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ACTIVITY IN THE GCC STATES.
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IN THE GULF MONARCHIES
SINCE THE 1990s

2005

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE
ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

Sixth Mediterranean Social
and Political Research Meeting
Montecatini, 16-20 March 2005

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Introduction

There is an overwhelming agreement that a deficit of freedom undermines human development. As is also well known, there is a dramatic gap between the levels of democracy in Arab countries and the rest of the world¹. In particular, none of the 16 Arab majority countries has a democratically elected government. At the same time, the combined GDP of all Arab countries is less than that of Spain, and labor productivity in these countries dropped between 1960 and 1990, while it soared elsewhere in the world. Even Africa outperformed the Arab region in rates of economic growth, etc.

Nevertheless, there is a group of Arab states in which the situation is quite different from the portrait painted above: the monarchies of the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, members of the so-called Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are among the richest countries in the world. Further, despite having highly conservative political systems, these countries have carried out significant political reforms in recent years, given citizens more say in state politics, and broadened freedoms. In the broader context of governance, the situation in the GCC states looks quite good in comparison to that in other Arab countries, and in other regions of the world².

At the same time, political liberalization in the GCC countries has not yet resulted in those countries attaining Western levels of democracy, and it is difficult to say when that goal might be accomplished. Moreover, there is a fundamental disagreement among scholars whether democracy is always the inevitable outcome of political liberalization³. In the case of the GCC states, it seems that a third type of relatively stable political system,

somewhere “between” the old authoritarian regimes and Western-style democracy, may emerge. In these regimes, certain elements of democracy will be present why others will not.

While definitions of democracy vary widely, the term - in its minimal connotation - presupposes regime transparency and accountability, the equality of all citizens under the law, and inclusive rules for political participation. Several initiatives put forth by leaders in the GCC states in recent years have aimed to move the countries of the region closer to these ideals. There is a movement from less transparent and accountable governments to more transparent and accountable governments; from less competitive (or non-existent) elections to freer, fairer, and more competitive elections; from very restricted liberties to better protected civil and political rights; from totally censored media to relatively independent ones; and from underdeveloped civil society institutions to more developed ones⁴.

Still, much progress needs to be made before the GCC countries could be characterized as “democracies” - that is - countries in which nearly every adult can vote, elections are freely contested, the chief executive is chosen by popular vote or by an elected parliament, and civil rights as well as civil liberties are substantially guaranteed⁵. The highly publicized (although controversial) Freedom House democracy scale offers evidence for this assertion: in 2002, besides Kuwait (which was rated a “partly free” country), all GCC states were considered “not free,” and Saudi Arabia was labeled one of the world’s ten most repressive regimes⁶.

This paper describes and analyzes the development of the electoral process in the GCC states in the last decade, and examines the activities of the consultative councils and parliaments that have led to political liberalization. Although introduction of elections and broadening of political participation form only a part of the complex democratization process, the importance of these developments for the future of the societies of the Gulf monarchies should not be underestimated.

Saudi Arabia

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Saudi Arabia has witnessed political activity that, while not directly questioning the religious base of the country's identity and legitimacy of rulers, has called for changes in the manner of state governance⁷. In particular, various groups submitted petitions to the King demanding political reforms. On March 1, 1992, King Fahd decided to take certain actions to calm down the situation. He decreed the long-promised Basic Laws - a constitution-like document, the statute for a new consultative council, and a system of regional government for the kingdom's 14 provinces.

The most important decision taken concerned the Consultative Council, established as a debating assembly consisting of 60 members appointed by the King⁸. The Council was to study all government regulations, treaties and international accords before they are promulgated through royal decree, as well as to deliberate upon and evaluate economic and social development programs. It was also to discuss annual reports submitted by ministers and present recommendations, and was empowered to question the cabinet members. The Council cannot, however, initiate debates on issues: it either has to obtain permission from the King to do so or await submission from the government. The King retained the power to dissolve or reorganize the Council at will.

