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9 **Parliaments and proto-parliaments in the Gulf Cooperation Council**

10 The past five years have seen major changes in the political horizon of the Gulf
11 Cooperation Council [GCC] countries: stirrings of democratization have been taking
12 place. The countries of the GCC, with the notable exception of the UAE have witnessed
13 an increase in political liberalization and a decline in the cohesiveness of the
14 regimes. Saudi Arabia is witnessing an increasing role for the appointed Majlis as-
15 Shura, Qatar has a new constitution which specifies that parliamentary elections will be
16 held in 2004. Bahrain has had elections to its newly formed parliament in October 2002.

17 Three factors seem to influence the development and speed of the democratization
18 in the Gulf:

19 1- Most of the impetus for increased participation seems to come from the top.
20 The Amirs and Kings pushed for the establishment of the new institutions often in
21 apparent opposition to other members of their families.

22 2- The ability of the leaders to bring about true reform is limited by the succession
23 systems of the GCC. The leaders know that demographics and increased education of
24 their people mean that, if they wish to preserve their own family's long-term position,
25 they must surrender some power to the people, i.e. increase participation. However, any
26 sharing of power with the people will come at the expense of their own family to whom
27 they owe their position of leadership. Thus, the leaders must first coax and negotiate any

28 political structural change with their own family first. As a consequence, most of the
29 new moves towards democratization are cosmetic in nature. They leave true power with
30 the families but limit cohesive apparati, increase press freedom, hold elections, allow
31 free speech, and in general promote the development of civil society. These changes are
32 seen by the populations as insufficient but are mostly accepted as first steps to a future
33 development of democracy in the region.

34 3- The demographic and cultural problems of the GCC countries are urgent,
35 obvious and enormous. Any Al Khalifah in Bahrain, Al Saud in Saudi Arabia, or Al
36 Thani in Qatar is faced with having to allow more participation to the people. It does
37 seem in this context that it does not matter which prince is the leader. Whoever is in
38 charge must increase participation by cutting into the existing privileges of his own
39 family. Hence, a prince which allies himself with the conservative Salafis may be doing
40 so only to increase his negotiating power with his king/amir when his privileges are at
41 stake and vice versa a “liberal” prince may just be using the strong current of needs for
42 reform, in other words use the popular pressure, to increase his position in the negotiation
43 for leadership and privileges.

44 **Existing Parliaments and Proto-parliaments**

45 Except for the UAE, all the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council now have
46 active assemblies that discuss affairs of the States. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman
47 have elected assemblies. Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar have assemblies with legislative
48 powers. However, none of them have powers giving them the right to establish laws
49 against the wish of the royal leadership. Oman’s Majlis as-Shura is elected but is only a
50 consultative body. Saudi Arabia has an appointed Majlis as-Shura with only consultative

51 powers. None of these assemblies have the power or the right to question or even discuss
52 the ultimate control of the State by their respective royal families.

53 The countries with elected parliament with legislative powers have constitution
54 written to limit their ability to make decisions unacceptable to the royal families. In
55 Bahrain the constitution accepted by referendum in early 2001 provides for a bicameral
56 system. The parliament is elected in freely contested elections. However, all the bills
57 which it discusses and approves must also be approved by the Majlis as-Shura which is
58 appointed by the King. This has given rise to an interested counterintuitive situation in
59 2002 when the country voted in representatives with strong conservative Islamic
60 leanings, even though, the major Shi'a groups, themselves known to be quite
61 conservative boycotted the elections. In answer to the success of the conservative
62 Islamic elements, the King named a very liberal Majlis as-Shura which included women
63 and religious minorities.

64 The Qatari Amir used a somewhat different version of the same principle. The
65 constitution which was overwhelmingly approved by voters in May 2003 provides for a
66 unicameral system. However, all laws must be signed by the Amir. If the Amir does not
67 approve them, he sends it back to Parliament who then must approve the law at two third
68 majority. The Parliament, which in the present constitution is called the Advisory
69 Council, will consist of 45 members: 30 elected and 15 appointed by the Amir "from
70 among Ministers or others" [article 77]. Any effort to override a nonsignature by the
71 Amir would have to obtain at least some votes from the appointed ministers. However,
72 "no laws shall be issued unless endorsed by the Amir" [Article 67-2]. Hence, the Amir
73 maintains total control of the legislative process.

