

Some Reflections on Social Change and Continuity in Oman and the Gulf

J.E. Peterson

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Abstract

The past three-quarters of a century have seen an enormous amount of change and transformation in the Arab states of the Gulf. This is most obvious in terms of economic development but social change has been more resistant while political evolution has been relatively minimal. The nature of “traditional” society and its preservation until the beginning of the oil era seems to provide one logical basis for social continuity while the ramifications of the coming of oil itself can be regarded as another reason for resistance to change. The accrual of oil revenues to rulers resulted in the creation of governments that assumed responsibility for economic development and assumed enormous power and dependency.

But the passage of time has complicated the situation. A rough balance between factors encouraging social change and those effective in maintaining continuity can be discerned; at times a factor may incorporate both elements. It is clear that education, employment, and urbanization have had a positive impact on social change. The abundance of expatriates in all the GCC states has also inevitably introduced changes, as has social strife and sectarianism albeit in a negative way.

At the same time, social continuity has been preserved, at least in part, by innate social conservatism, which in turn is buttressed by the strength of Islam and tribal or other social corporate identities. This has been reinforced by the gradual or incrementalist nature of economic change and, especially, by the traditionalist and patriarchal political order.

While Oman in general follows a similar pattern to the other Gulf states, there are significant differences that the paper discusses.

Introduction: The Nature of Social Change

In the last three-quarters of a century or less, Gulf societies have been buffeted by countervailing forces to a degree rarely seen elsewhere. Government and administration have become more elaborate, relationships between members of society are more diffuse, and traditional patron-client relationships have been partially supplanted by newer, emerging relationships based on education, occupation, and professional or vocational interests. The nature of personal and family relationships has been challenged, consumerism has become a focal point of activity, the principle of egalitarianism in traditional society – albeit more often honored in theory than in actuality – has been subordinated to more formal authority structures, and a thorough dependency on governments has emerged. The oil boom of the 1970s produced a halcyon effect while the recession of the 1980s were welcomed as a relief from the earlier intoxication and a return to “normalcy,” admittedly a perception colored by the rosy tint of nostalgia. More recently, another sustained period of economic boom in the midst of regional crisis has impacted societies composed entirely of populations born in the oil era. There can be no return to “normalcy,” only a search for a “new normalcy.”

It is an easy observation to note that perhaps the most significant and obvious changes in the Gulf during the oil era have been concentrated in the administrative and socioeconomic spheres while political change has been more gradual and limited. But to what degree have the Gulf states experienced social change? In one sense, this is a *non sequitur* as society is always experiencing change and adjustment. That is to say, social change is a constant. People alter their locations, occupations, and affiliations over time and societies are energized by regular influxes of individuals and communities, as well as weakened by departures. New ideas and intrusions are constantly being introduced into a society. The essential questions are what impact have the oil decades had on this process and how and whether it has altered the ageless permanence and fluidity of social change. There are two contradictory, yet complementary, ways of assessing this process: factors that stimulate social change and those that inhibit it.

Factors Inducing Social Change

The modern political, economic, and social evolution of the Gulf states has progressed through some three stages. In the first phase, the pre-oil era, the hereditary leadership was largely unquestioned but its effective power was constrained by such factors as external influences (particularly the role of the British), the poverty of the polity and therefore the rulers' dependence on cooperation with prominent merchants, the ability of family factions and tribal groups simply to move out of the geographical limits of a ruler's control, and – at least in theory – the consensual nature of tribal politics.

The introduction of the oil era, from the beginning of exploitation through full independence and beyond into the 1970s and early 1980s, constituted the second phase. Rulers and their families used their receipt of oil rents to quickly and vastly extend their control over their states and to create a condition of dependency. Elites were co-opted through government appointments and especially through expanded commercial opportunities. The distribution of benefits derived from oil wealth in

the creation of physical and social infrastructure served to ensure the loyalty as well as dependence of the population as a whole. The strengthening of the state was visible in the use of loyalty to determine advancement in the civil service and military, in the parcelling out financial opportunities and benefits through a wide network of elites, supporters and constituent groups, in the severe censorship of all media; and in the prohibition of public dissent and sanctioning of private dissenters.¹

The third phase, the maturing of oil regimes from the 1990s until the present, has seen a certain loosening of the strong and often heavy-handed authoritarianism exercised in the second phase by rulers and ruling families. An educated, sophisticated and well-to-do middle class that is not directly dependent on the regime has burgeoned in all six countries.²

As Abdulkhaleq Abdulla has pointed out, one school of thought contends that the Gulf States “have experienced more changes in the past fifty years than in their 500 years of recorded history. These states are pregnant with all types of changes, some deep-rooted and structural and some superficial and cosmetic. Changes in the [Arab Gulf States] have not only been massive, but occurred at a tremendous pace.” Furthermore, the “largely traditional and conservative ways of life have been almost completely replaced. Old-fashioned uniformity has been superseded by a vigorous and prosperous diversity. A more modern, urban and distinctly affluent society is coming into being.”³

The transformation of the economy without doubt was the most pivotal factor in creating change. The prevailing economy based on trading, fishing, pastoralism, pearling, and agriculture was quickly rendered nearly untenable. The very presence of oil companies was instrumental in introducing economic change through gradually hiring nationals, providing housing, stimulating consumer demand, and encouraging the formation of service and trading firms. New requirements for skills and dependability in employees forced readjustments in lifestyles, as well as a dependency on expatriates to fill many jobs.

