these two institutional frameworks. Individual monarchs can, at least in theory, cede more power to elected parliaments without placing their own thrones in danger. Greater parliamentary power in a family monarchy, on the other hand, means diminished power (and fewer jobs) for the extended ruling family as a whole. The Arab monarchies have followed very different paths regarding political reform in the Arab Spring, depending on whether they are based on individual or family rule.

Despite these real and important institutional variations within the regime type, all of the Arab kings, emirs, and sultans have been pushed by the uprisings of the Arab Awakening toward democratizing political reform. Even those that have successfully

resisted so far are facing increasingly mobilized populations, among other challenges. One of the most significant of those challenges on the ideological side has been the reaction of Salafi movements across the Arab world to the new democratic upheavals. While not all Salafis have become democrats, enough Salafis have embraced electoral politics to call into question the historical Salafi rejection of democracy. This challenge is most acute for the Saudi monarchy, which has made Salafi Islam the basis of the ideological justification for its rule. The region-wide spread of Salafism, however, makes the debates about democracy within Salafi circles relevant to every Arab regime, whether republic or monarchy.



# “JUST WAIT, THEY WILL FALL”

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Before explaining why the Arab monarchs have weathered the Arab uprisings, we need to consider whether such an argument is necessary at all. One reaction to monarchical stability in the academic literature has been to emphasize that the monarchies are skating on thin ice and will soon be subject to the same dynamics that brought down so many of their republican counterparts. Jordan is usually the prime suspect in such discussions, and one can understand why: it is a country that has been perpetually unable to fund itself, reliant on outside patrons to make ends meet. It lost a significant part of its territory in a spectacularly botched war in 1967; it experienced a bitter civil war in 1970-71; and it has been buffeted by regional events for decades, absorbing waves of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, and now Syria. One British ambassador, as early as 1956, described the situation of the monarchy as “hopeless.”<sup>1</sup> King Hussein himself titled his autobiography *Uneasy Lies the Head*.<sup>2</sup> Even now, after demonstrating its resilience through numerous crises, analysts who know the country well often invoke the prospect of its instability to urge outside powers to fork over more money to Amman.<sup>3</sup> The Jordanian monarchy’s political longevity has been called into question so many times over the decades that academic experts on

the country have started treating such predictions as an inside joke.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising that the upheavals of the Arab uprisings have raised questions about the future of the Jordanian monarchy, since almost every regional event raises questions about the future of the Jordanian monarchy. More puzzling are the analyses contending that the Arab Spring also heralds the end of the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Veteran journalist Karen Elliott House wrote in February 2011 that “the U.S. soon may face the staggering consequences of instability” in Saudi Arabia, raising the prospect of “a radical anti-Western regime” in the country.<sup>5</sup> A year later, she published a book-length version of that argument, despite the clear evidence that the Saudi regime had been the least affected of the major Arab states by the Arab uprisings.<sup>6</sup> A more academic version of the case for coming Gulf state instability was made by Christopher Davidson in his book *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*. He writes that the Bahraini and Omani monarchies have obvious problems that will bring them to crisis shortly, and that while Saudi Arabia “may appear more stable than its Bahraini and Omani neighbors...in reality the Saudi system is equally unsustainable and probably

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<sup>1</sup> Ambassador Charles Johnson, quoted by Philip Robins, *A History of Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 213, note 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hussein, King of Jordan, *Uneasy Lies the Head: The Autobiography of His Majesty King Hussein I of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan* (New York: Random House, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> David Schenker, “Saving Jordan’s King Abdullah Must Be a U.S. Priority,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2013, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323829504578267951332697058.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> The collection of essays on Jordan compiled by Marc Lynch is entitled “Jordan, Forever on the Brink,” *Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Briefing* no. 11, May 9, 2012, <[http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/POMEPS\\_BriefBook-let11\\_Jordan\\_Web.pdf](http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/POMEPS_BriefBook-let11_Jordan_Web.pdf)>. It must be noted that the authors in this collection overwhelmingly do not think that the Jordanian monarchy is about to fall.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Elliott House, “From Tunis to Cairo to Riyadh?” *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2011, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704657104576142452195225530.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Elliot House, *On Saudi Arabia* (New York: Knopf, 2012).

prone to implosion within the next couple of years.”<sup>7</sup> Davidson doubled-down on his prediction in a more recent article, saying that “traditional monarchy as a legitimate regime type in the region is soon going to reach the end of its lifespan.”<sup>8</sup>

Both House and Davidson identify real problems facing the Gulf monarchies, some of which I will discuss later in this paper. What is surprising is how quickly they move from analysis of problems to predictions of collapse, simply (it seems) because of the events of the Arab Spring. But those problems they identify – youth unemployment, an increasingly expensive welfare state, rising political activism, divisions within the ruling families – predate the regional crisis of the last few years. If these problems are so severe that they will soon destabilize these monarchies, why did that destabilization not come during the height of regional instability? After all, the monarchies’ citizens were watching Arab regimes crumbling in the face of mass mobilization all around the region. It is one thing to point out problems, which both of them do well. It is another to make the jump immediately to predictions of regime instability when we have just had evidence, in the midst of a serious region-wide crisis for all Arab regimes, of the ability of the monarchs in the Gulf, Jordan, and Morocco to sustain themselves while others were falling. Success cannot be evidence of failure.

Perhaps the greatest threat to regime stability in the oil monarchies would be a significant downturn in the price of oil. (Falling oil prices would also affect Jordanian and Bahraini regime stability, even though they

are not major energy exporters. Both countries’ economies are directly tied to those of the Gulf oil exporters, and both governments rely on direct aid from their Gulf allies.) The oil monarchs, as will be discussed below, all took on new fiscal obligations – increased salaries for government employees, new government jobs, new subsidies, and promises of infrastructure spending – to head off popular discontent during the Arab uprisings.

The “breakeven” price of oil for these countries – the price per barrel that would allow them to fully fund their government budgets – is rising.<sup>9</sup> There is little agreement among analysts on exactly what each Gulf state’s breakeven price is, but none estimate that for any of the monarchies (save Bahrain) it is higher than the current price of oil. The worry for the oil monarchs, then, is that the much-touted energy revolution in the United States will drive oil prices significantly lower over the next few years, below their breakeven prices. Moreover, amid uncertainty about global pricing, the oil monarchies’ export volumes are also in question. They are consuming more and more of their own production domestically – typically at extremely subsidized prices – resulting in pressure to divert exports for domestic consumption and a need for higher export prices to make up the difference.<sup>10</sup>

All these developments are still speculative. What is clear, however, is that the oil monarchies have, at least in the short term, enormous financial reserves, built up over the past decade of high oil prices. For example, Saudi Arabia has nearly \$700 billion in foreign assets under government control, according

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst and Company, 2012), 232-33.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher M. Davidson, “Why the Sheikhs Will Fall,” *Foreign Policy*, April 26, 2013, <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/26/why\\_the\\_sheikhs\\_will\\_fall?page=0.0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/26/why_the_sheikhs_will_fall?page=0.0)>.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Spindle, “Break-Even Oil Price Bogeyman Stalks Gulf Economies,” Middle East Real Time blog of the *Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 2013, <<http://blogs.wsj.com/middleeast/2013/05/28/break-even-oil-price-bogeyman-stalks-gulf-economies/>>.

<sup>10</sup> For a sobering long-term analysis of Saudi domestic oil consumption, see Jadwa Investment, “Saudi Arabia’s coming oil and fiscal challenge,” July 2011, <<http://www.jadwa.com/en/download/oil-fiscal-challenge-july-2011/saudi-arabias-coming-oil-and-fiscal-challenge>>. A summary of the findings can be found in Robin M. Mills, “The Kingdom of Magical Thinking,” *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2011, <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/25/the\\_kingdom\\_of\\_magical\\_thinking](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/25/the_kingdom_of_magical_thinking)>.

to one authoritative estimate. Saudi government spending in 2013 will probably total, according to the same source, about \$230 billion, while Saudi revenue will be approximately \$280 billion.<sup>11</sup> Even if Saudi revenue were to decrease by 30 percent, Riyadh could sustain spending at the current level (even accounting for inflation) for more than a decade just by liquidating these assets. Much as they did in the 1980s – when oil prices fell from over \$30 per barrel to, at one point, under \$10 – the oil monarchs can fund short-term deficits from their reserves.

Should oil prices stay stable or at least avoid a steep decline, the fiscal situation of the oil monarchies seems secure in the near term. None of this is to argue that they face no fiscal problems down the road. Given their new spending obligations, their continually growing populations, their own voracious domestic energy consumption habits, and the uncertainties of the world oil market, they all should be working to avoid a future fiscal crunch. But that crunch looms in the mid-to-long term; it is not an immediate problem. The oil monarchies will not face a serious economic crisis over the next five years, even if oil prices begin to decline. While there are real economic concerns, the problems are not nearly as daunting as those of the transitional Arab states.

Predictions of monarchical instability, in the face of evidence to the contrary, are not a new phenomenon. Every generation since World War II has heard predictions that the Saudi monarchy is not long for this world. Frequently, such predictions were made shortly after a regional upheaval (like the Nasserist wave of the 1950's and the Iranian

Revolution of 1979) that the Saudis, in fact, survived.<sup>12</sup> This reluctance to accept that these regimes have considerable resources – ideological and material – to maintain themselves even in the face of considerable challenges likely stems from the inability of

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***Rather than join the long line of those who have incorrectly predicted the demise of Arab monarchies, we should try to understand how they have held on as long as they have.***

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many to see them as anything but anachronisms. Monarchs who rule rather than reign have exited the scene everywhere else in the world. The Gulf monarchs in particular, with their “traditional” garb, their huge ruling families, and their opaque regimes, seem to be from another age. Given their history, Americans at the popular level tend to be dismissive of monarchy as a political system. All this is understandable, but not analytical. The eight remaining

monarchies in the Arab world do not seem to be going away anytime soon. Rather than join the long line of those who have incorrectly predicted their demise, we should try to understand how they have held on as long as they have.

<sup>11</sup> Jadwa Investment, “Saudi Chartbook,” June 2013, 11, <<http://www.jadwa.com/en/researchsection/research/chart-books>>.

<sup>12</sup> F. Gregory Gause, III, “Saudi Arabia in the New Middle East,” *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report* 63 (December 2011): 3-4.

# THE STRANGE CASE OF MONARCHICAL STABILITY

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How to explain the ability of the Arab monarchies to ride out the storms of the past three years? For many observers, the answer had to be something about the regime type itself. There are two legs to this argument: that Arab monarchs possess a unique cultural legitimacy; and that they have earned their stability through better performance in government – including on political reform – than the republics. The first leg is extremely weak. The second leg is also weak, but in a way that can help us understand the institutional differences between the two kinds of monarchies we see in the Arab world: the individual monarchies (Jordan and Morocco) and the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf.