74 The Kuwaiti parliament has been the longest in existence. At this time, it is
75 certainly the most fractious legislative body in the region. Like the other parliaments,
76 however, it has no real power except that it often plays dog-in-the-manger for initiatives
77 spearheaded by the government. No laws can be passed by parliament over the wishes of
78 the Amir. On the other hand no decrees promulgated by the Amir can become law
79 without approval by Parliament. This de facto veto power on both sides has rendered
80 Kuwaiti politics somewhat dysfunctional. For example, the government has pushed for
81 the voting rights of women, and parliament denied it. The government has also pushed to
82 open the oil fields to foreign investments and parliament has nixed this effort for the past
83 four years. The government is not responsible to Parliament. Parliament has the right to
84 question a minister and demand his removal, but cannot remove the Prime Minister or
85 withhold confidence in the whole government. The Amir has the right to dissolve
86 Parliament. The Amir can govern by decree until he decides when new elections can be
87 held. However, all the decrees signed by the Amir must eventually be approved by
88 Parliament. The Amir suspended parliament a number of times since the constitution
89 was implemented in 1962. The last suspension took place in 1986 and a new parliament
90 was not elected until after Desert Storm.

91 In Saudi Arabia, the Majlis as-Shura [Shura] is appointed by the king. It has no
92 legislative powers and is purely an advisory body. However, over the past ten years the
93 Shura has become increasingly important. Its numbers have gone from 60 in 1992 to 120
94 in 2001. The Shura is now involved in important discussions on the role of foreign
95 investments, financial market structures, role of women in society, etc. It has various
96 committees including a foreign affairs committee. It actually instigated and wrote the

97 new law on financial markets in the Kingdom, which was approved by the king in 2003
98 and three new laws on criminal justice, yet to be implemented. The opening and
99 proceedings of the Majlis as-Shura are widely reported in the press and on television.
100 The Shura does not deal with issues which have to do with defense, security, the role of
101 the royal family or the composition of the government. It is, however, a proto-parliament
102 which has become integral part of society.

103 None of the parliaments have any substantial power. They can be viewed as
104 mere venting organizations, where people can speak out their frustrations. However, it
105 may be unfair to damn the existing liberalization. The establishment of proto-parliaments
106 is a major progress in increasing participation in a region where there was none. A
107 closer look at what causes may be behind this evolution may shed more light on the
108 chances of any development of democratization in the GCC.

109 **Internal Influences**

110 *Royal Politics*

111 Common to the Bahraini, Qatari, Omani and Saudi proto-parliaments, is that their
112 inception came from the top. In most cases certain factions of the royal families were
113 opposed to their creation and the articles of the various constitutions reflect the tensions
114 within the families.

115 *Bahrain*

116 Bahrain's constitution seriously limits the power of the elected parliament. It
117 cannot reject or fire the government let alone be involved in choosing the prime minister.
118 It was a great surprise to most observers of Bahrain when in 1998, the then-Amir, and
119 now King, announced the moves to liberalization. Indeed, the strongest person in

120 Bahrain at the time was the Amir's uncle, the Prime Minister, Shaikh Khalifah Al
121 Khalifah. Defacto, Shaikh Khalifah controlled the police and the secret police and was
122 responsible for the strong actions against the opposition and the Shi'a uprising after 1994.
123 He also controlled most of the economic decisions in the island. The Amir himself was
124 seen as very close to the Saudi leadership and therefore assumed to be anti-
125 democratization. It is very unlikely that the Amir could have taken the decision of
126 liberalizing the political system without the support of the prime minister and of most of
127 the rest of the royal family. For the Amir to risk opening up the political system to the
128 Shi'a majority and the Sunni merchants, he had to assure the Al Khalifah family that they
129 would somehow maintain control. The Amir's compromise was to release all political
130 prisoners, stop arbitrary arrests and torture, provide for an elected parliament, a free
131 press, political organizations, and free speech. On the other hand, he would keep the very
132 powerful Shaikh Khalifah in his position of prime minister, maintain the government's
133 responsibility with the Prime Minister and the King, disallow any question about the
134 existing rule of the family and keep the major portfolios within the family.