The Consultative Council finally set to work in mid-1990s and quickly established itself within Saudi political system. This is why, in 1997, the Council was enlarged from 60 to 90 members and then in May 2001, to 120 members. Members of the Council were chosen from among the country's regions and important constituent groups: religious establishment, government bureaucracy and the business community, followers of both conservative and liberal ideologies. They have usually been highly-educated and experienced people, considered experts in their respective fields (academics, retired senior officers, ex-civil servants and private

businessmen). Sheikh Mohammed bin Ibrahim bin Joubayr, a respected Hanbali jurist and former Minister of Justice became the President of the first State Council and of successive ones. The influence of the Council, not grounded in law, has been a function of its members prominence and diversity. It also reflects the tradition of governance, which “prizes consensus, strives to maintain harmony through consultation and is deeply averse to conflict”⁹. While the verdicts of the Council are neither binding on the King, nor on the government, usually either the ministers accept the recommendations of the Council or the two parties reach a compromise.

The establishment of the Consultative Council did not satisfy the opposition groups, which since 1999 began to submit consequent petitions to the King requesting further reforms. An informal lobby of liberals, progressive Islamists, nationalists, and Shiites became even more vocal after September 11, 2001 attacks, in which Saudi militants were heavily involved, the subsequent criticism of the Saudi regime, as well as after Al-Qaeda attacks inside the Kingdom. Vigorous debate then started about the causes of extremism, with usual conclusion that the closed nature of the Saudi political system, imposed to large extent by a religious establishment, was the main reason for that. Of particular importance in that movement was petition submitted to King Fahd in January 2003¹⁰. The petition called “A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation”, was signed by 104 academics, businessmen, religious scholars and professionals from various regions and representing different religious and political orientations¹¹. Among various issues raised in the petition, its signatories called for providing the Consultative Council with legislative and control powers and made it an elected body, as well as for an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and the establishment of civil society institutions. The petition, despite its non-confrontational tone and respectful language towards the monarchy, essentially suggested the establishment of institutions to curb the power of the ruling family and guarantee popular

participation in decision-making, replacing a system with ruler's absolute power with the constitutional monarchy in which power is shared with elected representatives¹².

Another petition signed by more than 300 Saudis, including at this time 50 women, Sunnis and Shiites from all parts of the Kingdom appeared in September 2003. The petition entitled "In Defense of the Nation" basically repeated the demands from the previous petition but in the view of the emergence of terrorist activity in the Kingdom, openly blamed the existing political restrictions for its development. "Being late in adopting radical reforms and ignoring popular participation in decision-making have been the main reasons that helped the fact that our country reached this dangerous turn"¹³.

In yet another petition prepared in December, this time again jointly by a diversified group of Islamists, liberals and Shiites, titled "An Appeal to the Leadership and the People: Constitutional Reform First", the signatories called for the implementation of the reforms outlined in the January petition and went even further, demanding adoption of the constitution, which would construct "a modern Arab Islamic state"¹⁴.

A response of the government to these petitions was the organization of broad debates, the so-called National Dialogue sessions. The issue of elections was raised during the second debate which took place in Mecca in December 2003 and gathered 60 intellectuals, clerics and businesspeople, including 10 women (seated in a different room). Various political, social and educational problems were openly discussed at the meeting which ended in the formulation of 18 recommendations that were later formally presented to the acting ruler, Crown Prince Abdullah. Among others, they included holding elections for the Consultative Council and local consultative councils, encouraging establishment of trade unions, voluntary associations and other civil society institutions, separating the legislative, executive and judiciary powers, as well as broadening freedom of expression¹⁵.

The National Dialogue recommendations generally reflected opinions on the discussed matters of the Saudi society at large. In particular, Saudis seem to be in favor of political reforms. In probably the first, relatively independent opinion pool on the matter conducted in the latter half of 2003, 85 per cent of respondents thought that political reform would be beneficial for the country and 90 per cent wanted to grant more rights to women¹⁶. Somewhat contradictory, only 12 per cent of respondents had a positive view of liberal reformers, probably because they associated them only with the writing of inefficient petitions, while political reforms were perceived the most pressing concern for less than 10 per cent of respondents.