The Impact of Oil on Government and Its Role in Social Change. In the early years of the oil era, the inability of existing institutions to distribute the flood of income meant that primitive governments were forced quickly to create and utilise administrative and economic institutions to carry out new functions and responsibilities. The expanded role of government and its increasingly pervasive

1. One observer has contended that, even as the exploitation of oil produced economic benefits and strengthened the political order, the societies of the Gulf were distorted and disoriented by being thrown rapidly and without preparation into a far more complex international arena of politics, economics and finance. Levon H. Melikian, “Gulf Reactions to Western Cultural Pressures,” in B.R. Pridham, ed., *The Arab Gulf and the West* (London: Croom Helm for the Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, University of Exeter, 1985), p. 205. For a classic examination of society in the region, see Khaldoun Hasan al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula* (London: Routledge, 1999; Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1990).

2. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla has proposed a similar scheme of stages: “Since the end of the Second World War the Gulf has experienced four major phases: pre-modernity in 1950-70, the first stage of modernity in 1971-90, the second stage of modernity in 1990-2010, and finally the global moment of 2010 onwards.” Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, *Contemporary Socio-Political Issues of the Arab Gulf Moment* (London: London School of Economics, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, September 2010; No. 11), p. 7.

3. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 14.

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

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

As a consequence of this expansion of the role of the government, the state gradually came to depend simultaneously on two poles of legitimacy. One can be termed the “traditional pole,” which involved such elements as the rituals of consultation and equality, identification with Arabism, and conformity to popular expectations of an Islamic state. The other is a modern pole centered on the distribution of the benefits of oil income to all sectors of society and guaranteeing order and justice.

The Impact of Oil and Modernization Generally on Local Society. The onset of the oil era created immense changes in certain sectors of society. It introduced wage labor, created and/or enriched entrepreneurs, built urbanities where none had previously existed, or expanded port cities like Kuwait, al-Manamah, and Jiddah, and brought local population into contact with expatriates: Westerners, northern Arabs, Persian laborers – with the potential for absorption of new ideas or conflict and resentment.⁴ The transformation of more tangible aspects of society accelerated in the boom years of the 1970s, which brought not only opportunity and prosperity but also threatened to tear the fabric of society through the distortion of proportion, values, goals and integrity.

At the same time, effects of the “great transformation” caused by oil percolated throughout Gulf society. An assessment of the early impact of changes in a remote Omani village, written more than 20 years ago, concluded that the transformation was “a fortunate circumstance because it frees them from their economic insecurity of the recent past. Oil’s great transformation has permitted substantial improvements in the standard of life and soon will mean access to the benefits of modern

4. Some of the negative aspects of these developments are discussed in Robert Vitalis’ study of the impact of oil and ARAMCO on local populations in *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006; updated, London: Verso, 2009), and in Abd al-Rahman al-Munif’s fictional *Cities of Salt* quintet on the same subject (volumes 1-3 were translated into English and published by Vintage Books, New York, 1987-1993). An in-depth study of the history of one of these urban port cities is to be found in Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

education.”⁵ As time went on, change permeated deeper into society in the Gulf. One view argues that Saudi culture was profoundly impacted by the massive import of technology that required new perceptions and actions.⁶ Shafiq Ghabra has analyzed the role of education, expanded employment opportunities, government subsidies and assistance, travel, immigration, and television in increasing social mobility. He argues that these seeming factors for change paradoxically polarized Kuwaiti society along such traditional divides as *hadar* vs. *badu*, Shi‘ah vs. Sunni, old money vs. new money, and men vs. women.⁷

The cultural erosion through greater contact with the external world and the presence of a wide variety of expatriates has also played its role. The preference for imported goods over locally produced ones has led to the decline in handicrafts and local industries. Indigenous poetry, literature, and oral traditions have suffered as well. The sheer size and diversity of the expatriate population has imparted a myriad of cultural influences, while the media and foreign travel (many Gulf Arabs are far more familiar with Cairo, London, and California than they are with neighboring Gulf states) transmit other cultural images. Expatriate Arab teachers have had both direct and indirect influence on the socialization and cultural confusion of their students. The consequence is cultural alienation, and a common inability to distinguish between authentic and affected elements of indigenous culture.⁸

Class Structure and Emergence of the Middle Class. It can be said that social stratification in the Gulf is far less rigid than in many other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the onset of the oil era accentuated some divisions between elements of society even as it created an expansive new middle class. In addition to existing diversity, new distinctions that did not exist in the past emerged, based on education, skills, and occupations. At the same time, the uneven distribution of oil wealth and the ability of some groups to exploit their advantageous placement widened the gap between upper economic classes and the rest of the population.

In a paper published a quarter-century ago, I created a typology of social stratification and class

5. Dale F. Eickelman, “Omani Village: The Meaning of Oil,” in J.E. Peterson, ed., *The Politics of Middle Eastern Oil* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1983), p. 219. See also J.P. Bannerman, “The Impact of the Oil Industry on Society in the Arabian Peninsula,” in R.I. Lawless, ed., *The Gulf in the Early 20th Century: Foreign Institutions and Local Responses* (Durham: University of Durham Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1986), pp. 76-90.

