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# 11

## CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN ARAB GULF SOCIETY

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Gulf societies have been buffeted immensely by countervailing forces over the last few decades, to a degree rarely seen elsewhere. The advent of the oil era challenged the nature of personal and family relationships, introduced consumerism, subordinated the principle of egalitarianism to more formal authority structures, and created a thorough dependency on government.<sup>1</sup> Then the oil boom of the 1970s, the period of *al-tafra* [leap or upswing], brought not only opportunity and prosperity but also threatened to tear the fabric of society through the distortion of proportion, values, goals and integrity. For many citizens, the 1980s have been welcomed as a relief from the halcyon days of the previous decade; the image of recovering from an intoxication and returning to normalcy is often used to describe the end of that era. Admittedly, perception of pre-boom 'normalcy' may be coloured by the rosy tint of nostalgia.

A principal outcome of the economic retrenchment of the 1980s has been a re-emphasis on traditional values in religion, society and family structure. The continued existence and strength of this

bedrock of traditionalism underlies more visible change in physical and administrative infrastructure, social welfare, education, commerce and many other areas. Change in the Gulf has affected social institutions on their periphery, leaving the core of institutions intact. In fact, the two seemingly contradictory forces, tradition [or traditionalism] and modernisation, coexist comfortably.

Both social change and the extent or resilience of social continuity have direct and profound political implications, of course. The next few pages briefly outline some causes of social change, with special emphasis on social stratification and generational change. These are followed by a discussion of the elements of continuity, some points on the impact of the Iran-Iraq war on the GCC states, and finally some conclusions on the political impact of social change are drawn.

### CONTOURS OF RECENT SOCIAL CHANGE

Various causal factors, largely but not exclusively introduced by the advent of the oil age, have stimulated extensive social change in what remain heavily traditional societies. One observer has contended that, even as the exploitation of oil produced economic benefits and strengthened the political order, the societies of the Gulf were distorted and disoriented by being thrown rapidly and without preparation into a far more complex international arena of politics, economics and finance.<sup>2</sup> Some causal factors of social change may be seen as the deliberate consequence of government policies while others were unforeseen.

The transformation of the economy must be seen as perhaps the most pivotal of these factors. The prevailing economy based on fishing, pastoralism, pearling and agriculture was quickly rendered nearly untenable. The very presence of oil companies was instrumental in introducing economic change through hiring nationals [albeit only in small numbers at first], providing housing, stimulating consumer demand, and encouraging the formation of service and trading firms. New requirements for skills and dependability in employees forced readjustments in lifestyles, as well as a dependency on expatriates to fill many jobs.<sup>3</sup>

The inability of existing institutions to distribute the flood of income meant that primitive governments were forced quickly to create and utilise administrative and economic institutions to carry out new functions and responsibilities. The expanded role of government and its increasingly pervasive control of society was accepted because all sectors benefited. Simultaneously, the

unpreparedness [or the absence] of other sectors to take up economically productive positions in the new system seemed to necessitate the establishment of social-welfare states. Eventually, few citizens lacked such basic services as free health-care and education, nearly free housing, and efficient transportation and communications. At the same time, however, these systems directly served the economic interests of the elites and perpetuated and expanded the socio-economic gap between sectors of society.

The traditional leadership not only retained the power of distribution but also determined the criteria of allocation. *Ad hoc* improvements gradually gave way to a more systematic provision of social services and planned development. While a priority of development planning was the continued expansion of social services to all social groups, emphasis on national development and state-sponsored industrialisation distorted economic growth along distributive lines and no consideration was given to redistribution. Government contracts and land purchases provided trickle-down via merchant elites who were well placed to exploit new opportunities in co-operation with members of ruling families. Meanwhile, large sections of society continued to live permanently on social-service payments and non-productive employment.

Considerable emphasis was placed on education, both by governments as a means of improving the quality of manpower and by individuals for the higher status and public-sector job opportunities it provided. Until quite recently, educational qualifications were a relatively marginal consideration for most jobs, and higher education is still rarely seen as the key to intellectual inquiry [in large part due to the a-intellectual nature of Gulf societies].

Perhaps the most visible impact of modernisation has been the creation of vast, modern cities. The impressive physical transformation has been accompanied by massive in-migration of citizens [with an extensive denuding of the countryside in the smaller Gulf states], an influx of expatriates who work in nearly all sectors of the economy, and a mixing of cultural influences from the Arab world, the West and Asia. In the 1970s, Gulf governments asserted that the large expatriate communities were a temporary need occasioned by infrastructural development. In the 1980s, it became apparent that indigenous labour forces could not or would not replace expatriates and even greatly lowered salaries and benefits, especially for expatriates but also for nationals, failed to

lessen the predominance of expatriates in the work force.

The effects of these causal factors on social change can be seen in a number of areas. The process of sedentarisation of the *badu* and partial detribalisation accelerated. The decreasing economic viability of pastoralism, changes of lifestyles, the diffusion of tribespeople into urban settings, the replacement of the tribe by the state as a guarantor of social welfare and honour, and increased reliance on ascriptive qualifications for employment and advancement, all reduced the political and economic importance of the tribe. The tribe has been displaced as the primary political unit in Gulf society, and the traditional role of the *shaikh* has been much constricted. Over the years, increasing sedentarisation, encouraged by government policies, has led to the proliferation of *badu* shanties in and around urban centres. Physically part of the urban population, many *badu* remain culturally apart and economically disadvantaged.

