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The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the triangle of autocracy, oil and foreign powers¹

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This article is based on an executive summary of a forthcoming Arabic-language book to be published by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies. It examines the reasons underlying the failure of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to achieve stability and realize their developmental goals, despite their concerted endeavours to do so since the oil boom of the 1970s. This failure is attributable to the fact that these countries have fallen prey to a vicious cycle of autocratic governments, using the oil wealth of their people to stay in power, and which are being supported and maintained by foreign governments – especially the United States and its allies – in return for a share of the oil booty and other concessions. Accordingly, and on the basis of the experiences of these countries over four decades, any change in current conditions is not foreseeable unless the unholy alliance of autocracy, oil, and foreign powers is dismantled and replaced by a system that is more conducive to both prosperity and stability; where autocracy is replaced by a democratic form of government; where the role of oil is transformed into what will engender productive citizens; and where regional integration and co-existence with neighbours replaces foreign presence and the ‘protection’ or destruction that comes in tandem with it.

The fallout from autocracy

The autocratic nature of the ruling families of the GCC countries² has impeded the emergence and growth of civil society which is considered an essential prerequisite for both the development and stability of the region. As it is, the political systems in these countries resemble something similar to the historical Indian caste system in that the ruling families in these countries have drafted constitutions that confer on them certain financial and political privileges which are not afforded to others, which, therefore, permit them to feel that they are distinct from others. For example, with the exception of the Constitution of Kuwait, which recognizes the sovereignty of the Kuwaiti people, other constitutions do not mention any role for the people in their political affairs, meaning that governance is a monopoly of the ruling families alone. This form of autocratic rule is alien to these societies. It can neither be traced to the consultative form of government that existed at the dawn of Islam, where the ruler was obliged to attain the allegiance of his people, consult with them and abide by the principles of the Islamic religion (al-Jabiri 2001, pp. 225–231), nor can it be considered derivative from a tribal system where the leader of a tribal system is first among

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equals and, therefore, perpetually subject to the checks and balances of other tribal leaders (Al-Kuwari 2002, p. 55). Given the lack of either Islamic or tribal precedent and the implied legitimacy that such might confer, it is not surprising that for over four decades these autocratic systems have met with all forms of opposition from their own people as the following brief chronicles serve to indicate.

In 1938, there were calls for reform in Kuwait, which were inspired by Nasser's call for Arab unity, and the people's opposition to British rule. These calls for reform culminated in the promulgation of the 1962 Constitution which subsequently became the cornerstone of Kuwait's later political reform (Crystal 1995, pp. 81–83).

In 1938 too there was also a reform movement in Dubai city, led by merchants and prominent families, which called for the independence of the judiciary, the reduction of the British representative involvement in the internal affairs of the city and an increasing role of the citizenry in determining the allocation of resources, all of which were, naturally, not welcomed by the British (Davidson 2008, p. 33).

Similarly, there were demonstrations in Qatar in 1963 in support of the anticipated union between Egypt and Syria that led to the formation of a National Front, which called for curtailed spending by the ruling family, the establishment of an elected municipal council and other reforms (Stoakes 1972, p. 197).

In Saudi Arabia the opposition to the ruling Āl al-Sa'ūd never ceased, evidencing salient challenges beginning with the mutiny by Faisal Al-Duweesh³ in 1927, who accused the ruling family of deviating from the true principles of Islam and condemned their alliance with the British (Al-Rasheed 2009, pp. 41–42). A major indication of discontent came with the violent occupation of ka'bah by Juhayman Al-Oteibi and his followers in 1979 during the *hajj*, which drew international attention. Al-Oteibi accused the ruling family of corruption and loyalty to the Americans (Al-Rasheed 2009, p. 43). The 1990s witnessed a number of calls for political and economic reforms by different groups in Saudi society, but to no avail. Ultimately, al-Qā'idah weighed in on the side of the opposition, calling for the withdrawal of American forces from the Arabian Peninsula and carrying out bombings against US personnel in Riyadh and al-Khobar (Al-Rasheed 2009, pp. 44–45).

