

4-1-2015

## Christopher Davidson (Ed.). *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company, 2011.

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### Recommended Citation

Alahmed, Anas (2015) "Christopher Davidson (Ed.). *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*. London: Hurst & Company, 2011.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 6 : No. 2 , Article 12. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol6/iss2/12>

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The Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, initially seem to be relatively new states, having gained their independence as late as 1971. As the essays in this book explain, however, all six Gulf countries have varied, deep-rooted, rich histories of conflict and political expansion, extending back to the eighteenth century. The essays in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* explain the historical and political development in each of the six states. Each chapter of the book discusses a country by drawing on various aspects of state formation, political structure and personality, economic development and diversification, foreign policy and security, and future challenges. This collection emphasizes the common ground among the states and the common challenges they face.

According to the authors, most of the Gulf countries have been ruled by the same families for hundreds of years. In 1752, Al-Sabah began to rule Kuwait, with Saudi Arabia having been established shortly before that time, in 1744. Al-Khalifa's authority in Bahrain and Qatar has its roots in that family's conquest in 1766. Al-Thani took over Qatar in the 1850s and continues to rule today. Similarly, Oman was founded in the 1750s, and its current ruler, Qaboos, is the fourteenth sultan of the state. Most Gulf countries' ruling families came—as early as 1715—from the area of Najid (the center of the Arabian Peninsula) and from the Bani Utub tribe to the areas of modern-day Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. Such historical succession has allowed the Gulf States to preserve common cultures, traditions, and values and share similar identities, heritages, and belief systems. Each chapter explains how these similar cultural characteristics has made these states more homogenous than perhaps any other Arab countries in the Middle East and how this shared identity has made the Gulf States unique compared to the rest of the Arab countries. Socially, the Gulf States' monarchies are connected with each other on the micro level, and members of royal families across Gulf States frequently intermarry. Bahrain's King himself married the daughter of the Prince Sultan and former minister of defense of Saudi Arabia, and The King of Bahrain's son married one of the daughters of Sheikh Muhammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai.

*Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* explains that in terms of politics, each state is ruled by a royal family tradition. Monarchical rule may be under the title of king (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), emir (Qatar and Kuwait), sultan (Oman), or president (UAE). All royal rulers have complete power over the state and have the final word with regard to all decisions. This absolute monarchy serves both to centralize and “personalize” the authority within each state, with the policy and diplomacy of the state reflecting the unique identity of its ruler. Saudi Arabia is considered the most centralized state in terms of its political decisions. Each Saudi king has his own rules and his own “people,” and his decisions are sometimes above the constitution. Likewise, in Oman, the Sultan is known to be the source of all laws, holds the positions of chief of staff of the armed forces, Minister of Defense, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and chairman of the Central Bank, and has all the prerogatives of executive and legislative power.

These Gulf States, all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),<sup>1</sup> share many common social and political features: each has royal connections with tribes, and their foreign

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf is intergovernmental organization of all Arab States of the Persian Gulf “Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman except Iraq. GCC established on May 25, 1981 to confront challenges

policies are similar. All Gulf countries also share some common domestic policies and structures. For instance, all six states employ a sponsorship (Kafala) system, in which foreign workers must be sponsored by a local employer in order to obtain a work visa. The worker is usually unable to change jobs without his existing employer's permission. Finally, the Gulf States also face some challenges, most notably in successions—as the states (with the exception of Kuwait) have rather limited elections—and in employment. The number of foreign workers in each state constitutes half of each country's population because foreign workers will work for lower wages, are easier to hire and fire, and are less likely to organize unions. Within the states' national populations, the majority of workers are employed in the public sector, which means that they rely on underdeveloped government resources.

Despite their political and social similarities, including many mutual agreements among them, some opinions and political positions of the GCC states vary. Since the 1990s, Qatar has tried to be the region's mediator by negotiating political policies that were unlikely to have been accepted by neighboring countries without mediation. Oman has always been in a position to operate politically successfully and maintain economic relationships between the US and Europe on the one hand and Iran, Russia, and China on the other. Kuwait has an advanced democratic political system compared to the rest of the Gulf countries, while the United Arab Emirates has opened its space for capital and other economic goods.

