THE SMALL GULF STATES: THE BEST CASE EXAMPLES IN THE ARAB WORLD?

Panel Discussion *

On March 24, 2009, the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, the U.S. Department of State's International Information Programs in Washington D.C., and the Public Affairs Office at the U.S. Embassy in Israel jointly held an international videoconference seminar focusing on reform and democracy in the Gulf States. Brief biographies of the participants can be found at the end of the article. This seminar is part of the GLORIA Center's Experts Forum series.

Prof. Barry Rubin: The purpose of this discussion is to take a close look at countries that seem to be exceptions to many of the problems and failures facing Arab states. Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman—which are also all different—may have broken away from the patterns characterizing others in the region.

Have some of these countries advanced democracy more, and if so why? Are they places where an economics-in-command attitude is prevailing over ideology? Are they places, although starting from a more conservative and traditional standpoint, where there has been relatively greater social change, for example, regarding women's rights? Are these countries—or more accurately some of them—developing more, more flexible, and more successful than their larger counterparts?

In doing so, we will examine the security threats faced by these countries and their relations with the United States, Iran, and Iraq, and so on.

Dr. Patrick Clawson: It is often hard for us to appreciate just how poor these Gulf countries were during the lifetimes of their current leaderships. If we go back to 1962, at that time, Abu Dhabi's ruler turned down the British development plan because he thought it was too ambitious to propose that Abu Dhabi build a hospital, electricity system, and water supply system over the next five years.

People today in their sixties were young men at the time that decision was made. In 1966, in Abu Dhabi there were exactly six primary schools with 587 students, students who today would be 50 to 55 years old. But even with just those six elementary schools, Abu Dhabi was ahead of Oman. When Sultan Qabus overthrew his father Sa'id in 1970, one of the first things he did was to send several hundred Omanis to school in the UAE.
These were really among the most impoverished areas in the world. Indeed, on the whole, at the time of their independence in 1970, the UAE and Qatar were more backward than sub-Saharan Africa, and that should frame what has happened since.

Kuwait, of course, was different as its development began quite a bit earlier, but Kuwait was also a desperately poor country in the period before World War II, when the pearl industry had collapsed and the oil industry had not really gotten started. The 1973-1985 period, of course, was marked by a tremendous boom, followed by an era of slow years from 1986 to 2004. Kuwait's economy suffers the tremendous shock of the war, essentially the loss of all of their reserves: $100 billion dollars on war-related costs and rebuilding, such that by the mid-1990s Kuwait was running a significant deficit and facing a serious problem.

During those years, Qatar made a tremendous gamble on the development of natural gas at a time when the natural gas market didn't look so good worldwide. Qatar borrowed its entire gross natural product in order to develop its gas industry. Its timing couldn't have been more perfect because by the time these developments came on stream, the world economy had picked up and went into this post-2004 oil and gas boom. That tremendous boom has basically been used by these countries to reinforce preexisting patterns.

Kuwait is a country that has had great difficulty making decisions on economic matters due to political paralysis. It is not a good advertisement for the economic advantages of democracy, and the post-2004 period only reinforces that point.

Dubai is an area that during the slow years was able to take advantage of its trading background, its willingness to tolerate, and "anything goes" kind of spirit. Its ability to attract significant foreign investment after 2004 simply reinforces that trend.

Qatar is able to have an extraordinary hothouse development because of the natural gas money coming in. On the whole, there has been some pretty decent decisionmaking in the UAE and some pretty wild decisions in Qatar. Of course, the most recent period suggests that the 2004-2008 oil boom period has come to an end, and we may be back in a more moderate, or even slow growth, period.

In addition, there is a key economic, social, and political problem for these societies: the heavy dependence on foreign labor. This heavy dependence on foreign labor has led to growing unemployment and underemployment for Gulf state nationals. The combination of population growth and of decent education systems means that there are more nationals now joining in the labor market with high expectations that cannot be met by the local private sector, because those nationals demand salaries far higher proportionately than their productivity.

Moreover, foreign labor contributes to a gender imbalance of more than 5-to-1 among people in their twenties in the UAE. There are also social tensions arising from the behavioral patterns of foreign laborers who do not fit local expectations; and then of course there is the political problem stemming from reliance on long-term foreign residents who have no possibility of gaining citizenship. That is not a recipe for success.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** Patrick, could you please discuss what the UAE, and particularly Dubai, has been doing with its massive development attempts to become a tourist and financial
center? Some people would now say that the bubble has burst. Has this been a successful economic development strategy; what are the positives and negatives?

**Dr. Patrick Clawson:** On the whole it has been a successful development strategy and generally investors and the Dubai authorities have been taking some decent decisions to adjust to the slower pace of development there. After all, it was only 18 months ago that the big problem was a lack of housing and that housing prices were threatening the Dubai boom. In that environment, the Dubai authorities were fast-tracking all kinds of plans for new housing.