Responding to internal demands from liberals and the US pro-democracy pressures, the government began to think about organizing first elections in the country, to municipal councils, following a well tested pattern in neighboring Bahrain and Qatar. Prince Abdullah stated in his address to the Consultative Council that “municipal elections will be the beginning of the Saudi citizens’ participation in the political system”, while the Foreign Minister, prince Saud Al-Faisal, similarly remarked that Saudi Arabia “has reached a stage in our development that requires expanding political participations”. In turn, Prince Turki al-Faisal said that “reforming the Kingdom is not a choice, it is a necessity”¹⁷. Such vocabulary used to be taboo among the ruling family¹⁸. In this liberalized mode, the issue of elections became widely discussed throughout the Kingdom. As Islamist reformer, Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim stated: “It is hard to overestimate the importance of this step in a society where non-interference in politics is considered the condition of good citizenship. [The local] elections in themselves may not have much substance, but the decision to hold them breaks a barrier and establishes the principle that society can participate in making policy”¹⁹.

Many Saudi officials, however, have continued to be afraid of such a move. They believe that elections would pose too great

a risk to stability of the country and strengthen the hand of radical Islamists. Some of them claim that “because conformity to strict religious dogma remains the principal criterion for judging matters public and private ... political debates could potentially turn into religious clashes”, while “the culture of democracy accepts the pluralism of opinions and relativity in all things. How can you reconcile relativity with a society that is governed by religion?” and “democracy now will produce something very similar to the Taliban”²⁰.

With such thoughts in mind, the government decided to go ahead only with elections to municipal councils. Nevertheless, only half of the seats were to be appointed through ballot (the remaining was to be made of nominated incumbents, in theory the ones with the experience to assist the new members), second, that elections in 178 municipalities would be held in three phases: on February 10, 2005 in Riyadh and the surrounding areas, on March 3, in the eastern and southwestern regions and on April 21 in the remaining parts of the country (including Mecca and Medina, until then bust with the Hajj pilgrimage). That approach was designed for the authorities to take a step and evaluate the impact of elections before proceeding to the next phase.

Saudi women were not allowed to vote or to stand in the elections. That decision made conservatives relieved and liberals dismayed. Nevertheless, women may be allowed to do so during the next elections in four years. In fact, election rules are written ambiguously and for quite a time it was unclear whether they can participate even in the first elections or not²¹. The officially cited reasons for not allowing women to participate in the elections were of administrative and legislative character and also the result of the Kingdom’s limited experience in conducting elections. They did not stress the religion norms or Saudi customs, just creating a window of hope for many liberals²².

Surprisingly, in late November 2004, the government allowed women for the first time to participate in the elections: to choose

board members of the Saudi chambers of commerce and industry (in the past, men voted on behalf of women members). Nevertheless, only a small number of women used that opportunity²³.

Establishing the municipality councils through elections is an innovation for this deeply conservative country used to tribal and extended-family system of politics. It can be expected that, though once the election is seen to work, the next ones will be for the whole municipal councils, then for regional councils, and eventually for the Consultative Council. Prince Sultan bin Abdel Aziz, the minister of defense and a key figure in the ruling family told the Consultative Council, that the country leadership agrees with demands that this body should be developed and given further powers, to “monitor” and “supervise” the government in particular²⁴. Following this reasoning, the royal decree of November 29, 2003, enhanced the Consultative Council rights to act as a partly legislative as opposed to purely advisory body. In particular, individual members were granted authority to propose new legislation and to have more power in disputes with the cabinet. At the same time, it was decided to begin, for the first time, televised coverage of the weekly sessions of the Consultative Council. That became an important decision, as Saudis have a traditional aversion to public debate, preferring to settle matters behind the closed doors instead. The *Shura* members and Saudi intellectual elite welcomed these steps, although, especially following the Kuwaiti parliamentary model, they clearly want further enhancement of the Council’s role, in particular to make it the elective assembly, with power to pass the budget, to give or withdrew confidence from ministers and to separate the office of prime minister from that of the King²⁵. Responding to such proposals Prince Sultan dismissed, however, calls for an elected Council, saying that voters may choose illiterate and unqualified candidates to it and that the move would not serve national interests. “In some countries there are political parties and elections but the result is nothing, because