The ruling family in Bahrain has also faced its share of opposition since the mid-1950s when demonstrations broke out calling for political reform and denouncing the British–French–Israeli attack on Egypt (Kelly 1980, pp. 182–183). In Oman the Dhofar Revolution that broke out during the mid-1960s, and which was suppressed with the help of the Shah of Iran, was one manifestation of Omani's rejection of the autocratic rule of the al-Busaeed family (Halliday 2002, pp. 440–446).

The factor of culture

There is no doubt that culture factors in the potential for renaissance in any country, and Islamic culture, like all cultures, is a source of identity that inspires its followers and forms a bridge between their collective past and their future, providing them with a worldview (Huntington 2004, p. 30). The role of Islam in the GCC countries has a strong influence, but one must take into consideration or distinguish between original, authentic Islamic culture which was the foundation of the ancient Muslim civilization engendered by the Prophet and one of today's distorted versions of this culture which can be utilized to strengthen the grip of autocratic governments over power (Lewis 2002, p. 156). Islam also is influential as a factor of historical constancy and fixedness as well as flexibility, which is a characteristic that renders it adaptable to

changes across time and space, without necessarily violating its essence (Abu Zahrah 1996, pp. 23–24). In any case, a critical question pertains to how Islam functions in the minds of people and to what ends.

In addition to the role of Islam, pre-oil civil society was characterized by a very different sort of dynamic, which due to its simplicity and the much more direct contact between rulers (those chosen to rule) and people ruled by them was far more effective in putting checks and balances on a ruler's conduct of public affairs. This was because the ruler was financed and provided with security by his citizens (Hawley 1970, p. 195). This pre-oil balance and 'social contract' between rulers and their people was disrupted by the discovery of oil and the ensuing encroachment of foreign powers and their presence in the region. With oil wealth in their coffers and with the backing of foreign powers, rulers began a systematic marginalization of their people, beginning with the institutionalization of the ruling families (Crystal 2001, vol. 2, pp. 266–267) after which the merchant community was co-opted through all forms of projects, trade agencies, licenses, regulations, as well as all other facilities and activities controlled by the government (Champion 2003, p. 101). Muslim *'ulamā'* who once carried the banner of opposition to oppressive and ruthless rulers in the past became mouthpieces for the autocratic ruling families of the Arab Gulf Region – justifying their corruption and defending their injustices against their people and, in the process, breeding desperation instead of hope in the hearts and minds of new generations (Al-Rasheed 2007, p. 74). Moreover, the intellectuals also became victims of both government enticement with jobs and perks, as well as through their own incompetence and lack of clear agendas. The public did not escape the fate of these groups either, as it was lulled into a passive attitude through subsidies, gifts and handouts. Even sport clubs (Baker 2008, p. 79) and charity institutions were controlled through the appointment of members of the ruling families as their boards of directors (Jazerera TV 2010).

The role of institutions

Certain types of institutions are expected to play a pivotal role in the development of the GCC region; the four leading types in the countries under study are executive, legislative and legal institutions, and the press. The question of the efficiency and effectiveness of these institutions in fulfilling their stated goals, however, has to do – to a certain degree – with the collection of data, the enforcement of contracts, the preservation of rights and other factors (World Bank 2003, p. 37). The findings show, for example, that the councils of ministers in these countries are filled with individuals loyal to the ruling family without consideration of their education, competence or experience – all of which take a secondary place to subservience and obedience to the ruling family. Additionally, some cabinet posts such as premierships and a number of so-called 'sovereign' ministries are held by members of the ruling families, and it comes as little surprise that many of these ministries have been occupied by the same person for 20 or 30 years (Herb 1999, p. 60).

As for legislative bodies, the present study shows that with the exception of the Kuwait National Assembly, which is also subject to some limitations imposed by the ruling family, other assemblies are appointed or partially elected but lack any legislative or supervisory roles whatsoever (Addeien 2008, p. 126). Similarly, it was discovered that while legal institutions are found on paper, and while some may have facades of concrete, in practice they are not different from other institutions in terms of their preservation of the dominance of ruling families, and their failing to protect

property and contract rights, their providing security for domestic and foreign investors, and their failure to protect public resources from being plundered and squandered by the ruling families (World Bank 2009a, various tables).

The present study has also found that the media which is supposed to be a watchdog for the public good has become a mouthpiece subservient to the ruling families, which therefore has no role in searching for truth or presenting it for the average citizens to assist them in making judicious and informed decisions (Al-Biaize 2007, pp. 14–15).