Another effect was the development of a national political culture within an Arab and Islamic context. The unifying elements of Arab and Islamic identity were always present in Gulf societies; increased exposure to the outside world, as well as the presence of Arab and Muslim expatriates, have strengthened their influence. In addition, control over and the expenditure of oil revenues has provided the state and regime with a positive image in the eyes of nationals. Ruling families have served as the unifying symbols of new states: for some elements of society, loyalty to the state cannot be separated from loyalty to the ruling family. The state continues to mesh two poles of legitimacy: the traditional pole [involving the rituals of consultation and equality, identification with Arabism, and conformity to popular expectations of an Islamic state] with a modern pole [centred on the distribution of the benefits of oil income to all sectors of society and guaranteeing order and justice].

Social change, as is common elsewhere, has lagged well behind economic change. Marriage, divorce, custodianship, inheritance and other matters continue to be governed by Islamic precepts. The family plays a major role in the socialisation of children, and family status is still determined by age and sex.<sup>4</sup> The role and structure of the family is mirrored in many respects in society as a whole. Nevertheless, significant changes can be observed. The press and dispersion of urban life means that the extended family gathers less frequently, and men, for example, tend to spend more time with former schoolmates, business associates, and fellow club-members,

than with family members as in past. Younger women tend to be allowed relatively more freedom of movement than older generations. The move to nuclear households also provides wives, as well as husbands, with more autonomy from their families. Younger-generation married couples show less specialisation of roles, so that the husband participates more in the socialisation of the daughter and the mother more in that of her son.<sup>5</sup> While many of the traditional barriers between the men's domain and the women's domain still exist, there is more mixing than in the past for some elements of society. Women are educated in equal proportion to men, especially in Gulf universities, and female employment in Gulf governments is on the increase.

Another feature has been cultural erosion through greater contact with the external world and the presence of a wide variety of expatriates. The preference for imported goods over locally-produced ones has led to the decline in handicrafts and local industries. Indigenous poetry, literature, and oral traditions have suffered as well. The sheer size and diversity of the expatriate population has imparted a myriad of cultural influences, while the media and foreign travel [many Gulf Arabs are far more familiar with Cairo, London and California than they are with neighbouring Gulf states] transmit other cultural images. Expatriate Arab teachers have had both direct and indirect influence on the socialisation and cultural confusion of their students. The consequence is cultural alienation, and a common inability to distinguish between authentic and affected elements of indigenous culture.<sup>6</sup>

Other effects concern an evolution in class structure and greater social stratification, and changing outlooks in successive generations.<sup>7</sup> Because of their strong political implications, these last two effects deserve discussion in greater detail.

### **EVOLUTION OF CLASS STRUCTURE**

Social stratification in the GCC states is far less rigid than in many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the onset of the oil era has deepened the existing stratification. In addition, it has created new distinctions, based on education, skills, and occupations, that did not exist in the past. At the same time, the uneven distribution of oil wealth and the ability of some groups to exploit their advantageous placement has widened the gap between upper economic classes and the rest of the population.

A rough paradigm of class structure in the Arab Gulf states is

presented in Table 11.1.<sup>8</sup> It must be noted, first, that any single schema of social stratification in the Gulf necessarily blurs the lines between social, economic, and political elites and groups. High social status, such as that enjoyed by badu tribes, may be accompanied by poverty and marginal political power [although badu tend to do especially well once they get good jobs]. Wealthy businessmen may

TABLE 11.1:  
CLASS STRUCTURE OF THE ARAB GULF STATES

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<b>[1]</b>	<b>RULING FAMILIES</b>
<b>[2]</b>	<b>SECONDARY ELITES</b>
	A Senior 'ulama'
	B Tribal Shaikhs
	C Economic elite [established merchants, bankers, industrialists]
	D Senior government officials
<b>[3]</b>	<b>MIDDLE CLASSES</b>
	A Professionals [doctors, engineers, architects, professors, teachers]
	B Mid-level government employees
	C Small merchants, company managers and executives
	D Army officers
	E Religious establishment
<b>[4]</b>	<b>LOWER CLASSES</b>
	A Badu
	B Junior civil servants
	C Urban 'proletariat'
	1 Newly sedentarised badu
	2 Long-resident 'immigrants'
	3 'Origin-less' groups [e.g., pearl-divers, slaves and descendants]
	D Rural groups and peasantry
<b>[5]</b>	<b>OTHER GROUPS FALLING ACROSS CLASS LINES</b>
	A Shi'a
	B Expatriates
	1 Upper [professionals, government advisers and officials]
	2 Middle [professionals, company managers, teachers, mid-level government employees]
	3 Skilled and unskilled labour

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be looked down upon for their mean social origins. 'Ulama' may have considerable political influence but little economic standing. Second, the contours of class stratification differ considerably from one country to another. While badu heritage and the weight of the 'ulama' are of considerable social and political importance in Saudi Arabia, they do not apply nearly so strongly in Oman.

### 1. RULING FAMILIES

Ruling families are placed at the top of the paradigm for obvious reasons. They are the only elite into which members must be born. Always possessing high social status, these families have seen their monopoly of political power enhanced during the oil era, and in the later stages of modernisation have gained importance as an economic class because of the willingness of members to exploit their role in the allocation of state income, their increasing involvement in commerce, and their spending power.

### 2. SECONDARY ELITES

The cluster of secondary elites immediately below the ruling families owes its status to a mixture of social, economic and political criteria, the mixture depending on the individual group. They differ from ruling families in that the power of the latter derives from their ability to make and carry out decisions [and to coerce if necessary], while the more indirect power of the secondary elites lies in their capacity to prevent the rise of issues and decisions threatening their position and influence.

