



Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (C), viewed by many as the Muslim Brotherhood's spiritual leader, arrives at the opening of the International Conference on Jerusalem on 26 February 2012 in Doha.

The Muslim Brotherhood's Post-Arab Spring Legacy in the Smaller Gulf States *by Courtney Freer*

As Muslim Brotherhood affiliates came to power in Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, the smaller Sunni-majority Gulf states were surprisingly outspoken about their different approaches to handling potential Islamist challenges to their own rule. The Qatari leadership encouraged dialogue with and, in some places, provided material support to various Islamist groups throughout the region. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani said in a December 2011 interview that Islamists were likely to win elections in several countries that experienced political upheaval and that “we shouldn't fear them, let's cooperate with them.”¹

In contrast, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan denounced the Brotherhood as “an organization which encroaches upon the sovereignty and integrity of nations” and called on Gulf governments to work against its expanding influence.² Kuwait, the only Gulf state with a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate that participates in parliamentary elections and remains a major political force, largely remained out of the fray, helping to negotiate between the Qatari and Emirati authorities. That such otherwise similar small and wealthy Gulf states adopted such strikingly different policies toward Brotherhood affiliates is in itself noteworthy. Beyond that, however, we see that their foreign policies in fact mirror their domestic policies toward such groups.

While the wealthy super-rentier governments of Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are able to deliver resources and services to their citizens, they do not offer a compelling ideological justification for their rule beyond the occasional use of symbols appealing to religion or shared heritage.³ Islam, on the other hand, offers a common and indigenous language for political ideas and thus becomes the central ideological pillar for independent movements in such states.⁴ This is not to say, however, that Brotherhood-linked Islamist groups are necessarily threatening to the Gulf states; lacking means of political mobilization outside of Kuwait, they tend to focus on social issues ahead of broader concerns about government reform.

Political threat or social club?

At first glance, the Gulf, particularly its wealthiest states of Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, appears to be a strange site of Muslim Brotherhood influence. Indeed, these governments benefit from oil rent that allows them to grant generous social welfare packages for all nationals, obviating the need for Islamist social and political organizations to provide such services.

The smaller states of the Gulf also differ from the rest of the region in the prevailing importance of tribal social structures. Because these emirates have only existed as independent states for the past four to five decades, they have retained their tribal sub-structures. The presence of such a strong social network reduces the need for an organization like the Muslim Brotherhood to provide a sense of belonging and an arena for social gathering. Further constricting the space for the Muslim Brotherhood is government co-optation of the Islamic sphere through the Ministries of Endowments (or *Awqaf*)⁵ and Islamic Affairs, which often monitor mosques, imams,⁶ and sermons. Further, outside of Kuwait, there is no institutionalized political space for Brotherhood affiliates to influence government policy.

Despite a seemingly incompatible environment for Islamist activity, Muslim Brotherhood branches have existed in the Gulf for decades, dating back to the Nasser era, when many Islamists moved to the Gulf to escape persecution in Egypt and to take jobs in the understaffed region. Large numbers of Egyptian immigrants worked in the Gulf states' newly established educational and judicial systems, beginning in the 1950s. The Emirati, Kuwaiti and Qatari governments, under British protection at that time, initially welcomed Islamism as a counterbalance to the rising tide of Arab nationalism, even granting Brotherhood groups funds for social activities.⁷

Today, due to the limited space for political action in these states, with the exception of Kuwait, Brotherhood affiliates are most able to influence the government where social policies are concerned. This is all the more important as expatriate populations grow, especially in Qatar and the UAE. In all three states, the Brotherhood—in cooperation with Islamist Salafist groups—has led the charge in demands for restricting the sale of alcohol and pork products, the institution of a dress code, and the censorship of Western media deemed inappropriate.

The Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE do not have the potential to challenge regime authority in the short to medium term. This does not mean, however, that they are not ideologically influential. Certainly, the Brotherhood's conservative ideology and social values appeal to many citizens in the GCC's traditional societies. Due to this popular appeal, regimes may, with varying levels of severity, continue to consider the movement a political threat.

II. Analysis

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The Emirati government continues to view the Brotherhood as a security threat, conflating the *Ikhwan* (the Arabic word for the Brotherhood) with more extremist strands of Islamism.

Meanwhile, Kuwait and Qatar have proven hesitant to clamp down on the Islamist sector, belatedly instituting terrorist financing laws and regulating, though not restricting, the Islamic sector. Because they do not see the *Ikhwan* as a security threat and recognize its popularity domestically, these governments are willing to appease its members to a certain extent.