## CULTURAL LEGITIMACY

This argument is based on the supposed compatibility of monarchy with Arab historical and cultural norms. Simply put, in the Arab world monarchies are “legitimate.” Elliott Abrams, Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Global Democracy in the George W. Bush Administration, wrote that the Arab monarchies are “more legitimate than the false republics... [They] do not have histories of bloody repression and jails filled with political prisoners.”<sup>13</sup> Daniel Brumberg contended that because Arab monarchs exercise power “at some institutional and symbolic distance from the political arena,” they thus “had a crucial advantage over their presidential comrades: they could drape themselves in

the flag of national monarchical patriotism and thus be perceived more widely as legitimate (*and effective*) arbiters of competing social, economic, religious, and ideological interests.”<sup>14</sup> Victor Menaldo argues that Arab monarchs have “‘invented’ a political culture that has helped create a stable distributional arrangement and self-enforcing limits on executive authority,” and that “this unique political culture has provided the region’s monarchs with legitimacy.”<sup>15</sup>

The most cogent argument based on “cultural legitimacy” has been made by Saudi sociologist and political activist Khalid al-Dakhil. He identifies three reasons why monarchies have not been as affected by the upheavals as republics. The first is longevity: with the exception of Jordan, the Arab monarchies have long histories in their countries. The Arab republics, by contrast, are newer creations. The second is that the monarchies are “traditional regimes that emerged from within their traditional societies, by means and factors that are consonant with the structure of these societies.” Because of this, the monarchies have been “more humble” than the republics in terms of trying to direct and change their societies: “The guardianship (*al-wisaya*) of the republican regimes over their societies was clearer, and much more forceful, in comparison to the monarchical regimes.” These two reasons lead to his third: that the monarchical regimes are “closer to the society that they govern” than are the republics.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Elliott Abrams, “Ridding Syria of a Despot,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2011, <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ridding-syria-of-a-despot/2011/03/25/AFSRRVYB\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ridding-syria-of-a-despot/2011/03/25/AFSRRVYB_story.html)>.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Brumberg, “Sustaining Mechanics of Arab Autocracies,” *Foreign Policy*, December 19, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreign-policy.com/posts/2011/12/19/sustaining\\_mechanics\\_of\\_arab\\_autocracies](http://mideast.foreign-policy.com/posts/2011/12/19/sustaining_mechanics_of_arab_autocracies)>.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Menaldo, “The Middle East and North Africa’s Resilient Monarchs,” *Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (July 2012): 709.

<sup>16</sup> Khalid al-Dakhil, “The Position of the Monarchies and Republics in the Scene,” *Al-Hayat*, June 26, 2011, <<http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/281876>>. (Translated from Arabic.)

This argument about monarchical “legitimacy” has something of an academic pedigree. In his influential 1977 book *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy*, Michael Hudson said that the “remarkable persistence” of the monarchies of Arabia (including Jordan but excluding Morocco) “suggests that the legitimacy formula that they embody exhibits greater congruence with socio-cultural values than observers have thought.”<sup>17</sup> Bernard Lewis, the controversial and prolific historian of the region, wrote that through all the changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “the dynastic principle and the practice of hereditary succession remained powerful, deep-rooted and virtually universal in the Islamic Middle East.” He noted that even in the republics, the monarchical principle of hereditary succession was widespread.<sup>18</sup>

The “legitimacy” argument certainly has a *prima facie* appeal. The monarchs of the region spend time and resources to portray themselves as authentic representatives of their cultures. To varying degrees, they emphasize the compatibility of their regimes with their countries’ histories, with Islam, and with tribal traditions. But these portrayals are just that – political constructions meant to convince their subjects and outsiders that their rule is the natural result of history and culture. In fact, Arab monarchies, as currently constructed, are very new kinds of government. In some cases, like Saudi Arabia and Jordan, the regimes are barely a century old. Even in other cases, like Morocco and Oman, where the ruling house can claim a much longer pedigree, the degree of centralized control enjoyed by the monarch is unprecedented. These monarchies are the product of colonial policies that tamed domestic challengers and modern technologies of rule that would have baffled and amazed their predecessors.<sup>19</sup>

We should be careful not to accept regimes’ portrayals of themselves as culturally legitimate as the last word. Legitimacy is an extremely difficult concept to operationalize. How does one know that a regime is legitimate in the eyes of its people? Democratic governments have regular elections to support their claim to a legitimate right to rule (though some real democracies, presumably legitimate, have historically given way to non-democratic regimes). Authoritarian regimes try to appropriate some form of democratic legitimacy through plebiscites, referenda, and managed elections. But monarchies do not make claims to legitimacy based on the popular will. (Once the age of nationalism and democracy began in Europe, its newer monarchs tried to have it both ways. In their official pronouncements, the kings of Italy claimed to rule “by the grace of God and the will of the people.” They did not last very long.)

Certainly, mass uprisings against a monarch bespeak a loss of legitimacy, but, short of that, how can one tell that their people accept or reject these claims? The Shah of Iran’s lack of legitimacy escaped almost all analysts of the country before the revolution that dethroned him in 1979. Elliott Abrams implies that the lack of “bloody repression” in the history of the monarchies demonstrates their legitimacy. However, the record is not nearly so clear.

If the absence of serious upheaval and violence is the test of legitimacy, then the Jordanian monarchy, which has faced numerous trials during its history, including an all-out civil war in 1970-71, fails the test. So would the Omani monarchy, which experienced an extended insurgency in Dhufar in the late 1960s and early 1970s and an earlier challenge from the Ibadhi Imam during the

<sup>17</sup> Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Lewis, “Monarchy in the Middle East,” in *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000), quote on 19.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Anderson, “Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly* 106, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 1-15.



mid-1950s. As would the Moroccan monarchy, subject to numerous coup attempts in the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, the Bahraini monarchy is surviving its own uprising largely through a strategy of repression. And, while it would be wrong to argue that Saudi stability rests solely on the efficiency and ruthlessness of its security sector, it would be a mistake to ignore the role that the security forces in Saudi Arabia and other monarchies have played in dealing with domestic dissent. These are not regimes that have no need of the secret police. If we apply the most stringent test of legitimacy – the idea that no one could conceive of an alternative form of rule – then no monarchy in the Arab world is legitimate. With the arguable exception of Qatar, they have all faced, at one time or another, opposition that called for their demise and the establishment of another form of government.

In the end, the cultural legitimacy argument tends to rest on the number of monarchies in the Middle East, on the assumption that such an anomaly could only be explained by some distinctive cultural component. But the modern history of the region demonstrates that its monarchies are as likely to have fallen as to have survived, calling into question this idea that cultural affinity explains the persistence of the regime type. Ruling monarchs have been overthrown or deposed in Egypt (1952), Tunisia (1957), Iraq (1958), Yemen (1962), Libya (1969), and Iran (1979). The South Arabian Federation was a collection of sheikhs and sultans formed by the British around their colony of Aden in the 1960s that looked quite a bit like the current United Arab Emirates (albeit without oil); it collapsed to a Marxist revolt in 1967. The argument that the extant monarchs are different from the failed ones because their societies are “tribal” certainly does not pass

sociological muster. One could hardly argue that tribalism is unimportant in Iraq, Yemen or Libya, yet monarchies fell in all three.<sup>20</sup>

In the end, the argument that monarchy is somehow a more “legitimate” form of government in the Arab world than elsewhere becomes completely circular. We have no reliable means of judging whether the assertions of religious or tribal or historical legitimacy made by monarchs are accepted by their citizens. Do most of the citizens of Saudi Arabia believe Wahhabi Islam gives the Al Saud family the right to rule them, or that descent from the Prophet Muhammad gives the kings of Jordan and Morocco a similar status in the eyes of most of their people? Even though public opinion polling in the Arab world has advanced considerably in recent years, we would not want to treat as reliable the results to such polling questions, even if governments allowed them to be asked. Thus, without the means to measure a regime’s legitimacy, independent of longevity, its mere persistence becomes the proof of that legitimacy. And then that supposedly proven legitimacy is cited to explain its longevity.

While the Arab Spring launched the recent round of arguments about monarchical legitimacy, the events of the last three years actually present a number of important challenges to their underlying logic. Of the five Arab presidents who have fallen or been severely challenged, three (Mubarak, Qadhafi, and Ali Abdullah Saleh) were expected to transfer power to a son and a fourth (Assad) had inherited his office from his father. If there is one thing that sets monarchies apart from other regime types, it is the inheritance of political office. Yet Arabs in these republics seem to be rejecting the concept of *al-tawarith*, or inherited rule.<sup>21</sup> If monarchy were more

<sup>20</sup> I make this argument in more extended form in my article “The Persistence of Monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula: A Comparative Analysis,” in *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Dina Shehata argues that Mubarak’s effort to install his son Gamal in the presidency was a major reason for his loss of support among Egyptian political elites. “The Fall of the Pharaoh: How Hosni Mubarak’s Regime Came to an End,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

consonant with Arab society than republican forms of government, Arab publics should be *more* accepting of the idea of inherited power, even in non-monarchical systems. Their apparent rejection of al-tawrith calls into question the idea of monarchical legitimacy based on Arab culture.

As regimes are falling and Arabs in a number of countries are rewriting their constitutions, we also see no call for the restoration of monarchs in existing republics. The Libyan rebels appropriated the monarchical flag, but have not called on a descendant of King Idris to return to rule, or even reign, in Tripoli. Egyptians are not clamoring for a grandson of King Farouq to move back into Abdeen Palace. Tunisians are not searching for a descendant of the last bey to reclaim the throne. No party in the Tunisian or Egyptian elections called for the restoration of the monarchy. In Iraq, the constitutional monarchy party of Sharif Ali ibn al-Hussein (a cousin of King Faisal II) contested the first election in January 2005; it earned less than 0.2 percent of the vote and has not since returned to the electoral fray. At a time of institutional change in the Arab world, Arabs are not choosing monarchy as their preferred regime type.

Finally, one of the Arab monarchies did have a serious, regime-shaking crisis in 2011. It is hard to argue that the Bahraini monarchy has survived because the majority of its citizens view it as legitimate. Tens of thousands of Bahrainis took to the streets at the height of the protests in the spring of 2011 to demand

political reform. As a percentage of the total population, the Bahraini mobilization was the largest in the Arab world.<sup>22</sup> While the major Shi'ite opposition group, al-Wefaq, did not demand an end to the monarchy as an institution, it did demand an end to the monarch's and the ruling family's power to govern. In their July 11, 2011, communique, "View of al-Wefaq regarding Reform of the Executive Authority," the group called for "the people to be the source of all authority." To achieve that end, the prime minister must be appointed from the largest bloc in a fairly elected legislature, at least a third of the ministers need to be from the legislature, the government must be approved by parliamentary vote, and the government must have full executive authority.<sup>23</sup> While in this view the king might be able to reign, it would amount to a profound change in the nature of political power in the country, in effect removing the Al Khalifa family from executive authority. Moreover, al-Haqq, the other major Shi'ite political group in Bahrain, explicitly called for the end of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic in March 2011.<sup>24</sup>

Both the history of the last 60 years and the events of the Arab uprisings call into question the argument that monarchy is viewed as a uniquely "legitimate" form of government in the Arab world. Undoubtedly, there are many citizens of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states who believe that their monarchs legitimately govern them. Each of these regimes devotes time and resources to convincing their citizens of that legitimacy. But this is also true of the Arab

<sup>22</sup> The 2010 Bahraini census reports a citizen population of 568,399 and a total population of 1,234,571. The vast majority of the foreign residents are categorized as "Asian." Government of Bahrain, *Census 2010*, <[http://www.census2010.gov.bh/results\\_en.php](http://www.census2010.gov.bh/results_en.php)>. The February 22 "Martyrs' March" demonstration was described by the *New York Times* as "on a scale that appeared to dwarf the largest ever seen in the tiny Persian Gulf nation." The *Times* reported that it "blocked miles of downtown roads and highways in Manama," though it gave no numerical estimate. Sharon Otterman and J. David Goodman, "Hundreds of Thousands Protest across the Middle East," *New York Times*, February 25, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26unrest.html>>. Opposition groups estimated the size of this demonstration at between 100,000 and 200,000. Another *New York Times* report estimated that "at times more than 100,000 people have massed in the streets" during protests in late February and early March 2011. Elisabeth Bumiller and Neil MacFarquhar, "Gates Arrives in Bahrain amid Huge Protests," *New York Times*, March 11, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/12/world/middleeast/12unrest.html>>.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, "A Government for the Nation: the Vision of al-Wefaq for Reforming the Executive Branch," July 7, 2011, <<http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=5728>>. (Translated from Arabic.)

