

An Inquiry into the Politics of Elitism in the GCC States: The Security Dilemma

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Abstract

This paper explores the politics of elitism in the Gulf states. Within the context, an attempt is made to identify the Gulf elites and to explain why this study of political elitism is appropriate to the Gulf states. In addition, comments on the future of the Gulf political elites is put forward. The paper concentrates on the circumstances of the political systems and political elites of these states since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and its consequences. The paper addresses several points including the technique of the research, identifying the Gulf political elites, the dilemma of method selection, the role of Islam on the elites' behavior, the future of the political elites, the domestic dimension of the elites' stability, the regional environment surrounding the Gulf elites, the domestic dimension of the elites' continuity, and the threats of immigrants to the security of the Gulf societies. The article refers to an extensive range of Arabic and English material including interviews, official documents, correspondence, speeches, newspaper articles, and secondary literature related to the concept of political elites and the Gulf states' political literature. Several hypotheses are presented, and throughout the article there is an extensive discussion of many dimensions and aspects in support of these hypotheses. The conclusion offers the reader a comprehensive proposal of the difficulties that the political elites might face in the future. In addition, listings of notes and references in Arabic and/or English are provided.

Introduction

Since the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, the Gulf has been the globe's focal point of crisis. That invasion jeopardised the international community's interests, as Iraq managed for a while to control 20 percent of the world's oil reserves and threatened another 20 percent available in Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As a result, the security of the ruling elites of the GCC states and the countries they rule came under heavy pressure as far as security is concerned. The aim of this paper, then, is to explore the politics of elitism as far as the security of these ruling elites is concerned. Within the context an attempt will be made to explain why the concept of political elitism is more appropriate to the study of the political affairs of the GCC states in comparison with the concept of class formation, and to identify the ruling elites of the GCC states. Furthermore, an analysis of the issues which form threats to the security of the ruling elites will be given. As far as security is concerned, the discussion will concentrate on the domestic and external threats to the ruling elites with an emphasis on how Iraq, Iran and the expatriate labourers form the main sources of those threats.

This study is basically concerned with the ruling elites of the six Arab Gulf states comprising the GCC. Those states are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). There are several factors in common, which bring the six together. They are all new nation-states, starting with Saudi Arabia which was established by Abd al-Aziz bin Saud in the 1930s. The remaining states gained independence at different periods of time starting on June 19, 1961, when Britain relinquished its special treaty relations with Kuwait. They share a similar culture in that they are all Arab states and oil producing countries. Except for Saudi Arabia, the other five states range between small and relatively small states as far as size and population are concerned. Five of the GCC states are populated with a Muslim Sunni majority, and only Bahrain has a Shia majority. In addition, five of the states, (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the U.A.E.), were ex-British protectorates. The protectorate system lasted 150 years and dealt only with defence and foreign affairs.

The impact of that long period of protection did not affect the social structures of the old societies of the GCC states which existed long before British domination. This is mainly because the traditional ruling elites managed to prevent the British from interfering in their local affairs and were able to control their local communities. However, despite the fact that the six states are independent, they continue to search for identity as new nation-states. The traditional ruling elites are still seeking legitimacy and security. One of them was almost toppled on August 2, 1990. When Britain withdrew from the Gulf, the five states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the U.A.E. acquired

statehood and international recognition. But the need remained for a system of external security since the five states, in addition to Saudi Arabia, were threatened by larger and more populated neighbours, specifically Iran and Iraq.¹ Saudi Arabia is no exception, but its position is relatively better than that of the other smaller GCC states.

The Dilemma of Method Selection

The students of the Gulf face a dilemma concerning the most effective method to use in order to analyse and understand the political systems and the political processes of the GCC states. Thus, it is obvious that the methods which could be utilised are many. Despite the numerous methods available to us, we are basically concerned with studying the GCC states' political systems through the concept of elite formation. One might ask why one should prefer the study of the political systems through ruling elite formation rather than through class analysis, since most of the socio-political scientists argue that the two concepts are close to each other.

A student of politics would find it difficult to decide which of the two analyses to use. In fact, the decision to use one method or the other depends on many factors inherent to each individual society. There are no readymade formulas that can suit all societies, i.e., the adaptation of a single term to cover all situations would be an over simplification on the one hand and data falsification on the other. There are some critical points which must be raised here before one can decide whether to use the concept of class struggle or that of elite formation in order to understand the political processes of the GCC states. First, is the Western concept of class appropriate in the social structure of the Gulf? Second, what kind of labour force is there, and how large is it? Third, what is the role of personal relationships such as kinship, family ties, tribal origin and friendship in the Gulf societies? Fourth, what is the nature of the ruling elite concept itself. Finally, what is the role of religion in the formation of political and social relations?