The component groups of the secondary elite may be divided into two categories. The status and position of traditional elites [senior 'ulama' and shaikhs] antedates the oil era but their influence tends to be either static or declining. The appearance of 'modern' elites, however, relates directly to new opportunities and needs brought about by the oil era and their penetration of elite status generally is dynamic and growing. A 'modern' elite [with traditional elements] which has made the most of expanded opportunities is the economic elite, composed of both long-established merchant families and newcomers who made their mark in the 1960s and the 1970s. The newest addition is that of senior government-officials who have risen to their positions because of ascriptive qualities. They are principally a political elite, since they typically do not come from elite social origins, but often have used their positions to advance their economic interests.

### 3. MIDDLE CLASSES

The intermingling of social, economic and political aspects of class renders it difficult to draw distinctions between elites and constituents. Groups classifiable as middle class tend to be self-evident for the most part, although class size and boundaries are somewhat amorphous. Clearly, such factors as income, education,

values, occupations and careers, lifestyles, consumption patterns and common interests are important considerations in determining affiliation. Mid-level government bureaucrats and technocrats logically comprise the heart of the class, since their numbers have mushroomed with the growth of government and their advancement depends the most of any group on their personal qualifications. Other groups include military and police officers, professionals, small merchants and company managers. Although the middle classes tend to be a 'modern' creation, the 'rank and file' of the religious establishment [comprising *qadis*, imams, *khatibs* and Islamic teachers], formerly part of the elite, should also be included.

#### 4. LOWER CLASSES

Difficulties arise as well in drawing a dividing line between the middle and the lower classes, not least because of great differences between included groups in terms of social status, economic prosperity and political influence. While, in economic terms, the lower classes seem to be shrinking in size, the absence of any government policy of redistribution or income transfer indicates that lower class distinction will be perpetuated into the foreseeable future. While now representing only a small proportion of the population, the *badu* are important for historical, cultural, and social reasons.<sup>9</sup> Along with the ruling families, their acceptable social status arises from birth and cannot be altered. Sedentarised *badu* have come to form a major component of the urban 'proletariat', along with long-term 'immigrants', who have been resident long enough to acquire citizen status and assimilate [at least partially], and the residue of the population lacking social 'origins'. The category also includes other rural groups and peasantry, principally tribal or Shi'a agriculturalists.

In addition, there are several identifiable groups whose membership cuts across class lines. The Shi'a, as the largest indigenous minority in what are principally homogenous societies, also transcend class and ethnic lines. Their ranks include well-established merchant families, small shopkeepers, and white-collar employees of oil companies, as well as the rural masses of Bahrain, al-Qatif and al-Hasa.

Expatriates also must be considered as part of the class structure because of their permanent presence and importance to the economies of the Gulf states. The class/caste distinction between the indigenous 'aristocracy' and non-nationals is inviolate because of



the near-impossibility of getting GCC citizenship. The expatriate population itself is heavily stratified. The small upper-level is comprised of government advisers and some professionals, while larger numbers are middle class, including professionals, company managers, teachers and mid-level government employees. The largest group consists of skilled and unskilled labour. In a very rough sense, ethnic divisions parallel economic stratification, with Arabs predominating in the upper and middle categories and Asians in the middle and lower ranks.

## CHANGING OUTLOOKS IN SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS

The extent of social change in the last few decades can be charted through its impact on four successive generations with evolving characteristics and outlooks. The *pre-oil generation*, by definition already passed from the scene, displayed traditional social stratification and goals and values. There was a clear predominance of the oligarchy of ruling families and traditional elites and only minuscule middle classes were extant in some urban settings. Social mobility was limited and prosperity was not the rule even among the elites. The state at that time was minimalist in its capabilities, while control over the population and popular expectations of its role were limited.

The *transitional generation's* attitudes and world-view were shaped during the pre-oil era of traditional society and minimalist states. The ruling and secondary elites come mostly from this generation, which may help to explain the stress placed on traditional values and institutions. For many in the population, the breakdown of traditional economic patterns has meant dependency on the state for social services, welfare payments, and disguised assistance in such areas as monopolies in taxi ownership or rental income from real estate. At the same time, they retain a sense of equal footing with old and new elites and the state for them does not have such an omnifarious image. Their loyalty is not as automatic as for succeeding generations, but must be cajoled by pointing out the less desirable alternatives present in states nearby.

This generation, obviously, experienced the first changes in relations between classes. Ruling families began to differentiate themselves from other elites politically and even socially, sparking stratification into a sort of 'nobility' and 'gentility'. The newer secondary elites began to appear. Merchants became dependent on

the state for the protection of their commercial interests, were well placed to profit from the flow of public funds to the private sector, and also sought government participation in financial and industrial ventures as a guarantee.<sup>10</sup> One of the first fruits of policies of higher education was the rise of senior government officials as a non-ascriptive elite. The emergence of an indigenous middle class, however, was retarded by the paucity of education and the explosion of expatriates, who performed nearly all the necessary functions in the state apparatus, as well as the vitiating effect of social-welfare policies.

In some countries, secondary elites, particularly the established merchant families and some 'ulama', unsuccessfully challenged the political monopoly of the ruling families. In reaction, ruling families encouraged the expansion of sectors of the lower classes, especially the badu, and directly utilised them as supporters against challenges from other classes. This was clearly visible in Kuwait where the nationalisation of thousands of badu ensured government control over elections to the National Assembly.

*The oil-boom generation:* The half-decade or so beyond 1974 was an unsettling period for Gulf economies and societies alike. The guiding strategy of oil-income distribution was an attempt by governments to provide the highest possible standards of living, either through direct activities [as in government housing, road-building, the establishment of schools, the provision of employment, and the guarantee of medical treatment at home or abroad] or through indirect contributions [government purchases of land at uneconomic prices and policies of allowing continued monopolies on imports and the distribution of goods and services]. These policies stimulated demand for services, and the population's attitude shifted from accepting these services to demanding more of them. The value of work and production was in danger of being lost and instant wealth became an end in itself. Social problems and stratification were amplified by the failure of economic growth to distribute benefits equally. Economically, the elites and middle classes became tied closer to the West.<sup>11</sup>

The oil-boom generation was born and raised after the impact of oil was felt but it reached maturity during the 1970s. In many ways, the state has played an inordinately powerful role in shaping the lives of this generation. Governments have become the largest and the most prestigious employers. Commerce has been closely tied to

the government trough. In general, this generation has grown accustomed to the omnipotent role of the state and has become dependent on the state but still retains some of the previous generation's healthy scepticism regarding the role of the government and the groups that run it.

