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Down in the Depths on the Ninetieth Floor: The Gulf Arab States in the Modern Era

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For over eighty years, Ibrahim al-Arrayad served as one of Bahrain's leading intellectual figures. The son of an Iraqi mother and a Bahraini pearl merchant, al-Arrayad was born in Bombay in 1908. There he received an elite Indian and English education but did not learn his father's native tongue, Arabic, until he was eighteen. In 1927, al-Arrayad settled permanently in Bahrain, found work as a civil servant and translator, and began to write poetry in Arabic, English, and Urdu. He then served as a senior ambassador, mentored younger poets, helped draft Bahrain's constitution, and won fame in the Arab world as the Kingdom's most celebrated poet. A major street in Bahrain's capital, Manama, now bears his name.[1]

Significantly, throughout his work, al-Arrayad cited leading Arab poets along with a host of non-Arab writers and literary traditions. Among the most important were nineteenth-century English Romantic poets and Rabindrath Tagore, the Indian poet/philosopher who was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. One can find such multicultural influences in the books housed in al-Arrayad's library as well as in his poem, 'A Skylark,' which draws on Percy

[1] *Ibrahim al-Arrayad House of Poetry*, http://www.shaikhebrahimcenter.org/Eng/th-arrayed.aspx

Shelley, and in 'A Debate with Existentialism,' a poem modelled in part on Tagore's song-cycle, *Gitanjali*.[2]

While al-Arrayad's eclectic literary style reflects his life experiences, it also reveals the openness of Gulf society to foreign ideas and its ability to serve as a critical bridge between the ideas of civilizations from both East and West. Here it is worth noting that al-Arrayad spent his formative years far removed geographically and culturally from the Gulf and immersed in Indian and Western literary traditions. Nonetheless, he—like countless others—went on to make a critical contribution to Gulf society at home and abroad. This should come as no surprise. Although many mistakenly associate Gulf society with Islamic fanaticism and intolerance, few areas of the world are in fact more sociologically diverse than the Gulf or can match its success at integrating millions of Muslims and non-Muslims from around the world.

Unfortunately, the diversity and cultural openness embodied in al-Arrayad's work and the societies of the Gulf States do not play a role in the chief tool scholars use to understand them: the rentier model. The rentier model emerged to explain the oil-funded socioeconomic transformation of Iran and what would become the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Scholars see these states, which had tiny indigenous populations and strong monarchies, as so exceptional that they deserved a new scholarly model—the rentier model. This model focuses on the state's monopolies over the fees, or 'rents,' which foreigners pay for the right to extract oil from Gulf nations. Scholars argue that these rents permit monarchs in the Gulf to be police states and to govern without taxing their subjects or negotiating with the rest of society, as their counterparts must do in countries without oil. Within the rentier framework, the autonomy of a government vis-à-vis its population correlates to external rents from oil: the greater the revenues from these external rents, the greater the autonomy, and vice versa. If oil revenues decline, rentier

[2] Hasan Marhamah, ed. and trans., *Voices: An Annotated Anthology of Contemporary Bahraini Poetry* (Victoria, BC: Trafford Publishing, 2010), 8-11 and 23-28. One can also see these influences in Ibrahim al-Arrayad's 1966 translation of al-Khayami's *Rubayat* from Persian into Arabic.

governments must make significant concessions to their populations in order to remain in power.[3]

Yet events in the Gulf in recent years have challenged the rentier model in significant ways. Although the price of oil and revenues from oil sales increased with breakneck speed between 1999 and the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008, the opposite of what the rentier model predicts has occurred. Governments have held elections and permitted many groups outside of traditional Sunni Arab male elites—groups including women, Shia, foreigners, and religious and secular opposition groups—to take a far more visible public role than ever before. In 2008, Bahrain appointed a Jewish woman, Huda Nonoo, to serve as its ambassador to the United States.[4]

Together, these insights frame the four themes that are at the heart of this article. First, the Gulf States face many of the same political and socioeconomic problems that other states do, including those that lack oil. Second, many of the challenges that Gulf States face in the twenty-first century predate the rise of the region's oil industry in the 1930s. Third, we cannot understand either the past or contemporary realities in the Gulf States unless we come to terms with their diversity and the roles of men like al-Arrayad along with non-Arabs, non-Muslims, and women. Fourth, technological change has had and continues to have an important effect on life and on politics in the Gulf. Above all, I ask if it is possible to think of these states without