135 The Amir also changed his title to that of King. This change was not merely an
136 exercise in vanity. The King of Bahrain can now use his title to create legitimacy to his
137 line of descent. As Amir, he was still a Bedouin leader, more likely to follow Bedouin
138 traditions of succession. As King, the leader of the country can more easily follow the
139 British tradition of primogeniture and keep the succession in his line. It also starts the
140 country on the path of European styled constitutional monarchy. The change did not
141 appear to make much difference in 2001, since the previous succession had already been
142 from father to son. However, it is now enshrined in the constitution. It removes in

143 writing the Prime Minister and his sons from any run for the kingship. In the longer term
144 it may lead the royal family more easily down a true liberalization road.

145 *Qatar*

146 In Qatar, a similar pattern of parliamentary development took place. In a country
147 where there are only 120,000 local inhabitants, some of whom are first or second
148 generation Qatari, the basic rule of the Al Thani and their traditional allies, such as the Al
149 Attiyah, is unlikely to get questioned. Both the Al Thani and the Al Attiyah have strong
150 traditional commercial and personal links to a few powerful merchant families. In a
151 small community like Qatar, one cannot expect the major names to give up control. They
152 will want, however, to limit dissent and promote dialogue, but not at the risk of having an
153 alternance of power to new families. Thus, the constitution provides for the Amir to keep
154 his ultimate control over all decisions.

155 The new Qatari constitution allows the reigning monarch to name any member of
156 his family as next in line. This actually modifies the Bedouin tradition. Most Bedouin
157 regimes have an open succession where the upcoming leader is more or less elected by
158 his clan. By having a rule of succession where the Amir names his successor, in the case
159 of Qatar the Amir's second son, he has maximized the chances of his choice to be
160 accepted by the rest of the family.

161 *Kuwait*

162 The Kuwaiti royal family plays a central role in the political life of the country.
163 The present constitution which has resulted in the dysfunctional political system
164 mentioned above does not allow any questioning of the ultimate control of the state by
165 the al-Sabah. The Amir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, and the Crown Prince, Sheikh

166 Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah have used parliament to foster their own agenda. In 1993, the
167 Crown Prince [then also Prime Minister] demanded a parliamentary inquiry into the \$5
168 billion losses incurred by the London based Kuwait Investment Office [KIO] in various
169 Spanish investments. KIO was in charge of investing the Kuwaiti “Reserve For Future
170 Generation” [RFFG], which included most of the foreign assets of Kuwait. The RFFG
171 through KIO was controlled by the Amir. This inquiry and its findings led to the transfer
172 of responsibility for the foreign investments of Kuwait away from KIO, to the Kuwait
173 Investment Authority based in Kuwait and controlled by the Prime minister. [Seznec,
174 1994]. This change transferred most of the power of the purse from the Amir to the
175 Prime Minister, who in this manner became the strongest man in Kuwait.

176 Today, with both the Amir and the Crown Prince disabled, the third man in line
177 Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, has taken over as Prime Minister, braking the long
178 tradition of the having the Prime Minister-ship and the Crown Prince-ship held by the
179 same person. The nomination of a separate Prime Minister was also a long held demand
180 of parliament. Sheikh Sabah was able to become the defacto ruler of Kuwait, while
181 showing sensitivity to the requests of parliament and minimizing the impact on the
182 family. One can realize, though that the traditional alternance of power between the Al
183 Ahmad and the Al Abdullah clans described by Crystal [Crystal, Oil and Politics in the
184 Gulf: Rulers and Merchants of Kuwait, 1990], may have been changed to a more
185 traditional Bedouin system with the most able within one clan acclaimed by the rest of
186 the family.

187 *Saudi Arabia*

188 The role of intra-family politics is perhaps more obvious in Saudi Arabia than in
189 the other GCC countries. Indeed the slowness of liberalization may be a direct
190 consequence of the glacial evolution of the AlSaud family relationships. In 1980s King
191 Fahad who was then considered one of the most liberal members of the royal family,
192 stated that “elections have no place in the kingdom”. The strong pressure from
193 merchants, intellectuals and religious scholars for changes showed itself in the famous
194 petitions of 1992 and 1993 [Gause, 1994]. The king’s answer was to establish a toothless
195 advisory body of 60 technocrats called the Majlis as-Shura [Shura]. Over the past 10
196 years, the Shura has become more involved in policy making. The number of members
197 was doubled and two Shi’a member were added. The Shura was allowed to discuss many
198 more subjects and actually vote on projects not entirely supported by the government,
199 like the new investment law of 2003 and a revision of the criminal code. The
200 proceedings of the Shura have become widely discussed. The yearly opening of the
201 Shura is now presented with great fanfare on television, somewhat reminiscent of the
202 opening of parliament in the UK.