of their quarrels and conflicts between them"²⁶. Instead, on January 26, 2005, Prince Sultan announced that the *Shura* Council would be further expanded from 120 to 150 members and that in the next term all tribes and villages will be represented in it.

Allowing municipal elections to take place seems to be a tacit recognition by the ruling family that some reforms are needed, including greater transparency and accountability of decision making. Nevertheless, the rise of internal security challenges - the extremist Islamist violence - makes it difficult for the government to advance further the reform agenda. The leading members of the Saudi ruling family are not in agreement over the causes of existing tensions in the country and possible actions to be taken to confront them. In particular, many of them are afraid that political openings can be perceived in some quarters as a victory for "liberal" forces, a fact that may reinvigorate Islamist attacks. For that reason, the Saudi government is anxious to depict the whole process leading to municipal elections as being wholly compatible with Islam. This is an important matter as many Islamists consider the elections un-Islamic. In particular, Osama bin Laden in the message released on December 16, 2004 criticized the elections, noting "it is *haram* (forbidden) to participate in legislative bodies ... because Allah is the only lawgiver"²⁷.

Nevertheless, in an interesting development, the first round of elections, which took place in the Riyadh region on February 10, 2005, was won by Islamists, who took all of the seven available seats. Around 140,000 men had registered to vote out of 400,000 eligible voters in the area; 65 per cent of them went to the polls in the capital, while in other districts the turnout often exceeded even 80 per cent. Six hundred and forty-six candidates were on the list. Immediately after the results were announced, many losing candidates accused the winning seven of illegal formulation of an Islamist alliance, using the backing of Saudi religious establishment to get votes, and breaking election laws for campaigning on the election day. The winners denied all the allegations. Interestingly

enough, the winners used neither ads in the Saudi dailies, nor posters, nor did they set up "discussion tents" where they could meet potential voters, as all losing candidates did. Instead, they skillfully used Internet and mobile phones (short text messages), the tactic often used by Islamist groupings in the region. Thus, "The Riyadh elections should not be viewed as just an experiment in democracy, but also as a window into the possible ramifications that come with democracy in the kingdom. If the truth be told, the group that wanted victory the most - the Islamists - won"²⁸.

Kuwait

Kuwaiti constitution, since 1961, gives the Emir broad executive powers. In particular, it is he who appoints the prime minister and the cabinet. At the same time, the constitution established a partially elected parliament with some legislative powers; for several decades it had been the only national assembly of that kind in the GCC states²⁹. The parliament has never been a rubber-stamp and always discussed openly the vital Kuwaiti issues. Its criticism of the government, or from the other perspective, its activities perceived as threatening the political stability of the country, caused the Emir to dissolve it in 1976 (until the reestablishment in 1981) and again in 1986. When Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, the parliament was still disbanded. After the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi forces, the Emir, Sheikh Jabir al Ahmad al-Sabah was not eager to keep his earlier promises of prompt restoration of the assembly. Only after the mobilization of all Kuwaiti political factions, culminating in the presentation of a petition in the spring of 1991, did the emir agree to hold parliamentary elections in October 1992.

After years of limited political activity, the election campaign was very lively³⁰. Despite the non-existence of formal political parties, individual candidates in their *diwaniyyas* as well as various voluntary and professional associations were effective in articulating

critical views, helping to increase political awareness and activities of different groups of society. In effect, the election brought to the parliament a majority of opposition and independent deputies.