6. Sharif S. Elmusa, “Faust without the Devil? The Interplay of Technology and Culture in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 345-357.

7. Shafeeq Ghabra, “Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 359-372.

8. Mohammad Rumaihi asserts that a preference for the facile and uncomplicated, an aversion to abstraction and intellectual effort, and the precedence accorded material over spiritual values were among the most obvious features of cultural rupture in Gulf society. *Beyond Oil: Unity and Development in the Gulf* (London: Al Saqi Books, 1986), p. 106.

in the Gulf.⁹ In its essence, the situation has little changed since. It should be noted, however, that any single schema of social stratification in the Gulf necessarily blurs the lines between social, economic, and political elites and groups. High social status, such as that enjoyed by *badu* tribes, may be accompanied by poverty and marginal political power while wealthy businessmen may be looked down upon for their mean social origins. ‘*Ulama*’ may have considerable political influence but little economic standing. In addition, it should be kept in mind that the contours of class stratification differ considerably from one country to another. While *badu* heritage and the weight of the ‘*ulama*’ are of considerable social and political importance in Saudi Arabia, they do not apply nearly so strongly in Oman, for example.

For obvious reasons, ruling families form the upper strata of society and can even be classified as a caste. Their control of oil income has meant not only that their monopoly of political power has been enhanced and entrenched during the oil era, but their economic importance has grown immensely as well. Allied with them are a cluster of secondary elites who enjoy more indirect power in preventing the rise of issues and decisions that threaten their position and influence; their origins may be either “traditional” (senior ‘*ulama*’, *shaykhs*, and long-time merchants) or “modern” (senior government officials and newly prominent merchants). The middle class comprises the bulk of society and comprises both a traditional middle class of small merchants, administrative clerks, and religious figures, and the burgeoning “new middle class.”¹⁰

Gulf society also continues to evidence a layer of a socially lower or working class (also termed a peripheral class). In some respects, this is a continuance of stratification from before the oil era. But it also reflects such transformations in some countries as the marginalization of the *badu*. In the narrow sense, of course, *badu* implies nomadism and tribalism, and represents the Khaldunian opposite of *hadar*, settled. But *badu* tribes of Arabia often contained settled sections or were only semi-nomadic; some tribes were of course never nomadic. In the oil era, the encroaching process of sedentarisation (or semi-sedentarization) has reduced the numbers of true nomads but has not expunged the *badu* ethos, with all its cultural, social and tribal connotations. The inclusion of *badu*

9. J.E. Peterson, “Change and Continuity in Arab Gulf Society,” in Charles Davies, ed., *After the War: Iraq, Iran and the Arab Gulf* (Chichester, West Sussex: Carden, for the University of Exeter Centre for Arab Gulf Studies, 1990), pp. 287-312.

10. The concept of a new middle class in the Middle East arose out of social science studies in the 1950s and 1960s. In Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, its membership was defined as “managers, administrators, technicians, clerks, teachers of modern subjects such as mathematics and science, lawyers, scientists, army officers and others in government and business occupy a middle level in prestige and socioeconomic power, like other members of the middle class. But they are distinguished from the rest of the middle class by their reliance on secular, nontraditional knowledge to attain their positions. They are the first group of people in their society who are not automatically members of a class because of family ties; they are in the New Middle Class primarily because of their personal qualifications.” William A. Rugh, “Emergence of a New Middle Class in Saudi Arabia,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1973), p. 7. For a contemporary analysis, see Mark Heller and Nadav Safran, *The New Middle Class and Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1985; Harvard Middle East Papers, Modern Series, No. 3). For the impact on one prominent individual, see Stephen Duguid, “A Biographical Approach to the Study of Social Change in the Middle East: Abdullah Tariki as a New Man,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (July 1970), pp. 195-220.

among the lower classes is somewhat problematic, since many *badu* tribes may include shaykhly families, very wealthy and “urbanized” families, and some well-off herders, in addition to large numbers of “lower class” pastoralists. In this sense, “lower” or “working” class may represent as much or more of an economic distinction than a social one.

In addition, class lines are blurred by the presence of other identifiable groups whose membership cuts across class lines. These include sectarian differences, principally the Shi'ah, and ethnic ones, such as the Baluch. While often socially stigmatized as being outside the predominant tribal/Arab/Sunni ethos, their ranks include well-established merchant families, small shopkeepers, and white-collar employees of oil companies, as well as the rural masses of Bahrain, al-Qatif, and al-Hasa. Obviously, women also fall across class lines rather than constituting a separate class, but restrictions and limitations on their political and economic roles persist.

A recent study by Mishary Alnuaim divides Saudi society into three classes and concludes that the Saudi upper class constitutes about 3% of the Saudi class pyramid while the lower class is 30%, leaving 67% as middle class. In addition, he estimates that 50,000 members belong to the big bourgeoisie, which indicates a bourgeois class of about 750,000 or nearly 4% of the Saudi population.¹¹

Perhaps the most fundamental development in social stratification has been the emergence of the middle class. The Gulf states, especially those that can be described as city-states, have become in large part “middle-class societies,” which is more and more the norm. Although the definition of Gulf middle class is necessarily amorphous because of the intermingling of social, economic and political aspects of class, such factors as income, education, values, occupations and careers, lifestyles, consumption patterns, and new common interests are important considerations in determining affiliation. The growth of government administration and services (as well as security services) has perhaps been the biggest spur to middle-class expansion but the development of educational facilities, media, small and medium businesses, professionals, and private sector management has also been instrumental. Although the middle classes tend to be a “modern” creation, the “rank and file” of the religious establishment (comprising *qadis*, *imams*, *khatibs* and Islamic teachers), formerly part of a vastly more restricted elite, should also be included.