They quickly changed pace. For instance, the new airport-building project is dead for the foreseeable future, and that was really the biggest single infrastructure investment they were engaged in. A fair number of these housing projects which seemed so sensible when housing costs were increasing have also been abandoned. Without a doubt, there will be some drops in asset prices. There will be some real estate developers in trouble. But I don't hold with the idea that Dubai is going to go under economically. It would have to be a very deep, prolonged worldwide recession for that to occur, which is something I doubt. Of course, they have been adjusting, and investors are going to lose significant amounts of money.

The Qatars are in a worse situation because development there was always based much more on what the state was spending rather than on what foreign investors were bringing or foreign tourism. In Qatar, they are cushioned by the fact that their main export product is natural gas, which remains in favor with the environmentalists; and since the Russians are making everyone in Europe nervous about supply and pricing, there is interest in Qatari gas. Still, gas prices are dropping almost as steeply as oil prices.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I will be discussing things that are pretty familiar, but will try to put them into some context. These are small, fragile states with a lot of money in the middle of a very tumultuous area that presents tremendous challenges. The two strongest regional powers--Iran and Iraq--fought a war in the 1980s, followed by Iraq's 1991 invasion of Kuwait, and later the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. There have thus been three major wars fought in this neighborhood.

Now these states live under the volcano of Iranian nuclear development and Tehran's ambitions. Is Iran going to challenge the states directly or indirectly? How will they be affected assuming that Iran develops nuclear weapons? What kind of spillover, if any, is there going to be? They also live next door to an Iraq, which is trying to find some new path but clearly lots of things can go wrong. So there are tremendous regional problems.

Clearly, there is no way these small states can deal with their security problems alone. Historically, of course, they balanced off Iran and Iraq; they turned to the United States for protection. In theory, you could work out a stable situation from this kind of strategic maneuvering, but you could never feel very comfortable with it because there are so many dangers of drastic changes and so many forces that don't get along.

As if that were not enough, there are internal challenges as well. Regarding the strains of modernization, these countries are experiencing it to an extreme extent, going from a very traditional base and changing very rapidly. They face the usual challenges of modernization...
multiplied several times over, though they also possess the cushion of great wealth. How are they going to work out their own way of dealing with these tensions? We recall the East Asian Tigers, which had to make all sorts of social and cultural adjustments but were able to do so much more easily than the Gulf states could be expected to do.

Aside from that are political tensions. Most obviously, in Bahrain there is a Sunni ruler and a Shi'a majority. There are both Sunni and Shi'a in Kuwait, though this potential conflict does not seem to be very serious in practice. More important is the contrast between Kuwaiti liberalism and Islamism. When I wrote my book, *The Long War for Freedom: The Arab Struggle for Democracy in the Middle East*, Kuwait seemed to me the only country with real liberal reformist parties. Yet the Islamists have grown even more in electoral terms. So there are a large variety of stresses.

In Oman, the stresses are different. That country has a much lower degree of wealth and there is a likelihood its oil will run out in the foreseeable future. Then there are the questions of relations with Saudi Arabia and the Saudi attitude toward the smaller states. This all makes for a most complex brew.

The overall situation is akin to having a very advanced, high-investment oasis of modernization in the midst of this extremely earthquake-prone region, a remarkable transposition of elements.

Allow me to tell an anecdote that seems to illustrate some of these contradictions and choices. When I was teaching at Johns Hopkins University, most of my students were Arab diplomats from different countries, and one was from the Embassy of Qatar. He would always argue a very stereotyped Arab Nationalist line which outraged the Kuwaitis, Saudis, and others in the class. One day he turned and appealed to me and said, "The reason I speak like this is that without the concept of Arab unity, of the great Arab nation, Qatar doesn't amount to anything."

Now, of course, in addition to energy wealth, Qatar has also discovered the uses of satellite television--al-Jazeera--to become a power. It has pushed itself into the Fatah-Hamas negotiations; it has pushed itself into the Syria negotiations. There were two Arab summits simultaneously in 2008: the moderate states in Kuwait; the radical ones in Qatar, with the Qataris moving closer to Iran and Syria.

So the question is: Have the small states found a formula that works for them and that will sustain these emirates for a long period of time? Or will regional and internal stresses create a situation of tremendous instability in which revolutionary movements--perhaps externally supported--overturn these regimes in a very dramatic manner. This is something that we don't know but to which we should devote more time and attention.

The simple answer is that while objectively we can see tremendous reasons for them to fail they seem to be going along with a reasonable degree of success.