In fact, the terms "class" and "elite" have been used and developed as analytical tools in Western industrial societies. The characteristics and circumstances connected with them there, have never been evident in the Middle East (M.E.), in general, and the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf in particular. P.C. Lloyd argues that the two terminologies are rarely used in conjunction with one another. Even though they are not mutually exclusive, most writers confine themselves to either "class" or "elite".² Furthermore, before the collapse of most socialist regimes all over the world, Neo-Marxists have formulated the term "new class" to describe the upper stratum of some developing countries using the socialist philosophy to operate their economies in Asia, Africa, the M.E., as well as Eastern Europe.³ The new term was

introduced because the classical Marxist division into *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat* is clearly inappropriate.⁴

Indeed, in the GCC societies in general, any class theory depending on the nineteenth century Marx-Engles concept of class struggle is analytically useless because such concepts require the student of politics to take into account the following considerations in order for him to use them successfully. First, those members of a society who form a class, either the *bourgeoisie* or the *proletariats*, must show class awareness and solidarity, i.e., they must have a similar socio-economic situation and common interests. Second, it must be shown that those of the *bourgeoisie* who are in power share similar ideology and attitudes of their class. Third, there must be an identifiable structural linkage connecting those in power with members of their class. Fourth, income distribution in the society must be channelled in favour of those members who are in power, and the *bourgeoisie* must be seen as the main beneficiary of the regime's policy.⁵ If such conditions emerge, one can simply talk about class formation where the *bourgeoisie*, the *petite bourgeoisie*, and the *proletariats* exist. However, the *bourgeoisie* must be the dominant ruling class.

In fact, one cannot deny that new political groups have developed in the Gulf which have challenged the existing system and have put pressure on the dominant ruling elites.⁶ These groups have their own political attitudes and sometimes their own political programmes. However, this new phenomenon was not evident in the traditional societies when the pressure groups were identified by ethnic relations rather than different interests. But their evolution cannot simply be labelled class formation. Ironically, Mohammed Al-Rumaihi argued in 1975 that the leading group in traditional Gulf societies bears a resemblance to the emerging ones which have been named the bourgeois class. Within such a context, he said that this class — the bourgeois — is growing, with the expansion of government spending on internal and external ventures. Hence, the authorities in the Gulf, as Al-Rumaihi continues, now face a large organised labour class in some countries and a less organised labour class in others. Those organisations defend their members against the owners by means of protests and strikes.⁷

However, if one accepts Al-Rumaihi's argument of 1975 about the existence of a bourgeois class in the Gulf societies, then where are the other classes? More importantly, where is the proletariat? A social class can only exist in a system of classes. There can be no bourgeoisie without a proletariat and vice versa. In their homogeneity, hereditary characteristics, and class consciousness, the classes should reflect one another. If the Gulf bourgeoisie as mentioned by Al-Rumaihi form an upper class, then where are the lower ones? It is clear that in the Gulf societies the local labouring group is small in number and totally disorganised in its ability to gain any collective interests.

Furthermore, the industrial institutions are either owned by the state or by foreign companies - singly or jointly. The main industry, oil production, is totally or partially controlled by the state, and often foreign companies are the operators. Overall, it is obvious that the labour force which is found in the GCC states is connected in some way with the oil industry.⁸ This point needs some further elaboration to be thoroughly understood.

The GCC states have had a long history of labour migration because of their proximity to the international trade routes across the Indian Ocean and because of the economic activities connected with the routes used for the annual Hajj (Pilgrimage). The rapid development of the GCC area since the 1930s necessitated a large labour force which was not available in the GCC countries and is still largely unavailable. Consequently, most of the Gulf states started to recruit foreign labourers, either Iranians as during the 1930s in Bahrain, or Indians and Pakistanis later on in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the U.A.E.⁹

Similar to all labour importing countries, the expatriate workers in the GCC states are subject to the terms of the local labour laws which impose terms that permit all foreigners to enter the concerned countries only on short-term contracts generally valid for two years. Most of the foreign workers are imported for specific jobs. According to the U.A.E. labour law codes for instance, once their contract is over and the importing authority decides not to renew their visa they lose their visa, status and must leave the country during the month following the visa expiration date.¹⁰

Even though one cannot deny that some groups working in the oil sector attempted to strike in Bahrain, for example, in 1938, 1947 and 1953, and in Saudi Arabia in 1956, the reaction of the governments of both countries was immediate and severe. It was the 1956 strike, for instance, which led the upper stratum of the Saudi ruling elite to issue a decree prohibiting all future strikes in the Kingdom and declaring them illegal practices.¹¹ Simultaneously, the Qatari ruler refused to allow any foreign labourers to establish any form of organisational institutions or committees in the 1950s or later.¹²

Traditionally, all Arab Gulf societies were tribally oriented. This factor was much more important than wealth. However, with the discovery of oil and the ensuing rapid socio-economic development, a new phenomenon emerged. The incumbent ruling elites managed to recruit individual citizens who had acquired Western education, knowledge and skills to direct and staff a centralised administration. This administration is commissioned to implement the socio-economic development and, more importantly, to build up and command effective military establishments. Intentionally or unintentionally, the ruling elites of the GCC states created new middle income groups among their indigenous populations to work with and for them. There is no doubt that these new groups

are selling their labour, but they are not selling it to the bourgeoisie. They are selling it to the state institutions rather than to other classes.¹³ Therefore, class formation in the GCC societies at this stage of their socio-economic evolution does not fit the neat theory of the development of classes within a society, advocated by Marx and Engels in nineteenth century Europe.¹⁴

More specifically, in the societies of the Arab Gulf states, class struggle is not an obvious phenomenon because of many reasons. Historically, the size of the societies was too small, which meant that personal relationships might help to conceal the realities of economic and social inequality. Prior to the oil era, the labour force had few alternatives because the economic surplus was small and the ruling elites and the big merchants groups were not as wealthy as they are today; a secular modern education was not available, which meant that social consciousness was retarded; and the dependence of the population on a few sources of income such as pearl diving, fishing, trade, and peasant life put their expectations about continued reliable income in doubt. Poverty, illiteracy and a narrow environment led most if not all of the population to firmly believe that the existing conditions were determined by fate and were unchangeable.¹⁵