The policies of oil

What has been described above in terms of how ruling families in the Arab Gulf have marginalized the elites, distorted culture and incapacitated institutions has had many adverse repercussions on virtually all policies adopted by these countries over the last three decades. These include oil policies as well as those pertaining to development and security.

International oil companies, equipped with their knowledge of and long experience in the oil industry, manipulated and took advantage of these autocratic and secretive governments. Such corporations led ruling elites into signing oil contracts that accorded the lion's share of the oil rent to the companies and their governments (Collier 2010, p. 70); maintained these companies' dominance throughout all stages of the industry (Maugeri 2006, p. 65); enabled them to lie and cheat in their calculations of prices, costs and profits (Assaif 2007, p. 106); and deprived the producers from absorbing and mastering the know-how of the industry at both upstream and downstream levels (Vitalis 2009, pp. 39–44).

The story of exploitation by the oil companies extends to the area of pricing and production where, again, the outcome of the relationship between the autocratic ruling families and these corporations has been determined by a balance of power that was in favour of the latter and their respective governments and not by the forces of supply and demand alone (Adelman 1995, p. 96). This is due to the fact that these autocratic governments were not accountable to their people and, therefore, tried to compensate for this lack of legitimacy by accepting the protection of foreign powers and the dictation of oil policy that came along with it (Polack 2008, p. 316). This subordination to foreign powers took its toll on the unity of the producing countries and their ability to control the industry. Furthermore, it has also resulted in a fall in the real prices of oil for most of the period under study with few exceptions, as during times of war or other forms of turmoil in the region (Amuzegar 2001, pp. 41–42).

The impediments of rentier economies

The sheer magnitude of oil rent which GCC ruling families have given away to oil companies and their respective governments in order to buy their support is staggering. However, another aspect of rent is that Arab governments in the Gulf have failed to achieve a sustainable development. This is attested by a number of phenomena including: continued dependence on oil as a major source of income; the inability to develop a productive national labour force through the marginalization and cooption of the private sector; the mismanagement of both foreign investment and foreign aid; and finally the squandering of a large share of oil revenues on military spending, 'white-elephant' projects and salaries for all members of the ruling families.

In the course of this research, a number of measures were applied to test the degree to which GCC countries were able to diversify their economic structures in preparation for the post-oil era. The results of these tests show that economic growth in these countries still fluctuates with oil prices and revenues, which is proof that the economies in question are still dependent on oil (Askari 2006, p. 88), and which is a result also confirmed by the high share of oil in these countries' gross domestic product, exports and total revenues (Arab Monetary Fund 2009, appx 6/2, p. 330). Moreover, results indicate that the share of industry in the gross domestic products of these countries is negligible (Arab Monetary Fund 2009, appx 3/4, p. 305) and their intra-region trade does not exceed 5%, both of which point to the fact that these countries have not yet made any significant advances towards diversifying their economic structures (World Bank 2010, p. 375).

Probably the most important issue in the development of these countries is the creation of a national labour force equipped with adequate skills to replace oil as a source of income. The present research indicates that the failure in this area has nothing to do with a lack of resources but has had a great deal to do with a lack of political will on the part of the ruling families who, in conjunction with foreign powers, always saw that the expansion of education was concomitant with an increased awareness and awakening of the citizens of these countries, who would – sooner or later – demand more say in their affairs and also greater integration with their fellow Arabs in the region (Davidson 2008, p. 52). Both these aspirations were in conflict with the interests of the ruling families and their protectors who were sharing the oil revenue and did not want to see any change in the status quo (Vitalis 2009, pp. 111–112). Of course, after independence the pace of education grew faster than it had been previous to independence; however, being educated is one thing, but being in a position to apply one's skills and to make the right decisions are two different things in the Gulf region (Winkler 2009, p. 67). The lesson that can be derived from all this is that so long as these governments remain autocratic, they will not allow any encroachment by educated nationals on the decision-making process that could potentially loosen their current grip on power and money (Friedman 2005, pp. 460–463).