**Dr. Patrick Clawson:** One observation is that part of the strategic calculation of these countries seems to have been that they want to bulk up so that they are harder to swallow by a foreign invader; and I've had important people in those countries explain to me that reliance on foreign labor is part of this strategy. In other words, what we often regard as a strategic.
problem for them--namely the reliance on a large number of foreigners living in their country--also has some strategic advantages in that it means countries around the world are interested in what happens there and have a stake in protecting their sovereignty.

An interesting question is how their dependence for security on the United States through a close strategic relationship plays a role in their security environment. For example, the U.S. military has for seven years now controlled more than one-third of Kuwait's territory. In addition, the two largest airbases used by the United States in the world are located in Qatar and the UAE.

The UAE seems to be very concerned about the potential for U.S. policy developing a renewed strategic relationship with Iran. I read from UAE officials a certain nervousness about U.S. engagement with Iran. I also see Qatari officials who seem to be engaging in a balancing act in which the summit you referred to seemed in many ways, a reflection of a Qatari conviction that the U.S. star is on the wane and the Iranian star is on the rise. How can these countries handle a strategic situation in which they are uncertain whether their strategic partner is going to be the great power in the region that it has been in the past, and uncertain if it will be as protective of their interests as it has been in the past.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** How has the security strategy of the Gulf states developed? Clearly, during the period of the shah, in general, they used Iran as a shield against Iraq. After the Iranian Revolution, they used Iraq as a shield against Iran, including during the Iran-Iraq War. They also built up their relations with the United States. Then in the period of 1990 and after, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, they turned to the United States to protect them from Iraq and Iran.

After the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraq ceased to be a regional factor. The reason that I reviewed that history is to show that during the last 30 years or so they have gone through four periods in which their strategic approach was sharply altered.

Now we are entering the fifth period. Iraq is not so important, Iran is becoming stronger, and they cannot be certain about the United States.

They can try to build up their own power through investment and other methods to make themselves more important and attractive, and to develop their own militaries. But let's face it, that is not going to get them much beyond a certain point.

After they have exhausted this limited option, they will be left with creating some mix between dependence on the United States and good relations with Iran. Every one of these countries has a different blend ranging from the Qataris, who tilt most toward Tehran, and the UAE and Kuwait, who because of certain problems with Iran have to be more oriented toward Washington.

I do not see how they can feel secure in a situation in which Iran has nuclear weapons, and they have spoken privately about their fear of this happening. Behind the scenes, we have even heard positive things about the role played by Israel in opposing the expansion of Islamist and Iranian power, which helps them, though they don't have to do anything to obtain these indirect benefits.
They will come to the United States for it to give them an umbrella of protection but cannot be 100 percent sure that this will work.

Let us ask this question: If they perceive Iran as stronger and the United States as weaker, on what points might Iran's increasing influence be focused? The first thing that comes to my mind is the U.S. bases. They do not want to give up the basing, because such American involvement is a prime security asset for them. But what happens if the Iranians push in demanding an end to the U.S. presence, which Iran perceives as hostile, proposing instead purely local security arrangements?

And finally, of course, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been reassuring these countries that they do not have to fear from a better U.S.-Iranian relationship. One problem is that these states want a lot of benefits without giving much. They would prefer more U.S. support, a tougher U.S. stand on the Iranian nuclear issue, and that the Arab-Israeli conflict go away or be resolved so that it won't trouble them. Yet they are not prepared to do either anything or very much to make those things happen.

We might be entering into a period of tremendous difficulty on a strategic level. They may get through it unharmed, but they are going to have to worry about these things every day, and they may end up with considerably less freedom of action.

**Nachum Shiloh:** The behavior of the smaller states vis-à-vis the Iranian threat or challenge is not the same. Some try to appease Iran. Take, for example, the UAE. The UAE and Iran have a dispute over islands in the Persian Gulf, but recently the UAE has not loudly demanded the Iranians return the islands. In addition, Dubai has attracted Iranian financial activity, and thus the business community there has helped Iran bypass international sanctions.

While Qatar does business with Iran, Bahrain feels itself Tehran's targets as the Iranian press carries stories about claims that Bahrain should be part of Iran, which Bahrain condemns. In response, Bahraini authorities decided that Iranian ships would not be able to enter Bahraini ports.

Another significant development is that in 2010, all Gulf states are supposed to go into a joint Gulf market. They are discussing unification of the currency, which seems like an attempt to form a stronger economic framework. A key factor behind this is the belief that they need to act without delay and must act as six states so their cooperation will make them stronger vis-à-vis Iran.

**Dr. David Pollock:** I wonder what you think of the notion that these GCC countries have a common interest with Israel in containing or perhaps even confronting Iranian regional ambitions. Are there ways in which you can point to specific incidents or aspects of that common interest?