Furthermore, in the GCC societies, except in Bahrain, many groups such as the emerging labour group of the oil sector, the comprador group, and the middle income groups of government employees lack a historical background as cohesive classes.¹⁶ However, Al-Rumaihi mentions that labourers including the Bahrainis do not have a historical background as a cohesive labouring class with deep consciousness and experience because they have become familiar with labour values only recently. And generally, most of them work in the oil sector which pays a high wage compared with other economic sectors.¹⁷ In addition, the labour groups in all the oil producing Gulf states except Bahrain have never faced the problem of unemployment, the matter which would actually lead their ambitions to meet the desires of their employers. Moreover, personal relations in the Gulf societies were, and continue to be very strong at the level of the family, the tribe, the neighbourhood, and between friends. These relationships still connect the people in two ways which could be described as vertical, represented by tribe and the family, and horizontal represented by working colleagues. As long as the familial and tribal link is strong and influential culturally, and the one with colleagues is weak and ineffective,¹⁸ the labour class formation will remain weak for an unpredictable period, unless new dramatic social, political, and economic changes emerge.

Islam As a Barrier Against Class Formation

One cannot ignore the role of Islamic ideology and culture in the lives of Muslim people. However, as far as the GCC societies are concerned class struggle was not and is still not clear in these societies because of the influence

of Islamic ideology on the mentality of the people. Islamic ideology does not believe in the ascendancy of some groups of the society over the others. One finds that all the teachings of Islam, whether in the Holy Quran or in the Hadeeth (the teachings of the prophet), never encouraged this philosophy. On the contrary, most of the Islamic teachings concerning this issue limited the predominance of one group over another. Islam is a fundamental element in the behaviour and national identity of the GCC peoples. In terms of doctrine, it insists on equality. Most of the GCC states which have modern written constitutions contain references to Islam. Article Seven of the provisional constitution of the U.A.E., for instance, says: "Islam is the official religion of the Union. The Islamic Shariah shall be the main source of legislation in the Union".¹⁹

Furthermore, a GCC state like Saudi Arabia which does not have a modern constitution considers the Quran as its constitution. Implicitly, the ruling elites of the GCC states understand very well that their people owe them allegiance as a result of the assurance that the elites will not infringe upon Islamic law.

Thus, if we accept the fact that the ruling elites are the superior group in any given society, the concept of ruling elite formation can be used to understand the political processes in the GCC states. Perhaps one could say that the more socially mobile a society is, the more appropriate is the use of the term ruling elite to designate its superior members.²⁰ As far as the GCC states are concerned, the term ruling elite seems completely appropriate when used to describe political processes because there are neither bourgeoisie nor proletariat in the strict sense of these terms in the modern sector of the economy. However, the ruling elite concept also stresses the distinct qualities of the members of the ruling elite and their autonomy, i.e., their distinguished social privileges and political freedom from control by the public. Most M.E. political elite studies reached the conclusion that ruling elites enjoy more of what is valued in the society. In the GCC states there are privileged groups with more power, more wealth, more property and gradually acquiring more education than the rest of the society.

Who are the Ruling Elites of the Gulf?

From a methodological perspective the structure of the ruling elites may be explained in several different ways.²¹ Ruling elites may be defined as the few individuals who occupy the formal positions of political authority; or ruling elites might be described as those individuals who actually make decisions. Lacking clear information regarding just who does make decisions one might define ruling elites as those individuals possessing a reputation for making decisions.²² In our case, however, as a result of the development of the petroleum industry and its immense revenues in all the GCC states except

Bahrain, changes have taken place in the structure of the ruling elite. Prior to the oil era the characteristics of the GCC societies in general were divided into three major social groups. First were the upper strata of the elites consisting of the ruling families; the merchant families, especially those of Kuwait; the tribal nobility; the landlord in major cities, especially those of Al-Hijaz, the western province of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; the warrior elites of the major nomadic tribes; and the Ulama (religious shaikhs), particularly those of Oman and Saudi Arabia. In Oman for instance, the Ibadhi Imams exercised significant influence in the political affairs of the state, right through the history of the country.²³ Second, were the traditional middle income groups which are composed of small "businessmen", traders, ship owners, or al-Nawakhetha, regular civil servants in major cities such as Jeddah, Manama, Kuwait and Riyadh and the lower level Muslim circles. Third, were the lower social groups which consisted of workers in major cities, towns and harbours such as Jeddah, Riyadh, Manama, Kuwait and Dubai; the peasants and small farmers in the town fringes and the hinterland oasis, and landless tenants;²⁴ the fishermen and diving and cargo ship crews along the western coasts of the Gulf; and the tribal members belonging to certain Bedouin tribes, particularly the ones which are considered non-fighting tribes. These tribes are mainly sheep and goat herders.