The Gulf States not only differ in terms of social and economic practice but also face unique economic and geopolitical challenges. Qatar is known for its foreign diplomacy and negotiation, Kuwait for its democratic parliamentary process, Bahrain for its political movements and civil society activities, the UAE for its economic goods and open market, and Oman for its tourism industry. Saudi Arabia is the home of Mecca and Medina, two holy cities for Muslims; the country uses these cities as a part of their "soft power" diplomacy with Islamic institutions around the world. Bahrain is the most progressive and organized civic society in the GCC region; it is known for its political petitions and aggregating signature collectivity for demands. It had some of the first NGOs and the first organizations run by women, which appeared as early as 1955. Interestingly, Bahrain was the first Gulf country to discover oil, in 1932. Bahrain is also open to foreign investors, who can own 100 percent of a financial institution, whereas the UAE does not permit majority foreign ownership except in specific export-oriented free zones.

Kuwait is considered the most democratic and politically developed nation in the region. As early as 1921, the Consultative Council was formed, and the first constitution was announced. Kuwait also was the first country in the Gulf, and perhaps in the Arab world, to practice democracy through political elections and parliamentary power. The parliament of Kuwait, unlike governments in other Gulf countries, plays a political role; it sets the emir's salary and votes on his choice of crown prince, who also serves as the prime minister. The parliament also played a role in banning alcohol in Kuwait in the 1980s. The Kuwait parliament, founded with its new constitution in 1963, has the most power of any elected body in the Gulf, and opposition Members of Parliaments openly criticize the ruling Sabah family. However, the power of the emir is unquestioned. The emir has unconstitutionally dissolved the parliament five times since 2006 and more than once during the 1980s and 1990s, which confirms that despite a functioning democracy, the emir is the central power in the state.

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security after Iranian revolution in 1979 and to cooperate economically. GCC's headquarter is in capital city of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.

Qatar has the vastest natural gas field in the world and has become the largest global supplier of natural gas. The Qatar Investment Authority is linked with large-scale investments on a global level. Qatar plays a significant role in politics and in international relations through its motivation to become a global foreign policy player. Qatar is a powerful force in the region for several reasons: it has the most natural gas resources; it has a key geopolitical position in the region, and it also has the protection of the US through the Al-Udeid base.<sup>2</sup> Qatar's foreign policy has ultimately been recognized not through its aspirational vision and economic capacity but rather through its attainment of a sufficient level of national security, which enables autonomy and independence of action in its foreign affairs.

Oman, unlike the other Gulf countries, is an ally of Iran and Russia but is, at the same time, an ally of the US and Europe. As such, Oman usually makes the GCC more than a simple ratification instrument for Saudi policy. Oman never joined OPEC, though there was never any disagreement between Oman and Saudi Arabia, and, in fact, Oman has provided support for OPEC countries when necessary. For instance, when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Oman disapproved of the invasion and provided military solutions to liberate Kuwait while still maintaining cordial political relations with Iraq.

The collected essays in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* create an excellent source for understanding not only the history and the foundation of modern Gulf monarchies but also their roles in politics, economics in the region, and personal aspects of political decisions. This book examines how personal and social structures affect politics in the first place. This work is ideal for advanced undergraduate students in international relations and political science since it explains the historical formation of the Gulf countries and applies the history in contemporary world politics. This volume represents an important work for students, scholars, and anyone interested in the Arab Gulf States' history and politics. However, the book lacks analytical components. None of the essays mention the sectarian conflict in the Gulf region that has arisen in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, nor do any of the chapters discuss the Gulf States' unique conflicts with Iran. Of course, one book cannot be expected cover all relevant material, but acknowledgement of some of such conflicts would inform the essays.

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<sup>2</sup> Al Udeid Air Base is a military base in Doha Capital City of Qatar. Al Udeid based established during United States liberated Kuwait from Iraq invasion in 1990-1991. Al Udeid based functioned again during Iraq war in 2003. The base is considered the largest air base in the Gulf region.