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** Historically, we have looked at Middle Eastern politics as a battle among Arab regimes for primacy in the context of Arab Nationalism. We are now in a very new era in which increasingly the battle is between Arab Nationalism and Islamism, between most Arab states and an Iranian-led alliance that includes Syria and Arab Islamist groups.
But Iran is a key regional power. Egypt has no great influence outside its own borders. Iran has leaped the Persian/Arab barrier and the Sunni/Shea barrier, gaining influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and among Palestinians.

Increasingly, when most Arab states--excluding Syria in particular--look at the situation, they see three sets of factors.

The first factor they see is Islamist vs. Nationalist, that in every country the government is Arab Nationalist and the opposition is Islamist. The next era in the region will see the struggle between these two groups and ideologies.

The second thing they see of course is the nearby power of Iran, which has emerged as a non-Arab power having more regional influence than any Arab power.

The third element, which is psychologically disproportionate, is the perception of Sunni-Shi'a conflict.

Now, Israel has parallel interests, certainly against Islamists and Iran, though it is indifferent in principle to the ethnic Persian and Shi'a aspects. But it does not want Iran and radical Islamists to get stronger, much less achieve regional hegemony.

To give an example, if we look at Lebanon, Saudi policy in Lebanon has been basically to support the Sunnis, which in practice has meant backing the March 14 coalition against the influence of Syria, Iran, and Hizballah. Saudi policy thus parallels Israel's interests.

In addition, at least in private, the GCC countries are not happy about Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and getting stronger, and they have made that clear to Western states. Again these interests are parallel to those of Israel.

But of course there are also barriers against any actual cooperation. Arab states are still somewhat bound by the notion--reinforced by popular opinion, ideology, and political competition--that they can never do anything with Israel or anything that would be good for Israel. This rule has been weakened by self-interests--as in Egypt's opposition to Hamas--but it is still in force.

Even if a regime brings disaster upon itself, it is denied the alternative--just as to a lesser extent that has been true of working with the United States or West. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, however, the Arab states acted in their self-interest in order to get help. How much can the rule on working at least in parallel with Israel be broken? Even today, this is also a barrier to solving the conflict, though Egypt and Jordan have made peace with Israel, and despite the limited effort represented by what has been called the Arab, Saudi, or Beirut summit peace initiative.

So while there are parallel interests, this does not mean that there would be any direct cooperation, but it is still worth thinking about; are there ways to make those parallel interests coincide in actions?

Dr. David Pollock: I would like to discuss U.S. policy in that part of the region particularly relevant to the question of reform and democratization in the smaller GCC states.
During the Bush Administration, there was a lot of rhetorical emphasis in U.S. policy on reform and democratization in the Middle East, which was supposed to be a kind of protection against extremism, terrorism, and al-Qaeda. But I think it is important to understand that this was viewed as a very long-term strategy and as an evolutionary, not a revolutionary, approach to the trade-off between stability and reform or democratization or modernization in the region.

It was done, I think, with an eye toward changes that would be gradual and well within the framework of the traditional patterns of rule in those countries, which are monarchical. There was no expectation and no desire in the United States for true revolutionary change in any of these countries.

Nor do I think that changes of a revolutionary sort are on the horizon in any of these countries, despite any of the internal or external stresses that they face. The historical record and my own sense of current realities suggest that these regimes are likely to endure for the very long term. They have managed to juggle the neighborhood players; they have managed to create for themselves a special niche in American interest and security policy; and they have also managed, I think most important for the purpose of today's discussion, to parry and accommodate the various impulses coming from Washington or inside their own societies toward reform and greater democratization or social economic change.

And they have done so quite successfully, more successfully in fact than larger, more cumbersome, less oil-rich countries in the region that have had to cope with less traditional or less authoritarian patterns of political power. That success, I think, is quite likely to continue and I think that the United States has increasingly in the last several years realized that this is in fact in its own interest as well; that the idea of extremely rapid, uncertain risky, political or economic change in these countries is actually not an American interest. This was evident in the last few years of the Bush administration and is continuing today, at least in the early stages of the unfolding U.S. policy in the Obama administration as well.

I want to make a point, however, about the extent to which these countries--for their own internal reasons, regardless of U.S. promotion or pressure--have managed to reform. In the case of the UAE, their economic openness has been quite successful and is likely to endure and survive a prolonged economic slump and the stresses of greatly reduced oil prices; because it has worked. The UAE has been a model of how greater economic openness and globalization, even without democratization--which the UAE has not actually done, at all--can be an asset in terms of stability.

In the case of Kuwait, we are right in the middle of yet another sort of semi-crisis, another decision to dissolve parliament and a call for early elections. This is happening with increasing frequency in Kuwait, and it suggests that Kuwait, the most democratic of all of these countries, suffers some of the growing pains of democracy in terms of its ability to make significant economic advances and to juggle conflicting or at least competing interests within its own population. And yet, I would suggest that one of the things that Kuwaiti democracy has proved quite good at accommodating is sectarian differences within the country--the Sunni-Shi'a divide.