Kuwait: Institutionalized Brotherhood influence

Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest of the three under analysis, is the country's most organized political group, having competed in parliamentary elections as a bloc since the 1980s. The *Ikhwan* enjoyed good relations with the government in its first decades and has generally faced few limitations on its activities.⁸ In recent years, though, the Brotherhood has become part of a broad-based opposition movement agitating for the implementation of constitutional monarchy.⁹

The government appears to consider the Brotherhood as a part of the broader opposition rather than as a specific Islamist threat. Indeed, it has tried to resist reform through the revision of electoral laws to favor traditionally loyalist candidates, the protection of ministers from questioning by parliament, and dissolutions of parliament (twice in 2012). Rather than specifically targeting the *Ikhwan*, then, the Kuwaiti government has endeavored to stem the tide of the reformist movement more generally. Such measures, however, have been limited, and political blocs, including Salafi groups, continue to function with few restrictions.

Qatar: Informal influence

Despite Qatar's outspoken support for Islamists abroad, the Brotherhood domestically has only a weak presence, having chosen to dissolve itself in 1999. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood's ideology retains at least limited appeal to a largely conservative local population, and the ruling family appears to have attempted to co-opt rather than crack down upon the *Ikhwan*.

Most Islamist influence remains in the implementation of traditional social policies, yet it is uncertain whether it is strictly of the Brotherhood strand. Certainly, some changes represent gains for conservative Qataris, like the banning of the sale of alcohol in restaurants in the Pearl Qatar development in 2011, the removal of statues considered religiously offensive from public spaces, the restrictions on when alcohol can be consumed in licensed hotels, and the backing of campaigns for moderate dress; advocating for such policies is also traditionally the purview of *Ikhwan* movements. In the realm of foreign policy, the apparent preference for Islamist movements abroad during the Arab Spring was due primarily to their ability to enhance Qatar's global standing as an influential Arab and Muslim state on the world stage; it was not reflective of an ideological commitment on the part of the government or a reflection of agitation for such policies by the local population.

United Arab Emirates: Revolutionary influence?

The UAE has taken a security-centered approach to the Muslim Brotherhood's presence, from the beginning treating the organization as an existential threat. This stance is surprising, given that the Emirati Brotherhood functioned in a rather disjointed manner, in light of the state's federal structure. While Dubai, Fujairah and Ras Al-Khaimah housed Brotherhood affiliates, Abu Dhabi, the capital, never allowed a branch to open. While limited crackdowns occurred in 1994 and 2001-2002, the Emirati Brotherhood was effectively dismantled in 2012 following its labelling as a terrorist organization and the imprisonment of more than 100 of its members.

Such a strict policy seems to reflect government fears of Brotherhood seizure of political power, as Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan was "recorded in a 2006 US diplomatic cable referencing a meeting with US diplomats as stating that 'if there were an election [in the UAE] tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood would take over.'"¹⁰ There is little evidence to demonstrate that *Islah*, the Emirati Brotherhood affiliate, held substantial political capital or even widespread popular support. Nonetheless, its backing of conservative policies clashed with the moderate image that the ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai aim to portray. *Islah's* agenda also came to extend beyond revising social policies and touched on political reform more broadly, making it more threatening to the UAE's ruling families.

Conclusions

That the presence of local Muslim Brotherhood affiliates sparked such disagreement amongst states with otherwise strikingly similar demographic, economic, and political profiles demonstrates the degree to which these governments consider political Islam a threat. While the Emirati government has determined the *Ikhwan* to be fundamentally challenging to its authority, the Kuwaiti and Qatari authorities have permitted the Brotherhood to exist—in an institutionalized form in Kuwait and more loosely in Qatar where it holds less appeal in the Wahhabi state. Kuwaiti and Qatari Brotherhood supporters, having been integrated into the state to a limited degree, then, are unlikely to challenge those regimes. If the UAE continues its policy of crackdown, it may incite broader political opposition in the longer term; yet, at present, the Emirati Brotherhood remains underground inside the country, along with other pro-reform movements.

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¹ "Qatari Premier Says the West Should Embrace 'Arab Spring' Islamists," *Al Arabiya*, December 1, 2011.

² Ian Black, "Emirati Nerves Rattled by Islamists' Rise," *The Guardian*, October 12, 2012.

³ Jill Crystal, "Civil Society in the Arabian Gulf," in *Civil Society in the Middle East*, ed. Augustus Richard Norton (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2: 273.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵ *Awqaf* is the plural form of *waqf*, which in the religious context, is a voluntary endowment collected from among Muslims to be used for charitable or religious purposes. A ministry of *awqaf* oversees the collection of and possible uses for such funds.

⁶ Imams are those who lead prayers and give sermons in mosques.

⁷ F. Gregory Gause III, *Political Opposition in the Gulf Monarchies* (San Domenico di Fiesole: European University Institute, 2000), 15.

⁸ Mustafa Muhammad al-Tahan, *Abdullah al-Ali al-Mutawa wa Qadaya al-Muslimin fi-al-Alim* (Kuwait: Mustafa Muhammad al-Tahan, 2010), 71.

⁹ E.A.D., "Kuwait's Opposition: A Reawakening," *The Economist*, April 17, 2014.

¹⁰ Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst, 2012), 14.