Development and the negligible role of the private sector

The development experience of the region was assessed by evaluating the role of the private sector in these countries, which also used to be prosperous during the pre-oil epoch or during the pearl-diving era because it constituted the major source of financing for the rulers. This, however, has changed in the post-oil period since now all revenues are kept in government coffers and the ruling families wasted no time in exploiting this new relationship in order to infiltrate and corrupt the private sector (Malik 2004, pp. 126–138). Therefore, as things stand today, the role of the private sector as a source of revenues, as an employer, as an exporter of goods and services (World Bank 2009b, pp. 58–59), and as a generator of domestic and foreign investment is negligible (World Bank 2009b, p. 51). This means that there is a palpable need to reform the private sector to complement the role of the public sector in the development of the region. However, this reform should not be along the lines drawn by the 'Washington Consensus', but rather according to the genuine historical experience of the industrial and East Asian countries (Vogel 1991, pp. 14–15), which points to the leading role played by the public sector in the creation of a successful private

sector (Al-Yousef 1999). However, the public sector in mind here is not that run by the current predatory states, but rather a more democratic and accountable one (Evans 1992, p. 164).

Foreign aid and investment

This research undertook a brief assessment of both foreign investment in and foreign aid from the GCC countries since the early 1970s. While there is no quarrel with the principle of foreign investment as a vehicle of economic diversification, one can question the strategies adopted by these governments over the years, not only which led to the erosion of these assets through inflation, the devaluation of the dollar, financial meltdowns and sometimes even theft (International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2009, p. 11), but also which deprived the Gulf and other Arab countries from real investment in agriculture and industry–services, all of which could have contributed to a more sustainable development through job creation and the alleviation of poverty (Humphreys and Sandbu 2007, pp. 194–197). Similarly, while the foreign aid that these GCC countries have donated over the last three decades was high as a share of their gross domestic product by any and all standards, the impact of such aid on poverty – especially in the Arab countries – is still meagre. This is because aid giving by these countries was not institutionalized and transparent, but was meant to buy security and support for these autocratic governments, and it was also geared towards achieving the political agendas of foreign powers (Villanger 2007, pp. 17–22).

The plundering of oil resources by ruling families has been a standard *modus operandi* in the Gulf and has taken place in a variety of ways. It has been done directly through salaries received by members of the ruling families (Al-Kuwari 2009) and indirectly through the creation of a large bureaucracy as a way to buy support, earn commissions and silence opposition. It has also transpired through military spending that has little to do with the security and development of the region but much to do with commissions pocketed by members of the ruling families and jobs created for the military–industrial complex in the United States and Europe, again reminding one of how these governments try to compensate for the gaps in their legitimacy by the appeasement of foreign powers without any regard to the cost incurred by the people of the region by such conduct (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2008, p. 113).

Policies of national security

An attempt has been made to evaluate here the policies on which GCC countries embarked, over the last three decades, towards their own people and towards regional and foreign powers to ascertain if these policies and their repercussions have contributed to peace and prosperity in this region or not.

The paper distinguishes between two perceptions of the concept of ‘Gulf Security’. The first is that which is often mentioned in the media and has been applied in reality ever since the discovery of oil in the region, and it implies the preservation of the West’s hegemony in the region (Gause 1994, p. 176) so that oil can be supplied to the West at low prices and where its revenues are recycled through the purchase of weapons and the flow of oil surpluses to the West, and the preservation of the state of Israel as it is today. It is through this system that the ruling families in the region are protected and any change in the existing balance of power that might impact the previous components of security as viewed by the West and its allies in the region is

aborted (Maugeri 2006, pp. 63–75). The second perception of security to which the majority of the people of the region subscribe and aspire is: to be allowed to control their destiny and establish representative governments; to achieve regional integration and cooperation both to reduce regional conflicts and to improve the chances of development; and to live on good terms with the rest of the world. As the reader can readily infer, the people of the region have never been permitted by local autocrats and their protectors in the West to realize their own view of security up to this date.