203 However, the Shura is not elected, in spite of constant discussions and rumors that
204 such move is imminent. In fact the last two petitions presented to Prince Abdullah since
205 January 2003 have demanded such elections. The response to the petitions was an
206 announcement in October 2003 of municipal elections to be held within a year in 14
207 municipalities. Half of each of the municipal councils will be elected with the balance
208 being appointed, presumably by the Ministry of Interior. In other words, Crown Prince
209 Abdullah had to compromise with one of his main rivals, Prince Naif, the minister of
210 interior. Prince Naif needs not fear elections, since he still will control the municipalities,

211 while the “liberals” are given a bone in the form of the first elections since the 1960
212 municipal elections. Another bone was thrown to the liberals: on October 20, 2003, the
213 press reported unnamed but prominent sources as stating that elections to the Shura
214 would be held within three years. The president of the Shura denied the rumor on October
215 26, but the word did spread to the liberal press and appears to be a type of test of the idea
216 to soften up the conservatives.

217 The bigger issues brought forth in the petitions: the independence of the
218 Judiciary, the role of women in society, the role of the religious authorities and police
219 [the mutawa’een], elections to the Shura, and corruption have not yet been directly
220 addressed. The issues of the independence of the judiciary and of corruption are
221 especially difficult since a true reform of the judiciary and a control of corruption would
222 alter their privileges of the royal family. Independent judges would be able to adjudicate
223 disputes with regular citizens against the family. This would allow a sizable return of
224 private money into the economy as merchants could invest in the booming market for
225 petrochemicals without fear of shake down or de facto confiscation by princes. An end to
226 major corruption practices in defense and security oriented contracts would also limit the
227 cash flow of major princes and thus limit their ability build followings among minor
228 clans. Thus, a Kuwaiti style parliament with investigative powers or even with power to
229 accept or reject an Al-Saud minister is not likely to get established soon.

230 One could speculate, however, that once the present Crown Prince becomes king
231 and that his appointed Crown Prince become established, they will be able to bring the
232 changes needed. The present family negotiations for the future post of Crown Prince are
233 most important. In this context, one should not put too much emphasis on personalities,

234 but more on positions. In the early eighties, the “Sudairies” [King Fahad, Prince Naif,
235 Sultan and Salman] were viewed as “liberals” in opposition to Prince Abdullah who then
236 was seen as closely linked to the Wahhabi establishment and anti-modernization. Now,
237 however, it is often taken for granted that both Prince Sultan the second deputy prime
238 minister, minister of defense and third oldest surviving son of king AbdelAziz as well as
239 Prince Naif, the Minister of Interior, would be opposed to liberalization if either one were
240 named Crown Prince by the future King Abdullah. Certainly, Prince Naif has taken
241 strongly pro-conservative positions in the past two years. He has removed two editors for
242 writing articles opposed to the Wahhabi establishment. He has allowed a mutawa
243 resurgence of August and September¹. He obviously did not give any ground in the
244 municipal election changes mentioned above. Naturally, his present position allows him
245 to establish himself as a major force to reckon with. By taking very conservative stands
246 now, he is appealing to the conservative elements in the royal family and the religious
247 establishment which increases his ability to obtain the family council support against a
248 potentially liberal candidate for Crown Prince.

249 The present “conservative” stands of Prince Naif and Sultan may be more tactical
250 that deeply seated. They are both in a struggle with the more popular clans of the family,
251 namely the AlFaysal bin AbdelAziz or the AlSalman bin AbdelAziz. The sons of former
252 King Faysal as well as Prince Salman [and his sons] are very respected in the kingdom.
253 They are well educated and have extensive governing experience. They have the best
254 noble origin and legitimacy within the family. The AlFaysals’ mother was a Thunayan²

¹ The mutawa’ en raided a house where Sufis were worshipping and arrested all. They also obtained a very harsh verdict against the men of a family who had beaten some mutawa’ en for disrespecting their sister.