<sup>24</sup> "Bahraini 'Coalition for a Republic' Issues First Statement," *Jadaliyya.com*, March 9, 2011, <<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/839/bahraini-coalition-for-a-republic-issues-first-statement>>.

monarchs who fell in the past and the Arab presidents who have fallen since 2011. It is hard, absent reliable polling data, to establish that the majority of the citizens of the Arab monarchies view them as legitimate forms of government, rather than simply accept them as the form of government under which they live.

## FUNCTIONAL SUPERIORITY: PERFORMANCE AND REFORM

Another line of argument in the recent literature on monarchical stability is that the monarchs are just better at governing. This argument has two elements. The lesser-emphasized part contends that monarchies produce better results for their citizens than do their republican counterparts economically. The more prevalent part argues that monarchies are better able to credibly and effectively institute political reform in the face of mobilized opposition, and thus defuse it. While there are interesting insights generated from both strands of the functional superiority argument, neither in the end is a convincing argument for monarchical stability.

Michael Herb argues that the Arab monarchs “profited from comparisons between their rule and that of the presidents .... And this comparison in particular gave rise to a zeitgeist in the Arab world before the Arab Awakening in which monarchism enjoyed some measure of tolerance as a regime type that produced better results (or at least less-bad results) than the available alternatives.”<sup>25</sup> Victor Menaldo

makes a much more ambitious argument, that the internal checks and balances placed on monarchs by their fellow ruling family members and institutions of elite consultation create limitations on autocratic power and thus encourage stable property rights, investment, and economic growth.<sup>26</sup>

The problem here is disentangling the great wealth of the oil monarchs from the issue of performance. We should not be surprised that Kuwaitis, Qataris, and Emiratis are generally more satisfied than Tunisians, Egyptians, or Syrians, given the enormous disparities in per capita national income. (Menaldo claims to be able to control for oil effects in his work, but his data do not extend to 2011, so they are somewhat less useful in analyzing the specific crisis of the Arab uprisings. He also claims to measure political stability,

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not regime stability. Thus, a regime that experienced very little tumult over the years but was then overthrown would, according to this metric, be a more “stable” regime than one that saw numerous strikes, riots, and disruptions but remained in power.) The hard test for arguments that monarchies deliver the goods better than republics is how the non-oil monarchies – Jordan and Morocco – have fared.

Here the evidence is mixed, but certainly not strongly supportive of the functional superiority thesis. Per capita income in Jordan (estimated at \$5,400 in 2010, based on purchasing power parity) and Morocco (\$4,800 in 2010) was less than that in Egypt (\$6,200 in 2010) and Tunisia (\$9,400 in 2010) on the eve of the revolts of 2011.<sup>27</sup> The GINI index, measuring income

<sup>25</sup> Michael Herb, “Monarchism Matters,” *Foreign Policy*, November 26, 2012, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/26/monarchism\\_matters](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/11/26/monarchism_matters)>.

<sup>26</sup> Menaldo, “The Middle East and North Africa’s Resilient Monarchs,” 711.

<sup>27</sup> Figures take from Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html>>.



inequality on a 100-point scale, of Jordan (33.8 in 2008), Egypt (30.8 in 2008) and Tunisia (36.1 in 2010) are all roughly the same.<sup>28</sup> (Morocco did not report these figures to the World Bank.) At least on this gross measure, Jordan does not seem to have a more equal income distribution than Egypt or Tunisia. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index gives some support to the idea that monarchies provide better governance, with the eight monarchies averaging a score of 5.2 in the 2010 survey (with 10 being perfectly uncorrupt), while nine Arab republics averaged 2.5.<sup>29</sup> However, the relationship between this ranking and regime stability is hardly absolute. Tunisia (4.3) ranked above Morocco (3.4) and very close to Jordan (4.7) in the survey. The Arab world's lowest ranks were held by Sudan (1.6) and Iraq (1.5), countries not caught up in the 2011 upheavals. Given the number of protests in Morocco and Jordan during the Arab Awakening, it would be hard to argue that citizens of these countries were satisfied with the quality of governance there. If some monarchies are better governed than some republics in the Arab world, it would seem that this is because of specific decisions made and policies followed by the leaders, along with general level of wealth, rather than something inherent in regime type.

The more prevalent argument about monarchy's functional superiority in the face of political challenge has to do with monarchs' supposedly greater ability to offer concessions to the opposition which then defuse demands for regime change. Kings, according to this argument, can reform more credibly than presidents. They can do so both because they remain somewhat above the political fray and because they have

untrammelled powers and so are better able to "reform from above" than are presidents. Unlike ruling parties, monarchs can tolerate a wide range of political expression and mediate among various factions without fear of losing their jobs. Because the people do not vote for kings, kings can, in effect, tolerate them voting for lesser offices.<sup>30</sup>

Like the legitimacy argument, the recent functional superiority argument also has a long academic pedigree. It is a variant of the thesis put forward by Lisa Anderson twenty years ago, arguing that monarchy is functionally well-suited to state-building, which requires centralized personal authority able to command military force.<sup>31</sup> Anderson was not arguing that monarchies are better-suited functionally to this task than republics, only that they were just as suited to it and thus had an equal chance to succeed at it as their republican neighbors. In later work she argued that monarchs are perhaps better-suited than secular nationalists to deal with the "ambivalence and ambiguity of political identity in the region," as the monarch's claim to rule is not tied to a narrow notion of national identity. The monarch is well-suited to preside over a society characterized by a mosaic of communities – Berber and Arabic speakers, Christians and Jews as well as both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, various tribes and clans – because the monarch stands above them all.<sup>32</sup> Implicitly, a monarch that stands above society can allow social forces to compete for power against each other, since the victory or defeat of any one group will not affect the position of the monarch. Michael Herb developed Anderson's implicit argument about a monarch's ability to permit greater political contestation, perhaps even democratic contestation. Arab monarchs are more likely to be both willing and able to

<sup>28</sup> World Bank, online comparative data generator, <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>>.

<sup>29</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2010*, <[http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2010/results](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results)>.

<sup>30</sup> See Herb, "Monarchism Matters," and Marina Ottaway and Marwan Muasher, *Arab Monarchies: Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2011, <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/arab\\_monarchies1.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/arab_monarchies1.pdf)>.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, "Absolutism and the Resilience of Monarchy in the Middle East."

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Anderson, "Dynasts and Nationalists: Why Monarchies Survive," in *Middle East Monarchies*, ed. Kostiner, quote from 66. Brumberg, "Sustaining Mechanics of Arab Autocracies," makes a similar argument as well.

introduce political reform than Arab presidents, Herb contended, because they are less threatened by real elections than presidents who rely upon the façade of popular sovereignty.<sup>33</sup>

There is something to this argument, but it is not applicable across all our cases of monarchy. Where individual monarchs rule in Morocco and Jordan, they have been able to take steps to deflect popular discontent like firing their prime ministers and instituting cautious political reforms. Those steps have probably (it is hard to say definitively) contributed to the ability of those regimes to stay in power. However, in the “dynastic” monarchies of the Gulf, we see neither serious political reform nor the kinds of cabinet changes that have characterized Jordan’s reaction to the Arab revolutions.<sup>34</sup> On the contrary, most of the Gulf states have witnessed greater limitations on political freedoms than they enjoyed before and, in the case of Bahrain, a reliance on coercion to suppress popular demands for reform. They certainly have not seen greater moves toward more democratic governance.

This difference among the monarchies is because the dynastic monarchs are in a very different structural position than the kings of Jordan and Morocco. With the partial exception of the Sultan of Oman, the Gulf’s kings and emirs rule at the head of large families that share in executive authority through cabinet and other positions. The ruler cannot simply replace the prime minister when discontent rises, either because he is the prime minister (Saudi Arabia, Oman) or the prime minister is his nephew, uncle or cousin. About one-third of the cabinet positions in each of the GCC states, including many of the most important ones, are held by ruling family members. In Oman, the Sultan personally holds not just the premiership, but also the portfolios of the foreign ministry,

defense ministry and finance ministry; he also acts as head of the central bank. The nature of dynastic monarchy constrains the rulers in these systems to such an extent that, for the purposes of the argument about monarchy and political reform, we need to see these two forms of monarchy as different regime types.

Herb argues persuasively that the dynastic element of the Gulf monarchies helps to explain their longevity. They are not “one-bullet” regimes. The extended family serves as a built-in intelligence service and a functional “ruling party,” maintaining networks within the population and keeping the rulers informed of currents in public opinion.<sup>35</sup> But now the dynastic character of these monarchies is an impediment to political reform. Changing the cabinet in response to public and parliamentary pressure means undercutting the monarch’s primary constituency, his own family, and perhaps even undermining his family’s rule. This point was dramatically demonstrated in Bahrain in 2011. Removal of his uncle, the prime minister, at the outset of the popular protests might have allowed the King to deflect and contain the mobilization for political change. But he was either unwilling or unable to do so. Making the government directly responsible to and composed from parliament, as demanded by the opposition in Bahrain and Kuwait, directly threatens the extended family’s right to rule. The structural imperatives of dynastic monarchy are now running directly against the regional trend for greater public participation in politics and greater democratic limits on executive power.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Herb, “Princes and Parliaments in the Arab World,” *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 3 (July 2004).

<sup>34</sup> The term was coined by Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Revolution, Absolutism and Democracy in Middle East Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Herb, *All in the Family*, Chapters 1 and 9.

# MONARCHICAL POLITICAL REFORM: INDIVIDUAL V. DYNASTIC MONARCHIES

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An examination of how the Arab monarchies have reacted to the challenges of the Arab Spring demonstrates this important institutional difference between the individual and dynastic systems.

## THE INDIVIDUAL MONARCHIES

Neither Morocco nor Jordan has become a full-fledged constitutional monarchy in response to the protests and demands for reform that both experienced during the Arab uprisings. In both cases, the king has retained most, if not all, of his executive powers and his central role in the system. But both Muhammad VI of Morocco and Abdullah II of Jordan have been able to take steps in the direction of greater parliamentary power and democratic reform in response to the pressures from below, helping to secure their thrones when republican leaders around them were falling.

Muhammad VI moved with alacrity as protests began in Morocco in February 2011. On March 9, 2011, in a nationally-televised address, he appointed a commission to recommend constitutional changes, promising that among those changes would be a guarantee that the leader of the largest party in parliament would be called upon to form the government. (Appointment of the prime minister had been a prerogative of the king.) On July 1, 2011, the new constitution – including the change regarding appointment of the prime minister – was approved

overwhelmingly in a popular referendum. The new constitution was ambiguous about the exact role of the monarch in the political system, but it maintained his role as head of state and commander of the armed forces; confirmed his right to dismiss governments and parliaments; and sustained his historic title of “commander of the faithful” and his role as the leader of the country’s Islamic institutions. On the other hand, the new constitution is replete with democratic language and guarantees the rights of NGOs and civil associations to petition the government.<sup>36</sup>

The King’s quick reform move took the momentum out of the Moroccan street protests. Though sporadic demonstrations continued, they had neither the numbers nor the reach of the February 2011 protests. Political action focused more on the November 2011 parliamentary elections, the first to be held under the new constitution. Some of the protest movement leaders urged a boycott; turnout was 45 percent, higher than in the previous parliamentary election of 2007 but hardly a ringing endorsement of the new reforms.<sup>37</sup> Still, the King’s constitutional reforms and the elections had redirected the country’s political energies away from the streets. The Islamist Justice and Development Party won a plurality of the seats (107 of 395, with about 23 percent of the vote). In accordance with the new constitution, the King appointed the party’s leader, Abdelilah Benkirane, as prime minister.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Silverstein, “Weighing Morocco’s New Constitution,” Middle East Research and Information Project, July 5, 2011, <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070511>>.