I have coined a catch phrase for this: It is an unusual case in the Middle East of what can be
called "consensual sects." In other words, the Shi'a and Sunni population of Kuwait are able to coexist quite harmoniously and peacefully by any regional or by any international standards despite instigation at times by Iran and despite the examples of Lebanon and Iraq. Kuwait has managed to insulate itself to a great degree from that, not just by its oil wealth per capita—which is enormous even at $50 a barrel--but also by its relatively open social and political dynamics. Each country is a special case, but for Kuwait this has been an important ingredient in its relative success over the years.

And finally, I would turn to Qatar, which is a very special case from an American standpoint. It is true that the United States has at times, at least in public statements, pointed to Qatar as a good example of reform and democracy, or at least progress toward that goal, in the region. For example, it allowed women to vote in the municipal elections. Qatar, I think people in Washington recognize privately at least, is very far from being a democracy and is unlikely ever to go many further steps in that direction.

Moreover, it is a country with barely a quarter of a million citizens and therefore no model for any other country in the region. It is also a country whose promotion of al-Jazeera could be loosely considered an exercise in freedom of the press but is also inimical to U.S. interests. The close relationship is based on Qatar's strategic and economic value to the United States, the al-Udayd Air Base and the huge amounts of money and gas reserves that Qatar has at its disposal, not its record as a reforming or so-call proto-democratic state in the region.

Moreover, regarding U.S. interests in other regional conflicts whether that be the Arab-Israeli conflict or the challenge of Iranian ambitions in the Gulf and beyond, is one on which Qatar, in the last couple of years, has been exceedingly unhelpful. Therefore, behind the scenes, the United States has begun in recent months to exercise some pressure on the government of Qatar to some useful effect. For example, in convincing the government to cancel plans to support a rival to the PLO that would be led by Hamas, follow a hardline course, and be funded by Qatar.

This was something where I think the U.S. Government privately exercised significant influence with the government of Qatar--and usefully so--and this has absolutely nothing to do with Qatar's internal, social, political or other aspects of reform but has everything to do with the strategic imperatives that the United States continues to face in the Gulf and in other parts of the region.

Nachum Shiloh: Regarding democratization in Kuwait, I find it a little difficult to call it a democracy or to refer to it as the most democratic. Yes, there is a parliament. Yes, the parliament even impeached the emir in 2006, but many components of democracy are lacking in Kuwaiti politics. For example, Kuwaiti citizens cannot elect the ruler, the emir; not even the parliament can do so. The government does not allow the parliament to question the ministers either, as every time it tries to do so, the government resigns.

Parliament does not have the power to legislate; the emir and the ruling family legislate. And they can suspend the constitution any time they want. And all the parties are associations, political groups but not political parties. So what is going on in Kuwait and other Gulf states that may seem like democracy is at times actually a struggle between branches of the ruling
family. The 2006 impeachment was actually a maneuver of the government itself by one branch of the ruling family that activated Article 3 of the constitution providing the power to impeach the emir. This was not a result of the people or parliament members. Now the Arabic media calls what happens in Kuwait anarchy, not democracy.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** How do you see a future U.S. policy toward these smaller countries as they enter a new period, including a period in which Iran has nuclear weapons?

**Dr. Patrick Clawson:** I would say that the United States is often tone deaf when it comes to these smaller countries' strategic interests. A good example of that is the question of engagement with Iran. I think the small countries of the Gulf are quite pleased to see U.S. engagement with Iran, so long as that the engagement doesn't lead to marriage; I stole that line from a Saudi diplomat.

I don't know that the United States is going to be particularly adept at consulting with these smaller Gulf countries about issues that they see as absolutely vital to their national security concerns. We have a history of not doing a particularly good job of that. But paradoxically, what we hear from the smaller Gulf States is the strong desire for U.S. leadership in these matters and recognition that they really are the ones that will be able to decide what has to happen.

I had the instructive opportunity to discuss U.S.-Iran policy with a very significant member of a ruling family of one of these Gulf countries. He said how he would be in favor of the United States bombing Iran's nuclear installation if he felt that the United States would do it long enough and hard enough; but he didn't think the United States would and therefore he was nervous about what the United States might do in these matters. So, the paradox is that while these Gulf states are worried that the United States is not going to take into consideration their interests, on the other hand, simultaneously, they want to see the United States exercise vigorous leadership on these matters and solve the problem without these small Gulf states having to up play--at least publicly--an active role of decisionmaking.

**Dr. David Pollock:** I don't necessarily assume that Iran is actually definitely going to require having nuclear weapons in some clearly demonstrable way, and so I think that the interest that these countries in the Gulf and the United States and Israel do have in common is to prevent that or at least finessing that issue. This is likely to be a very important source of continuing engagement, not just between the United States and Iran, but also between the United States and Israel and the GCC countries. I also think that even if the United States does proceed, as it almost certainly will, to withdraw nearly all of its combat troops from Iraq, that is not taken and should not be taken by these Gulf countries as a sign that the United States is about to abandon them to the tender mercies of someone else in the region.