The class structure in the Gulf assumed its present form and stratification in the generation of the 1970s. Ruling families enhanced their status as a social and economic elite while retaining their political monopoly. The secondary elite has enlarged considerably and become more differentiated. Modern sectors of the secondary elite gained influence and size while traditional sectors either remained static or declined. The middle classes expanded rapidly and assumed increasing, if indirect, influence in the political system through their size and ubiquity in the government infrastructure and economy. The cutting edge of the middle classes prospered, because their education, skills and goals were well suited to exploiting new opportunities through qualifications and individual initiative. The lower classes, shrinking slightly in size, became less useful to ruling families as a counterweight to the challenges of other classes.

The members of the *post-boom generation* have known only the modern state. Their youth occurred during the oil boom, when everything seemed possible, both in terms of personal advancement and material possessions, and the state's emphasis was concentrated on disbursing oil income to provide benefits and raise standards of living, including conspicuous consumption. But the end of the boom and the emergence of a new period of stagnant or sluggish economic growth has indicated the limits of government capabilities. Still, pressure from the economic elites, the bureaucratic self-interests of the middle class, and the consumer ethic ingrained in the post-boom generation often have forced governments to continue costly policies based on fulfilling expectations of virtually free services and guarantees of comfortable lifestyles, rather than pursuing undoubtedly painful but rational economic considerations.<sup>12</sup>

Higher levels of education, greater access to services, more sophisticated tastes, broader travel, and larger disposable incomes have led the post-boom generation to expect more out of life. At the same time, however, the seemingly unlimited opportunities for the ambitious, which existed during the oil-boom years, have been curtailed. Growing competition exists for even entry-level jobs and

rapid promotion through the ranks of government to prestigious and senior positions is no longer possible. At the same time, the post-boom generation displays a marked reluctance to take up managerial [as opposed to entrepreneurial] and salaried positions in the private sector. This generation and coming ones will also find it necessary to accept jobs in locations far from home or the big cities. At some point, disappointment may well turn to frustration and then to alienation.

In class terms, the development and entrenchment of the middle class will be seen most clearly in this generation, because individuals will have the greatest need to find well-paying jobs for the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. Entry qualifications for these jobs are continuing to rise and admission to universities is becoming more difficult. At some point, the lower strata of the middle class and/or less capable offspring from this class will be forced into vocational training and blue-collar jobs. Still, the middle class will continue to grow and expand its influence at the expense of other classes. There is a possibility of an eventual alliance between middle and lower classes to break the oligarchic social and political power of the elites, perhaps with an emphasis on redistributive policies to close economic gaps. The first signs of this alliance are visible in the populist postures of the Gulf's national assemblies and consultative councils.<sup>13</sup>

To a certain extent, the concerns and limitations of the middle-class members of the post-boom generation are reflected in the ruling families. Younger generations, particularly in cadet branches, increasingly must make their mark on non-ascriptive terms while genealogical and generational distance limits access to family leadership. The protracted leadership of GCC states by rulers from the transitional generation, accompanied by the progressive remoteness of their administrations, may well exacerbate alienation within ruling families.

## **DIRECTIONS OF FUTURE CHANGE AND CONTINUITY**

The political systems of the Gulf have coped successfully with rapid economic transformation. While real social change has accompanied this transformation, an enduring bedrock of continuity underlies what are often more superficial changes. The Arab Gulf states will find it necessary to continue to reflect traditional precepts and values while simultaneously offering [responding to demands for]

new services and functions. In particular, the evolution of the class structure and generational attitudes outlined above will have a great impact on the maturation of what are, in many ways, new political systems.<sup>14</sup> The social challenges to the fledgling nation-states and city-states of the Gulf most likely will be played out in the following arenas:

### [1] CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

While the cohesiveness of the extended family may diffuse into more emphasis on the nuclear family, the obligations imposed by society on the family have essentially remained intact and the authority structure and its patriarchal nature remains basically unchanged. By extension, the fissiparous process of sophistication and specialisation within Gulf society has not altered the underlying acceptance of the patriarchal system of authority. For most of the population, the usefulness of the *majlis* [or *diwan* or *diwaniya*] continues. They attend the formal majlis of rulers, close relatives of the rulers, and governors, either as supplicants, presenting petitions for favours or grievances, or in symbolic attestation of allegiance. Others may view and use a more informal majlis as a forum for discussion of current issues, to conduct business, to socialise, and to maintain contacts and show respect. The institution in this sense has not changed, even though affiliation may be based more on common ties established through work, age, education, and shared modernist outlooks, rather than family and tribal relationships.