<sup>37</sup> Daphne McCurdy, “Morocco’s New Elections, Same as the Old Elections?” *Foreign Policy*, November 28, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/28/moroccos\\_new\\_elections\\_just\\_like\\_the\\_old\\_elections\\_0](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/28/moroccos_new_elections_just_like_the_old_elections_0)>.

The performance of Benkirane's government in the ensuing year and a half has demonstrated that the constitutional changes of 2011 have not led to a significant shift in real power in Morocco. The prime minister has not challenged the monarch on any significant issue. Palace officials continue to intervene in matters of state that in a European constitutional monarchy would be the sole preserve of the government.<sup>38</sup> Muhammad VI thus deftly undercut the protest movement while maintaining the core powers of the monarchy. The constitutional change of 2011 that obliges him to appoint the leader of the largest parliamentary party as prime minister might come to be seen as the first step on Morocco's road to real constitutional monarchy. But, as of yet, his reforms seem more a tactical victory for regime stability than the beginning of real political reform.

Jordan's King Abdullah II reacted more cautiously to the protests in his country than did his sharifian colleague in Morocco. In the time-honored Jordanian royal tradition of crisis management, Abdullah fired his prime minister in February 2011 and then fired his replacement in October 2011. The third Jordanian prime minister of the Arab Spring, respected international jurist Awn al-Khasawneh, suddenly resigned his position in April 2012, frustrated in his

inability to implement political reform. His replacement was then himself replaced in October 2012. In the two and a half years of Arab Spring protests, Jordan has seen five different prime ministers and six governments. Meanwhile, protests have become a regular occurrence, not only in Amman but also in smaller cities like Kerak and Maan that have historically been bedrocks of support for the Hashemite monarchy.<sup>39</sup>

While keeping the music playing for the traditional game of prime ministerial musical chairs, the King also promised more substantive political reforms. He appointed a commission to recommend constitutional and legal amendments, which returned a set of recommendations that fell short of even the modest reforms adopted in Morocco. In

a June 2011 speech, the King said that Jordan would work towards a system where the head of the largest bloc in parliament would become prime minister; he declined, however, to specify a timetable for that reform.<sup>40</sup> The electoral law was modified on the margins, but the core of the electoral system, with each voter casting a single ballot for his or her district's representa-

tive in parliament, remained unchanged. Advocates of political reform have regularly called for multiple votes for each voter, so the voters can support clan and tribal allies with

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*As of yet, Muhammad VI's real reforms seem more a tactical victory for regime stability than the beginning of real political reform.*

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<sup>38</sup> Maati Monjib, "All the King's Islamists," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 20, 2012, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/09/20/all-king-s-islamists/dvbw>>; David Pollock, "Is Morocco a Model or a Mirage?" Al-Monitor, March 12, 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/morocco-king-mohammed-reforms-islamists-pjd.html>>; Andrew Hammond, "Moroccan Opposition Says Monarchy Still Calls the Shots," Reuters, December 10, 2012, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/10/us-morocco-king-islamists-idUSBRE8B90US20121210>>.

<sup>39</sup> Rana F. Sweis, "Jordan Treads Softly Amid Rising Protests," *New York Times*, July 4, 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/05/world/middleeast/05iht-m05-jordan-reform.html?smid=pl-share>>; Jodi Rudoren, "Riots Erupt Across Jordan over Gas Prices," *New York Times*, November 13, 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/world/middleeast/jordan-faces-protests-after-gas-price-proposal.html?smid=pl-share>>; Kareem Fahim, "As Elections Near, Protestors in Jordan Increasingly Turn Anger Toward the King," *New York Times*, January 21, 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/22/world/middleeast/as-elections-near-protesters-in-jordan-increasingly-turn-anger-toward-the-king.html?smid=pl-share>>.

<sup>40</sup> Sean L. Yom, "Jordan's Fictional Reforms," *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/09/jordans\\_fictional\\_reforms](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/09/jordans_fictional_reforms)>; Sean L. Yom, "Jordan Goes Morocco," *Foreign Policy*, August 19, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/19/jordan\\_goes\\_morocco](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/08/19/jordan_goes_morocco)>; and Shadi Hamid and Courtney Freer, "How Stable is Jordan? King Abdullah's Half-Hearted Reforms and the Challenge of the Arab Spring," Brookings Doha Center Policy Briefing, November 2011, <[http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/11/jordan%20hamid%20freer/10\\_jordan\\_hamid\\_freer](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/11/jordan%20hamid%20freer/10_jordan_hamid_freer)>.



one vote and support a political party with another. While the new electoral law nodded toward a greater role for parties, setting aside 27 seats to be elected by proportional representation by party, the vast majority of the seats are still apportioned by the single-vote, district method. While the King called for a stronger party system, he was unwilling to risk moves to empower parties this time around.<sup>41</sup>

The only significant political party in Jordan, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), read the tea leaves and chose to boycott the January 2013 elections, protesting what it saw as the lack of serious political reform in the electoral law. The IAF, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, had boycotted the previous election in 2010 on much the same grounds.<sup>42</sup> So, rather than being a true electoral test of Islamist political strength in the Arab Spring, as the Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan, and Moroccan elections had been, the Jordanian parliamentary poll became more about whether the palace could turn out a decent number of voters against the Brotherhood's boycott call (which was joined by some other, more secular political groups). The results could be termed a draw. The government reported turnout of 56 percent of registered voters, which it chose to spin as a victory.<sup>43</sup>

The new parliament looked remarkably like the old parliament. It elected a speaker, Saed Hayel Srour, who had held the chair six times previously. After extensive consultations among the parliamentary blocs that formed after the election – encouraged by the King as a sign of increased parliamentary input into the formation of the government – the

sitting prime minister, Abdullah Ensour, was reappointed.<sup>44</sup> Not much changed in Jordan. But that might have been the intention of Abdullah II all along.<sup>45</sup> It remains to be seen whether the new parliament will live up to the King's promises of political and administrative reform.

Both Muhammad VI and Abdullah II stepped nimbly around the challenges presented by the Arab uprisings. While protests continue in both countries (more often in Jordan than in Morocco) and both governments face serious economic problems (exacerbated in Jordan by the inflow of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees), it appears that neither monarchy is now at risk of falling in the near term. I will discuss in greater detail later the factors that can account for monarchical longevity in these two cases. Here it is enough to say that these individual monarchs were able, because of the institutional advantages their particular type of monarchy afforded them, to deflect, coopt, and rechannel public anger in ways that their dynastic monarchical colleagues could not. They offered limited elements of political reform (while keeping ultimate power in their own hands). Both held parliamentary elections. Both changed governments. In Morocco, the king appointed an Islamist prime minister, after his party won a plurality in parliamentary elections. In Jordan, the king fired four prime ministers and presided over the formation of six governments. These political maneuvers absorbed enough of the energies of their populations to head off whatever prospects there might have been for more serious regime challenges.

<sup>41</sup> Danya Greenfield, "Jordan King Launches 'White Revolution'," *Al-Monitor*, February 14, 2013, <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/02/jordan-king-abdullah-ii-white-revolution.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> "Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood to Boycott Early Elections," *BBC*, July 13, 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18825221>>.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Lynch reported, after an interview with Jordan's foreign minister, that "the Palace is clearly feeling its oats on reform after the election, and thinks it has a positive story to sell at home and abroad." "Debating Jordan's Challenges," *Foreign Policy*, February 18, 2013, <[http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/02/18/debating\\_jordans\\_challenges](http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/02/18/debating_jordans_challenges)>.

<sup>44</sup> Curtis Ryan, "Elections, Parliament and a 'New' Prime Minister in Jordan," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2013, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/11/elections\\_parliament\\_and\\_a\\_new\\_prime\\_minister\\_in\\_jordan](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/11/elections_parliament_and_a_new_prime_minister_in_jordan)>.

<sup>45</sup> Sean L. Yom, "Jordan: The Ruse of Reform," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 2013).

## THE DYNASTIC MONARCHIES

The dynastic monarchs in the Gulf also successfully survived the upheavals of the Arab Spring, but their strategies were, of necessity, very different from those of Morocco and Jordan. The dynastic regimes could not play the political reform game of government changes and electoral reforms because government changes and new powers for parliament would have directly challenged the ruling families' right to govern. Whereas King Abdullah II could fire four prime ministers without anyone thinking that this was a derogation of royal power, firing the prime minister in Saudi Arabia would mean the king firing himself. In Bahrain, it would mean the king firing his uncle; in Qatar, the emir firing his cousin; and in Kuwait, the emir firing his nephew (which did happen, but only after almost a year of political maneuvering, to be replaced by another member of the ruling family). Whereas King Muhammad VI could appoint an Islamist prime minister after that party won a plurality in the parliament, for any of the dynastic monarchs of the Gulf to appoint a commoner prime minister because that politician had the support of parliament would mean that his own family would cease to control the major cabinet positions. Structurally, the leeway for political reform available to the individual monarchs was not available to the dynastic monarchs.

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All of the Gulf monarchs recognized that the Arab revolutions were raising expectations and demands for political participation among their citizens as well, even if they were not out on the streets as they were in Bahrain and, at times, in Kuwait. Saudi Arabia held municipal elections in late September 2011 that had been postponed from 2009, though turnout nationally was below 40 percent of registered voters, who accounted for only about one-third of potentially eligible voters, and even lower in major cities.<sup>46</sup> Previous emir of Qatar Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani declared that long-promised elections to parliament would be held in the second half of 2013;<sup>47</sup> and then those elections were postponed again for three more years when the Emir abdicated in 2013 and handed power over to his son Tamim. The UAE held elections with a broader franchise to the Federal National Council in September 2011, though one newspaper described them as a “damp squib.”<sup>48</sup>

But the more prevalent reaction of the dynastic monarchs to the popular mobilizations of the Arab Spring has been to call out the police and to crack down on political dissent. Bahrain's use of force to disperse the protestors in Pearl Roundabout on February 17, 2011, is well known, and clashes have occurred regularly in the period since the mass popular mobilization was crushed.<sup>49</sup> Oman stepped up arrests in 2012 of online activists and those calling for political reform, accusing them of “insulting the sultan.”<sup>50</sup> (In

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<sup>46</sup> *Al-Hayat* (Saudi local edition), October 2, 2011, <<http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/313914>>; “Low Turnout in Saudi Arabia's Local Polls,” Al Jazeera Online, September 29, 2011, <<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/09/20119298149855126.html>>.

<sup>47</sup> Habib Toumi, “Qatar to Hold Parliamentary Elections in 2013,” *Gulf News*, November 2, 2011, <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/qatar-to-hold-parliamentary-elections-in-2013-1.921954>>.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Peel and Camilla Hall, “UAE Poll Attracts Low Turnout,” *Financial Times*, September 26, 2011, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5e4c1aea-e75e-11e0-9da3-00144feab49a.html#ixzz1Z4XAQ2hd>>.