I think that the U.S. commitment to the security of the GCC states and to the continued maintenance of U.S. military facilities in that part of the region is really very strong and not dependant on what happens in Iraq or for that matter in Afghanistan. It reflects enduring long-term American interests, and I think that the Gulf states, despite their qualms about America staying power and democracy, are smart enough and experienced enough to understand this fact of life.
Nachum Shiloh: I will speak about political participation and reforms in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain. This phenomenon of political participation by voting and parliaments is a phenomenon relevant to the last 15 to 20 years. It wasn't like that in the past when populations were smaller and the development level lower. These were tribal states, and before 1990 they used the tribal representation methods like a consultative assembly and tribal gatherings. When the population grew and when economic benefits given by the states to the citizens declined due to political and economic problems, citizens began to demand reforms. At a certain point, each Gulf state decided that reforms should be initiated by the government instead of being demanded by the masses.

In Kuwait and Bahrain, there are elections on a national level but there are still no parties, only political associations or groups. The people cannot elect or change the leader; only the leader or the ruling family has this power. The elections in Kuwait are characterized by struggles between at least two branches of the family, making the political system unstable. In Bahrain and in the UAE, the parliament is not entirely elected by the population. In Bahrain, there are two houses of parliament: an elected parliament and a shura (consultative) council appointed by the emir. And the latter has all the legislative power. The parliaments can only speak and give advice, but cannot pass laws.

In the United Arab Emirates, the formula is a little different. There are 20 elected and 20 appointment members. What is also significant in all of this process is the participation of women in politics in Kuwait and Bahrain, where they can both vote and run for office. Women, however, do not do well in the elections and either none or only one wins office. What is happening in Bahrain is that the emir has appointed women to the parliament, as ministers and in other positions.

All of these reforms are very interesting, but we should emphasize that it is not necessarily an evolutionary process toward democratization. The most important words are political participation and political representation. A key concept is that change is to be gradual, not rapid, to avoid what are called electoral accidents. The UAE, Kuwaiti, and Bahraini leaders see what happened in other countries in the region: the anarchy in Iraq, the civil war in Algeria in 1991, and Gaza in 2006 after free elections were won by Islamists.

What is going on in the Gulf states, then, is not necessarily a process of liberalism, human rights, or democratization. This also faces a potential process of radicalization. The rulers are always aware of the possible clash between these two things.

Dr. Patrick Clawson: I don't think that the experiences of these Gulf monarchies should be seen as completely unique. There are a lot of other countries that have struggled with the problem of how to make political reforms that give more voice to their populations when their peoples have been completely unused to being involved in public decisionmaking. On the whole, the experience is that a modest and slow process is more likely to be durable and sustainable.

Prof. Barry Rubin: Let me give two examples of social peace being maintained when stability has been tested in political processes. In the case of Kuwait, when parliaments have been suspended, there has not been a strong reaction leading to instability. In Bahrain, where for the first time parliament exposed some scandals and investigated them, people were very
self-congratulatory that this had been done and specific officials had been called to task, again without instability resulting.

Nachum Shiloh: We have to understand why people didn't go to the streets when parliament was suspended. When things began to get messy in parliament, the emir had three options. He could suspend parliament and declare new elections, which he has recently done. He could have suspended parliament and suspended the constitution and not declared elections. And he could have stayed with the same parliament but replaced the prime minister. He chose to suspend the parliament but call for new elections. He did not suspend all rights--freedom of speech, the press, etc--because he knew that if he did that the people would take to the streets.

Dr. David Pollock: Kuwait is not the same as any of these countries in the sense not just that its parliament has a much longer history, but also that it has power. It is not merely a consultative body. It is true that the emir is not directly elected and does not have to face the parliament for a vote of confidence or anything of the sort. It is still a monarchy. But the parliament, both according to the constitution and in practice, does control the economy of the country and that is not the case in any of these other countries. And in recent years, the parliament has increasingly been able to prevent the ruling family from doing the old-fashioned kind of deals that all these other governments in the region that have only advisory consultative councils or something of the sort still do.

According to the constitution, the emir theoretically has the right to suspend parliament, not just until a new election a few months later but for years. This was actually done in the 1970s and again in the 1980s. Ever since liberation in 1991, the emir has not dared to do that again, and I do not think he would want to take the chance of trying to reverse this very slow but still significant democratic progress that has gone a lot further in Kuwait than anywhere else. I don't want to suggest that it is going to happen to the point where the emir does have to be elected. I don't think that is going to happen in our lifetime or maybe ever in Kuwait.

