

Brotherhood Trials and Tribulations in the Gulf

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Brief Analysis

Secretary Kerry's planned visit to Abu Dhabi to reinforce the U.S.-UAE strategic partnership comes at an awkward time, as the country opens another controversial trial.

Today, the United Arab Emirates began the trial of thirty Emirati and Egyptian nationals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Abu Dhabi's State Security Court, the second such trial this year. Ninety-four Emirati defendants (known as the "UAE 94") associated with the Brotherhood were tried in the same court between March and July. Sixty-nine of them were found guilty of establishing and managing a secret Brotherhood organization that sought to overthrow the government; the organization allegedly ran parallel to the UAE's longstanding social and cultural Brotherhood association, al-Islah. Yet public records show no evidence of seditious activity by the convicted defendants, aside from a confession that one of the men gave under torture and later retracted.

Secretary of State John Kerry's scheduled arrival in Abu Dhabi shortly after the new trial's commencement creates an unwelcome sense of déjà vu. The UAE 94 trial began on the eve of his last visit to Abu Dhabi in March. Although the parallel timing is a coincidence this time around, it serves as a poignant reminder of the disturbing approach to basic rights taken by an important U.S. ally and challenges America's top diplomat to address the issue prudently.

THE UAE AND AL-ISLAH

Among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the UAE has adopted the most aggressive approach to local Brotherhood elements. It remains the only member state to try individuals explicitly for links to the group since the initial Arab uprisings in 2011.

Al-Islah has been the UAE's most organized civil society group for decades and has at times been perceived as a domestic security threat. Emiratis linked to it were key participants in recent calls for political reform in a country where political organizations are outlawed and political debate is discouraged.

The primary charges against the ten Emiratis and twenty Egyptian nationals currently on trial are establishing an

illegal Brotherhood branch in the UAE, stealing and airing state security secrets, and collecting funds illegally. The Emirati defendants are also serving jail sentences in conjunction with the UAE 94 case. Evidence aside, there are no indications that the new trial will proceed any differently from the UAE 94 trial, in which the proceedings were closed to officially unapproved foreign media and observers, the government detained relatives of the accused who sought access to or reported on the trial, and authorities tortured defendants and denied them their basic judicial rights. In the meantime, the UAE continues to detain other Emiratis and Egyptians for Brotherhood links.

ELSEWHERE IN THE GULF

The UAE trial comes amid a new phase in Gulf-Brotherhood dynamics following the July military ouster of Egypt's Brotherhood-led government. The removal of democratically elected president Muhammad Morsi exacerbated fault lines between Gulf governments and local Brotherhood supporters. The leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait had been concerned that the Brotherhood's rise to power in Cairo would inspire the group's Gulf sympathizers to rise up against them. Accordingly, they rushed to congratulate the new military leadership in Egypt and promise \$12 billion in aid, while Brotherhood supporters in these states privately and publicly condemned the coup and their governments' backing of it.

Since then, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have sought to minimize the influence of, and in some cases root out, local Brotherhood supporters via stepped-up security actions. The organization's damaged reputation among Gulf publics following its poor performance in ruling Egypt has helped enable this approach. For example, both countries have suspended imams who condemned Morsi's ouster or expressed support for Egypt's pro-Brotherhood demonstrators during Friday sermons. The scuffle that broke out in Riyadh's al-Firdous Mosque on August 23 highlights the tension surrounding the issue. During that day's sermon, the mosque's imam criticized Egyptian defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, the general who helped spearhead the overthrow. When an Egyptian at the service objected to those comments, a Saudi attendee hit him repeatedly with his *igal* (traditional Gulf headwear).

For its part, Kuwait has targeted Egyptian nationals -- the country's largest foreign Arab population -- for deportation and entry restrictions. One such incident involved Asmaa Mahfouz, a leader of Egypt's April 6 Youth Movement who was asked to leave Kuwait on September 28 so as not to upset the country's delicate political environment. And in mid-August, authorities announced the deportation of several Egyptians who had participated in Kuwaiti demonstrations against the crackdown on pro-Morsi protestors in Cairo; the local rallies were organized by former Kuwaiti parliamentarians near the Egyptian consulate and the U.S. embassy. At the time, Kuwait also suspended the issuing of family and business visas for Egyptians until the situation in Cairo calmed down, according to an August 22 *Kuwait Times* report.

The other three GCC countries -- Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar -- have different relationships with the Brotherhood, and the organization is not subject to the same kind of targeting there. Specifically, the Brotherhood works in cooperation with the government in Bahrain, is not perceived as a formidable force in Oman, and is considered to be defanged in Qatar by official support for local Islamist elements.

BEYOND THE GULF

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait's efforts to limit the Brotherhood's influence at home have extended well beyond their borders, as seen in Egypt. Diminishing the organization in its birthplace appears to be a key factor in their decision to provide billions of dollars in economic aid, apparent weapons supplies, and robust political weight to Egypt's military-backed interim government. On October 9, UAE press reports noted that Morsi's trial would take place on November 4 and the latest Emirati trial on November 5. The near-simultaneous reports hinted at a well-coordinated Gulf-Egypt effort against the Brotherhood.

Viewed more broadly, however, Gulf relations with the group are decades long and quite tangled, due in part to the

Brotherhood's prominent place in Gulf educational, legal, and other institutions. For example, according to an October 10 report by Arabic news site al-Mogaz, Kuwaiti diplomats in Cairo allow funds to be funneled through them to the Egyptian Brotherhood. If the reports are true, it is unclear whether the Kuwaiti government is directly supporting the group, turning a blind eye, or being caught completely unaware. In any case, the situation attests to the deeply entrenched relationship between some Gulf officials and the Brotherhood. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has supported Brotherhood-linked international charities for decades.

U.S. APPROACH

The UAE trial comes at a time of strained rapport between Washington and the GCC states over differences on shifting relations with Iran, involvement in Syria's civil war, and support for Egypt's interim government. Moreover, the challenges of U.S. diplomacy in Bahrain have brought into sharp relief America's limited leverage on issues of basic rights in the Gulf. In the UAE, officials have repeatedly rejected foreign meddling in internal affairs, including U.S. objections to the 2012 closure of two democracy-promoting organizations, the National Democratic Institute and Germany's Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

On November 3, Secretary Kerry addressed the issue of Muslim Brothers on trial in Egypt, telling reporters in Cairo that he and Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy "agreed on the need to ensure that Egyptians are afforded due process with fair and transparent trials." In the current environment, such comments are unlikely to be echoed regarding Abu Dhabi's Brotherhood trial. At the same time, the UAE is profoundly interested in upholding its international image as a modern, progressive state. Releasing convincing evidence of seditious activity would stigmatize the Brotherhood locally and internationally, but without such proof, the UAE will remain vulnerable to international charges of targeting political expression. Accordingly, Washington should privately encourage its close ally to bolster its image abroad by publicly presenting the evidence against the defendants currently on trial.

Lori Plotkin Boghardt is a fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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