<sup>49</sup> As recently as March 2013, the major Shi'ite opposition group al-Wefaq reported that 35 protestors were injured in clashes with security forces. “35 Injured in Bahrain Unrest,” *Saudi Gazette*, March 15, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Peter Salisburry, “Insulting the Sultan,” *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2012, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/19/insulting\\_the\\_sultan\\_in\\_oman](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/19/insulting_the_sultan_in_oman)>.

characteristic fashion, Sultan Qaboos pardoned most of those arrested in 2013.<sup>51</sup>) In Kuwait – the Gulf monarchy with the longest history of relative freedom of political speech – 25 people, including three former members of parliament, have been arrested in 2013 for “insulting the emir” in speeches or in social media. The Kuwaiti government has proposed a new media law that would fine those found guilty of insulting the emir or senior government officials up to \$1 million.<sup>52</sup> In mid-April 2013, former member of parliament Musallam al-Barrak, the leading vote-getter in the May 2009 and February 2012 elections, was sentenced by a Kuwaiti court to five years in jail for insulting the emir.<sup>53</sup> (His sentence was later overturned on appeal, with an order for a re-trial.<sup>54</sup>)

Saudi Arabia’s security forces have confronted Shi’a protestors in the country’s Eastern Province on numerous occasions, though without using such overwhelming force as to mobilize larger demonstrations.<sup>55</sup> The Saudi government implemented a stringent new press law in late April 2011, constraining the already limited amount of

freedom enjoyed by Saudi newspaper writers, a step that led to mild criticism of the government from the Saudi press itself – a most unusual occurrence.<sup>56</sup> Activists have been arrested at various times in Saudi Arabia since the outbreak of the Arab Spring; most recently, in March 2013, two advocates of political reform, Abdullah al-Hamid and Muhammad al-Qahtani, were sentenced to long prison terms.<sup>57</sup>

The United Arab Emirates arrested 94 Emirati political activists associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and placed them on trial in early 2013, accusing them of conspiring against the state.<sup>58</sup> In July 2013, 68 of those 94 were convicted and sentenced to prison terms.<sup>59</sup> In June 2013, authorities announced that another 30 Emiratis and Egyptians would be tried on similar charges.<sup>60</sup> These steps came after a series of arrests and crackdowns during 2011-12 that targeted Brotherhood members and others calling for political reform and that further tightened what was already one of the most constrained media environments in the region.<sup>61</sup> The UAE authorities also closed the local offices

<sup>51</sup> “Oman Ruler Pardons Jailed Dissidents,” Al Jazeera Online, March 23, 2013, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/03/201332363737987137.html>>.

<sup>52</sup> “Kuwaitis Rally Against Arrests, Call for Reform,” Reuters, April 10, 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/10/kuwait-politics-rally-idUSL5N0CX4BM20130410>>.

<sup>53</sup> Kareem Fahim, “Kuwait Gives 5-Year Term to Dissenter,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2013, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/16/world/middleeast/kuwait-gives-5-year-term-to-dissenter.html?smid=pl-share>>.

<sup>54</sup> “Barrak Jail Term Quashed; Kuwaiti Opposition Vows Poll Boycott,” *Kuwait Times*, May 28, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> By the end of 2012, at least 14 people had been killed in the Eastern Province during protests. “Saudi Arabia: Sweeping Injustices,” Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2013, <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/31/saudi-arabia-sweeping-injustices>>. See also Frederic Wehrey, “Eastern Promises,” Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 12, 2013, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/02/12/eastern-promises/ffnh>>.

<sup>56</sup> On the press law, see “Saudi King Tightens Media Restrictions,” *Kuwait Times*, May 1, 2011. On the criticism, see the columns by Abd al-Aziz al-Suwayd and Badriyya al-Bishr in *al-Hayat* (Saudi edition), May 2, 2011, <<http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/262003>> and <<http://ksa.daralhayat.com/ksaarticle/262009>>.

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed Al Omran, “Saudi Activists Silenced and the U.S. is Silent,” *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2013, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/11/saudi\\_activists\\_silenced\\_and\\_the\\_us\\_is\\_silent](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/11/saudi_activists_silenced_and_the_us_is_silent)>.

<sup>58</sup> Abdullah al-Rashid, “The Brothers and the Emirates,” *Al-Majalla*, February 14, 2013, <<http://www.majalla.com/eng/2013/02/article55238281>>; Lori Plotkin Boghardt, “The Muslim Brotherhood on Trial in the UAE,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Watch* 2064 (April 12, 2013), <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muslim-brotherhood-on-trial-in-the-uae>>.

<sup>59</sup> “UAE Islamists Convicted for Plotting Government Coup,” BBC, July 2, 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23142248>>.

<sup>60</sup> Yara Bayoumy, “UAE Will Try 30 Emiratis, Egyptians for Illegal Brotherhood Cell,” Reuters, June 19, 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-emirates-egypt-idUSBRE95111N20130619>>.

<sup>61</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “The UAE: Holding Back the Tide,” *Open Democracy*, August 5, 2012, <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/uae-holding-back-tide>>; Christopher Davidson, “The United Arab Emirates: Frontiers of the Arab Spring,” *Open Democracy*, September 8, 2012, <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/christopher-m-davidson/united-arab-emirates-frontiers-of-arab-spring>>.

of the National Democratic Institute and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, American and German quasi-governmental organizations promoting political freedom and reform.<sup>62</sup> Even in normally placid Qatar, which projects an international image of both stability and openness, a poet was jailed in 2011 and subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment for “insulting the emir” after circulating a poem supporting the Arab uprisings.<sup>63</sup>

While Jordan and Morocco made tentative openings in their political systems in reaction to the Arab uprisings, the dynastic monarchs have taken the opposite tack. But they have few options on this score if they want to preserve their systems of extended family rule. The experiences of the two Gulf states with real elected parliaments, Bahrain and Kuwait, demonstrate the dilemma the rulers face. Now, the political circumstances in the two states are very different. Bahrain experienced a massive popular mobilization and a regime-shaking crisis in February 2011. Its politics are depressingly polarized between the Shi’ite majority and the Sunni ruling family. In Kuwait, the regime has faced its share of street protests, but politics have not divided along sectarian lines. The Shi’ite minority has excellent relations with the ruling family. There have been no serious calls for the end of the monarchy. Yet in both cases the ruling families are facing the same demand – for a government that is responsible to and formed from an elected parliament. They are taking roughly the same position toward such demands:

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a willingness to talk to the opposition but not to compromise on the principle that the extended family, not the parliament, rules the country.

The Bahraini story is better known than the Kuwaiti because it is so dramatic. As the demonstrations gained momentum in Manama during February and early March 2011, the

United States publicly urged King Hamad to come to some accommodation with the opposition.<sup>64</sup> On March 13, Crown Prince Salman, the King’s son, called for an end to threats to the security and stability of the country and offered talks with the opposition on seven points, including “an elected parliament with full vested powers and prerogatives, a government reflecting the will of the people, [and] fairly demarcated electoral constituencies.”<sup>65</sup> While

it is not clear from the Crown Prince’s statement that a full move to constitutional monarchy – with a government subject to and drawn from parliament – was on the table, the issues he proposed for discussion were those on which the mainstream opposition groups (i.e., those not calling for a republic) were demanding change. On March 14, at the request of the King, Saudi and other GCC forces entered Bahrain to support Bahraini security forces in dispersing the protesters in Manama’s Pearl Roundabout. That operation began on March 16. The mainstream opposition groups expressed willingness to meet with the Crown Prince based on his seven-point proposal, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East Jeffrey Feltman,

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<sup>62</sup> Steven Lee Myers, “United Arab Emirates Shuts U.S.-Backed Group,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2012, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/world/middleeast/uae-shuts-american-democracy-building-group.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Simeon Kerr, “Qatari Poet Jailed for ‘Insulting Emir,’” *Financial Times*, November 29, 2012, <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/41246042-3a2f-11e2-a00d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2XL42Lfeo>>.

<sup>64</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, “Gates Tells Bahrain’s King that ‘Baby Steps’ to Reform Aren’t Enough,” *New York Times*, March 12, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13military.html>>.

<sup>65</sup> Habib Toumi, “National Dialogue to Discuss Issues: Bahrain Crown Prince,” *Gulf News*, March 14, 2011, <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/national-dialogue-to-discuss-issues-bahrain-crown-prince-1.776317>>.



who was in Bahrain, tried on March 14 and 15 to broker a meeting. But once the security operation had begun, there was no response from the government. Elements in the Al Khalifa ruling family opposed to constitutional reforms that might take away their power had won the day.<sup>66</sup>

Since that dramatic turn, the dynamic in Bahrain has remained the same. The mainstream opposition, which includes the Shi'ite Islamist group al-Wefaq along with a number of smaller liberal and leftist groups, has reiterated its calls for a government elected either directly or indirectly by the people – a parliamentary government formed from the parliamentary majority. They expressed this as their first demand in the Manama Declaration of October 2011 and have reiterated it ever since.<sup>67</sup> The Al Khalifa ruling family, split into factions more and less willing to engage with the opposition, has initiated “national dialogues” (in July 2011 and April 2013) and offered the occasional olive branch. It has not, however, been willing to accept the central demand of a government responsible to parliament and staffed by elected officials.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, the level of violence in the country remains below that which would paralyze it, but consistent enough to call into question whether a stable political outcome can be achieved.<sup>69</sup>

In Kuwait, the political situation is not nearly as fraught as in Bahrain. Violence is rarely used, either by the state or by protesters. Political splits are not reinforced by

sectarian divisions; those opposing the policies of the Al Sabah ruling family are largely Sunni, as is the family itself. (The country's Shi'ite minority is more aligned with the Al Sabah than with the opposition.) But a key demand of those in opposition is the same as in Bahrain – a prime minister and government from the elected parliament, not from the ruling family.

Kuwaiti politics has been characterized by repeated stand-offs between the cabinet and the elected parliament since the current emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, succeeded his brother Jaber in January 2006. Since then, there have been eleven governments and six parliamentary elections, as the Emir and the relatives he has appointed to leading positions in the government have not been able to either cooperate with parliament or secure majority support within it. Sheikh Sabah appointed his nephew Nasser al-Muhammad to form seven governments between his ascension and November 2011. Meanwhile, parliamentarians were crossing previous red lines, calling for confidence votes on senior ruling family members in the government and, eventually, on the prime minister himself. Finally, in the face of public outrage over alleged bribes by the government paid to members of parliament (expressed through very large demonstrations outside the parliament building and the storming of the parliament building on November 16, 2011), Sheikh Nasser submitted his resignation for the seventh time in November 2011.<sup>70</sup> The Emir then appointed another senior member

<sup>66</sup> Caryle Murphy, “Bahrain Becomes Flashpoint in Relations Between US and Saudi Arabia,” *Global Post*, April 13, 2011, <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/110411/bahrain-saudi-arabia-protests-pearl-roundabout?page=full>>.

<sup>67</sup> For an English text of the Manama Declaration, see <<http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=5934>>. See also note 19 for an early statement of this demand by al-Wefaq. For the most recent statement of the demand by al-Wefaq, see their statement on the appointment of the Crown Prince as deputy prime minister issued on March 11, 2013, <<http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=7648>>.

<sup>68</sup> On the splits within the Al Khalifa, see Anthony Shadid, “Bahrain is Nervously Awaiting Report on its Forgotten Revolt,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/22/world/middleeast/bahrain-nervously-awaits-revolt-reports-findings.html>>; Charles Levinson, “A Palace Rift in Persian Gulf Bedevils Key U.S. Navy Base,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2013, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324595704578239441790926074.html>>; and Justin J. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism, the Khawlid and the Securitization of ‘the Shia problem’ in Bahrain,” *Journal of Arabian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (June 2013).

<sup>69</sup> For a recent assessment of the violence in Bahrain, see Laurence Louer, “Talks of Hope?” *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 19, 2013, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/02/19/talks-of-hope/f6u>>.