² Thunayan was a son of the founder of the Al Saud dynasty Mohamed bin Saud in the mid 1750s [Bligh, 1984 *From Prince to King*, Columbia U. Press

255 and their paternal grandmother is an AlSheikh³. King Faysal of course is the most
256 respected of all kings since AbdelAziz. For his part, Prince Salman is a full brother to
257 Fahad, Naif and Salman. He has been governor of Riyadh for many years. He has a
258 great deal of charisma and as full brother to Prince Naif and Sultan is less threatening to
259 them. Since both the AlFaysals and the AlSalmans control the two major press groups in
260 the country, it is not a surprise that they have pushed an agenda in opposition to Princes
261 Naif and Sultan. Thus, they argue for increased participation by the people, and it is not
262 surprising that Naif has tried to limit their influence.

263 In the end, to insure the long term role of the Al-Saud in this demographically
264 challenged country, whatever prince is in power will have to provide jobs, as well as
265 satisfy some of the political aspirations. Political liberalization, the development of an
266 independent judiciary, the opening of society to women and the curbing of royal family
267 privileges will have to be addressed by the royal family leadership. Thus, until the
268 succession issue is resolved, only minor, relatively cosmetic changes in political
269 liberalization is likely to happen.

270 In Saudi Arabia, just like in Kuwait, Bahrain or Qatar, internal family
271 negotiations must take place to allow for any democratization to move forward and the
272 symptom of this system is that liberalization comes from the top. The Kings or Amirs
273 make the basic decision to open up the political decision process. However, the leaders
274 do depend on their own clans for their survival. Thus must first negotiate with their kin
275 prior to bringing liberalization into the political equation.

276 A similar pattern of negotiation within the families before liberalization takes
277 place can be found in every state of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Certainly a leader

³ The AlSheikh are the direct descendant of Mohamed AbdelWahab

278 with charisma, like former King Faysal, or the present Prince Abdullah will have a
279 slightly easier task in negotiating any political opening with his family. However,
280 position is primary to the process. In Saudi Arabia today, delays are caused by the fact
281 that Prince Abdullah is not yet king and that as Crown Prince he can only make cosmetic
282 changes to gain time.

283 *Economic and Demographic Pressures*

284 Saudi Arabia as well as the other GCC countries is riding a demographic tiger.
285 According the Saudi American Bank [SAMBA Economic Report October 2002] 28
286 percent of Saudi men between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed. Population growth
287 is estimated by the Minister of Finance to have declined to 3.2 percent in 2002 from
288 previous estimates of 4 percent p.a.⁴. On a population of 13.5 million Saudis⁵, and a
289 population where 50% are below the age of 18, and even with a small decline in birthrate,
290 job creation should be in the realm of 100,000 to 200,000⁶ per year.

291 The region may be suffering of the Dutch disease⁷. It lags behind the world in
292 economic growth in spite of its very large income stream from energy sales. However,
293 unlike Holland in the 1980s, a lower value for the local currencies may not provide
294 enough incentive to develop a deeply rooted industrial base. Until now a new industries
295 could not have found the right type of skills in the labor pool to produce goods that could

⁴ Presentation by HE Ali Al Naimi in Washington DC, August 2002.

⁵ The actual population figure is hard to estimate in the absence of a real census. 13.5 million is based on a growth rate of 4% with a starting figure of 4.5MM provided by the Ministry of Finance to the author in 1974.

⁶ 50% of 13.5 million people would imply that about 180,000 men will enter the work force each year. However, the curve is skewed towards the very young tranches, so one should cut the estimate to 100,000 but this figure will grow very rapidly. It also assumes wrongly that women would not seek work. Hence the range of 100,000 to 200,000 is needed to cover the likely errors in this estimate.

⁷ "The Dutch disease" occurs when a country rich in mineral resources, like Holland with its natural gas in the 1970's, sees its currency kept artificially high by inflow of cash in dollars from the sale of this resource. The high value of the currency makes the local industry uncompetitive with the rest of the world and thus keeps the country far behind in real economic growth.

296 compete in the world markets. Naturally, because of the lack of water in the region,
297 agricultural development would not have succeeded either. Today, there are advances in
298 food production, especially in Saudi Arabia where major subsidies have been provided.
299 There are also some major industrial successes in petrochemicals but not enough to
300 match the employment need. Large scale employment can only be created with large
301 scale investments. The government has computed that industry in kingdom created a
302 total of 304,000 jobs on investments of \$62.7 billion [Arab News 9/18/2002 quoting Dr.
303 Ahmed AbdelRahman AlZamil Deputy Minister of Labor]. Accordingly, it would appear
304 that each job created required \$206,000 in investment. In other words, it would take
305 between \$21 billion and \$42 billion of yearly investments to create the jobs needed for
306 full Saudi employment. Naturally the states alone cannot invest this amount of money,
307 most of the capital will have to come from the private sector. There are strong market
308 indications⁸ that such investment would come if the economic structure was liberalized
309 enough to make the financial and capital markets more liquid and easily accessible by
310 industrial ventures. However, in spite of efforts to bypass the bureaucracy in the region
311 [such as SAGIA in Saudi Arabia or the Bahrain Development Board] very little has been
312 achieved.

