

# The Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf: Prospects for Agitation

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Brief Analysis

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**Local Brotherhood groups range from regime irritants to regime supporters, and the security challenge they represent to the Gulf monarchies should be assessed on a country-by-country basis.**

In three weeks, the United Arab Emirates state security court is slated to issue verdicts for nearly 100 citizens linked to a local Muslim Brotherhood group and charged with subversion. The trial has shaped perceptions about the potential for Brotherhood organizations in the Persian Gulf to pose security threats to the region's rulers, and the verdicts -- some of which are expected to include stiff sentences -- likely will too. Yet there is no "one size fits all" formula for understanding the near-to-midterm interests and undertakings of indigenous Gulf Brothers. The strength, fortunes, and political activities of such groups stem directly from their particular relationships with their rulers and reflect the distinct societies in which they operate.

## SEEDS OF POLITICAL MOBILIZATION IN THE UAE

When it comes to countering the Brotherhood, the UAE has been more proactive than other Gulf governments for a reason. Local Brotherhood group al-Islah has been the most organized nonstate actor in the country for decades, and Emiratis linked to it have been key participants in calls for political reform despite the government outlawing political organizations and discouraging political debate. In March 2011, al-Islah supporters represented dozens of the 130 signers of an exceptional petition demanding comprehensive elections and legislative authority for the advisory Federal National Council. Since then, UAE authorities have detained, tried, and sentenced some of the signers, albeit for unrelated charges; several of those currently on trial were signers as well.

In general, Emiratis are quite comfortable with their high living standard and are not politically active, so popular support for the Brotherhood's transformational goals appears limited. Al-Islah backers remain concentrated in the poorer and more religiously conservative northern emirates. Not coincidentally, the government announced a multiyear, \$1.6 billion infrastructure investment plan for those emirates shortly after the March 2011 petition

surfaced. Although al-Islah associates are some of the most likely activists to press for political change, and the best-placed to reap the rewards of any limited liberalization process, they still face an uphill battle in rallying the public around their cause. Down the road, however, broader electoral participation, greater political awareness, and increased discussion of national issues among Emiratis might work to the group's advantage.

## **TACTICAL ALLIANCE WITH RULING FAMILIES IN BAHRAIN AND QATAR**

**T**he ruling families in Bahrain and Qatar have each co-opted local Brotherhood organizations, albeit in different ways. Bahrain's al-Minbar Islamic Society -- the political arm of the local Brotherhood's al-Islah Society -- is one of the few such organizations permitted to operate in a country where political parties are outlawed. Many believe that Bahrain's Royal Court and Islamic banking sector even bankroll the group.

Government support for the Sunni al-Minbar society reflects the Sunni royal family's fundamental interest in offsetting the country's Shiite majority, which is well-represented in parliament. Al-Minbar has won parliamentary seats in each of the three elections held since 2002, and it generally supports the monarchy's political and economic agenda while pursuing its own Islamist social objectives in conjunction with the Sunni Islamist group al-Asalah. In February, for example, al-Minbar announced that it would boycott the national dialogue, ostensibly intended to address Shiite political disgruntlement. The group claimed it was protesting the Shiite opposition's "silence" about acts of violence that erupted during the second anniversary of the country's 2011 uprising.

Despite supporting government interests, al-Minbar does pose certain hazards to Bahrain's rulers. One danger lies in its potential to side with one royal faction over others on issues such as Sunni-Shiite relations and political reform.

In Qatar, the local Brotherhood affiliate dissolved itself more than a decade ago, partly to avoid contentious relations with the country's rulers at a time when other Gulf governments were arresting Brotherhood supporters. Today, most former members see little reason for antigovernment agitation in a country that has become host and home to some of the region's most famous Brotherhood figures, that has provided public platforms to these individuals, and whose foreign policy since 2011 has been anchored in support for Islamist groups. As a result, there is little evidence of Brotherhood political activism on the ground in Qatar. Yet younger elements of the original Qatari Brotherhood who did not agree with the decision to dissolve the group may be engaged in underground activity.

## **COOPERATION WITH THE OPPOSITION IN KUWAIT, SAUDI ARABIA, AND OMAN**

**T**he Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood is a superbly organized and extraordinarily wealthy monolith that has worked both with and against the ruling family at various times. Its political fortunes increased significantly following the 1990-1991 Iraqi occupation, when local Islamist associations and figures organized resistance activities and community services. More recently, the Brotherhood's political wing -- the Islamic Constitutional Movement, also known by its Arabic acronym Hadas -- joined other opposition groups late last year in major protests against a government ruling on electoral procedures. Hadas's proven willingness to work with opposition factions, combined with its potential to benefit from the growing strength of more-conservative tribal elements of Kuwaiti society, suggest that the group will pose an increasing challenge to the ruling family's monopolization on power going forward.

In Saudi Arabia, the royal family's relationship with the Brotherhood has been a mix of support and co-option, along with anxiety and antagonism toward the group's political agenda. Most Saudi Brotherhood figures have maintained a

low profile, avoiding public criticism of the palace or calls for change. Some, however, have confronted the royal family on political issues. In the early 1990s, Brotherhood figures joined the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyah (Islamic Awakening) intifada, a movement that focused on opposing the deployment of foreign troops on Saudi soil to liberate Kuwait from Iraq, and also encompassed protests and petitions demanding political reforms such as the creation of an independent advisory council. In early 2011, several Brotherhood figures unsuccessfully urged the organization to support other Saudis calling for far-reaching political reforms. These episodes show the group's selective interest in partnering with other factions calling for political change -- an interest seemingly tempered by careful calculation about putting the Brotherhood's position in the kingdom at risk.

In Oman, Brotherhood influence is limited by the group's Sunni roots. Unlike in most other Gulf states, Sunnis make up a minority (15-20 percent) of the Omani citizenry, which is mostly Ibadi Muslim. Nevertheless, the Brotherhood does operate secretly there, and the government has taken action against it in the past. In 1994, authorities arrested hundreds of individuals presumably linked to the Brotherhood, charging them with subversion. Those tried in court included a former ambassador to the United States, a former air force commander, and two undersecretaries of government ministries, suggesting that key Brotherhood figures permeated high levels of government. Given its limited appeal to most Omanis, however, the Brotherhood should be viewed as a wider threat to the government only in collaboration with other groups. The most likely impetus for such collaboration would be the unexpected departure of Sultan Qaboos bin Said -- who has been ruling the country for nearly forty-three years without a publicly identified successor -- and the subsequent reopening of old political fissures.

## CONCLUSION

In the near- to midterm, the security challenge that local Brotherhood organizations represent to the Gulf monarchies is far from monolithic. These groups hold different stakes in each country's political system and garner different levels and forms of support from their fellow citizens. Accordingly, neither the UAE view nor the Egyptian model of the Brotherhood threat represents a particularly useful lens through which to understand Brotherhood activity in the Gulf. Instead, U.S. policymakers should pursue a well-calibrated approach to indigenous Brotherhood organizations in each Gulf state based on the local political environment.

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