More specifically, Alnuaim has divided Saudi Arabia's middle class into three sections: upper, basic (middle class), and peripheral (marginal), which he explains as follows:

In fact, there are no major differences among the class fractions of the [middle class] in terms of income, job and education. All these class fractions are difficult to monitor accurately in themselves. The basic and peripheral (lower) sections of the [middle class]

11. Mishary Alnuaim, “The Composition of the Saudi Middle Class: A Preliminary Study” (n.p., Gulf Research Center, October 2013; GRC Gulf Papers), pp. 53 and 34. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 15, goes even farther and estimates that the middle class throughout the Gulf comprises 80% of the citizens. According to Alnuaim, the great bulk of the Saudi middle class is in the massive state bureaucracy. He also notes that a notable part of the basic subclass is sliding into a peripheral status and the peripheral subdivision is in danger of slipping into the lower class. Furthermore, he deduces that the country's middle class is shrinking, which he sees as posing “unfavorable economic and political consequences.” Alnuaim, “Saudi Middle Class,” pp. 4-6. For an earlier comprehensive analysis of Saudi class structure, see Ali A. Al-Sultan, “Class Structure in Saudi Arabia,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1988).

consist of those who occupy different jobs, including owners of small businesses, employees in middle administrative levels in private and public sectors, technicians and employees in health jobs, legal jobs, secretaries, etc; the list also includes retailers in the private sector. The incomes of all these vary greatly, but all share the fact that their incomes are not high. As for education, most of them have secondary school certificates, but some of them have diplomas or bachelor's degrees.

The upper section of the [middle class] consists of leading employees in many institutions in the private and public sectors. They occupy positions wherein they can take decisions that guide work in the institutions concerned. According to these decisions, employees in middle administrative sectors and blue-collar workers perform the jobs' duties and tasks. This class fraction includes leading administrative positions in the private and public sectors (especially financial, banking and industrial institutions and others), top doctors, senior lawyers, engineers, and university lecturers.¹²

The expansion and entrenchment of the middle class has strong political implications: "It is a sign of a modern and democratic future. This class has not yet pushed hard enough for its rightful share of political power. However, socio-politically there has already been a discernible shift of social power away from the old tribal leaders and business oligarchies, which are still around but have lost much ground as a social force for continuity. The existence of a well-established middle class is the most concrete proof of change. .. In terms of societal impact, the members of the middle class not only tend to act as the drivers for modernization, democratization, globalization, social mobility and entrepreneurship, but above all inject a healthy dose of rationality and political stability."¹³ Furthermore, "Over time, as the economies of the [Arab Gulf States] change, many basic values of the new Gulf middle class also appear to change. They start to acquire a set of socio-political views shared by the global middle class, such as assigning more importance to individual liberties, considering religion less central, holding more liberal social values, and expressing more concern about the environment and democratic institutions."¹⁴

Merchants have long played a key role in Gulf society. In Kuwait, for example, it was the middle group of society between the ruling family and laborers. Responsible for opening the first schools and sponsoring the first magazines, the merchant group was also the driving force behind the 1938 reform movement and the functioning of the National Assembly after 1962. Their role became even more dominant after the inception of the oil era because of their exploitation of new economic opportunities.¹⁵ The group eventually bifurcated into membership of two classes: rich merchants and the well-established merchant families formed a tier in the upper class while the majority of merchants – mostly small shop, workshop, and service owners – fell into the middle class. Both, however, adopted new urban values and embraced education, eventually leading them to agitate for

12. Alnuaim, "The Saudi Middle Class," pp. 12-13.

13. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 15.

14. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 17.

15. Ghabra, "Kuwait and Socio-Economic Change," pp. 361-363.

political reform, which the government sought to counter by encouragement of Islamic groups and “the tribes.” Throughout the Gulf, challenging times are seen for merchants of both classes. Increasing globalization is forcing larger merchants to move beyond trading into large-scale industry while smaller merchants may find themselves relegated to a lower-middle-class status because of a Darwinian culling and the continuous competitive intrusion of new merchants.¹⁶

Sedentarization of Bedouin and Hadar/Badu Relations. The vast majority of the Gulf’s indigenous population evinces tribal membership or origins. A large proportion of that comes from a *badu* or nomadic (or semi-nomadic) herding background. But the oil era has seen an accelerating process of sedentarization of the *badu* and partial detribalization. The decreasing economic viability of pastoralism, changes in lifestyles, the diffusion of tribespeople into urban settings, the replacement of the tribe by the state as a guarantor of social welfare and honor, and increased reliance on ascriptive qualifications for employment and advancement, all reduced the political and economic importance of the tribe. But this process has not been complete or troublefree. Over the years, increasing sedentarization, encouraged by government policies, has led to the proliferation of *badu* shanties in and around urban centers. Physically part of the urban population, many *badu* remain culturally apart and economically disadvantaged.¹⁷