Increasingly, Gulf nationals live in nuclear households, albeit often in clusters of relatives' houses. Such living arrangements generate a number of social implications. Men are increasingly monogamous, partly through the social pressure of appearing 'modern' and partly for financial reasons, although marriages still tend to be arranged. New brides are less the drudges in large households and subject to the tyranny of mothers-in-law but have more opportunities to pursue education and careers if their husbands approve. More husbands seem to desire educated wives and look abroad for them if they cannot find them at home. The nuclear family plays an increasingly central role in the socialisation of children, in a process that tends to instil conformity and docility.<sup>15</sup>

The pressure of work and new patterns of socialisation erode the fabric of intrafamily relations. A few years ago, when young men first established separate households, they continued to make a point of seeing their fathers on a daily basis; increasingly, the same

men point out that the lack of time and the snarl of traffic have led them to settle for telephone calls on a less regular basis. Familiar patterns of 'workaholic' husbands, bored wives seeking satisfaction in outside work, and troubled children [distracted by fast cars and easy drugs] have begun to appear in the Gulf. Men, and women to a lesser extent, may congregate with peers more than kinship groups, and often join relatively formal majlis or diwaniya groups. They may chafe at the special privileges of ruling families, and resent the flagrant corruption of some officials in high positions.

## [2] EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Education is beginning to pose several related problems. Opportunities for higher education already have expanded immensely. The shift of students from universities abroad to home institutions and the swelling of their numbers increases dependence on an overwhelmingly foreign teaching and administrative staff. The service of the qualified and committed among these expatriates is lost almost as soon as they adapt to the local situation; many are second-rate. The Gulf states face a dilemma familiar to the United States: a commitment to a universal right to educational opportunities jeopardises standards of admission and teaching quality. Ironically, the push to educating nationals at home irrespective of the cost in terms of educational quality comes at a time when the Gulf states finally have begun to pay closer attention to the quality of Western institutions which their students attend.

A more fundamental problem arises from the deficiencies in the system of Arab higher education, both in the process and the product.<sup>16</sup> This has particular effect on the Gulf states because of their importation of an essentially Egyptian academic method. The commitment to excellence in education is suspect due to a pervasive absence of an intellectual or academic culture in the Gulf: the possession of a degree is regarded simply as a qualifying step to a prestigious job and little thought is given to the university's role in unlocking the doors to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. Indeed, a reluctance to apply rigorous standards to courses and to fail indifferent students breeds unqualified and unmotivated graduates. Continued budget-problems exacerbate the predicament of higher education.

On a more practical level, governments are becoming concerned with the emerging surplus of graduates in the liberal arts and humanities. Government employment is most prestigious. As the

educational levels of the general population and the numbers of graduates rise, nationals increasingly are replacing 'middle-class' expatriates in white-collar, middle- and high-level management jobs. But as the educational levels of the entering national workforce increase and the proportion of 'expendable' expatriates decreases, entry qualifications become stiffer, in terms of both the level and the specialisation of education. For example, university degrees are required for employment in Qatari ministries and for officer status in the armed forces; Bahrain will not consider teaching applications without a bachelor's degree. Even if a suitable job is secured, once-automatic promotions have become more difficult since higher positions are held by relatively young men. Bahrainis, in particular, face the problem of a lack of promotion opportunities because of the relative plethora of well-qualified nationals at all levels of government and commerce. It is becoming common for graduates in some states to wait a year or two to find a good job.

Some GCC states already have reached the crossroads of deciding whether to adopt the wasteful Egyptian model of guaranteeing employment [largely in the government bureaucracy] for every graduate, or to steer students into fields of study for which there is a need. There is still scope for localisation of manpower in the private sector. But at some not-too-distant point, the post-boom and succeeding generations will have to come to terms with the necessity of taking vocational training instead of a prestigious university degree in order to get a job. Increasingly, employment opportunities will be concentrated in the presently undesirable range between white-collar professions [for which advanced education is required] and the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations [now filled by expatriates except for a few areas favoured by the badu and the urban proletariat].

### [3] SECULARISATION AND ISLAMIC RESISTANCE

Many of the aspects of modernisation brought about by the oil era undeniably involved secularisation and elements of Westernisation. One need look only at such disparate examples as the construction of the education system and universities, the civil service systems, the organisation of the national assemblies and consultative councils, the villa style of nuclear-family housing, the American-style shopping centres, supermarkets and fast-food outlets, and more. As the oil boom rolled on and receded, however, the wholesale rush to materialism and Westernisation gradually was

tempered by an attempt to rediscover indigenous roots and values.

A wide range of reactions to cultural pressures can be discerned: [a] isolation for fear of cultural contamination; [b] resistance by defending values and beliefs [especially by reactionary Islamic movements calling for a return to Islam and its implementation in the social, economic, and political life of the community]; [c] acceptance of Western culture in the Gulf [a generally selective course which has not been widely advocated]; [d] a strengthening of national identity [the shift in loyalties and allegiances from tribe to state makes states less vulnerable to outside pressure than in the past]; [e] a strengthening of Gulf identity [especially through the GCC, which has enhanced the national awareness of Gulf peoples and strengthened their Arab-Islamic identity]; [f] the search for roots [the attempt of states to preserve their cultural heritage by creating museums, restoring old buildings, reviving some handicrafts and saving unwritten folklore and customs]; and [g] revitalisation [the opposite pole from a reaction of resistance, which represents a genuine attempt to revitalise the spirit of Islam and a search for authenticity].<sup>17</sup>

The Gulf in recent years has been caught between two of these principal cultural trends: an inclination towards liberal thought, and an adverse reaction to the penetration of Western ideas and materialism in Islamic resistance. The movements engendered by such resistance call for a return to religion and its full implementation in the life of the community. The appeal of resistance to Western cultural pressures, which reactionary movements trumpet, finds fertile ground in traditional Islamic societies, where values and beliefs are an integral part of a religious system that permeates and regulates every aspect of life. Such a response is easier and thus more attractive than the opposite pole of revitalisation. Adherents are concerned with matters of behaviour rather than belief, particularly such details as modest dress, contact between the sexes, and the eradication of alcohol and pork. Their preoccupation with literalism leads them to reject all outside ideas and influences.<sup>18</sup>

The agents of Islamic reactionism are not necessarily the 'ulama', who have been co-opted into alliance with the regimes and serve to legitimate the existing governments for preventing what is forbidden in Islam and allowing that which is permitted. Rather, Egyptian and other Arab teachers and workers have inculcated the



precepts of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Salafiya in those societies which have transformed the most, such as Kuwait and Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, strict Wahhabi opposition to what can be perceived as a wayward state continues to appeal to some conservative elements, as well as the fanatical fringe [such as seized the Great Mosque at Mecca in 1979]. The kingdom is particularly vulnerable to religiously motivated criticism and its Islamic institutions [such as the Islamic universities and organs of international proselytising] may serve also as channels of organisation for disenchanting elements within the country and for alliances with similar movements outside.