Right after the election the opposition called for the separation of the previously combined offices of prime minister and crown prince, as traditionally in Kuwait, the crown prince (as well as the whole al-Sabah family) were not subject to any criticism or control. Only when in a conciliatory move, the Emir appointed several members of parliament (who retained some credibility due to the fact that they had been popularly elected) as ministers for the first time, the opposition eventually gave up and accepted the status quo. Nevertheless, parliamentary committees initiated a series of investigations including inquiries into the events leading to the Iraqi invasion, government responsibility for the Kuwaiti defeat, alleged corruption and mismanagement in the Kuwait Investment Office (which manages the country's overseas capital), and the cost-effectiveness of arms-deals with Western powers. These were very sensitive issues whose investigation led to confrontation with top government officials, including members of the ruling family. This was the first time in the history of the GCC countries that such people were publicly questioned, strongly criticized and forced to take responsibility for their actions. The whole term of parliament was alive with heated debates over the issue of power and wealth sharing, corruption and waste in defense expenditure, the way the privatization was conducted, and other important issues. The parliament also decided to broaden the base of its electorate, extending the right to vote to the large number of sons of naturalized Kuwaiti citizens (naturalized men are eligible to vote only if they have held Kuwaiti citizenship for at least 20 years).

After tough experiences with dealings with the opposition, the government made serious efforts to influence the results of next elections, and the parliament chosen in October 1996 was not as confrontational as the previous one had been. Nevertheless, tensions between Islamist groups in the assembly and the

government did not subside. In effect, in 1998, the parliament blocked the government deal with the US to buy the so-called Paladin artillery due to irregularities in the procurement process. Then, in 1999, the Islamists attempted to bring down Sheikh Saud Nasser al Sabah, the Minister of Information. His ministry had permitted books critical of Islamic orthodoxy to be displayed at the international book fair in Kuwait. The minister had to resign. The government perceived the action of the opposition as a breach of the unwritten agreement that Islamists would never attack members of the ruling family. The Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Sheikh Saad al Abdallah al-Sabah warned that criticizing the ruling family jeopardizes the security of the country, and that this security would be always put "over and above democracy"³¹. The Islamists, however, continued to criticize the government. In turn, they attacked the Minister of Religious Affairs for publishing a version of the Koran with typographical errors. Tensions increased. When the whole cabinet threatened to resign, the Emir dissolved the parliament and called for new elections.

The election campaign was again characterized by intense activity on the part of various political groupings which in meantime had grown in popularity³². During traditional political meetings in *diwaniyyas*, candidates openly charged the government with conspiracy, interference in the elections, incompetence, corruption, etc. Women's political rights became a central issue in the campaign as the Emir, in a surprising move, announced his intention to award women the right to participate in future elections. Islamist groups opposed the decision and the Emir's decree was eventually defeated in the all-male parliament. Another highly debated issue was the suspended right to hold tribal primaries, whose results had significantly affected previous general elections.

Altogether, 288 candidates competed for the 50 parliamentary seats during the elections of July 3, 1999- Nevertheless, only 113,000 men out of the total Kuwaiti population of 793,000 cast their ballots, showing a relative lack of interest in political proceedings. Six

groupings played a crucial role in the election campaign and won seats in the parliament: the Islamic Constitutional Movement (closely connected to the Muslim Brotherhood), the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum (the alliance of liberals, Arab nationalists, leftists, and independents), the Islamic Popular Bloc (an orthodox Salafi group demanding strict implementation of the Islamic law), the Salafi Movement (a splinter of the Popular Bloc), the National Islamic Alliance (a Shiite Islamist group) and the National Democratic Bloc (a liberal group connected with the academic and business communities). In the elections the Islamists won 18 seats altogether: six went to Shiite candidates and remaining 12 to Sunnis. The main losers were the pro-government candidates, with 11 major incumbents losing what earlier had been considered secured seats.