313 In the GCC, the key issue to address in promoting economic liberalization seem to
314 be the tight control of the civil service on the financial and industrial sectors. [Seznec
315 1994, 2002]. This tight control on the economy make investment very illiquid and not
316 attractive to most local investors. It does, however, keep the royal families out of the
317 realm of industry, which they otherwise might take over at minimal cost to themselves.

⁸ Each share offerings are vastly oversold and the stock market has been booming. The share index went from 1413 in Dec 1998 to 4276 in Sept 30 2003

318 A large influence on business and industry by royals would undoubtedly create great
319 tension in the Gulf, especially in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and in the long run
320 endanger the very existence of these royal families. Thus, until the royal family
321 privileges can be curbed and the princes be truly made equal under the law, the civil
322 service will limit the financial markets. Once opened, the private sector will likely rush
323 in to invest in all manners of industries. If, as mentioned in numerous press reports and
324 articles, investments abroad by Gulf citizens are truly in the \$400 billion to \$1 trillion,
325 there is enough capital to create the jobs needed. Therefore the “curbing” of the royal
326 families is not only a political necessity to liberalize economies, it is a necessary
327 condition to promote political liberalization and in the long term bring the region closer
328 to becoming a group of constitutional monarchies. An elected parliament with a
329 minimum of power could pass laws promoting the independence of the judiciary, thus
330 limiting royal privileges. Until this political step takes place, it is unlikely that a
331 liberalization of the economy could be truly implemented which will translate in slow job
332 growth.

333 Saudi Arabia has been trying to liberalize its economy without changing the
334 political structure. This, in essence, places the cart before the horse in the sense that it
335 efforts to liberalize seek to limit the bureaucracy before removing the royal privileges
336 which caused it in the first place. For example, the Saudi Shura passed a law on financial
337 instruments in 2003. This new law, approved by the King, is to be implemented in 2004.
338 It already removes a number of the civil service control over the financial markets. It
339 creates a new securities and exchange commission which will remove some of the
340 barriers to floating shares on the market. It allows for private brokers to help match

341 buyers and sellers [presently this function is achieved solely by the banks under tight
342 supervision from the central bank. However, the new law does nothing to protect private
343 companies from potential predatory practices by the royal family. Therefore, it is not
344 likely to bring large amounts of investments back.

345 **External Influences**

346 *The war in Iraq and US policies*

347 It could be easy to dismiss the idea that the US occupation of Iraq will help
348 democracy “spread like wild fire” throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Indeed, just looking
349 at the dates of the various liberalization steps taken by the local leadership, one can see
350 that many decisions had been made before the US invasion of Iraq in April 2003.

351 Bahrain’s referendum on the new charter was held in October 2000. Municipal elections
352 were held in May 2002 and parliamentary elections in October 2002. In Qatar municipal
353 elections were held in 2001 and the draft of the new constitution prepared for a year
354 ahead of the May 2003 referendum. In Saudi Arabia, the Shura was established in 1992
355 and the press and national discussions became more open than anytime before. The
356 Crown Prince actually accepted various petitions for change and met with some of the
357 signers prior to April 2003.

358 In talks with various Gulf citizens, it seems that the Washington neo-conservative
359 strident criticism of Saudi Arabia in particular and of the Gulf states in general has
360 galvanized the population against US influence. On the basis of anecdotal evidence and
361 local newspaper editorials, it appears that the local populations view Washington’s
362 criticism of their political system as gross interference in their internal affairs. It does
363 make some sense that democracy should be home grown and not imposed from outside.

364 Imposing democracy on a society from outside is an oxymoron. The example of the
365 CPA in Baghdad naming of a Governing Council is not an example of democratic
366 behavior which any of the Gulf States would follow. Undoubtedly they would
367 understand that the CPA has to start somewhere to establish some form of representative
368 government. However, any government imposed by an occupying force will suffer from
369 an original sin of dictatorship which will limit its legitimacy.