After the discovery of oil and the flow of its revenues to the economies of the GCC state, the composition of the ruling elites somehow shifted from the traditional. This shift came when the upper stratum of the traditional ruling elites, the ruling families, started to recruit certain individuals from other lower level social groups and admit them to the inner circles of the ruling elite. Presumably, the post-oil ruling elites of the GCC states consist of whole ruling families; the heads of states, either a king, a president, a sultan, an Emir or a shaikh; the council of ministers; the members of the elected or appointed councils of representatives, especially those of Kuwait, Oman, the U.A.E. and to some extent Qatar. Besides these groups, one might consider parts of the educated elites as new comers to the GCC states' ruling elites arena. On the other hand old social groups remain, which play significant roles within such a context. Leading merchant family members, the tribal shaikhs (Shieokh al Qabaiel) and the religious "institutions" still play important roles as they are parts of the traditional ruling elites. However, the roles of the last elements are more appropriately studied through their presence in the council of ministers or in the representative councils.²⁵

Within this context one could consider the introduction of the western form of the council of ministers and western form of a representation system, a significant political change in both the system of government and in the composition of its ruling elites. In fact, the peaceful transition from the dominant elite groups to wider representation has been achieved in some GCC states,

particularly Kuwait. The introduction of parliamentary rule and consultative councils has enabled representatives of both the Bedouin and the emergent middle income social groups to partially gain ruling elite status, either as deputy members of the parliaments in Kuwait and for a short period of time in Bahrain and recently in Oman, or as members of the consultative councils as in the U.A.E. and Qatar, or as members of the cabinet.²⁶

At this stage of political development, it seems that those members of the two types of institutions described above are pleased by their participation in the decision-making process and by the rewards those positions bring. In fact, even the most vocal opposition groups led by radical political activists have chosen to work within the system rather than advocating radical changes. Such reality was proven with the emergence of those groups during the first quarter of the 20th century. In Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates historical evidence was recorded, as reformers and opposition groups started to raise their voices on public issues and urge the ruling elites to take account of that,²⁷ however, without any attempt to topple those ruling elites. Most recently such reality was dramatically proven during the first days of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The Iraqi regime failed to find a single Kuwaiti citizen, even from the opposition, to collaborate with it.²⁸ However, one should not draw the conclusion that the political reforms made by the ruling elites were sufficient. In fact, there is some indication that even though political reforms in Kuwait, and to some extent in Bahrain, expanded the scope of political participation, they did not help very much in other areas such as Dubai.²⁹

On the other hand, and similar to other developing areas, with the development of the oil industry, new institutions and social forces, or old institutions that had taken on new meanings began to exert pressure on the authority system because the oil economy created visible collective inequalities and constituted politically manipulative material which when combined with Arab nationalistic movements, produced several acts challenging the legitimacy of the regimes and the ideologies and policies of the governments. Therefore, the emerging social and political forces created by the oil market worked to modernise the existing political systems.³⁰

The Future of the Ruling Elites

In order to speculate about the future of the ruling elites of the Arab Gulf states one should take into consideration three factors which are connected to each other and affect each other. First, the regional aspect or the external dimension; second, the relation between the ruling elites and their people; and third, the economic dimension which is concerned with oil production and prices.

The Regional Dimension: The Gulf ruling elites set up a regional organisation, the GCC, on May 25, 1981 with the signing of the charter in Abu Dhabi.³¹ The organisation emerged as a result of various external threats,³² but its collective performance never witnessed any remarkable progress. Up until now it continues to evoke quite different reactions among the peoples of the Gulf and the political observers of the area.

On the other hand, since its establishment the council has held several meetings between the heads of states, foreign ministers, interior ministers and other officials at various levels. Many working papers were submitted by the different members concerning security and economic issues. On the other hand, it is unwise to assume that the GCC is an organisation which seeks the unification of the area. Reviewing the GCC's literature makes it clear politically, economically, socially, conceptually, and organisationally, that the council is not working towards full unity of its members. Concepts such as unity and union have rarely been announced by states and organisation officials inside and outside the conferences rooms.

Ideas and concepts most frequently made public have dealt with mutual co-operation, coordination, standardisation, harmonisation, collaboration and the like.³³ However, after the second Gulf War the GCC is going to stay around for quite some time to come. This fact is no longer in doubt since indications of that became clear during the course of the war for the liberation of Kuwait. After all, the six states comprising the council are located in the area which contains more than 40 percent of the world's oil deposits. Besides that, the various ruling elites of the GCC states are for the time being firmly in control of their respective countries especially after the dramatic liberation of Kuwait and the restoration of its legitimate government, as the Kuwaiti Emir returned to his country by March 14, 1991.³⁴ Justifiably so, the ignorance of their people as far as the issue of political participation is concerned, is diminishing. Kuwait has restored its pioneering democratic experience after the liberation. Oman is introducing its own participation method;³⁵ and Qatar has announced that it will hold municipal elections as soon as possible.

In the post war period, the pace of economic development in the Gulf could be an issue which restores the region as one of the fastest growing parts of the world during the course of the 1990s. Thus, it seems that the potential of the GCC is quite promising. But whether such potential can be fully realised is another question, as prospects must be launched against a number of national, regional and international considerations in the area of economic, political and social affairs.³⁶

From a political point of view, the GCC states are relatively young. They are highly nationalistic, and until August 2, 1990, mutually suspicious of one another, especially as far as border disputes are concerned. Thus, it would be

unrealistic to generalise and assume that such differences and disputes would be quickly overcome. In addition, we should not suppose that the subordination of national, political and economic affairs to larger regional arrangements will occur easily and quickly.