Geopolitics

A study of geopolitics of the region over the last four decades reveals how the distorted view of security previously mentioned and the unholy alliance of autocracy, oil and foreign powers it embodies have conspired to keep this region in turmoil that has manifested in revolutions (Rosen 1985, pp. 56–59), coups d'état, wars and foreign presence (Palmer 1992, pp. 106–111), violence of all kinds (Goldberg 1990, p. 158), shifting alliances (Klare 2008, p. 185), and conspiracies (Parsi 2007, p. 21) – all of which have resulted in greater instability as well as more destruction and killings (Galbraith 2006, p. 37) and – most insidious of all – a weakening of what is called the 'Arab World', a process that has culminated in the occupation of Iraq (International Crisis Group 2005, p. 1), and the adverse impact of all these developments on the Arabs in Palestine vis-à-vis Israel (al-Dakhil 2009, p. 96) as well as on the Arab Gulf region vis-à-vis Iran (Nasr 2006, p. 184).

This last dimension has become increasingly important in light of Iran's nuclear programme because of its potential impact on the balance of power in both the Gulf and the Arab region and it hinges on how far it is from reaching its goal of producing nuclear weapons (IRNA 2004). The motives for this include the deterrence of foreign powers as well as the potential realization of Iranian hegemony in the Gulf and other regions as well (Gold 2000). The international community has two possible options for dealing with the Iranian nuclear programme which include containment or destruction, and their costs and benefits (Pollack 2008, pp. 371–372).

Toward a better future

Despite the negative characteristics and phenomena that have been outlined thus far, the future need not necessarily be a bleak one, and the people of the region can make it brighter than the past if they have the will. However, building this future demands that the GCC governments initiate a number of in-depth and multilayered reforms. Some of these reforms must be internal, by opening up to their people and making them partners in everything instead of relegating them to the status of subjects. The GCC governments also need to normalize their relations with their neighbours beginning with fellow Arab countries; and ultimately, they need to establish an effective presence on the international stage.

Internal reforms are – of a necessity – initiatives possessed of many intricacies such as the creation of consensus among the different parties of the inevitability of reform (Ottaway 2008, p. 2), the speed and consistency of these reforms (Bellin 2006, pp. 137–138), their scope (Ghani and Lockhart 2009, pp. 124–127), possible obstacles such as those inherent in defining the relationship between democracy and Islam (Al-Qaradawi 2009, p. 139; Huwaidi 1992; Al-Musseli 2007; Center for Arab Unity Studies 2010b; Ibrahim 1999), internal and external influence for change (Telhami

2007 p. 15), the support of the peoples of the Gulf for these reforms (Pollack 2008, p. 239), the priorities of reform (Muasher 2003), the significance of gradualism in reform (Goldberg 2005, p. 60), and the impact of expatriate labour on these reforms (Teitelbaum 2009, p. 18).

Internal reforms in each country ought to be accompanied and augmented by the pooling of resources at the GCC level in order to lay the foundation for real development and to promote stability in the region. In this context, an evaluation of the pluses and minuses of past efforts was undertaken to create unity among the six GCC countries (Alkuwaiz 1993), and some ways and means for deepening these countries' integration in the coming years (World Bank 2000), the potential benefits of doing so (Micco *et al.* 2003), and the short-term cost likely to be incurred before achieving such objectives (Chang 2009, pp. 117–122) were explored.

The indubitable importance of the foregoing aside, there is a clear necessity for going beyond the Gulf to some form or other of cooperation with the other countries of the Arab World, since the Gulf countries face a number of challenges including the scarcity of human resources and security challenges – especially from Iran – which cannot be dealt with at the Gulf level alone and thus must be approached in an Arab context (Galal and Hoekman 2003, p. 2). Among the conclusions of the present studies which should be made clear are that lessons from previous unsuccessful Arab cooperation efforts should be digested (Center for Arab Unity Studies 2010a, pp. 36–40), and economic integration and security issues should top the Arab agenda in the coming years (Arab Monetary Fund 2009, appx 8/4, p. 352).

In a globalized world, the GCC countries need to work jointly and in conjunction with other Arab countries and the rest of the developing countries in order to have a voice at international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Security Council. Specifically, these countries should work together to reduce the monopoly of industrialized nations over the decision-making processes of these organizations – especially with regard to the setting of agendas and policies (Mahbubani 2008, p. 104).

Notes

1. This is an executive summary of a forthcoming book that will be published under the same title by the Center for Arab Unity Studies.
2. The GCC was formed in 1981 of the following six counties: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.
3. Al-Deweesh was leader of the Ikhwan, a tribal military force that helped Ibn-Saud expand and consolidate his power base on most of the Arab Peninsula forming what is known today as Saudi Arabia.

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