#### [4] RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SEXES

In part, the growth of women's rights and opportunities is a function of the speed and extent of social change throughout the society, in a sort of 'push' effect. This is complemented by a 'pull' effect derived from the unmistakable need for women's full participation in the developing economy and polity. It is also a function of the changing attitudes of both men [tolerance to broader roles for women] and women [insistence on broadening their roles].

Politically important indications of present and future change lie in such areas as higher education. Women comprise the majority of local students in many GCC universities, and a small but significant number are pursuing postgraduate degrees. The trend for women to constitute an ever-growing proportion of university-educated citizens is likely to cause enormous strain in these traditionalist societies if it continues. The socio-political implications go beyond simple numbers. The cross-over of women into non-traditional specialisations is a controversial but real possibility. The Gulf states already decry the reluctance of male students to enter a number of fields essential for development plans. There is likely to be considerable temptation to allow female students to move into such disciplines as engineering or the sciences. Given the desire of all the governments to train nationals to replace expatriates in as many jobs as possible, the state then would be faced with a dilemma: whether to place a female national in a non-traditional position or keep a male in that position even if he were an expatriate.

One consequence of the oil boom of the 1970s, coinciding with, if not prompted by, the economic levelling of the 1980s, is a renewed social conservatism. This trend bolsters traditional attitudes toward the restriction of women to the 'women's domain'. Such neo-

conservatism is reinforced by the Islamic resurgence. Whether this resurgence is limited to a re-emphasis on faith or embraces the utilisation of Islam as a political ideology [Islamic resistance], the implications for freer roles and activities for women are the same.<sup>19</sup>

### [5] DEVELOPMENT ORIENTATION [DISTRIBUTION VERSUS REDISTRIBUTION]

The state [and traditional ruling elites] have been able to distribute oil revenues in such a manner as to perpetuate the political and social order because the population has been rentier and not productive. Expenditures in the early oil-years, including those of a 'development' nature, were oriented to the benefit of first the ruling families and then the commercial elite.<sup>20</sup> The increasing sophistication of development planning has led to a capitalist bias infused with middle-class interests [since the expansion of government bureaucracy and its increasingly efficient control over planning functions has come to depend increasingly on middle-class officials], as long as the interests of the elites have been satisfied. The oil boom ensured that there was no problem in doing both.

But the expansion of the middle classes [especially in the post-boom generation] and the squeezes they face will generate more emphasis on productive capability and carry-through. At the same time, the sophistication of the planning process and the fine-tuning required for sustained economic growth and diversification will require greater participation of the middle classes in the decision-making process, even as constraints on government budgets force an emphasis on economic viability and the need to generate wealth outside the oil sector. The potential alliance of the middle and lower classes undoubtedly will lead to more demands for policies of redistribution.

### [6] THE PRESENCE OF EXPATRIATES

The ubiquity of expatriates in the Gulf states must be accepted as a permanent condition. While the inflow has declined in recent years, the economic contraction has only marginally reduced the share of expatriates in the work force. The past assumption that localisation would be achieved easily, once the task of putting in an infrastructure was completed, ignored the need to re-orient nationals' job preferences away from administrative and entrepreneurial positions concentrated in a few favoured sectors. Meanwhile, the ability of employers to reduce labour costs by

renewing expatriate contracts on less favourable terms has reduced incentives for localisation in the private sector.

The Gulf states face a major dilemma. Large numbers of expatriates are necessary to continue development programmes and to maintain the infra-structure created during the last few decades. Individually, nationals have an interest in keeping large expatriate populations for their impact on local consumption and trade. At the same time, expatriates represent cultural contamination and diffusion, and economic dependency. There is a real danger of submergence in a sea of alien cultures, particularly those of northern Arabs and the West. While the impact may be clearly visible, as in the wide mix of peoples in public places, it is also demonstrated in such subtle areas as the influence of Asian nannies in teaching young children words, folktales, songs and other religious and cultural symbols from another culture.

The last 15 years have seen a dramatic shift from northern Arabs to Asians [the proportion of Arabs among the non-national population fell from over 75 per cent in 1970 to just over one-half in the late 1980s].<sup>21</sup> On the positive side, this shift reduces the expatriate population while maintaining a constant workforce [since Arabs are more likely to bring families, thus increasing social costs]. Other benefits include an increase in worker productivity, cheaper costs of labour, less likelihood of Asians seeking permanent residence, less danger of political activities and reduced competition with the goal of localisation. On the negative side, such a shift entails a diminution of Arab identity and greater problems of cultural, religious and linguistic differences.<sup>22</sup>

### THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Although the war constituted a very real external threat, its direct impact on Gulf society was limited. At most, it may have played a role in accelerating the retreat to insularity, a process already set in motion by adverse reaction to al-ta'fra. Essentially, the impact of the war has been marginal and has not affected the fundamental substance of society. Nevertheless, it is worth noting a few specific repercussions.<sup>23</sup>

First, the GCC states find themselves increasingly drawing together, partly because of their inherent similarities and partly as the result of outside threats and pressures. The impetus of co-operation in political and security matters, which predated the Iranian revolution as well as the war, undoubtedly will continue.