The Regional Environment Surrounding the Gulf Ruling Elites

Iraq's Threats to the GCC States: Until the partial, however major, destruction of the Iraqi war machine in 1991, the principal threats to the ruling elites of the Gulf came from Iraq and Iran. The Iraqi threat has been temporarily diffused since the allies partially devastated Iraq's infrastructure. Major destruction has touched Iraq's industrial centres, petrochemical complexes, the import substitution industries,³⁷ the port facilities in the southern part of the country, the main airports, and partially the Iraqi military machine. In fact, as a result of the present difficult situation which Iraq faces because it has been driven to the limits of its endurance by an irresponsible dictator, the first impression would be that Iraq will be unable to play significant or even minor roles in the affairs of the Arab world in general and the Gulf in particular. This impression might be cemented by the fact that as long as the Bathist regime remains in power, the conservative ruling elites of the Gulf and the other moderate Arab regimes will be cautious, suspicious and hesitant in dealing with the Iraqi regime. And the reason for that is, despite the unfit conditions of the Iraqi war machine at the eve of partial destruction, Iraq remains a threat to the ruling elites of the GCC states, particularly the Kuwaiti and Saudi ones which share borders with Iraq.³⁸

As the Gulf ruling elites, especially Saudi Arabia, consider themselves as victorious over Iraq, they believe that they are entitled to influence Iraq and to determine its future. They would like to see the current Iraqi government toppled from power. If such an event occurred, three scenarios might evolve. A government selected, backed and subsidised by the Saudi ruling elite and consequently by the other GCC ruling elites might emerge. Such a government would consist of members of previous Iraqi regimes, but would be regarded as a clumsy effort to "impose a pax Americana on Iraq which would lack the support of the Iraqi people and some other Arab governments and Iran".³⁹ Another possibility is that a coup d'état might succeed and bring a military man to power. Such an event would probably evoke support from the Iraqi population at large, and from Iraq's neighbours including Turkey, Iran, and the GCC's political elites. As far as the Iraqi people are concerned, a new leader of this sort might be accepted if he were to begin to work towards the formation of a government of national reconciliation. Such a scenario is probably impossible since it must include participants from all political parties and interest groups inside and outside the country.⁴⁰

Iran's Threats to the GCC States: The ruling elites of the GCC states deeply distrust the revolutionary regime of Iran because of Iran's practices against them. Several incidents support this argument. The most illustrative ones are the U.A.E.'s territorial dispute with Iran over the islands of Abu Musa, Tunb the Greater, and Tunb the Lesser; and the GCC states' criticism of Iran that it is interfering in their domestic affairs, particularly those of Bahrain. The latest is the accusation that Iran was behind an attempted coup d'etat to overthrow the traditional ruling elite in Bahrain.⁴¹ However, as far as the islands dispute is concerned, it could be considered as symbolic of the very strained relations between the GCC states and Iran, and illustrates the GCC states' ruling elites distrust of Iran.⁴²

Despite the fact that neither the U.A.E. nor Iran conceded its claims on the disputed territory, the U.A.E.'s island dispute remained politically static for almost twenty-two years since Iran occupied them. However, since November 1971 the Iranian authorities have increased their military and political presence on the islands; justifiably so, since Iran had a substantial military garrison on Abu Musa; it has built a new runway which is capable of receiving different types of military aircraft; and, it is going ahead with ambitious plans to build a deep water military port.⁴³

Yet, although there is a memorandum of understanding between the U.A.E. and Iran signed in 1971 which stipulated that the Abu Musa island would be divided between the U.A.E. and Iranian authorities, Iran increasingly encroached on the U.A.E. side by installing military fortifications around the periphery of the island.⁴⁴

In March 1992, the Iranian authorities in Abu Musa started to take new measures to control the whole island. These measures included the Iranian demand that non-U.A.E. nationals entering the U.A.E. controlled side of the island, have Iranian visas in their passports. Iran explained its action by saying that those people were using the port on the Iranian side of the island.⁴⁵ To the U.A.E. this was an unexpected step - an illegal act violating the terms of the memorandum of understanding of 1971, which challenged the sovereign claim of the U.A.E. In September 1992 the U.A.E.'s foreign minister visited Iran. During the visit Iranian officials pointedly demanded financial aid. The justification for that was to help Iran recover from the eight years war against Iraq and for the support in keeping oil prices high. The U.A.E. government interpreted the Iranian demands as a means of pressure similar to those used by Saddam Hussain against Kuwait and the U.A.E. in 1990, before the invasion of Kuwait took place.⁴⁶

The Iranian visa act did not go through, but the dispute still continues. As such, the U.A.E. has gained the support of the other GCC states, the Arab League and many other states of the international community. As far as the

GCC states are concerned, when the heads of states or ministers of foreign affairs get together collectively or dually, they usually issue declarations or statements affirming their support to the U.A.E.'s claims to sovereignty over the three islands.