[3] The leading proponents of the rentier model are Hazem Beblawi, Kiren Chaudhry, Jill Crystal, Gregory Gause, and Giacomo Luciani. Even the recent work of Michael Herb, which investigates the institutional development of the states' monarchies and compares Kuwait and the UAE, accepts the guiding assumptions of the rentier model as accurate. The same can be said of the Italian scholar Matteo Legrenzi, who has done the most in-depth recent work on the GCC. One scholar who has sought to move away from the rentier paradigm in regards to Saudi Arabia is Pascal Ménoret. Together, these studies have yielded important insights into the institutional constructions of GCC states, such as the political and economic dangers of state dependence on oil sales and the problems arising from weak societal institutions. For more on these works, see Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Kiren Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gregory Gause, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994); Michal Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Matteo Legrenzi, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Diplomacy, Security and Economy in a Changing Region* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Pascal Ménoret, The Saudi Enigma, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Zed Books, 2005).

[4] Nora Boustany, 'Barrier-Breaking Bahraini Masters Diplomatic Scene: Nonoo Is First Jewish Ambassador from an Arab Nation,' *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2008.

beginning and ending our discussion with Islam and oil. Indeed, neither Islam nor oil provides us with an explanation for how it is possible that a mass-circulation newspaper in Saudi Arabia regularly published schedules for satellite television programs and employed an openly gay writer even though satellite television and homosexuality are officially illegal in the Kingdom.

Broadening our analysis beyond petroleum reveals the breadth of socio-economic and political factors and actors that shape the destiny of GCC societies. It also allows us to see important historical and institutional continuities that predate the rise of oil in the 1930s and have continued over the past century. In particular, Gulf ruling families are unique in the Middle East: with the exception of Morocco, they are the only regimes that can claim a continuous tradition of governing their states that predates World War I. Gulf rulers have governed for decades by utilizing established traditions of rule, by cultivating social networks, and promoting Islamic and tribal values. At times, rulers have utilized non-Islamic calendars and beliefs—even when they contradict the religious traditions they claim to uphold. Despite the fact that Ibn al-Wahhab characterized astrology as sorcery and thus forbidden under Islamic law, the decree establishing Saudi Arabia in 1932 announced that the date of the Kingdom's founding was specifically timed to correspond to the first day of the ascendancy of the constellation Libra.[5]

Both before and after the rise of the oil industry, ruling families have utilized these traditions, networks, and values to maintain their position and fend off various foreign and domestic challenges to their power. In mosques, sword dances, *majleses*es, markets, hajj pilgrimage speeches, royal visits to provincial cities, and welfare institutions, monarchs interact with ordinary people and are thereby confirmed as leaders. Many rulers have further reinforced their authority through a system analogous to a welfare state in which individual subjects and tribes receive generous cash subsidies, food, and clothing. Rulers have also often leveraged their international position and importance to Great Britain, the United States, and South Asian Muslims to win assistance and funds akin to the rents they would later receive from oil. In fact, Saudi Arabia's dependence on the annual fees paid by hajj pilgrims in the 1930s and the 1940s resembled the Kingdom's later dependence on the proceeds from the sale of oil.

Significantly, the oil industry that took hold in Saudi Arabia and its neighbours reflected a nexus of technological and social factors that was every bit as global as the hajj pilgrimage. To begin with, in 1912 the British Admiralty turned oil into the most prized strategic commodity in the

[5] Astrology is still important to Saudi society, despite the fact that senior Saudi religious scholars have linked it to sorcery and other sinful acts. The Saudi Arabian daily newspaper, *The Saudi Gazette*, regularly published horoscopes in the 2000s, and the characters in Raja al-Sanea's novel, *The Girls of Riyadh*, discuss their horoscopes and those of potential husbands. For more on these issues, see Amos Peaslee, *The Constitutions of Nations*, 2nd ed., vol. 3: *Nicaragua to Yugoslavia* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1956), 276, Rajaa al-Sanea, *Girls of Riyadh,* trans. Rajaa al-Sanea and Marilyn Booth (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 53-55, and Natana DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73-75.

world by transforming the fuel of the British fleet's steam turbine engines from coal to oil. In a single stroke, Britain ensured that the Persian Gulf would play a paramount role in global affairs over the next century. Equally important were the economic and cultural factors after 1945 that intensified energy consumption while limiting the use of coal, especially in North America and Europe. These factors included shortages of coal after the war, an enormous global increase in the number of automobiles, solid economic growth, and public outcries about pollution from coal. The following statistics suggest how dramatic a shift this international transformation was. In 1950, coal provided 75 percent of the energy for the Western world, whereas oil provided 23 percent. By the 1970s, oil provided 60 percent of the West's energy needs, whereas coal provided 22 percent. Thanks to these changes, Saudi Arabia and its neighbours grew wealthy and emerged as a key centre of the global economy.[6]

