

Cyclone

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Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

Why have the Arab Monarchies in the Gulf Remained Unaffected by the Arab Spring?

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A decade after the eruption of the Middle Eastern turmoil, the monarchies in the Gulf emerge as the most stable set of countries in the Arab sphere, and as entities with tremendous impact on the regional agenda. While key non-monarchial Arab regimes have collapsed, the Gulf monarchies, and even those outside the Gulf, such as Jordan and Morocco, have remained intact, even though some of them have been facing tremendous socio-economic pressures greatly enhanced by the COVID-19 crisis.

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As the long-standing power hubs in the Arab world – namely Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus that are grappling with ongoing violent struggles and severe economic hardship – lose their strength, the status of the Gulf states as the new engine of the Arab world is on the rise. These countries have become more influential than ever, and are actively involved – on military, economic, and political levels – in various centers of struggle in the region, among them Yemen, Libya, and Syria.

However, the rising powers in the Middle East have distinctly different basic characteristics than the actors that have led this region in the past: the monarchies sanctify the status quo, and do not support any kind of revolutionary or radical idea; their strength is based on their economic standing, diplomacy, and, in recent years,

military strength too; their approach is clearly pro-Western; they perceive the U.S. administration as a key strategic source of support; and they display a relatively softer approach toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as demonstrated in recent months by the promotion of normalization between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

The Gulf monarchies' relative stability may be traced back to three main reasons:

1. **Economic** – oil gains have ensured the Gulf regimes' survival, primarily by maintaining calm in the public sphere, and garnering external support. When turbulence first began, huge sums were designated to prevent public protest, mainly directed at the younger generation that spearheaded the Arab Spring. When the turmoil was in its initial stages, the Gulf monarchies spent some 150 billion Dollars on reforms: from cash grants and raises in salaries to development, housing, and job-creating projects. These efforts were particularly noticeable in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. To finance these reforms, and in light of the drop in oil prices, Gulf regimes turned to cutting back on subsidies provided to citizens for water, gas, and electricity. For the first time in their histories, they imposed various taxes, including Value Added Tax.
2. **Social** – among the monarchies' oldest survival techniques is the division of key roles among the ruling family members. This helped maintain the monarchies' cohesiveness tremendously over the past decade, when some of the ruling elites in the Arab world were grappling with challenging internal rifts that undermined their status or even eliminated them altogether. Monarchial regimes' traditional nature, and the fact that many of them are socially "intertwined" (family ties) with large parts of the population also contribute to such countries' relative stability. Against this backdrop, such regimes are more (if not absolutely) legitimized domestically, and viewed as more acceptable by local societies.
3. **Political** – the regimes in the Gulf are undeterred by oppressive steps to counter political protest and advance stringent oversight of public discourse for fear that it be directed against them. Although all regimes in the region attempt to uphold an image of liberal, political change, the traditional political method in most has mostly remained as it was before the regional turmoil, and at present, has not faced broad collective demand for change. Enforcement and oversight efforts are focused on social media activity, viewed as a key "platform" serving as basis for the evolvment of the Arab Spring.

The Gulf states' strategic balance sheet following the past decade is leaning significantly toward the negative. This decade has raised grave concerns among many monarchies, who now cast a doubtful, worrisome look toward the future. For while they have improved their status and impact in the Arab world, and are much more involved in its geostrategic shaping than they once were, viewed as powerful forces by international entities, they also face old challenges that have now been exacerbated, as well as new ones that have subsequently emerged. The most prominent threat is the one posed by the Shiite camp headed by Iran, which threatens the Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia, from new arenas, primarily Yemen.

Looking toward the future, several key challenges to Gulf monarchies can be anticipated:

1. **Lessening oil dependency:** The economic crisis exacerbated by the pandemic demonstrates the Gulf states' deep dependence on the global oil market. The Gulf states can utilize the current crisis to improve their economies' performances by introducing more citizens into the labor market at the expense of reducing the number of foreign workers, strengthening the private sector, stepping away from large-scale projects, and prioritizing productive projects that do not depend on the oil market. However, the pursuit of income sources that do not depend on oil will require many resources that compete with the resources currently needed to mitigate the decline in citizens' standard of living. It seems that, at present, these regimes will have no choice but to infringe upon their citizens' living conditions.
2. **Portrait of future leaderships:** The rise of the young generation of leaders in the Gulf, who are relatively freed from past restraints, may impact the nature of states in the region. There is no imperative that the young leaders will open up the political system to citizens' involvement, for an attempt at democracy is still identified to a large extent with the bloodshed and destruction associated with the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the expectations of political involvement may increase social tension, forcing rulers to initiate reforms, albeit symbolic and limited, by way of making it subside. This challenge is particularly prominent in Saudi Arabia. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, socio-cultural openness has grown, and reforms may lead to high expectations among the younger generation while causing unrest among the traditional and religious circles that are still quite dominant in the kingdom.

3. **The rise of the younger generation:** As in the rest of the Arab world, the Gulf states are also dealing with a young, educated generation that has financial expectations and, in future, perhaps some political ones as well. Many young adults born when the economy was thriving, are expecting to secure jobs in the public sector. To maintain their stability the Gulf states will have to meet these young people's expectations. As mentioned, the younger generation is yearning for rapid changes across the board in life in the kingdom, a trend that could evolve into a cascade of expectations should it discover that there are many difficulties on the road to realizing this longed-for change.
4. **The relations with the U.S. administration:** The Gulf states are concerned about the policy that President Biden may promote in the Middle East. The Arab rulers are worried that the dialogue with Iran will recommence, particularly on the nuclear agreement, thus filling Iran with renewed confidence that will make it bolder and more influential in the Middle East. They are also troubled by heavy American pressure on human rights issues, and the possibility that Washington will attempt to form a channel of communication with the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East. Like the Saudis, the rest of the Gulf states are likely to focus in the near future on forging ties with the new administration, and setting up lobbies in U.S. power hubs. They are also expected to improve the state of individual liberties in the kingdom, at least on the surface, and continue expanding their security-related acquisition from the United States. They may even go as far as to show greater involvement in the peace negotiations in the Palestinian context.
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Looking ahead, the Gulf monarchies will have to maneuver between the need to implement profound internal reforms and maintaining current political order. As economic pressure in the Gulf will mount, and the social contract in them shatter, the monarchies will find it more difficult to rely on the religious legitimization – particularly relevant to the Saudi monarchy – or tribal loyalty that contribute to maintaining stability in the Gulf states.