The ruling elites of the GCC states deeply feel that Iran represents a source of military and political threats to them. No matter what ambitions Iran has, to export the Islamic revolution to its neighbours, the ruling elites of the GCC states understand that in time they have to defuse them by all possible means. On this point the interests of the ruling elites of the GCC states are in harmony with the interests of the international community, especially western Europe, the United States and their allies. As the invasion of Kuwait proved, the West has permanent economic and strategic interests in the area connected with the oil industry. Whenever those interests face threats by any ambitious regional power like Iraq or Iran, the West, headed by the United States, will return to the area militarily.⁴⁷

Iran is taking hard positions vis-a-vis the GCC states in all the disputed issues between itself and the GCC states especially oil production, border disputes and the presence of the US military forces in the Gulf. This, however, reflects Iran's ambitions to regain the previous role which it played during the Shah's era. Iran is looking to itself as the most important state in the Gulf because it is the most populous, economically capable, geographically larger, as well as strategically and militarily stronger. Yet, as the second Gulf war came to an end, and Iraq lost large parts of its military and economic strength, Iran wanted to utilise the new situation to achieve its own interests. Iran is looking on the situation as convenient, and the opportunity is available because the regional military balance switched to its favour after the defeat of Iraq by the international alliance.⁴⁸

On the other hand, Iran gives high importance to the economic factors related to oil production and oil export. This importance is reflected clearly in the Iranian foreign policy. When the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates visited Tehran in August 1992, he met with the Iranian president, Ali Akbar Hashimi Rafsengani. During the meeting the Iranian president made accusations to the U.A.E.'s minister that the U.A.E. was producing huge quantities of oil even though it has a small population. A statement of this kind carries many interpretations and meanings to the U.A.E. and the other GCC states. The most important meaning is that it has been considered a means of political pressure on the GCC states to reduce their oil production according to Iranian wishes and interests. Iran feels that the GCC states are producing more than they should and by doing so they are flooding the international oil market, which in turn leads the prices to collapse. This collapse causes Iranian oil revenues to diminish; a matter which affects the Iranian development plans.⁴⁹

It is well known that Iran is facing diminishing oil resources and that its economy is still under the influence of the results of revolution and the long war against Iraq, and that the Iranian economy is unable to meet all the basic needs of the Iranian people. As such the Iranian government is obliged to find new sources to support the economy. Within this context Iran is now anxious to gain a larger quota of the oil market for itself as far as daily production is concerned. And what it is trying is to achieve that at the expense of the members of OPEC, particularly the GCC states. The Iranian justification is that it has to compensate for what it has lost during the war against Iraq and that it has to rebuild what has been destroyed during the war as soon as possible.⁵⁰

On the other hand, it is well known that Iran had a strong position against the "Arabic Regional system" (ARS) before its collapse as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. There are many reasons for Iran to take such a position. Most important is that the legitimacy of the ARS was established on the basis of Arabic nationalism, Arabic unity and Arabic integration. Such a theme is against the Iranian themes and ambitions which are based on Shiism, the Islamic league, the new formation of Darul Islam and Shii radicalism which belong to Al Ethna Ashariyah (The Twelve Imams) and Willayt el-Faqeh. By its nature, such theses form challenges to the legitimacy of all the political systems and ruling elites of the Arab world in general and the conservative ruling elites of the Gulf in particular.⁵¹ However, with the inactive roles of most of the Arabic regional systems and organisations such as the Arab League and its sub-organisations, and the old Arabic regional and security systems, Iran considered the new situation as its golden opportunity to achieve national interests in the Gulf and renew its old ambitions in the Arab world, and as an entrance to a wider regional role in the newly proposed Middle East,⁵² the subject of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

All this comes in the context of Iran's attempts to marginalize the importance of the roles expected to be played by the Arab states of Egypt and Syria, the members of the Damascus declaration, in the affairs of the Gulf. This, however, would be done through political rhetoric, manoeuvring between permanent enmity against Israel; complete objection of the American and western presence in the area; political and military pressures on the GCC states; and evasive actions targeted to involve Iran in a combination including the GCC states. The goal of Iran in all this is to penetrate the states of the broader Middle East in general, and the GCC states in particular as far as security, military, commercial and economic affairs are concerned.⁵³

However, a set of important questions stems from those Iranian approaches. First, can Iran achieve its ambitions using such methods? Second, are the other parties involved going to remain static and not challenge those ambitions? Third, do those aggressive positions of Iran

against the GCC states serve Iranian interests in the long run? Or, in other words, is Iran going to achieve its economic and strategic interests by utilising antagonistic means? Definitely, it is difficult to answer that set of questions easily because of the nature of those questions.

Since the end of the war in the Gulf area the approach the GCC states now seem to be following is that if they stand firm over the next few years and do not antagonise any of their neighbours, especially Iran, communications and natural relations might eventually improve to everyone's benefit. Whether such contacts are based on a bilateral nature, i.e., between each individual country of GCC and Iran, or between the GCC and Iran, is not a critical matter as long as they serve to provide stability to the Gulf.⁵⁴ However, at the present time, Iran's relationship with the ruling elites of the GCC states is unclear, since Iran still views the Gulf states as allies of Iran's great enemy, the United States. In addition, and apart from the scenario that this paper illustrates, the Mullahs of Iran themselves have not clearly spelled out what they think the role of Iran in the Gulf should be.

The Domestic Dimension: The ruling elites of the Gulf are facing numerous domestic political issues which jeopardise their stability, security and legitimacy. Thus, they must challenge those issues in order to secure their survival and future. Our discussion will be devoted to two important aspects of the domestic problem. The first is the underdevelopment of the political institutions, which includes the absence of political participation, and the second is the issue of the presence of expatriate labour in the area.