But the role of *badu* in new states and transforming societies is more complex than simply physical relocation and economic deprivation. Kuwait provides the starkest example of *hadar/badu* conflict. The growth of urban Kuwait intensified differing perceptions between the original urban population – the *hadar* – and newly settled *badu*, and the social distinctions were magnified by government “policies implemented between the 1950s and 1980s [that] fostered the political integration but social exclusion of the *badu*.” While “hosting a substantial desert population in the past, Kuwait no longer contains any Bedouin who practice a nomadic or pastoral lifestyle. And yet the term *badu* remains in popular use in Kuwait to designate a group considered sociologically and culturally distinct from the *hadar*, or settled urbanites, which in Kuwait’s context refers solely to descendants of the pre-oil townspeople.”¹⁸ The social and political situation is further complicated by the existence of thousands of *bidun*, *badu* in Kuwait but without citizenship due to the government’s contention that they emigrated to Kuwait from Saudi Arabia and Iraq after oil in order

16. Jean-François Seznec, “Changing Circumstances: Gulf Trading Families in the Light of Free Trade Agreements, Globalization and the WTO,” in Alanoud Alsharekh, ed., *The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity* (London: Saqi in association with the London Middle East Institute, SOAS, 2007), pp. 80-81.

17. Abdulrasoul A. Al-Moosa, “Bedouin Shanty Settlements in Kuwait: A Study in Social Geography” (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976); Donald P. Cole, “The Bedouin and Social Change in Saudi Arabia.” *Journal of Asian and African Affairs*, Vol. 16 (1981), pp. 128-149. For a study of efforts to support nomadic tribes in their traditional environment, see Dawn Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

18. Farah Al-Nakib, “Revisiting Hadar and Badu in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (February 2014), p. 5.

to receive citizen benefits.¹⁹ In Qatar, the *hadar/badu* distinction is complicated by the fact that many of the *hadar* are Shi'i or *hawalah* (Arab families who claim to have moved from Arabian littoral of the Gulf to Persia in the past and then back some generations ago).²⁰

Employment, Education, Urbanization, and Social Media. Unlike the more structural or class-related impacts of social change presented above, note should be made of the decisive impact of various factors of modernization that cut across class and community lines. One of the earliest – and still exceedingly important – was employment, primarily in new governments (including the army and police) and then to a lesser extent in the private sector. Formal employment liberated individuals, primarily men at first, from traditional occupations such as agriculture, fishing, pearling, and pastoralism. It provided welcome income for families and villages that had been enmired in poverty. It introduced clock-based time and wage-based income into society for the first time. As employees were drawn from many locales, social groups, and tribes, working together resulted in new avenues of socialization. Eventually, acquiring good jobs required experience and education as much or more than *wasta*.

Considerable emphasis was placed on education, both by governments as a means of improving the quality of manpower and by individuals for the higher status and public-sector job opportunities it provided. But education produced more than just job qualifications: it sparked broad intellectual inquiry, provided new outlooks on life and society, increased exposure to ideas and ideologies from outside, and, in the case of higher education, gave students first-hand experience of northern Arab countries and the West. In addition, education had a profound impact on women and male-female relations: “Female education and employment have improved the status of women within the family and given them more power in family decision-making, particularly in upper-middle and upper classes. ... Women derive most of their power from their family status, which is sometimes more influential than female education and employment. ... Education might affect women’s power in the family, but it does not always guarantee a woman more power in decision-making.”²¹ A more positive assessment holds that “The visibility of women is not seen as a threat to a patriarchal order, but as a sign to show the world that GCC societies are no longer gender biased and are as progressive as others.”²²

19. It should be noted that nearly all the Gulf states contain some *bidun* (the word means “without”), although their composition may differ from state to state. For example, the *bidun* of Bahrain are largely Persians who came to Bahrain in search of work.

20. Sharon Nagy, “Social and Spatial Process: An Ethnographic Study of Housing in Qatar” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1997), pp. 178-179.

21. Salwa al-Khateeb, “The Oil Boom and Its Impact on Women and Families in Saudi Arabia,” in Alanoud Alsharekh, ed., *The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity* (London: Saqi in association with the London Middle East Institute, SOAS, 2007), p. 103. For a look at Bahrain, see May Seikaly, “Women and Social Change in Bahrain,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (August 1994), pp. 415-426.

22. Lubna Ahmed al-Kazi, “Gulf Societies: Coexistence of Tradition and Modernity,” in Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg, eds., *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (London: Saqi, 2008), p. 178.

Similarly, the process of urbanization has had profound influence on Gulf society. The simple action of creating cities, with a profusion of neighborhoods, civil infrastructure, and impersonal transportation networks, has disturbed traditional social patterns.²³ The availability and price of land means more and more families and clans are dispersed throughout cities and the emergence of clogged traffic has reduced daily contact between family members. New houses are meant for nuclear households, thus changing traditional family residential patterns. Both men and women form close relationships with classmates, fellow workers, members of professional associations, and other affiliations that are independent of family, tribal, or community connections. The impersonal nature of the city is accentuated by the preponderance of a legion of expatriates from a bewildering range of countries. Nationals find themselves in the minority in their own countries in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE.