370 On the other hand, the various tragedies of the Middle East such as Iraq or
371 Palestine emphasize to the Arab population that their political systems have failed them.
372 Unemployment is very high. Educational systems have failed to prepare people for
373 modern economies. Corruption is rampant. The latest UN report Arab Human
374 Development [UN 2003] is quite damning on the political structures of the region and
375 blames them for keeping the region socially behind the rest of the world.

376 The populations of the GCC can see that Iraq failed as a state because of the Iraqi
377 people's inability to chase a brutal dictator. The leaders of the region can also see that
378 without the ultimate support from their own people they are likely to follow the fate of
379 Saddam Hussein. Although, the US occupation in Iraq is not making democracy more
380 popular, it is nevertheless shaking the GCC leadership and showing them the importance
381 of obtaining legitimacy and support from their own people as soon as possible.

382 The key element of opposition to US policies is based less on the dislike of the
383 invasion of Iraq than on the US steadfast support of Prime Minister Sharon and the Israeli
384 occupation of Palestine. However other issues are also very important to the Gulf
385 citizens. Among the most commonly mentioned are: the treatment of Arab visitors to the
386 US and the US confinement of prisoners in Guantanamo seen as a flagrant violation of

387 human rights. Consequently, any push by the US to promote democracy in the region is
388 seen as primarily self serving. It has led, however, the populations and the leaders of the
389 GCC to question their own systems and try to make them evolve but with the ultimate
390 goal to preserve social stability and leave the present leaders' families in charge for the
391 foreseeable future.

392 *Globalization and Access to Information*

393 The governments of the GCC are no longer able to control the access of their
394 people to information. Globalization has come to the Gulf through economic growth, the
395 subsequent large inflow of highly technologically savvy expatriates, and the wide spread
396 of their knowledge to the local societies. The internet is available to all either through
397 direct access from home, through universities and through a very large number of internet
398 cafes. Naturally, the states have tried to place filters on internet portals, but most
399 politically oriented information is still available and filters relatively easy to by pass.

400 Due to the substantial increase in living standards in the past 30 years, the local
401 population including women and children has been able to travel extensively to Europe,
402 the US, the Far East and to the neighboring countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon or
403 Jordan. It is hard to evaluate what effect the interaction of foreign cultures on the GCC
404 visitors has had, but it may have shown to these travelers that the local societies do have
405 some major values, like strong family links, which must be preserved. It also must have
406 shown that their own societies have remained behind in many aspects, like the role of
407 women, the ability to choose leaders, freedom of expression, etc.

408 Adding to the experiences mentioned above is the well known influence of the
409 media. Almost everyone in the GCC region has access to worldwide information. Al

410 Jazeera, of course, has been the primary focus of people's interest. When it first started
411 Al Jazeera gave everyone access to talk shows in arabic which aired the great range of
412 opinions between Wahhabi type conservatives and liberals. It could question the level of
413 economic development relative to the rest of the world. It could question the locally
414 originated and usually extremely boring newscasts of the Saudi, Bahraini, Qatari state
415 televisions. It gave a window to the real world in Arabic. However, Al Jazeera is not the
416 only channel of importance. Most Gulf households can hook up at no expense satellite
417 dishes that will receive channels from all over the world, from China, to Lebanon,
418 France, Pakistan or the US. Language, of course, is a barrier but many countries have
419 some programming in English and/or Arabic. There are also a number of TV channels
420 based in London and Lebanon and owned by Saudi royals which broadcast game shows
421 and musical numbers in Arabic showing a very open, modern and quasi European Arab
422 society.

423 There are also politically charged channels like Al Manar, the Hizbollah TV from
424 Lebanon, which gives very skewed pro-Islamic information. Saudi Dissidents have tried
425 to use the air waves to promote dissent in the Kingdom. Al Islah radio broadcasts from
426 Lithuania information to the Saudis. They were credited with the demonstrations in
427 Riyadh in November 2003. Their reach is still small but is beginning to have some
428 impact.

429 Altogether, the information barrier has disappeared. In fact the spectrum of
430 information and types of broadcasts available in the Gulf is much wider than that
431 available in the United States. Under the increased globalization of information, the
432 governments of the GCC are faced with a public that can compare their lot with that of

433 other societies. People know the alternatives. This knowledge of course plays both
434 ways. Many in the region can see the advantage of participatory governments in the
435 West, but they can also watch the ill effects of loose morality, such as many provocative
436 clips of MTV. It does, however, push the leadership to deal with people seeing the
437 outside world. Widespread access to information does not necessarily bring about
438 change but definitely puts pressure to increase participation.