Yet the modern oil industry was not just oil rigs and tankers. It arose in a society that utilized a host of other technological advances which have had at least as important an effect as oil on politics in the Persian Gulf. These new technologies permitted Gulf governments to build massive communities modelled on post-war US suburbs, increase the number of foreign and native inhabitants, and achieve rapid economic growth. Air conditioning was especially significant since it permitted people, particularly foreigners, to live in the region year-round without suffering the disabling effects of prolonged exposure to extreme heat. It also reduced the incidents of illness to those on a par with incidents of illness in Europe and North America.

None of these changes were enough, however, to convince Arab nationals that the socioeconomic and political structures of their states had changed beyond all recognition. Although the outside world may have increasingly seen these states chiefly through the lens of petroleum, Arabs in the Gulf no more defined their communities by oil than did Americans, Western Europeans, or others who lived in societies in which the consumption of oil had become central to every facet of daily life since World War II. Instead, Gulf Arabs saw the changes as part of a process that was so tentative that their societies could easily re-embrace the Bedouin lifestyle of their fathers and grandfathers. This view emerged in a saying among Gulf Arabs in the 1970s: 'My father rode a camel. I ride a Cadillac. My son flies a jet. My grandson will have a supersonic plane. But my great-grandson … will be a camel driver.'[7]

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[6] Arthur P Clark, Muhammad A Tahlawi, William Facey, and Thomas A Pledge, *A Land Transformed—The Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia and Aramco* (Dhahran: Saudi Arabian Oil Company and Houston: ARAMCO Services Co, 2006), 253-256.

[7] Myron Weiner, 'International Migration and Development: Indians in the Persian Gulf,' *Population and Development Review* 8, no. 1 (March 1982), 11. This prediction is also similar to Ibn Khaldun's famous sociological and historical theory about the rise and fall of ruling families in four generations. For more on this issue, see Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqadimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 105–107.

The debate over the political structure and future of Gulf society has played out for decades in the region's mass media. Following World War I, radios became very popular in the Persian Gulf. They were easily transportable and provided information to people who were both semiliterate and, with rare exceptions, without access to daily newspapers and weekly magazines. Television appeared in the 1950s and became as much an aspect of daily life in the region as the call to prayer and Quran readings. From the start, Gulf States treated mass media as an aspect of sovereignty and competed fiercely with one another, as well as with private oil companies, Arab nationalists, and regional US military bases, over stations and channels. The result was that Arabs in the Gulf—much like Germans during the Cold War—had access to broadcasts in their native language from terrestrial radio and television stations based in neighbouring states. Although regional governments censored domestic radio and television content whenever they could, they did not in fact control everything that was broadcast within their national borders. Instead, they were forced to compete for domestic audiences, which overwhelmingly preferred foreign television and radio broadcasts.

After Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the media framework in the Gulf underwent a shift as profound as was the introduction of radios. The new framework cantered on the rise of satellite television networks modelled on Cable News Network. It altered which foreign and domestic groups could demand access to state resources and also ensured that government decisions respected the interests and views of those groups. The media—foreign and Gulf-based—pursued their own agendas and were sometimes funded by governments or organizations that differed considerably from the official voice of the Gulf States. The Internet and new satellite television media gave a platform to dissident Gulf and Arab voices and often employed Western-trained, Arabic-speaking journalists. Unlike European or American journalists, these journalists did not depend on local (often government appointed) guides and translators. They could follow a story wherever it naturally led without fear. If that meant interviewing Bin Laden, covering anti-US protests, or discussing long taboo subjects, the stories went on the air.

Fortunately for the new Arab satellite television networks there were many local stories to cover. To begin with, the decision of the Gulf States to maintain close ties with the United States may have deterred Iran or Iraq from attacking them, but it also enraged important segments of GCC public opinion, convincing some people to support Al-Qaida and other organizations dedicated to using violence to overthrow Gulf regimes. Initiatives designed to reduce the dependence of Gulf economies on the proceeds from exporting oil joined with an influx of expatriate labour to reopen social divisions, since few GCC nationals were qualified to work in the positions created by the booming private sector.