Another aspect of the urban anomie is the creation and persistence of ghettos of poverty. These can be found in all the Gulf states, although more so in some, such as Saudi Arabia. Not surprisingly, there is considerable concern that the poor will turn to antisocial and anti-government acts out of desperation.²⁴ A related concern revolves around the disgruntlement and ennui of youth, particularly young men. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman display serious problems of youth unemployment and not surprisingly, political discontent has made itself felt in all three countries as a result. But the lack of productive outlets in closed societies leads young men – and some women – of all classes to turn to drugs, dangerous hobbies (rioting after football matches and “car drifting”)²⁵, and political disaffection including recruitment by Islamist extremists.²⁶

Social Mobility and Social Media. In recent years, technology – as in satellite television and the Internet – has greatly expanded exposure to outside views and influences as well as exponentially improving the capability for communication by means other than face-to-face. The use of social media exploded in the Middle East and the Gulf after the uprisings of 2011. The numbers of Facebook and Twitter users doubled and tripled again. Certainly a great deal of this usage is devoted to socializing, making friends, and keeping in touch with friends, acquaintances and colleagues. However, intellectuals and others interested in political affairs (domestic, regional and international) have taken to the use of social media with a vengeance. One study found that 78% of the top fifty

23. One study traces the role of political stability, religious and tribal factors, and bureaucratic guidance in determining trends of urbanization. Gary Anderson, “Differential Urban Growth in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia: A Study of the Historical Interaction of Economic Development and Socio-Political Change” (Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1985).

24. Rana Abdulullah BinSaeed, “Urban Poverty in Riyadh” (Master’s thesis, Webster University, 2008).

25. Pascal Menoret, “Development, Planning and Urban Unrest in Saudi Arabia,” *Muslim World*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 269-285.

26. For an in-depth look at Saudi youth, see Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenges of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999), and *ibid.*, “The New Generation in Saudi Arabia: Cultural Change, Political Identity, and Regime Security,” in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds., *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles and the Search for Consensus* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 189-205.

Middle East tweeters used the medium to discuss politics as well as sharing news, and that political and government officials are increasingly using Twitter.²⁷ Not surprisingly, social media are dangerous to governments because they are extremely difficult to control and they diffuse so rapidly and broadly throughout the politically active community.

Social Strife and Sectarianism. It cannot be said that all social change in the Gulf has been positive in nature. As Abdulkhaleq Abdulla remarks, “Its disruption and negative impact have been just as discernible as change itself, and in some instances they have even been destabilizing. The effects include the unequal distribution of oil wealth, a considerable amount of psychological dislocation and disorientation resulting in increasing social alienation, growth of a highly individualistic culture, conspicuous consumption, a deepening of dependency and the presence of large number of foreigners.”²⁸

Another negative impact has been in the deterioration of sectarian relations between Sunnis and Shi-ah. The long harmonious relationship between members of the two sects was disturbed first by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 with its anti-establishment Pan-Islamist pretensions. But it was the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s that fostered a palpable atmosphere of mutual suspicion. The destruction of Saddam’s Iraq and the incomplete reconstruction of the state along sectarian fault lines has deepened splits in Gulf societies even more. The loyalty of indigenous Shi-ah to their states has been questioned and hardliners within the Bahraini ruling family have sought to portray opposition to the government as Shi-i extremism directed from Tehran. To be sure, this is a political issue but it nevertheless threatens the long-term integration of Shi-ah in Gulf society in more than one country.

Factors Encouraging Social Continuity

The foregoing discussion may well give the impression that the oil era has been characterized exclusively by social change – mostly positive although complex. But the opposite argument, that Gulf society persists in resistance to change and has maintained a continuity, also has merit. Abdulla has summarized this argument as follows: “This line of thinking assumes that the [Arab Gulf States], beneath the façade of change, are essentially at the pre-modern stage of development as they have been for centuries. They are still in essence traditional societies wrapped in a façade of modernity. ... Indeed, the net impact of the oil wealth of the 1970s and the 1990s has been the consolidation of the existing medieval order. Oil, in its own unique way, has strengthened the sociopolitical status quo and the old frame of references, including the typically conservative and

27. <http://notebook.portland-communications.com/2012/11/how-the-middle-east-tweets-en>.

28. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 15. Gulf governments have created large bureaucracies in part as a way of providing employment, which has led to a sense of entitlement that cannot be sustained indefinitely. Ingo Forstenlechner and Emilie Rutledge, “Unemployment in the Gulf: Time to Update the ‘Social Contract’,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 38-51.

old-fashioned mode of thinking.”²⁹

In part, this continuity has been part of a deliberate strategy. “Gulf states use their wealth to buy political loyalties through public spending, including a generous subsidy system. This non-economic utilization of resources [leads] socialized youth to believe that work has no inherent value and production is irrelevant ... These citizens look at income as their right, their fair share in the oil revenues. Because of entitlements, individuals and families perceive no need to change the current position. Were they to try to bring pressure on the state, they might jeopardize these benefits. In a sense they become ‘more royal than the king’.”³⁰

As a consequence, it can be credibly argued that the innate conservatism of a still-traditional, patriarchal, and Islamic society has steadfastly resisted fundamental transformation, and that this tendency has been reinforced by state encouragement³¹ and religious and Islamist insistence – as for example in the pressure for conformity in modesty in women’s dress.³² It can be argued as well that tribalism and the enduring emphasis on family and clan is a compelling force for continuity. As one scholar notes, “when modernization projects were extended to include the family, especially those relating to women, particularly unmarried women, tribal society objected even though it accepted change in general. The tribal society was not a participant in development, it was largely a consumer.”³³ Even though the political power of the tribes has waned considerably over the course of the oil era, their social functions remain undiminished. Marriages preponderantly take place by and large within the tribe, if not within the extended family. The government issues identity cards