Still, expanding co-operation necessarily will confront the mismatch of a [relatively] giant Saudi Arabia looming over its five small partners, as well as the difficult question of how to deflect Iraqi participation in Arab Gulf organisations and activities.

A second feature of the war years has been growing economic inter-dependence and a strengthening of cultural ties. Increasing emphasis on GCC economic co-ordination creates ties between countries and their peoples that cannot easily be broken. There seems to be more interaction between GCC nationals on a personal level. This can be seen in intra-regional trade and other commercial activities, athletic contests, cultural exchanges and visits, and a growing intra-GCC tourist industry [such as weekend visits to Bahrain or Dubai, and summer holidays outside al-Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, or in Dhufar, Oman].

Third, not surprisingly, the proximity of the war has skewed expenditures towards military purchases. While it is true that pre-war defence-spending was also inordinately high, the difference now is that the post-war economic climate emphasises austerity. Of course, high-profile arms and *matériel* agreements can be postponed or pared down. Still, there are constraints upon a severe decrease in defence spending. Among these are fixed personnel costs, the undeniable need to compensate for small armed-forces with expensive 'high-tech' equipment, the prestige and influence of an effective officer corps, and the involvement of senior members of ruling families in military acquisitions.

A fourth impact of the war arises out of the growing strength and effectiveness of the state over the course of the oil era. The security threats posed by the war and Iranian incitements have induced GCC governments to assume more pervasive and even repressive control over residents. Internal security forces have been bolstered, political crimes have been redefined and punishments made more severe. Several states have introduced computerised systems for identifying and tracking national and non-national residents.

A fifth, and probably lasting, consequence of the Iranian revolution and the war has been the intensification of divisions between majority Sunnis and minority Shi'a. This is particularly true in Kuwait, Bahrain [where the Shi'a already comprise the majority], and Saudi Arabia; but lesser reverberations have also been felt in Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. While some steps have been taken to redress grievances and thereby undercut the potential of outside

agitation, the scars created in the last few years will take time to heal. Similarly, the continued presence of multitudinous expatriates will long be suspect, in part because of the possibility of Islamic activists among them.

Sixth, more generally, political participation and freedom of expression have been curtailed. The war has provided justification for suspending or postponing national councils. The Kuwaiti National Assembly, reconvened in 1981 after an absence of five years, was suspended again in 1986 amid growing sectarian tensions and unprecedented attacks on ruling-family members of the Cabinet. Rumours of the return of Bahrain's National Assembly, discontinued in 1975 after only two years of operation, periodically have been refloated but without result. In Saudi Arabia, the committee established to formulate a practicing Consultative Council has deliberated indefinitely and inconclusively, even though the Council's chambers adjacent to the new King's Office have been completed. With the end of the war, the excuse for inaction disappears. Even more alarming, cases have been recorded in Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE in the last several years of intellectuals and scholars experiencing government pressure, the loss of jobs, and even brief incarceration. Not all of these repercussions of the war have disappeared with the cease-fire; some may endure indefinitely.

### THE PERSISTENCE OF CONTINUITY

The most significant point to note about social institutions in the Gulf is their continuity and not their change. This applies as well to the fundamental political institutions which guide the ships of state in the region. Gulf society remains governed by the central importance of the family, as well as the subordination of the interests of the individual to it. Rather than becoming diluted, the patriarchal nature of society has been reinforced. The cardinal role of Islam has been strengthened, as a result of both the repercussions of the oil boom and the social and political currents flowing through the Islamic world. Governments are increasingly zealous in enforcing social conservatism as part of their maintaining legitimacy.

Continuity may be found even in areas where change seems most apparent. New-found prosperity harbours a reluctance to upset the existing harmony. The inundation of foreigners encourages citizens to close ranks and lay stress on the unique elements of their culture. The accelerating trend toward providing all education at home,

rather than abroad, suggests a lessening of exposure to other views and ideas, and thus possibly less tolerance in the future. In addition, the orientation of the political culture towards tradition, rather than change, has been intensified by such factors as the government's continued control of the economy, by the spectre of war and revolution raging all around the Gulf, and by the failure of externally-generated ideologies to penetrate Gulf politics.

The foregoing is not to say that political and social institutions have remained unaltered. Indeed, both have undergone potentially shattering attacks: the political system wavered under the combined assault of internal debate, weak leadership and the challenge of pan-Arabism in the 1960s while society was nearly turned inside out by the intoxication of the 1970s oil-boom. Both, however, recovered from these crises and appear stronger now. Their very recovery and continued utility has reaffirmed their central importance and legitimacy. This simply underscores the inappropriateness of analysis of social and political change in the Gulf in terms of a clash between traditionalism and modernisation, rather than the modernisation of tradition.