Among the beneficiaries of the Gulf's investments in non-oil industries and the social issues they spawned were women because they had the modern skills to work in the private sector. They had benefitted far more than men from the massive investments Gulf states made in education starting in the 1970s. Since younger women on average are more literate, perform better

academically, and stay in school longer than their male counterparts this gap will only widen in the future. Already women account for two thirds of the students in many universities in the Gulf. In Kuwait, women's success at the college level has been a political issue, with Islamist politicians claiming that it is unfair and demoralizing for Kuwaiti men to have to compete with female students.[8] The complaints of Kuwaiti Islamists reflect the reality that men in the Gulf are increasingly only qualified for jobs in family businesses and the military. Furthermore, women are a natural ally for the Gulf's leaders, who, since September 11, 2001, have sought to modify their region's austere image in order to win greater foreign investment and to combat extremist groups. In the long run, extending the right to vote to women and permitting them to drive—issues that make headlines today—will look minor in comparison to those issues facing the Gulf states when women emerge as the only segment of the indigenous population qualified to work in modern economies.

These new social pressures point to two key larger aspects of my argument. First, the emerging power of Gulf women is consistent with their position historically in Gulf society. As recently as the 1930s, women travelled freely and were teachers, entrepreneurs, political leaders, religious leaders, and even led men into battle. Second, issues such as the veil and gender-separated schools are not solely women's issues; they reflect social norms in which both women and men are expected to act modestly. The male *dishdasha* and accompanying headgear cover nearly as much of the body as traditional women's garments do and are just as politically and culturally significant. The example of Bahrain is instructive. Starting in the 1950s, Bahrainis of all ages began to wear Western clothing, and Bahraini men, as an American noted at the time, 'left the Arab gown' for 'foreign clothes.'[9] But when Bahrain joined the GCC in 1981, Bahraini men switched back, adopting the *thobs* worn by their fathers and grandfathers. It was now important for Bahrainis to look correct and to signal that they had joined the community of Gulf Arabs.[10]

An equally misunderstood element of Gulf life is the role of non-Sunni Muslims and expatriates in GCC states. These individuals are often referred to by Gulf scholars as a collective other, whose presence is temporary. Many scholars characterize expatriates as indicative of the decadence of Gulf society and warn of the danger if they are not replaced by indigenous workers. In reality, the presence of these foreigners is the product of a long tradition whereby Americans

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[8] Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 160–164.

[9] Ida Patterson Storm, 'Bahrain,' *Arabia Calling* 244 (Autumn 1956): 10.

[10] Bruce Ingham, 'Men's Dress in the Arabian Peninsula: Historical and Present Perspectives,' in *Languages of Dress in the Middle East,* ed. Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham, 40-54 (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1997).

and other non-Arabs and non-Muslims have gone to the Gulf and made important contributions to the region. Both before and after the rise of the oil industry in the 1930s, individuals as disparate as Protestant missionaries, Greek mariners, European geologists, and Indian and Jewish merchants have played important roles in the region. Missionary doctors served thousands of patients in Saudi Arabia between the 1920s and 1952. Although Gulf peoples have a reputation for religious intolerance, the ruling families have readily integrated non-Muslims into their societies and granted them wide cultural freedoms and, over time, direct state protection and citizenship. While Shia Muslims faced discrimination, they also benefitted from official commercial privileges or the oil industry to achieve rapid socioeconomic advancement.

Just as indigenous Sunni Arabs have been affected by the rapid technological and political changes in the Middle East since 1990, non-Muslims and Shia have too. These individuals can turn not only to international media and nongovernmental organizations to promote better labour practices in the Gulf but also to the Shia government in Iraq, to India, and to other states that send workers to the Gulf. Many expatriates also maintain extensive communal organizations in the Gulf and have representatives in their home country's parliament. The demographic presence of foreigners (as much as 70 percent of the population in some states) and their socio-political activities have not gone unnoticed by the indigenous Sunni Arabs. Although some fear that the expatriates will lead to the eventual extinction of indigenous Gulf society, others have sought to incorporate Indian democratic traditions into civil society in the Gulf and to give foreigners the opportunity to become citizens.