Prof. Barry Rubin: We should note that even in the United Kingdom, the emir isn't elected.

David Zohar: Given that democracy is equated in the West and to some degree now in the East with progress and modernization, it is not surprising that a good deal of lip service is given to such ideas. Insofar as these new ideas do not get in the way of traditional ways of governance, some general discussion is even tolerated in Qatar and Oman and neighboring countries.

But if we examine how Gulf governments actually work they are not exactly Western democracies. Ministers may offer advice to the rulers and advisory councils make suggestions, but decisions are always made at the top. It is true that there have been some tentative moves to allow elections at the municipal level in Oman and Qatar, but again the executive branch is embodied in the emir or sultan. Lip service is given to democracy, but no more than hinting that Qatar or Oman are amenable to the idea of eventually allowing political parties, freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, or any real criticism of the government.

The notion that the government can actually be changed at the ballot box as in any Western
democracy is too mind-boggling to be considered in earnest. The case of Oman in which Sultan Qabus reigns over his regime undisputed was compared by a British advisor who spent many years there to that of pre-revolutionary France. As the Omani press is very strictly controlled, it is extremely difficult to know if anyone in the sultanate has threatened the stability of the regime in recent years. One has to go back to 2005 to find in the public record the arrest of 30 suspected Islamist militants accused of plotting against him. They claimed that they wanted to restore an Ibadi caliphate, apparently feeling Sultan Qabus was taking the country away from its religious traditions. After serving short prison terms, they were pardoned. As elsewhere, a useful safety valve for venting anger against the regime is provided in Oman by encouraging the exorciation of Israel, such as the recent article by Essa al-Muhammad Zedjali in the *Times of Oman* in which he justified the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews in Europe.

Moving to Qatar, residing there is the most important Islamist spokesman, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is close to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. From his pulpit in Doha, he has sanctioned suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians. Khalid Mash'al of Hamas has called him the "shaykh of the resistance." As the shaykh is also a very smart politician, he has kept in the good books of the emir by supporting Shaykha Muza, wife of the emir, in her drive to improve the status of women in Qatar.

There is some justified concern in Israel, Egypt, and the United States over the course Qatar seems to have chosen of siding with Iran and other radical forces. After Senator John Kerry returned from the Middle East recently, he said, "Qatar can't continue to be an American ally on Monday that sends money to Hamas on Tuesday."

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** Oman is the country most likely to have energy resources run out soonest, so two points: How do you think Oman's political system would react to the loss of that income, and what would you say about succession in Oman?

**David Zohar:** According to what I have heard, the sultan, who has no heir, has left a sealed will, expressing his preference as to who should succeed him when he passes away. Now, we will have to wait and see indeed if that is going to happen. Meanwhile, the country seems to be stable.

As for energy, the Omanis are aware that their reserves are smaller than those of their neighbors. They were thinking of diversification in industry and trade but not much has happened. For safety's sake, they have tried to be friends with their neighbors in all directions, including the Iranians across the Straits of Hormuz, as well as with the Americans.

**Nachum Shiloh:** In 2010, the Gulf states are to undergo some unification of currency, taxes, and labor laws. Of the six countries, only Oman objects to these economic moves.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** Returning to Qatar, to what extent is its unique foreign policy purely the result of one or two individual personalities doing this? And if this is true, might the country quickly change course if there are some shifts in ministers?

**Dr. David Pollock:** In Qatar, policy is made by just a few people, but my understanding is
that the emir is solidly behind the policies we have seen, and this is not a kind of private initiative by the prime minister or foreign minister. There is a pretty strong view in Washington that the religious factor is quite significant in shaping the emir's views.

The emir is young, worldly, and modernized in many respects. In education, he has greatly expanded the horizons and physical facilities of Qatar's educational system on all levels, including huge and very expensive cooperative projects with American universities. He has also allowed women to vote in municipal elections.

But, that doesn't mean that he is not also extremely religious in a traditional and conservative Islamic sense. His wife is of much the same character, some might even say Westernizing in certain respects. In some other respects, including in her attitude towards Israel and toward Islam and its place in the world, she is actually quite traditional and inward-looking, focused on protecting the umma (Islamic nation) as she sees it.

It is important when we talk about reform and economic progress not to lose sight of what also may be, simultaneously, quite traditional religious convictions. I would say that part of the inspiration for Qatar, though—and this is very important—is also to be as different as it can get away with from Saudi Arabia and to stake out a claim, as some people here call it, to "punch above its weight," to have its own independent, different policies and identity on the world stage.

Prof. Barry Rubin: Of course, we should remember that this is the only other country in the world where Wahhabi Islam is in the majority. I think we have progressed to the point where we can bring in the Saudi factor. How do you see the balance in the GCC between Saudi Arabia and the smaller states? They are not happy with things they see in Doha. How much are these countries going to do what the Saudis want? To what degree is the GCC going to be determined by Saudi preferences as opposed to these other countries having a voice?