## NOTES

- 1 See Levon H. Melikian 'Arab Socio-political Impact on Gulf Life-styles', in B.R. Pridham [ed.], *The Arab Gulf and the Arab World* [Croom Helm, London, 1988], p. 115; citing Salah Al-Akkad, *Political Currents in the Arab Gulf* [Anglo-Egyptian Press, Cairo, 1974, in Arabic], p. 177.
- 2 Levon H. Melikian, 'Gulf Reactions to Western Cultural Pressures', in B.R. Pridham [ed.], *The Arab Gulf and the West* [Croom Helm, London, for the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, University of Exeter, 1985], p. 205.
- 3 Abdelrahman Munif has painted a rather gloomy picture of these developments in his trilogy, *Mudun al-Milh*, the first volume of which has been translated as *Cities of Salt* [Random House, New York, 1987].
- 4 Levon H. Melikian, and Juhaina S. Al-Easa, 'Oil and Social Change in the Gulf', *Journal of Arab Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 1 [Oct. 1981], pp. 79-98.
- 5 Soraya Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behaviour Among the Elite* [Columbia University Press, New York, 1986], pp. 59, 61-2, 70, 77.
- 6 Mohammad Rumaihi asserts that a preference for the facile and uncomplicated, an aversion to abstraction and intellectual effort, and the precedence accorded material over spiritual values are among the most obvious features of cultural rupture in Gulf society today. *Beyond Oil: Unity and Development in the Gulf* [Al Saqi Books, London, 1986], p. 106.
- 7 It should be stressed that 'generation' in a genealogical sense is not meant here, but simply distinctive – and somewhat overlapping – age groups. Furthermore, all six GCC-countries are not strictly comparable in chronological terms [for example, exploitation of oil occurred at different dates], and thus the appearance and passing of specific generations are not simultaneous across national boundaries.
- 8 Studies which treat class structure and the nature of elites in Gulf society include Khaldoun H. al-Naqeeb, 'Changing Patterns of Social Stratification in the Middle East: Kuwait [1950-1970] as a Case Study', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Texas, Austin, 1976; Othman Yasin al-Rawaf, 'The Concept of the Five Crises in Political Development –

Relevance to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia', unpublished PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1980, pp. 316-33; Suhail K. Shuhaiber, 'Political Development in Kuwait: Continuity and Change in an Arab Independent Gulf State', unpublished DPhil thesis, St Catherine's College, University of Oxford, 1981; Mohamed Ali Elgari, 'The Pattern of Economic Development in Saudi Arabia as a Product of its Social Structure', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1983; and Mishary Abdalrahman Al-Nuaim, 'State Building in a Non-Capitalist Social Formation: The Dialectics of Two Modes of Production and the Role of the Merchant Class, Saudi Arabia 1902-1932', unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California [Los Angeles], 1987.

- 9 The term 'badu' must be employed with some caution. In the narrow sense, of course, *badawa* implies nomadism and represents the Khaldunian opposite of *hadar*, settled. But badu tribes of Arabia often contained settled sections or were only semi-nomadic. In this century, the encroaching process of sedentarisation [or semi-sedentarisation] has reduced the numbers of true nomads but has not expunged the badu ethos, with all its cultural, social and tribal connotations. Most of the ruling families and many other prominent families of the Gulf states boast badu origins and *badawi* traditions are heavily emphasised. It might also be noted that the inclusion of badu among the lower classes is somewhat problematic, since many badawi tribes may include shaikhly families, very wealthy and 'urbanised' families, and some well-off herders, in addition to large numbers of 'lower class' pastoralists.
- 10 Shuhaiber, 'Political Development in Kuwait', pp. 86-7.
- 11 Rumaihi, *Beyond Oil*, p. 42. This effect is analysed in terms of dependency theory in Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective* [Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1982]; and Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, 'Political Dependency: The Case of the United Arab Emirates', unpublished PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 1985.
- 12 On this point, see Rumaihi, *Beyond Oil*, pp. 42-3.
- 13 See J.E. Peterson, *The Arab Gulf States: Steps Toward Political Participation* [Praeger, New York, 1988; published with the Center for Strategic and International Studies; Washington Papers, no. 131].



- 14 As Hisham Nazir has noted, an all-embracing political system that is responsive to local needs and that is a part of indigenous culture is normally the last institution to evolve. He notes that this is not a historical accident, but rather a reflection of the dynamics of social evolution. Some of the essential ingredients for the development of a mature political system he identifies are an adequate level of public education, the diffusion of power among interest groups, and an enlightened leadership. Hisham M. Nazer, 'Institution-Building in Developing Countries', in Ibrahim Ibrahim [ed.], *Arab Resources: The Transformation of a Society*, Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington, [Croom Helm, London, 1983], p. 113.
- 15 Melikian and Al-Easa, 'Oil and Social Change', pp. 79-98.
- 16 On the crisis of Arab education, see Samir N. Anabtawi, 'Arab Institutions of Higher Learning and their Own Manpower Development', in Ibrahim [ed.], *Arab Resources*, pp. 125-35. On its effect in the Gulf, see J.S. Birks and J.A. Rimmer, *Developing Education Systems in the Oil States of Arabia: Conflicts of Purpose and Focus*, Occasional Papers Series, no. 21, Manpower and Migration Series, no. 3 [University of Durham Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham, 1984]; and Rumaihi, *Beyond Oil*, p. 137.
- 17 Discussion of these forces and the range of responses is drawn from Melikian, 'Gulf Reactions', pp. 209-16.
- 18 Rumaihi, *Beyond Oil*, pp. 106-7.
- 19 For further discussion of the changing roles of women, see J.E. Peterson, 'The Political Status of Women in the Arab Gulf States', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1 [winter 1989], pp. 36-50.
- 20 Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, pp. 122-80, presents a detailed analysis of how the UAE's small ruling families and economic elite have thoroughly dominated the country's economy.
- 21 Ian J. Seccombe, 'International Migration, Arabisation and Localisation in the Gulf Labour Market', in Pridham, *The Arab Gulf and the Arab World*, pp. 155-6. See also J.S. Birks, I.J. Seccombe and C.A. Sinclair, 'Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf: The Impact of Declining Oil Revenues', *International Migration Review*, vol. 20 [1986], pp. 799-814; and J.S. Birks,

'The Demographic Challenge in the Arab Gulf', in Pridham, *The Arab Gulf and the Arab World*, pp. 131-52.

22 Seccombe, 'International Migration', pp. 185-7.

23 For further discussion of this topic, see J.E. Peterson, 'The GCC States After the Iran-Iraq War', *American-Arab Affairs*, no. 26 [Fall 1988], pp. 96-106.

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