<sup>70</sup> A good summary of these events can be found in Kristin Smith Diwan, “Kuwait's Constitutional Showdown,” *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/17/kuwaits\\_constitutional\\_showdown](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/17/kuwaits_constitutional_showdown)>.

of the ruling family, former defense minister Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak, as prime minister. He has subsequently formed four more governments in the ensuing year and a half.

To break the political stalemate, the Emir dissolved parliament and called for new elections in February 2012, which were dominated by critics of the government. While the corruption issue certainly played a major role in their victory, the opposition was also pushing for greater parliamentary power vis-à-vis the government.<sup>71</sup> Some members of parliament called publicly for commoners to be appointed to key government posts like deputy prime minister and interior minister. The opposition bloc demanded that nine of the sixteen cabinet posts go to parliament members, which Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak refused to accept.<sup>72</sup> After numerous rows between the government and the parliament, Sheikh Sabah suspended parliament for one month in June 2012.

While parliament was suspended, the Kuwaiti constitutional court ruled the Emir's dissolution of parliament in November 2011 was unconstitutional, thus voiding the subsequent February 2012 election. In response, opposition parliamentarians began calling for constitutional amendments to establish a "full parliamentary system."<sup>73</sup> Demonstrations were held calling for a fully elected government; banners reading "sovereignty belongs to the people" were raised.<sup>74</sup> Opposition leader Musallam al-Barrak, during an October 2012 protest, directly addressed the Emir, crossing another red line, telling him that "we will not allow you, your highness,

to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy."<sup>75</sup> When the government, in the absence of parliament, adopted changes to the electoral law (reducing the number of votes each voter could cast in the 10-member parliamentary districts from four to one) and called for new elections, the opposition organized on October 21, 2012, what appeared to be the largest protest in the country's history, with marchers chanting, "We will not allow you." The march was met by security forces with tear gas and batons, a show of force unusual for Kuwait.<sup>76</sup> The opposition boycotted the December 2012 parliamentary elections and organized a number of large protests against it in November.

Politics in Kuwait remain stalemated. The government remains in the hands of senior members of the ruling family. Further dysfunction in the relationship between parliament and the government is likely; even the most recent parliament, the product of an opposition boycott of the polls, proved less cooperative with the government than expected, and new elections were held in late July 2013. As with the Al Khalifa in Bahrain, the core issue of ruling family control of the government is something the Al Sabah are not willing to compromise.

Whereas in Jordan and Morocco the kings could deflect political mobilization by appointing new commoner prime ministers, who (at least theoretically) could mobilize majority support in parliament, that political maneuver is not available to the dynastic monarchs of the Gulf. Gulf kings and emirs could become more like their friends

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<sup>71</sup> Gwenn Okruhlik, "The Identity Politics of Kuwait's Election," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2012, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/08/the\\_identity\\_politics\\_of\\_kuwait\\_s\\_election](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/02/08/the_identity_politics_of_kuwait_s_election)>.

<sup>72</sup> Ghanim al-Najjar, "Is Kuwait Out of the Impasse?" Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 8, 2012, <[http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=47427&solr\\_hilite](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=47427&solr_hilite)>.

<sup>73</sup> "Kuwaiti Lawmakers Call for 'Full Parliamentary System'," *Kuwait Times*, June 23, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Hamid al-Jasir, "The Kuwaiti Opposition Has Begun a Protest Campaign Against Political Autocracy," *Al-Hayat*, August 29, 2012, <<http://alhayat.com/Details/430051>> (translated from Arabic); Sylvia Westall, "Kuwaitis Protest Ahead of Electoral Law Ruling," Reuters, September 24, 2012, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/24/us-kuwait-politics-rally-idUSBRE88N12920120924>>.

<sup>75</sup> "Kuwait's Emir Warned at Opposition Protest," BBC, October 16, 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19964068>>.

<sup>76</sup> Kristin Smith Diwan, "Kuwait's Balancing Act," *Foreign Policy*, October 23, 2012, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/23/kuwait\\_s\\_balancing\\_act](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/10/23/kuwait_s_balancing_act)>.

in Jordan and Morocco, but that would mean that their relatives would lose their jobs and their political power. Since the first constituency of any dynastic monarch is his own family, proposing political reforms that would vastly decrease family power is likely to excite opposition not just to the reforms, but possibly to the ruler himself. The fall from grace of Bahraini Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad within the Al Khalifa after he put real political reform on the table for discussion, is an indication of the potential fate of Gulf monarchical reformers. It would take a strong figure to bring his family to heel and accept such a reduced political role. At present, with the exception of Oman, none of the Gulf monarchies are led by a figure with that kind of clout within his own family.<sup>77</sup>

The argument that Arab monarchs are structurally better able to institute real political reform than their republican colleagues turns out to be correct only for a certain kind of monarchy, where the king rules as an individual. Where extended families rule, real political reform – that is, governments formed from and responsible to elected parliaments – will be much harder to achieve.

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<sup>77</sup> Oman holds an interesting middle position between the dynastic monarchies and the individual monarchies. The Sultan of Oman governs in the name of his extended Al Said family, but he has not included them in his government. However, he also has not turned government over to commoners, as the kings of Morocco and Jordan have. He personally holds the state's most important positions, including prime minister, minister of foreign affairs, minister of defense, minister of finance, and head of the central bank. In the face of protests during the Arab Spring, Sultan Qaboos made a number of reform gestures that went beyond those of his fellow GCC monarchs, while not calling into question his monopolization of ultimate power. On Sultan Qaboos' steps to deal with the protests he faced in 2011, see Ra'id Zuhair al-Jamali, "Oman, Kind of Not Quiet?" *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2011, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/07/kind\\_of\\_not\\_quiet](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/11/07/kind_of_not_quiet)>.

# EXPLAINING MONARCHICAL STABILITY

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Given that the Arab monarchies themselves are not a single regime type, it is not surprising that they pursued different strategies for regime survival in the Arab Spring. The individual monarchs could offer more on the political reform front; the dynastic monarchs relied more on oil wealth and coercion. The key to understanding why the monarchs were able to hold on is to be found in the coalitions they have formed to support their rule. These coalitions differ by country; there is not an ideal-type “monarchical coalition” undergirding every Arab monarchy. Over time, the nature of the coalitions can change. Those coalitions can also degrade, as the fallen monarchs of the past and the deposed presidents of today have found out. But to answer the question of why the Arab monarchies were able to survive the Arab Awakening, we have to look at the coalitions they have built to support themselves.<sup>78</sup>

This approach runs directly counter to one of the prevailing notions of how monarchies have survived. Lisa Anderson has argued that monarchs are better able to preside over societies that contain multiple identity groups because the king sits above society; he is not a member of any of the competing groups, but a natural arbiter among them.<sup>79</sup> Daniel Brumberg specifically cites the ability of the monarchs to place themselves at “some

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symbolic and institutional distance from the political arena” as giving them the ability to act as “legitimate and effective arbiters” among various social interests.<sup>80</sup> Victor Menaldo’s account of monarchical legitimacy also paints a picture of kings as better able than presidents both to discipline themselves (as the ruling family will check their inclinations toward autocracy), to provide focal points for popular input into decision-making through consultative councils and parliaments, and to establish rules of the game for political actors.<sup>81</sup> In effect, he sees monarchs as more effective rule establishers and enforcers than presidents. This approach in the literature sustains an image that monarchs like to project for themselves, the Solomonic figure rising above specific interests who can dispense neutral justice to all.

This image may be useful from a propaganda perspective, but is quite lacking empirically. Arab monarchs hardly stand above their societies. They have actively courted certain social groups and excluded others from power and wealth. They are not neutral arbiters among competing parties; rather, they represent the interests of certain factions and, by doing so, vest the interests of those factions in the continuation of monarchical rule. When crises come, the monarchs rely on those factions to rally in their support.

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<sup>78</sup> Sean Yom and I introduced this argument in an earlier article. See Sean L. Yom and F. Gregory Gause, III, “Resilient Royals: How Arab Monarchies Hang On,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 2012).

<sup>79</sup> See note 27.

<sup>80</sup> Brumberg, “Sustaining Mechanics of Arab Autocracies.”

<sup>81</sup> Menaldo, “The Middle East and North Africa’s Resilient Monarchs,” 709-712.

It is in the context of coalitions that oil wealth's connection to regime stability needs to be understood.<sup>82</sup> Oil wealth in and of itself does not guarantee the stability of regimes, nor does it inevitably lead to their destabilization. The collapse of oil prices in the mid-1980s played an important role in the sequence of events that led to the Algerian civil war, for example. It has also been argued that the dislocative effects of the great oil price increase in the early and mid-1970s contributed to the Iranian Revolution. Oil wealth could not prevent a regime-shaking crisis in Libya in 2011 (though it took external intervention to finally bring down the Qadhafi regime). Oil wealth, when it is abundant, allows regimes that use it wisely to expand their support coalitions, reducing the zero-sum aspect of most political conflict, and to reduce the economic incentives for mobilization of opposition and for cross-ideological opposition coalitions to form.

The oil monarchies of the Middle East were fortunate that the Arab uprisings occurred at the end of a ten-year period of relatively high oil prices. They thus had plenty of money in the bank and were willing to spend it quickly and effectively to blunt popular discontent and reassure existing client groups. Saudi Arabia announced new commitments of over \$100 billion in domestic spending in the early months of 2011.<sup>83</sup> The other Gulf rentiers made similar payouts to their citizens in that crucial period. The new fiscal obligations they have taken on, in the form of higher salaries for state employees, new government jobs created, and new welfare benefits, might lead to problems for the oil monarchs in the future if oil prices decline.<sup>84</sup>

We should note that while the buoyant oil market of the last decade was not enough to save Qadhafi, the other major energy exporters among the republics, Iraq and Algeria, escaped major upheaval. This is not to argue that oil was the sole explanation for their stability; both had also gone through recent violent upheaval, which most likely inhibited political mobilization in 2011. But it reinforces the regime-stabilizing elements of a long period of high oil prices for oil regimes.

Of course, not all the monarchs are rich. Neither Jordan nor Morocco is an oil monarchy. However, both of those regimes built political strategies for survival that have allowed them to weather the challenges of the past and the present. In Morocco, the monarchy associated itself with the struggle for independence against France, endearing it to at least part of the newly mobilized political classes in the 1950s. It further strengthened its nationalist credentials by leading the move to absorb the Western Sahara into the kingdom in the 1970s. It also shrewdly allowed parliamentary politics to continue to operate throughout most of Morocco's modern history, with the king rising above the day-to-day political struggle and playing the various factions off against each other. In that sense, Morocco is the monarchy that best approaches that ideal type of the "monarch above society" that was criticized above. But that is only one part of the strategy that has sustained the royal house. The monarchy has kept substantial resources in its own hands – the fabled *makhzen*, which allows the king to dole out patronage to favored clients.<sup>85</sup> The monarchy has also made it its business to act as the protector of Morocco's minorities, particularly Berbers and Jews.

<sup>82</sup> See Benjamin Smith's article refuting the contention from the earlier oil and politics literature that oil dependence led to regime instability. "Oil Wealth and Regime Survival in the Developing World, 1960-1999," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (April 2004).

<sup>83</sup> For a concise description of these various plans, see Banque Saudi Fransi, "Saudi Arabia Economics: Strategy Shift," April 4, 2011, <<http://www.alfransi.com.sa/en/section/about-us/economic-reports>>.

<sup>84</sup> A good summary can be found in Suliman Al-Atiqi, "Laboring Against Themselves," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 26, 2013, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/26/laboring-against-themselves/fle9>>. For the argument that the spending sprees of the past few years are setting the oil monarchies up for trouble when prices fall, see Steffen Hertog, "Back to the 70's: Saudi Arabia's Political Economy After the Arab Uprisings," unpublished paper, Rahmaniya Conference, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, January 2013.