How well indigenous Gulf Arabs (and expatriate workers) reconcile these issues will play an important role in the future of the region, especially given the fact that petroleum prices declined rapidly and a world financial crisis erupted in 2008. Not only did Gulf government revenues collapse, but sovereign wealth funds in the Gulf were eviscerated by declining stock markets. Furthermore, China and other nations sought to stimulate their economies in 2009 by investing in technologies that will decrease their use of oil, promote reusable energy sources, and reduce carbon emissions.[11] In the long run, these new investments could have as significant an impact on the demand for and price of oil as the reduction of coal use did in the United States and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s.

Within this financial environment, Gulf Arabs have an opportunity to reshape their societies and to achieve an economic model more in line with that of Mexico, where petroleum is important but not the centre of daily life. The key to such a transition may be expatriates, since they are precisely the type of hard-working and industrious people who are essential to the success of contemporary economies, especially those based on knowledge industries. If expatriates remain in the Gulf, they could transform the region's economy and spearhead an economic system not

[11] Thomas Friedman, 'The Great Disruption,' *The New York Times,* 8 March 2009.

based on petroleum. Ironically, the chief dilemma posed by expatriate workers for Gulf Arabs would not be how to replace them but how to keep them from leaving.

When the Gulf States achieve a post petroleum economy, women will be well positioned to take advantage of it but men will not be. They continue to fall further behind their female peers. With bleak career prospects and ample time on their hands, young men (and some older ones) have gravitated toward antisocial behaviour, including truancy, petty crime, drug abuse, religious extremism, and 'drifting,' a form of car racing in which drivers perform complex and dangerous manoeuvres at extremely high speeds. Drifters throughout the Gulf post their performances on YouTube, where they are celebrities who are said to have their pick of young male sexual partners.[12]

The dangers of drifting to Gulf society have been clear for many years. In 2005, three young boys died in Jeddah in the car crash of a Saudi naval officer, Faisal al-Otabi—better known as Abu Kab—who wrecked his car while attempting to perform a stunt-driving manoeuvre. Abu Kab's trial caused considerable public outcry, especially after it was revealed that he had more than sixty speeding tickets. There have been similar deadly accidents in other cities in the Gulf. One of the most dangerous of terrorists was a drifter: Youssef al-Ayyeri headed Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula until he died in a shootout with Saudi security forces in 2003.[13]

Drifting, especially when linked to other dangerous antisocial problems of young men, suggests that future 'gender questions' in the Gulf will revolve around how to integrate young men (including those in their twenties and thirties) into society and make them productive individuals before they engage in behaviour that is dangerous to themselves and others.

It is significant that the problems of men in Gulf societies are analogous to those faced by men in the United States and elsewhere during the current economic downturn. A white paper produced by the US state of Georgia's Department of Labour in 2009 called for the state radically to alter how it delivers social services to men, a significant percentage of whom are in grave danger of becoming 'structurally unemployed.' The report noted that men in Georgia and in other parts of the United States—much like men in the Gulf Arab states—lack basic modern skills and lag far behind women in educational achievement. The report also noted the striking statistic that the

[12] Tom Whitwell, 'This Week: The Arab Drift,' *Times,* August 16, 2008; Robert F. Worth, 'Saudi Races Roar All Night Fuelled by Boredom,' *New York Times,* 7 March 2009.

[13] Fatima Sidya, 'Verdict in Abu Kab Case Today,' *Arab News,* 2 February 2009 and Worth, *Saudi Races Roar All Night Fuelled by Boredom.*

percentage of students who are female in Georgia's universities, colleges, and technical institutes is approximately 60 percent, a number that is in line with the percentages in the Gulf.[14]

Although the Gulf States are facing immense problems, by international standards they are doing exceptionally well. They may be angst ridden, but they are also immensely rich. One only need look at Qatar's successful bid to host Football's World Cup in 2022 to see how much money one Gulf state can deploy to meet its national objectives.[15] As the US songwriter Cole Porter put it, the Gulf States are 'down in the depths,' but they are also in rich man's heaven 'on the ninetieth floor.'[16]

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[14] Michael Thurmond, 'Georgia Men Hit Hardest By the Recession, December 2007 to May 2009,' *Georgia Department of Labour: White Paper on Georgia's Workforce,* 7 July 2009 (available at http://www.dol.state.ga.us/)

[15] Jamie Jackson, 'Football crosses new frontier as Qatar wins World Cup vote for 2022,' *The Guardian*, 3 December 2010. The total bill for Qatar's 2022 world cup bid is expected to exceed $3 billion.

[16] Cole Porter, 'Down in the Depths,' *Red Hot and Blue,* in *The Complete Lyrics of Cole Porter*, ed. Robert Kimball, 206–207 (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).