29. Abdulla, *The Arab Gulf Moment*, p. 12. He adds “That is also why the religiously inclined societies of the [Arab Gulf States] today appear more religious and even more fundamentalist than they were during the pre-modern phase.” *Ibid.*, p. 13. A study on Saudi Arabia contended that the old bedouin and rural-based society was transformed into an urbanized and class-stratified one with emphasis on the vital role of the new middle class and the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, oil wealth remained the critical factor in preserving the status quo. Matrook Alfaleh, “The Impact of the Processes of Modernization and Social Mobilization on the Social and Political Structures of the Arab Countries with Special Emphasis on Saudi Arabia” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1987).

30. Ali al-Tarrah, “Family in the Kinship State,” in Alanoud Alsharekh, ed., *The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity* (London: Saqi in association with the London Middle East Institute, SOAS, 2007), p. 123.

31. “Kuwait, for example, could have achieved higher development rates if it had helped to develop civic values to assist development efforts. As the dominant source of wealth and the party responsible for its distribution, the Kuwaiti state could have changed the social, economic and political fabrics of Kuwait by creating new social classes, which would then have contributed to the overall development of the country. In an attempt to limit the influence of modern, urban-based classes, however, the state looked backwards, reverting to its traditional source of strength in tribes, factions and clans. This strategy undermined civic values while reinforcing bedouin values as the tribe became a political force and major player in public affairs. That process is best characterized as ‘bedouinizing the city.’” Tarrah, “Family in the Kinship State,” pp. 122-123.

32. A thorough study of the role of the Kuwaiti government in creating and supporting women’s societies as a way of engendering Islamist support for the regime is to be found in Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi Books, 1993; 2nd ed., 2001).

33. Mouza Ghubash, “Social Development in the United Arab Emirates,” in Edmund Ghareeb and Ibrahim Al Abed, eds., *Perspectives on the United Arab Emirates* (London: Trident Press, 1997), p. 289.

classifying the holder by tribal membership. Tribesmen seek the assistance of fellow tribesmen in obtaining employment, business help, and resolving problems with the police.

Resistance to change is anchored within the family. Marriage, divorce, custodianship, inheritance and other matters continue to be governed by Islamic precepts. The family plays a major role in the socialization of children, and family status is still determined by age and sex.³⁴ This is not to deny that shifts inevitably have occurred. The press and dispersion of urban life means that the extended family gathers less frequently, and men, for example, tend to spend more time with former schoolmates, business associates, and fellow club-members, than with family members as in past. Younger women tend to be allowed relatively more freedom of movement than older generations. The move to nuclear households also provides wives, as well as husbands, with more autonomy from their families. Younger-generation married couples show less specialization of roles, so that the husband participates more in the socialization of the daughter and the mother more in that of her son.³⁵

While many of the traditional barriers between the men's domain and the women's domain still exist, there is more mixing than in the past for some elements of society. Women are educated in equal proportion to men, especially in Gulf universities, and female employment in Gulf governments is on the increase. It has been observed in Kuwait that as a result of urbanization, women have become key players in tribal marriages, including such areas as bridal selection, the marriage proposal, and the marriage negotiation.³⁶ At the same time, however, "although tribalism has weakened in Saudi Arabia, Saudis still consider tribal descent in regards to marriage. People from shaikhs' families always prefer their daughters to marry men from the same background."³⁷ This attitude pervades all Gulf societies.³⁸

Fundamentally, Gulf society is organized around kinship relations and status. "Society is tightly controlled and dominated by kinship, which include tribalism, which in turn leads to factionalism. This repression and factionalization cause depression and a high level of frustration and alienation

34. Levon H. Melikian and Juhaina S. Al-Easa, "Oil and Social Change in the Gulf," *Journal of Arab Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (October 1981), pp. 79-98.

35. Soraya Altorki, *Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior Among the Elite* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

36. Ali Z. J. R. al-Zubi, "Urbanization, Tribalism, and Tribal Marriage in Contemporary Kuwait" (Ph.D. dissertation, Wayne State University, 1999).

37. Khateeb, "Oil Boom," p. 92. The author further amplifies by pointing out that "This frequently gives rise to differences between parents' and daughters' choices for marriage. Parents look first at tribal affiliation, family status, wealth, position, religiosity and finally education and personality. Daughters look at education, personality, religion, family status and tribal affiliation, in that order." *Ibid.*

38. For example, despite the principle of equality in Oman's Basic Law, the judicial system has tolerated the principle of *kafa'a* (that husband and wife should be from socially suitable families) and upheld the Personal Status Law in determining the legal status of marriages. Khalid al-Azri, "Change and Conflict in Contemporary Omani Society: The Case of Kafa'a in Marriage," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (August 2010), pp. 121-137.

within society. In sum, kinship dominates every facet of socio-economic life. The family is the basis of social structure and carries both positive and negative aspects. ... [N]egative aspects of kinship have militated against sustainable development efforts."³⁹ As a result, the role of the middle class in socioeconomic development has been seen as stunted since individuals place more reliance on powerful kinship loyalties as a way to strengthen their positions and gain benefits from the state.⁴⁰

The gradual or incrementalist nature of economic change can also be seen as an element mitigating social change. While the first phase of the oil era introduced the shock of economic dislocation and the second encouraged unbridled and competitive materialism, it remains true that the lives of most Gulf nationals follow a familiar pattern of schooling, preparation for a relatively narrow range of jobs (the majority of which any more can be classified as middle class), and advancement along a career ladder. Few must contend with jarring blows presented, for example, by the closure of mines and shipyards, the decline and disappearance of natural and mineral resources, or the need for relocation forced by population shifts. Instead, the pursuit of productive and harmonious lives demands conformity and acceptance of the *status quo*.