Absence of Political Participation: Modern political institutions can be established if four basic criteria are in existence. First, there must be a legal structure which is able to transform the public will into activities in harmony with the general policy of the system. Second, the public must be involved in the political process and must be enriched by their participation. Third, the ruling elites must want to achieve national integration through systematic accommodation of cultural, religious, ethnic, tribal and similar divisively active powers. Fourth, there must be a union between the administrative knowledge, responsibility and rationality of the elite, and the public desire to participate in this activity, subject to the neutrally executed law of justice and equality.⁵⁵

One of the important observations made about the Arab Gulf states is the gap between the fast social transformation on the one hand, and the official conservative attitude to preserve and protect the traditional internal characteristics of the decision making process, on the other. This has resulted in a situation where the political institutions and processes are underdeveloped and need dramatic transformation.⁵⁶ It is well-known that the contemporary state which seeks to be a modern one should contain three basic authorities: the legislative, the executive and the judicial. These authorities

must cooperate with each other and must share the responsibilities of the state. Each one must not exceed the limits of its responsibilities and, in fact, the responsibilities of the others.⁵⁷ In the Arab Gulf states there is a serious overlap between the functions of these authorities. This fact by itself is enough to create serious problems for the ruling elites in the coming future. While it has been observed that the elites are willing to change their policies in the fields of education, housing, health, and other public services and affairs as a result of the availability of the resources coming from the oil revenues,⁵⁸ it is also observed that these elites are reluctant to accept new methods in political affairs and the decision making process.

The ruling elites of the Arab Gulf states are tenacious of the old political order, and the states they rule are characterised by the presence of traditional political structures which are patriarchal in nature.⁵⁹ On the other hand the forces generated by the new wealth have created a new educated elite,⁶⁰ and a broader educated and politically aware public. Because of modern education, several ordinary citizens occupy important positions in the state, which has led the internal policy formation to be divided between patriarchal elites and the emerging politically aware non-elites.⁶¹ This new situation should force the traditional ruling elites to reconsider their position and to take steps to modify the traditional political structures.

The static position of the elites vis--vis political development has led to another problem related to administrative backwardness which has fragmented the formation of contemporary Gulf societies. Indeed, while these societies harvest the benefits of social and economic development, they continue to suffer from the old political order, which is in contradiction with the modern norms of urban life. As a result, the Arab Gulf societies find themselves in confusion. While they have absorbed all the inputs of modern societies, they remain politically run by the inputs of the traditional tribal societies.⁶²

Hence, despite the existence of the modern state structure, the contemporary Gulf societies continue to be run by the tribal mentality.⁶³ The most immediate security problem which the ruling elites face stems from their conservatism and reluctance to introduce political reforms based on public political participation. The gap between the ruling elites and their indigenous population might generate further dissatisfaction. Since there are no democratic processes and clear channels to transmit such dissatisfactions to the elites, the consequence would be a situation that would be ripe for underground political activities⁶⁴ which might deteriorate into armed activities. In fact, the contemporary history of the Gulf is rich with such activities, an example of which is the rebellion in Dhofar during the 1960s and mid-1970s.⁶⁵

The Threats of the Alien Expatriates

Most of those writers and observers who have dealt with the issue of the presence of expatriate workers in the GCC states mention that the real danger from the expatriates lies in the risk that they may attempt to form a kind of organisation in order to identify their interests with those of the local ruling elites and peoples. They may form associations aimed at furthering their own interests at the expense of the Gulf countries, peoples and ruling elites.⁶⁶ On the other hand, some westerners who have dealt with the immigration problem in the Gulf, such as Roger Owen, have denied that there is an immediate political impact on the ruling elites and the countries concerned because the presence of the expatriates stems from economic reasons.⁶⁷ However, such arguments are unrealistic because the presence of such huge numbers of aliens all over the Gulf vis-a-vis the local citizens, raises very relevant and timely questions. Might not political interests and goals emerge out of the economic needs of the immigrant groups? Is there any guarantee that a large nationality group might not be rallied by local or outside politically active groups?⁶⁸ In fact, the differences in origins among expatriates living in the GCC states, by their very nature form a source of conflict which threatens the stability and the security of concerned countries. These expatriates might be used, for instance, by external powers such as Iraq and Iran to implement destructive terrorist activities, such as those committed in Kuwait in the 1980s⁶⁹ and Bahrain in 1996.⁷⁰

On the other hand, one can assume that the political orientation of most of the expatriates who live in the GCC states is more advanced than those existing in the area, as far as the rights of labourers are concerned. In their own countries, many of these labourers such as Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Filipinos and Iranians are politically organised through trade unions, labour organisations, and revolutionary parties. As a result, they believe that they have the right to strike, express their views and demand more rights and higher wages. But when they come to the GCC states they find themselves living in a different political situation and face difficulties on various levels. Consequently, they usually attempt to express their disagreement over the difficulties they face by protesting or striking. Several incidents occurred all over the GCC states and have drawn responses in the expatriates' country of origin. The Indian Minister of Industry, for example, announced that his government is considering the grievances which the Indian labourers face in the GCC states, and is taking such grievances seriously into account. India was supported by other nations such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.⁷¹ Such announcements are clear indications of the willingness and ability of such countries to intervene in the domestic affairs of the Gulf states, a situation which should alarm the ruling

elites and make them aware of the dangers hidden behind the uncontrolled presence of the expatriates.⁷²

However, even though the presence of the expatriates in the GCC states contributed widely to the efforts of the ruling elites to develop each country individually, there is no doubt that the expatriates' presence has also substantially added to the list of problems which both the GCC states ruling elites and their peoples must face. Yet the ruling elites have found themselves unable either to implement laws and regulations which organise the right of foreign labour internally, or have avoided external pressures by different foreign governments.⁷³ The case of the Filipina house maid who killed her employer in Al Ain (U.A.E.) is a clear example.