Dr. David Pollock: Briefly, the Saudis remain by far the most important country in the GCC in terms of resources, population, strategic importance, and even the capacities of their security forces—limited as they are in a regional perspective. But that actually has the paradoxical effect of igniting rivalry among their smaller neighbors and partners in the GCC. Each one is very jealous of its own national identity, sovereign prerogatives, internal political arrangements, and culture—which is actually not the same from one to the other. They are likely to remain that way, so the idea, periodically posed, of much greater integration is unlikely to happen.

Consequently, the idea that the GCC as a bloc can be an effective player in some common cause in the region, strategically, diplomatically, and so on, is a very dubious proposition. Thus, the idea of putting together some kind of "GCC plus two" group—including Egypt and Jordan—as it was called in the waning days of the Bush administration, in order to cooperate more closely and more effectively in addressing the Iranian challenge seems an uphill battle at best. In my view, we are doomed to work with, or in some cases against, a variety of different policies that come out of these different countries.

Understand that part of the reason they have these different policies is just to be different. The ruling families and elites in these countries see as part of their identity to have their own
separate policies. Even on the economic level, I remain somewhat skeptical that this project of uniting GCC currencies and bringing their economies closer together is going to bear fruit in the immediate future, despite the nominal deadline that they have.

**Nachum Shiloh:** We witnessed the differences in the foreign policies of two of the small Gulf states in the Gaza crisis, when during the same week, Kuwait and Qatar hosted separate conferences: Qatar with Iran, Syria, Sudan, and others who support Hamas; while Kuwait hosted the more moderate Arab summit with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

**Dr. David Pollock:** But in Qatar they didn't have the quorum to make it an official Arab summit, which would have required, I think, 13 out of the 22 members. So in a sense, I would say it was a failure for Qatar being unable to capture the center of Arab politics.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** The fact that there were two Arab blocs meeting separately has not happened for a very long time and is one of the most important developments in the region. There was not so much talk about this being a turning point or an end of unity, but the situation is pretty shocking--though of course it reflects real disputes.

**David Zohar:** What do you think is the effect of the return of so many students educated in Western universities to these countries? There they have learned about freedom of speech on campus, were exposed to campus politics, and they come back home and are given jobs. But do they have a say in anything? Have they learned anything in America that will be a contributory factor to bringing democratization to the Middle East?

**Nachum Shiloh:** Until the 1980s when those people came back, they just arrived at the airport and had a nice job waiting for them, because the state could afford to give jobs to every educated young person who comes back. When oil revenues declined in the 1990s and there were not so many jobs to distribute among those returning students, then the reality was of a growing middle class with political aspirations. The regimes tried to minimize the risk of unrest by promoting political reforms. What we have seen loud and clear since the early 1990s is in some countries, the political reforms came after petitions were sent to the ruler. Thus, political shifts may be intended to compensate for this gap.

**Dr. David Pollock:** I would just thank you for that concluding observation. I agree; I think there is a political reform cycle that corresponds with the economic cycle. They are sort of the mirror image of each other in many of these countries, though that is not to say that it always works that way. I think that here again, the steps toward greater political reform undertaken in several of these countries came during a boom cycle of the oil economy in the early years of this decade or toward the middle of this decade. That is not a formula that you can apply with scientific precision, but it is an important aspect of how the regime and societies tend to balance themselves.

I would venture to predict more of the same, despite all of the tumultuous events nearby. These countries have almost an uncanny ability to emerge almost the same as they were before and to stay that way. In part, I would say, this has to do with their small size, which is a weakness in a strategic sense, but internally a strength. It also tends to correlate with boom times of the oil and gas cycle, which tends to correlate with enormous disposable income per capita. Iran, by contrast, has twice as much oil revenue but 50 times as many citizens, and
that is not a recipe for being able to weather these cultural and social storms quite as successfully. That is a sort of fact of life that these countries have very much in their favor.

**Prof. Barry Rubin:** I think the answer to that question can be found in the difference between two words, "bend" and "break." Bend means that a society under tremendous pressure can adapt and survive; and break of course means that it splits open. If we talk about Iran, we see a society that did break under the pressure of modernization. The smaller states' societies, oiled by large amounts of money compared to small populations, seem to have an incredible capability to bend and not to break.

And here is an interesting irony. We tend to speak about extreme social conservatism and devotion to tradition as colliding with modernity and thus being more likely to lead to a crisis. But here the strength of tradition has cushioned the change and allowed the society to bend rather than break. Arguably, these societies are subjected to a higher level of internal pressure, tradition vs. modernization, external pressure, and strategic challenges than almost any other society in the world. So that is a remarkable and unique series of factors.

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