<sup>85</sup> For recent examples of the *makhzen* in action, see Hammond, "Moroccan Opposition Says Monarchy Still Calls the Shots."



In Jordan, the idea that the monarch is a neutral arbiter among social groups is as far from the truth as could be. The monarchy has always relied on a strong bedrock of support among the East Bank tribes and towns that formed the original emirate of Transjordan. Their loyalty was the difference between victory and defeat for King Hussein in the civil war of 1970-71. This is not to say that East Bankers are permanently attached to the regime. They, too, have expressed growing discontent in recent years, including demonstrations against price increases in East Bank towns.<sup>86</sup> King Abdullah II's strategy of economic liberalization can be seen as an effort to broaden the monarchy's support base into the Palestinian business community, though he has been careful not to push the policy to the point of completely alienating East Bankers who rely on government jobs and support.

Jordan's limited resource base makes the task of maintaining a coalition of support for the monarchy more difficult than is the case in the oil monarchies. The Saudis could promote a whole new stratum of business families from central Arabia in the 1970s without having to disadvantage the historical merchant families of the Hijaz because the oil boom provided opportunities for all. Abdullah II walks a much finer line. It remains to be seen if he can promote the Jordanian private sector and encourage economic growth without cutting too drastically the state sector on which East Bankers have always relied. The King is also reconfiguring the regime's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. His father, King Hussein, relied on the Brotherhood for support against Arab nationalists in the 1950s and 1960s and maintained good relations with the group throughout his reign. Abdullah II is trying to develop a limited parliamentary opening while marginalizing the Brotherhood, which

is the largest organized political group in the country. This combination of economic and political change, aimed at cementing a new support coalition for the monarchical regime, is an ambitious project. The fate of the Hashemite regime rests on how successful Abdullah II is at pulling it off.

The Gulf oil monarchs have their own social bases of support predating oil. The Al Saud have famously been allied with the institutions and supporters of Wahhabi Islam since the founding of the dynasty in the 18th century. The Al Khalifa of Bahrain, as recent events have shown, rely on the Sunni minority in their country as their base of support. Both governments have heightened the sectarian divisions in their societies in order to brand opponents as pursuing a narrow Shi'ite agenda and to accuse them of being agents of Iran.<sup>87</sup> The Al Sabah of Kuwait are not playing those sectarian games these days (though they did in the 1980s, after the Iranian Revolution). They maintain a careful balance among the important social groups in their country – Sunni merchant families, the important Shi'ite minority, and tribal groups. The various ruling families in the United Arab Emirates developed networks of patronage and support among the important tribes and families in their emirates. Sultan Qaboos of Oman has built patronage networks among tribes and regional elites since taking power in 1970 and extending the reach of the Omani state outside the major cities and into the hinterland of the country. Oil has allowed the GCC states to expand their support coalitions, but all had pre-oil social alliances upon which to build.

The coalitions that the Arab monarchies have built are not limited to their own societies, though that is the most important level of analysis for regime stability. They also have an effective network of mutual support in

<sup>86</sup> For recent examples, see Kim Murphy, "In Jordan, King Abdallah II Getting an Earful from Tribal Leaders," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 2011, <[www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-jordan-tribes-20110225.0,4453115.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-jordan-tribes-20110225.0,4453115.story)>.

<sup>87</sup> Two forthcoming books bring out the sectarian element of these regime's strategies in dealing with the Arab Awakening: Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that Wasn't* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013) and Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

crisis, a monarchical solidarity that increases their individual resources when needed. At the international level, they all have strong relations with the United States and other Western powers. That strategic choice helped the Hashemites in their hour of need in 1970, the Al Sabah in 1990, and the other monarchies when challenged by outsiders. Great Britain was an indispensable support to the Omani monarchy in putting down the Dhufari rebellion in the early 1970s (as was the Shah's Iran). France and the United States both remain close allies of the Moroccan rulers. Help from the West has been essential for the monarchs in facing international threats or armed internal uprisings. The United States and other great power allies are less useful when rulers face massive, peaceful protests from their own citizens, as the events of both 1979 and 2011 demonstrated. Even though the United States cannot save an ally from revolutionary domestic upheaval, it is still, in a crisis, better to be a friend of Washington than an enemy. The United States might occasionally criticize the Bahraini government for its treatment of its opposition, but it does not support the opposition in Bahrain the way it did in Libya or does in Syria.

If the United States cannot be that helpful as an outside ally to monarchies facing internal political mobilization, their fellow monarchs can. The deployment of GCC forces to Bahrain in March 2011 demonstrated that Riyadh does not share Washington's qualms

about helping allies put down peaceful political protest. While Saudi forces might be useful in a small neighboring state like Bahrain, it is Saudi and Gulf state money that is the more important resource on offer

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***Outside allies cannot by themselves save a monarch, as the Shah of Iran discovered. But they are an important part of an overall coalition of support underpinning the Middle East monarchies.***

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to oil-poor monarchs. The rich oil monarchs of the Gulf promised in 2011 to establish a \$20 billion development fund for their less-well-off monarchical neighbors, Bahrain and Oman.<sup>88</sup> How much of that money has actually been delivered is hard to tell,<sup>89</sup> but at least some of it seems to be a real commitment.<sup>90</sup> Gulf money was also important in helping Jordan avoid economic austerity measures that were scheduled to be implemented in 2011, but were postponed to 2012.<sup>91</sup> One wonders what

will ever become of the invitation to Jordan and Morocco in 2011 to throw geographical considerations to the wind and join the GCC – probably not much. But it was a signal that Saudi Arabia is willing to help fellow monarchs in trouble. Outside allies cannot by themselves save a monarch, as the Shah of Iran discovered. But they are an important part of an overall coalition of support underpinning the Middle East monarchies.

<sup>88</sup> "Gulf States Launch \$20 billion Fund for Oman and Bahrain," Reuters, March 10, 2011, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/10/us-gulf-fund-idUSTRE7294B120110310>>.

<sup>89</sup> As of June 2012, according to a prospectus issued by the Bahraini government for a sovereign bond offering, "the Development Fund has not been capitalized." "GCC \$20 bn Aid Fund Not Yet Capitalised: Bahrain," *Gulf Times*, June 21, 2012.

<sup>90</sup> "UAE Grants Bahrain \$2.5 bn for Development," Reuters, February 18, 2013, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/18/bahrain-uae-grant-idUSL6N0BI5X920130218>>.

<sup>91</sup> Reports of the amount differ. A Saudi source says that his country supplied Jordan with \$400 million in aid. Nawaf Obaid, "A Saudi Perspective on the Arab Uprisings," CNN, June 8, 2011, <<http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/06/08/a-saudi-perspective-on-the-arab-uprisings/>>. Sean Yom, relying on a report in a Jordanian newspaper, puts the figure much higher, at \$1.4 billion. Yom, "Jordan Goes Morocco."

# THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE ARAB SPRING ON THE MONARCHS

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Monarchical stability in the Arab Spring is best explained not by monarchy as a regime type but by the specific portfolios of resources, networks, and strategies of the individual regimes. But this does not mean that these specific portfolios are immutable, or that the events of the last three years will leave Arab monarchies unaffected. The regional changes that brought down four regimes and led to elected governments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt will present challenges for all the monarchs down the line. The most significant of these changes is ideological. The global democratic wave of the last thirty years has finally arrived in the Arab world. It is nearly impossible to imagine

the formation of a new Syrian government, should Assad fall, without a country-wide election, in the same way that no one questioned the need for country-wide elections to form new governments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Kings in Morocco and Jordan have promised to give elected parliaments greater executive power. Popular and parliamentary pressure has forced the downfall of an Al Sabah prime minister of Kuwait. Of course, if democratic change in the countries that saw their regimes replaced is reversed, or if the new democratic governments do little to improve the lives of their peoples, the regional democratic wave might not have

this long-term power. But if the experience of other parts of the world is any indication, consolidated democracies in some Arab countries will have a powerful regional effect toward democracy in other Arab countries. There is a growing sense that there is no viable alternative to increasingly democratic politics (if not completely democratic) as the basis for regime legitimacy and stability in the Arab world. The fact that the Egyptian army immediately pledged early elections for the presidency and parliament after deposing President Muhammad Morsi in July 2013 is a back-handed confirmation of the new power of democratic ideas in the Arab world.

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The most important reason for the ideological triumph of democratic ideas in the revolutions of 2011 was the increasing acceptance across the Islamist ideological spectrum of democracy as not only compatible with, but the preferred system for, an Islamic state. The Muslim Brotherhood (and its Turkish equivalent, the Justice and Development Party) has in its various manifestations been heading in this direction for a few decades. Even though the tribulations of Brotherhood governments in Tunisia and Egypt have

raised questions about the group's ultimate commitment to democratic practice, it is too early to argue with any conviction that

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<sup>92</sup> Marc Lynch, "Did We Get the Muslim Brotherhood Wrong?" *Foreign Policy*, April 10, 2013, <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/10/did\\_we\\_get\\_the\\_muslim\\_brotherhood\\_wrong](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/10/did_we_get_the_muslim_brotherhood_wrong)>.



the Brotherhood's democratic turn is simply a sham.<sup>92</sup> (In this regard, it is important to distinguish between "liberal democracy," accompanied by a panoply of individual and minority rights, and "electoral democracy," which focuses primarily on majoritarian principles. The Brotherhood might have accepted the democratic process, but it is not liberal.) It will be interesting to see if the overthrow of President Morsi in Egypt changes the democratic trend in Brotherhood thought, but the group's immediate reaction to the coup was to label it an attack on constitutional and electoral legitimacy. Arab Shi'a Islamists have also accepted the principle of democracy, even if at times they act against it in practice (including Hizballah's use of force in Beirut in 2008 and various undemocratic moves by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki).

The more recent shift towards democracy, and a unique ideological development of the Arab Spring, has been among Salafis – in Egypt, where the Nour Party did very well in the legislative elections, and Saudi Arabia, where important Salafi activists signed petitions calling for an elected parliament earlier in the year. Salman al-Awda is the most interesting case here. He was a fierce critic of the Saudi regime in the 1990s and spent some time in jail for his trouble. He rallied to the defense of the regime after the 9/11 attacks, defending it against both its Western critics and al-Qaeda. He became something of a regime favorite and was given his own television show on the Saudi-owned Middle East Broadcasting Company (MBC) network, one of the Arab world's most popular satellite channels. In 2011, he signed an online petition calling for an elected Saudi parliament

and, on his website, strongly supported the Egyptian uprising when the Saudi government was publicly backing Mubarak.<sup>93</sup> As a result, his MBC show was cancelled.<sup>94</sup>

Not all Salafis have taken a democratic turn in the Arab Spring. Some Salafi groups in Tunisia have refused to participate in democratic politics and have been blamed for a number of violent attacks in the country. For other Salafis, participation in democratic elections is old hat: they have been in the Kuwaiti and Bahraini parliaments for some time.<sup>95</sup> But the Salafi turn in the Arab revolutions is the most interesting ideological development of this period of regional upheaval. This shift is most threatening to Saudi Arabia, which has made Salafi Islam the official religion of the state and the legitimating ideology of the regime. Saudi Arabia's relative stability during the uprisings of 2011 indicates that democratic sentiment has not yet diffused through the entire Saudi Salafi community, but the trends cannot be reassuring for the Al Saud. More generally, the Islamist turn toward democracy, if it continues, calls into question one of the stronger ideological and social pillars of Arab monarchy. Islamists that supported the monarchical regimes in Morocco and Jordan in previous decades are now in the forefront of the calls for greater democracy. Many of the leaders of the opposition forces in Kuwait now are Salafis and Muslim Brothers. The alliances that developed between Islamists and monarchs in the 1950s and 1960s, when both saw Arab nationalists as their major challenge, are now more than frayed.