The announcements of the Indian Minister of Industry and the support it gained from other South Asian countries, form clear indications of the willingness and perhaps ability of such countries, to involve themselves and intervene in the domestic affairs of the GCC states. The justification of that would be to protect their national residents in the concerned GCC states, and to protect the chain of interests these countries have there, which are connected to the presence of their nationals. This phenomenon, however, should alarm the Gulf's ruling elites and make them aware of the possible dangers hidden behind the random presence of alien migration especially in GCC countries, such as the U.A.E.⁷⁴ However, as far as this specific issue is concerned it is hard to confine the situation to non-Arab expatriates as is indicated above. In fact, the experience in Kuwait during the Iraqi occupation of the country in 1990-91 is proof of such an argument. During that period some of the expatriate residents in Kuwait, whose governments supported Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait, collaborated with the Iraqi authorities. Among those were some of the Iraqis themselves, Palestinians, Jordanians, and to a lesser extent Yemenis and Sudanese.⁷⁵

After the liberation of Kuwait it seems that the Kuwaiti government has absorbed the lesson very well and started to be cautious of the presence of certain nationalities inside its territories. The later population policies of the government of Kuwait proves that it is very important to follow policies that make a kind of balance between the numbers of expatriate nationals according to the requirements of the national security of the GCC states. Kuwait itself prevented the entrance of the nationals of those governments which supported the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, and collaborated with the Iraqi government during that disastrous period.⁷⁶

The reluctance of the ruling elites to deal effectively and rapidly with the huge uncontrolled presence of expatriates gives an impression that they are relying on the presence of a divided population in order to maintain their domination, a situation which has occurred because local population have

become minorities in most of the Gulf states.⁷⁷ But to rely on this kind of method for stability, legitimacy, or continuation is a dangerous one for the existence and safety of the elites themselves. In fact, an underlying disloyalty has only been covered by good fortune. In the long run, and due to political deprivation and possible unavoidable conditions related to living standards and wages as well as social services such as health and education, the expatriates may become clandestinely organised and may provide a receptive ground for Internal unrest which might be generated from outside. If the time comes when such a situation occurs, it certainly would be a destructive factor for the stability and continuation of the ruling elites.⁷⁸

Conclusion

It is agreed among scholars that the concept of the elite, and the power structure of the state, are apt to vary with its socio-economic evolution. This process can be accelerated and a direction provided, if the existing pattern of power structures can be identified. Thus, the identification of the elite in itself may be a significant step towards providing an institutional foundation for the newly emerging GCC states, as it may eventually help them in their growth. Indeed, the adequate understanding of the processes that shape the power structure of GCC societies are bound to be a tremendous help in evolving a social structure consistent with development requirements. Those processes include the nature and composition of the society, identification of the ruling elites, their characteristics and value orientations, as well as the paths of their emergence, the path of their legitimacy, the sources of their influence and the extent of their influence.

As far as the GCC states are concerned, it has been noticed that after the discovery of oil, the traditional ruling elites were committed to achievement and performance and are legitimised by their success. At the same time, the ruling elites are strongly connected to the traditional legitimisation — the Utopian visions of the tribalist cohesion and supremacy, the struggle for the preservation of independent entities and the past of the people. On the other hand, most Western scholars who have approached the study of the ruling elites of third world states, as well as their students who have come from the third world, find that they have connected their study of the elites with the level of development that the elites have achieved.

In this sense the elites of the GCC states face two directions. Is this also causing them to face new dilemmas? Maintaining the balance between the impulse to change, and the constraints of conservatism, is contingent on two factors — the rate of change and the method of change. If the rate of change is too rapid, then serious splits with traditional values will result, causing counter modernisation movements in which religious groups rebel and demand a return to fundamentalism, such as in Iran. If the rate of change is too slow, then

expectations generated by oil wealth cannot be fulfilled, similar to what is taking place in Saudi Arabia at this stage of its development. As such, one would predict that disillusionment is inevitable, and new opponents may arise calling for rapid modernisation by more drastic methods. The Dhofari revolution in Oman during the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s is an excellent example. The tensions between the demands of modernisation and traditional views resulted in new beliefs. These beliefs are likely to be given a voice by groups such as the newer ranks of the government bureaucracy, the educated or, generally, the new emerging middle income social groups. Ambitious, zealous and impatient, they are actually sensitive to resistance to change.

Second, there is another constraint which revolves around the rate of change. With economic development comes new social differentiations — mainly occupational groups. These groups seek political participation as an expression of their social status. Where modernisation is too rapid, high expectations are fostered by the mobility of these groups. This may impel them to become autonomous centres of power. On the other hand, if change is too slow the traditional elements may be intransigent in their resistance to the new differentiation.

Third, a dilemma rotates around the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of the Gulf ruling elites. An expansion of elite membership may diminish control and extend the range of conflict, yet being too restrictive can deny proper representation to the elites. In either case, elites must opt for the new differentiation, allowing them representation. If individuals from the new strata are not permitted entry into elite positions, efforts at collective mobility may result. On the other hand, if such groups with their extreme anti-traditional outlooks are too rapidly absorbed into power positions, dissension may result.

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