From another point of view, the overwhelming of Gulf societies by the influx of expatriates and outside, particularly Western, influence has produced a backlash. Social interaction between nationals and expatriates outside of the workplace and formal encounters that seemingly took root in the 1970s has receded. Dress, economic benefits, and rights of residence have all been employed to restrict the role of expatriates, which increasingly have been regarded as threats to both the purity ("cultural integrity") and the security of Gulf society.⁴¹ It has been contended that this has led to a "securitization" of society against perceived security threats from the presence of expatriates and outside influence.⁴²

What Makes Oman Different from the Rest of the Gulf?

In large part, Oman has become a "Gulf country" in its economy, political affiliation, and cultural orientation. Yet, in part due to its later experience with oil-fueled development, it can be said that

39. Tarrah, "Family in the Kinship State," p. 121. Tarrah further contends that "Not encouraged by alternative visions, individual Gulf states have derived their social identity from their tribes, clans or factions. This has made the state a hostage of kinship, thus creating a vicious spiral of misgovernment and a sense of power entitlement in individuals. Citizens' affinities and loyalties have shifted away from the government to their tribe or clan, rendering the government weak in comparison to these social forces." *Ibid.*

40. Tarrah, "Family in the Kinship State," p. 122.

41. For example, "Conventional wisdom has it that 'Kuwaiti traditions' and 'the Kuwaiti way of life' are under threat and that expatriates are the major source of this menace." Anh Nga Longva, "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy: Citizens, Expatriates and the Socio-Political System in Kuwait," in Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, eds., *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 122.

42. Jennifer Carol Heeg, "Seeing Security: Societal Securitization in Qatar" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 2010).

the extent of its social change has been more subdued than most of the rest of the Gulf.

There are numerous ways in which Oman resembles its neighbors in the Gulf. It has experienced similar phenomena of urbanization, occupational shifts, rising levels of education, and the profusion of exposure to outside influences via the presence of large numbers of expatriates, satellite television, the Internet, and social media. While urbanization, with all its effects, is most noticeable in Muscat, it has also played an increasingly formative role in regional centers such as Suhar, Nizwa, and Salalah.

At the same time, however, Oman differs from much of the rest of the Gulf in equally significant ways. Less oil income per capita and lower standards of living mean that the typical Omani is less well off than many of his or her Gulf counterparts. Government benefits are more modest. Growing population and burgeoning numbers of secondary school graduates exacerbates widespread unemployment. Youth anomie, intensified by unemployment and a lack of prospects, combines with indignation against elites for corruption and ostentatious consumption. The consequent discontent and the expression of deep-seated grievances came to the surface in 2011 and after.

Even more fundamentally, Oman is a geographically diverse country, unlike the smaller GCC states like Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the individual UAE members. Among other things, the remoteness and inaccessibility of much of the population has resulted in disparities in development. Furthermore, a strong tradition of local identification and regional alliances and differences means that much of the country's social diversity is retained, particularly as ties to villages remain vibrant.

Within the GCC, Oman's economic and social situation most closely resembles that of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Although Saudi Arabia has far more oil revenues and therefore a per capital income greatly exceeding that of Oman, it is a large country in geographic size and population relative to the rest of the GCC. Like Oman, providing services to a widespread population and finding employment for a large and burgeoning youth demographic has been taxing for the Saudi state. Bahrain's per capita income is closer to that of Oman than any other GCC state. Both countries have high rates of unemployment, particularly of the youth. Bahrain has become a more thoroughly urbanized society, however. The essential difference between the two countries lies in Bahrain's political dichotomy. This does not mean divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ah, although that figures strongly in the dichotomy; rather the chasm between the regime and the majority of the Bahraini population. Economic inequalities, social discrimination, and a political impasse have characterized Bahrain's situation for nearly a century. Oman, fortunately, by and large, does not face this particular challenge.

Finally, in a more speculative conclusion, there is the intangible factor of Omanis' unique identity and personality. While since the 1970s Oman has become a "Gulf state" in its social orientation and influences as much as in economic commonalities and political and security alliances, its significantly dissimilar character and experience continues to set it apart. Subnational influences of diverse important communities – among them Baluchi, "Zanzibari,"⁴³ Lawati, and Dhufari – mean that Oman displays a singular social consciousness. The country's late start to oil-fueled development and its innate self-contained and traditionally strong identity present a strong force in favor of continuity.

43. Zanzibari is a commonly used term referring to Omanis with a connection of birth or previous residence in various East and Central African countries.

Nevertheless, the adaptability and ingenuity of its people, as well as the specific circumstances prevailing in the sultanate, indicate the probability of a sustained and measured approach to social change.