

Middle East Snapshot: Will the Gulf's Monarchs Keep Their Thrones? (Foley)

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Scott Lucas in Bahrain, EA Middle East and Turkey, Gulf Cooperation Council, Kuwait, Middle East and Iran, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sean Foley, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, United Arab Emirates



Dr Sean Foley writes a guest analysis for EA:

When demonstrations began in Tunisia in late December 2010, few foresaw that they would spread to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), collectively known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (or GCC) states.

By 2011, the six monarchies, central to the international economy with massive oil and gas deposits and lucrative consumer markets, had rebounded from the global financial crisis, thanks in part to strong oil prices. The threat from extremist Islamic and terrorist organizations had largely ebbed while longstanding security

ties with Washington appeared to shield the states against Iran and other external threats. Many Gulf governments had adopted a strong presence online, and both Dubai and Qatar were global leaders in delivering e-government to their citizens.

However, only weeks after the start of Tunisia's revolution, monarchs from Kuwait to Oman face the most serious challenge to their authority in half a century. In Bahrain, Shi'a activists have regularly held enormous demonstrations—sometimes reaching 100,000 people—against the island's Sunni monarchy, demanding political and economic opportunities commensurate with their status as the island kingdom's largest religious group. In Oman, Sultan Qaboos has fired his entire cabinet, including 10 ministers in a single day, and the head of security, but his actions have failed to quell the demonstrations or stem the erosion of Oman's formerly sterling international reputation. International ratings agencies have downgraded the Sultanate's credit worthiness, and British student groups have demanded that their universities return donations from Oman until it becomes a democracy.

Demonstrations have also taken place in Kuwait, where political activists and stateless Arabs have demanded greater rights. In Saudi Arabia, Despite Riyadh's announcement of a massive aid package for Saudis and stern official warnings against demonstrations, the Shi'a in the oil-rich eastern province have voiced their grievances, activists have called for a "day of rage" to take place on March 11, 2011 and leading Saudi voices have distributed petitions calling for reform. In the UAE, a group of academics has issued a statement calling for democratic elections.

These political upheavals reflect political, social, and economic dynamics that have been brewing beneath the surface of GCC societies for a decade—and that had already started to shift the balance of political power. Chief among these were the telecommunications revolution, which has brought news of democracy (as well as regime misdeeds) to people’s homes, the lack of jobs for major segments of the male population, and the increasing economic power of women and minorities. Despite sustained oil revenues from 2003 until 2008, monarchs in the Gulf could not check dissent and demands for political reform, either among their own citizens or the many foreigners who work in the Gulf. In particular, the success that South Asians and others have had in using strikes to improve their working conditions and pay over the last five years signaled to Gulf populations that their governments could not quell mass and sustained demonstrations.

It is these complex issues that are now at the forefront as the GCC monarchies grapple with their citizens’ demand for a new “nizam” (or “order”) which adequately meets the growing challenges of both modernity and money. Neither Sultan Qaboos nor the King of Bahrain are likely to be expelled from power like President Mubarak was in Egypt. But they will face a political challenge greater than the one Mubarak faced in February: how can they keep their authority while at the same time meeting the demands of their peoples to remove the institutions and individuals who have kept monarchs in power for years?

For Sultan Qaboos of Oman and others, reinventing the political structures that keep them in power will not be an easy task but there is no reason to think that he and his fellow Gulf monarchs will fail this political test. These states and their leaders have survived seemingly far more serious regional crises in the past: Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, Islamic activism and the Iranian revolution in the 1970s, and three large wars in the Persian Gulf between 1980 and 2003. In fact, most of the monarchies in the Persian Gulf trace their roots to the 18th century—far longer than any other regime in the Middle East except Morocco. It is likely that GCC monarchs will remain on their thrones for some time to come.

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