<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, the petition al-Awda signed was posted on the website <[www.dawlaty.info](http://www.dawlaty.info)>, which is now no longer operative. I can supply a copy of the petition to those interested. For a reference to the petition and the site, see "Saudi Arabia: Free Cleric Who Backs Change," Human Rights Watch, February 28, 2011, <<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/28/saudi-arabia-free-cleric-who-backs-change>>. For an English translation of his statement on Egypt, see Sheikh Salman al-Oadah, "Has Egypt's Hour of Reckoning Come?" Islam Today, February 2, 2011, <<http://en.islamtoday.net/artshow-413-3937.htm>>.

<sup>94</sup> "Dr. Salman al-Awda: I Lost 'Life is the Word,' But I Did Not Lose Trust in God," Islam Today, February 24, 2011, <<http://islam-today.net/salman/artshow-78-146578.htm>>. (Translated from Arabic.)

<sup>95</sup> Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 3 (Summer 2012).

## MONARCHICAL STABILITY AND AMERICAN POLICY

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The stability of the kings, emirs, and sultans of the Arab world is not to be explained by their royal status or some imagined cultural affinity between their subjects and monarchical rule. They stay in power because they have built states that provide order for their societies and benefits for enough of their citizens. They stay in power because they have constructed political alliances with domestic and foreign allies that provide support in times of crisis. It is the politics, not the pomp, that sustains them. For Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman directly, and for Bahrain and Jordan indirectly, both state-building and coalition-building has been greatly abetted by oil.

The stability of Arab monarchies is basically good news for the United States. For the most part, the monarchies share American policy goals in the Middle East and cooperate with the United States on military, diplomatic, and intelligence issues. But the rhetorical American commitment to democracy in the region does open Washington up to the accusation of hypocrisy regarding its cozy relations with its royal allies. This tension is greater with the dynastic monarchies than with the individual monarchies. When Washington talks to the kings of Morocco and Jordan about democracy, it is not calling into question their position in their systems. They can make, and have made, concessions to elected parliaments without substantially changing the nature of their regimes. The same cannot be said of the dynastic monarchies. When the United States talks about democracy to the kings of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain or the emir of Kuwait, it is implicitly saying that they should abandon their primary constituency – their own extended families – and transfer power from the extended family

to commoners elected by legislatures. That would be a change in the fundamental nature of these regimes, a change that would be vigorously resisted by those extended families.

There is an inevitable tension between the more democratic impulses released in the Arab world over the last few years (impulses that remain, despite the problems facing democratic transitions in North Africa and the Syrian civil war) and the persistence over time of dynastic monarchy. This tension exacerbates the American policy dilemma regarding democracy and stability. The United States wants stability and thinks that gradual democratic reform is the best long-term guarantee of securing it. But in the short term, democratic changes can be very destabilizing, as we have seen in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. A real American push for democratic change in dynastic monarchies could undermine the very stability that extended family rule has given those countries. In each of these countries, Washington has an agenda that goes beyond domestic political reform, with real interests related to oil, Arab-Israeli peace, military cooperation, and intelligence-sharing all at stake. Moreover, as our Iraq experience teaches, American intentions can differ radically from the results that American pressure for domestic political change produces on the ground. This complicated matrix argues for a very cautious – and humble – country-by-country approach for U.S. diplomacy on political reform in America's Arab monarchical allies.

The United States can praise the reform steps taken by Muhammad VI and Abdullah II, even if they are not exactly leading Morocco and Jordan to become Arab versions of European constitutional monarchies. There is a trajectory in these countries toward constitutional

monarchy, even if the path there will be neither straight nor quickly traversed. The United States has in the past stepped up to help the Jordanian government in times of trouble. With Syrian refugees pouring into Jordan and no end in sight to the fighting in Syria, now is one of those times. But that is not a policy change; it is simply supporting a long-standing U.S. ally. With the individual monarchies, Washington can pursue business as usual.

With the dynastic monarchies, squaring the circle of practical interests and support for democracy is harder. In places where there are no serious challenges to the rulers – Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – there is no particular need for a re-examination of policy. It would be nice if the Omani succession issue were more settled and transparent, but there is little Washington can do about Sultan Qaboos' management of his own family. The democracy issue need not be on the American foreign policy agenda with these countries because it really is not on their domestic agenda in any serious way.

Kuwait has been facing a slow-motion crisis of governance for the past seven years. The Arab Spring has simply clarified the issue between the Al Sabah family and parliamentarians who want more control over the government. Fortunately for both Washington and for Kuwaiti society, neither party in this conflict wants to tear the house down on its head to defeat the other. Given Kuwait's wealth, things can muddle along even with regular showdowns between the ruling family and the opposition. The upside for the United States is that, no matter how Kuwait's politics shake out, the American strategic relationship with the country will not be affected. The experience of the 1990 invasion made practically every Kuwaiti a supporter of a strong alliance with the United

States. No one in the opposition is campaigning against the American military presence in the country. In Kuwait, Washington can provide advice when asked and maybe even

encourage the ruling family to accommodate opposition demands a bit more without running any serious risks.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are the only two difficult cases in America's relations with the Arab monarchs. The Saudi rulers do not want to hear American advice about domestic political reform. They successfully withstood the regional crisis of 2011 and do not think that they need lectures about the pressing need

for democracy in Arabia from the United States. Saudi-American tensions over Egypt, Bahrain, and their differing approaches to the Arab uprisings in early 2011 have dissipated. As has been the case so often in the past, tangible common interests related to Iran, Yemen, Libya, Syria, counter-terrorism, and many other issues have pushed the unlikely allies back together. The Obama Administration shows no particular inclination to push Saudi Arabia for democratic reform, and this is a prudent course. There is no sense prioritizing an issue over which the other side will refuse to concede any ground in a relationship that involves so many other equities.

Rather than talk to the Saudis about democracy, it makes more sense to emphasize the heightened sectarianism that the Saudi media is helping fuel and its dangerous implications for regional stability. Addressing it makes sense both because of its regional security component and because the Saudi rulers themselves have regularly and publicly avowed their own commitment to tamping down sectarian divisions. A reduction in regional sectarian tensions is unlikely in the short term, given what is happening in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, as well as the continuing

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intensity of the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry. Still, Riyadh can play either a mitigating or an exacerbating role here. The Saudis are tolerating, if not encouraging, a fierce anti-Shi'a trend in their own media. This runs against King Abdullah's earlier efforts in the post-9/11 period to engage the Saudi Shi'a community and it contributes to negative trends throughout the region. Reduced sectarian tensions could improve the prospects of a political settlement in Bahrain, create the potential for a less intractable post-Assad transition in Syria, and increase the possibility that Iraq will arrest its current slide into Iran's orbit. Al-Qaeda and other Salafi extremist groups thrive in an atmosphere of sectarian tension.

The solution to underlying sectarian tensions within Saudi Arabia is not, in this context, greater democracy. The Saudi Shi'a minority will always be outvoted on the national level. Rather, the answer is to encourage the Saudi government to empower local government in Shi'ite areas with greater autonomy for local development and greater access to government revenue. King Abdullah took some steps in this direction in the post-9/11 period as part of his more general outreach toward the Shi'a community. More importantly in the immediate term, the Saudi government should push back against the sectarian rhetoric in its media and re-emphasize the language of citizenship King Abdullah encouraged in the early 2000s.

Bahrain is not exactly the problem from hell for America, but it is a nagging toothache that occasionally flares up in a very painful way. It would be better if it were fixed. At the beginning of the Arab uprisings, when positions were less fixed than they are now,

the United States failed to broker a deal between the reform-minded Crown Prince and the mainstream opposition. It is unlikely that a direct mediation effort now from Washington will move the issue any closer to resolution. (Such movement would probably require a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, and that does not seem to be in the cards anytime soon.) More so than in the other monarchies, an American push for real democracy in Bahrain will only exacerbate sectarianism, rather than mitigate it. Real democracy is exactly what the opposition is requesting, but it is exactly what both the Al Khalifa ruling family and many of their supporters in the Sunni minority fear. Real elections anytime soon in Bahrain would simply become a sectarian census, as the first elections in post-Saddam Iraq were, raising rather than lowering temperatures. While there is little hope for progress in the near term, the best that American diplomacy can do in Bahrain is to support the Crown Prince, encourage steps by the Bahraini government to redress opposition demands, and urge Bahrain's GCC partners to counsel Manama about the dangers of continued instability.

Given the probability that Bahrain will remain in a state of political crisis for some time, the issue of what to do about the American naval base in Bahrain inevitably appears on the policy agenda. The idea that Washington can use the threat to move the base, the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, elsewhere to push the Al Khalifa toward a political compromise has been gaining ground in policy circles.<sup>96</sup> As well-intentioned as this sentiment is, it probably misreads the political dynamics in the country. The U.S. presence is a restraint on the government and brings international

<sup>96</sup> Toby C. Jones, "Time to Disband the Bahrain-Based U. S. Fifth Fleet," *The Atlantic*, June 10, 2011, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/06/time-to-disband-the-bahrain-based-us-fifth-fleet/240243/>>. Frederic Wehrey of the Carnegie Endowment recommended that the Navy should "prepare plans for the gradual relocation of the Fifth Fleet's assets and functions away from Bahrain to use as leverage to shift regime behavior." *The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy*, The Carnegie Papers-Middle East, February 2013, 2, <[http://carnegieendowment.org/files/bahrain\\_impasse.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/bahrain_impasse.pdf)>. Admiral (ret.) Dennis C. Blair, former Director of National Intelligence, called for the base to be moved from onshore in Bahrain back to aboard ship in an article for *The Hill* on February 12, 2013. "False trade-off on Bahrain," <<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/282337-false-trade-off-on-bahrain>>.

attention to the opposition. It is entirely possible that the hard-line faction of the Al Khalifa would be more happy to see it go than would the reformers or al-Wefaq.<sup>97</sup>

That said, the ultimate rationale for keeping an American military base in a country is not to use it to exercise leverage on that country's domestic politics. Rather, it is to serve larger American strategic interests. Maintaining a base in an unstable country detracts from its military purpose and runs the risk that the United States will be drawn into domestic conflicts in ways that would damage U.S. interests. Political instability in the host country requires the diversion of resources and attention to force protection. Most importantly, having a base in an unstable country puts American service people at risk. For these reasons, Washington has to make clear to the Al Khalifa government that it cannot sustain its military presence in Bahrain if current conditions continue. The United States should be taking serious steps to explore alternative basing arrangements for the Fifth Fleet in the Gulf region, not as a bluff to move the Bahrainis toward reform, but as a way to insure our own military interests in the area. The United States does not need bases in unstable countries.

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<sup>97</sup> Emile Hokayem, "U.S. Has Few Options to Curb Crackdown in Bahrain," *The Atlantic*, October 19, 2011, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/us-has-few-options-to-curb-crackdown-in-bahrain/246942/>>. Justin Gengler argues on a parallel issue that cancelling Bahrain's Grand Prix auto race would hurt more moderate factions within the Al Khalifa family and that this is why al-Wefaq has not called for its cancellation. "Who Needs the Bahrain Grand Prix?" *Foreign Policy*, April 16, 2013, <[http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/16/who\\_needs\\_the\\_bahrain\\_grand\\_prix](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/16/who_needs_the_bahrain_grand_prix)>.



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