439 *Oil and Gas*

440 It is commonplace to assume that the very large inflow of money from oil and gas
441 sales has allowed the governments of the GCC to co-opt society: power to the royal
442 families exchanged for welfare to the people. Saudi Arabia alone earned about \$1.4
443 trillion from oil sales between 1978 and 2003⁹. However, the amount spent on the co-
444 optation of the population contained their own seed of dissent. The health systems of the
445 region have become very modern and relatively efficient and mostly free. This has
446 resulted in the population boom, and the subsequent employment problems discussed
447 earlier. Each to the GCC countries also spent vast amounts on educating both men and
448 women, thereby creating an educated public which is more able to question issues than
449 before. The money in the public was also spent on traveling, buying access to
450 information, bringing large numbers of foreigners. In general, money from oil and gas
451 has opened societies to the outside. The consequence is that people have become more
452 aware of the need for participation in politics.

453 This effect however, is not reversible. If incomes were to decline substantially [as
454 they have between 1992 and 1998], pressure builds to question the controls of funds by
455 the royal families. On the other hand if incomes increase, as they have since 1999, the

⁹ Computed from reports in Middle East Economic Survey, Nicosia

456 population gets more education and opening to the outside world, which also translates in
457 increase demands for participation.

458 ***Conclusion***

459 The external pressures on the GCC societies are important and inescapable. The
460 present governments and the royal families have to contend with a wide open access to
461 world information. They are constantly reminded that they have been unable to create
462 jobs, that they cannot stand up to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, that they cannot
463 stand up to the US in Iraq, etc.

464 However, the old saw that all politics is local does apply in the Gulf countries.
465 The leaders know they must change. Most GCC countries have made sizable cosmetic
466 changes. They have increased participation somewhat, though proto-parliaments like the
467 Saudi Shura. They have had, or are about to have, elections. However, none of the
468 parliaments have any substantial power. It does seem that the autocratic rulers of the
469 Gulf have designed the liberalization of local politics as "survival strategies designed to
470 prevent the emergence of any effective political society" [Brumberg, Journal of
471 Democracy Oct. 2002 p.64]. The proto-parliaments are in great part just venting
472 organizations, for people's frustrations. Power sharing is being delayed in every country
473 of the GCC by the need to find an accommodation within the royal families. It is obvious
474 that the royal families' privileges must be curbed if not erased. Nevertheless, the Saudi
475 petitions, which ask for the abolition of privileges, always claim allegiance to the King
476 and the Crown Prince. No group in the GCC ever questioned the power of the Kings and
477 Amirs, but, all expect these leaders to control their royal families, who put them in charge

478 in the first place. The conundrum for the GCC leaders is difficult to solve but explains
479 why the process is taking so long.

480 Perhaps the single most important aspect of this slow process of democratization
481 is to promote the development of a truly competent and independent judiciary. A society
482 which can count on fair and consistent adjudication of disputes, regardless of its actors,
483 will see the privileges disappear, and all the structures built around them to bypass
484 dealings with the royal families become obsolete. For example, in Saudi Arabia,
485 independent judges could take cases against royals, whether land disputes, or
486 enforcement of major corruption cases. It could also enforce the rights to privacy and
487 thus limit the power of the most conservative elements by removing the unconstitutional
488 mutawa'een. Such examples would change society and allow democratization to
489 accelerate. However, it will take time to allow the Kings and Amirs to develop such
490 judiciary, even though they realize that their long term survival may depend on it.

491 One can criticize the present liberalization efforts as being purely cosmetic.
492 However, the establishment of proto-parliaments has provided some degree of
493 participation in a region where there was none. The electoral process has achieved an
494 unknown degree of openness in Bahrain and Kuwait. The press has become relatively
495 free. Public speech is free and open, except for questioning the ultimate role of the Kings
496 and Amirs. In Bahrain political parties have been allowed. Even in Saudi Arabia, the
497 discourse is mostly open and the press much more able to speak out than any time before.
498 In sum, the liberalization that has taken place so far in the GCC is giving birth to a still
499 limited but increasing civil society, which hopefully will blossom into more democratic
500 societies.

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