The winning Islamists, in a short period of time, undertook a number of actions in the new parliament. In effect, an entirely new Sharia-inspired version of the penal code was adopted together with a ban on festivals and concerts "that are against tradition and morality". Later the Islamists also managed to force the government to re-introduce gender segregation at the Kuwaiti university. In general, Islamists have wanted to widen the role of the Islamic law. They would like to amend the constitution, changing the clause that Sharia is "a main source of legislation" for "the source of the legislation". They also requested the right that no law may be promulgated by the Emir unless it has been passed by the National Assembly first¹¹³. Finally, they would like to get Kuwait's political parties licensed and formally written into the country's legal system. These motions were re-introduced in the following years, but not approved yet.

In 2002 a new crisis between parliament and the government occurred when the Finance Minister, Youssef al-Ibrahim was accused of abuse of power and misappropriation of public funds. In particular, Islamist and independent deputies wanted him to acknowledge officially that senior ruling family members authorized

the expenditure of billions of dollars without the supervision of the Audit Bureau, the legislature watchdog for monitoring state finances. The interpellation proceeded to a vote of confidence. But when Sheikh Sabah, the Acting Prime Minister, threatened that the whole cabinet would resign if the minister lost the vote, the majority of deputies decided not to support the no-confidence motion. Another crisis was avoided.

The following parliamentary elections were held on July 5, 2003. They were affected by the political situations in the region³⁴. Removal of Saddam Hussein influenced the campaign as government could not use the Iraqi threat any more to secure support for its own candidates. In times of change in the Gulf, liberals pushing for modernization of the country expected to obtain more seats in the assembly. On the other hand, Shiites also hoped to do better thanks to internal mobilization of the group, caused by developments in Iraq, where the Shiite majority began gaining power after years of discrimination. Tensions between the US and Iran, in the period when Kuwait was improving its relations with the Islamic Republic, were also expected to influence the election results. The issue of extending vote to women became again an important issue in the campaign, especially among liberals. Some women voted in a mock election as a demonstration of their desire to obtain more political rights in the country³⁵.

The election expectations proved wrong. First of all, liberals suffered a stunning setback. "Shock and horror. Parliament topples liberals" was the headline in the daily *AlAnbaa*. Both members of the Democratic Platform present in the previous assembly, including prominent opposition leader, Abdallah al-Nibari, lost their seats. Independent liberals went down from six seats to four. In turn, the Islamist traditionalists, both Sunni and Shiite, became the election winners, taking 21 of the 50 seats. At the same time, the members of parliament affiliated with existing political groupings went down from 32 to 25, probably due to government's efforts to weaken all the unofficial political parties. The so-called "service"

candidates, who emphasized their constituent services rather than political or ideological platforms, did also well in a number of districts. Interestingly, two of three Islamist political groupings also lost seats. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (in the past connected with Muslim Brotherhood) went from five to two seats, while the National Islamic Alliance (Shiite) went from three seats to one. In turn, the *salafi* groupings gained seats, with the Salafi Movement rising from a single seat to three. Independent Sunni Islamists went up from five seats during the previous term to six and independent Shiite Islamists - from two to three. In general, the Assembly became rather equally divided between pro-government lawmakers and Islamist-dominated opposition, with a very small presence of liberals. The defeat of liberals was probably much influenced by the American politics in the Middle East. President Bush's initiative to bring democracy to the region while occupying Iraq "sends many native liberals and democrats under their beds", worrying of being labeled as American puppets³⁶. Elections were not completely clean: there were accusations of increased vote buying, switching districts and registering in different areas³⁷.

Right after the elections, Kuwait's Emir, Sheikh Jaber, appointed Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al Sabah the prime minister. For the first time in the history of Kuwait, the post of the prime minister was separated from the post of the Crown Prince, officially as a response to the public demand, in reality maybe only due to the poor health of the Crown Prince. The decision had a significant meaning as in this way the prime minister can now be placed before legal inquires in the parliament, which had been impossible in the past as the Kuwaiti constitution grants full immunity to the ruler and the Crown Prince.

The first major clash between the new parliament and the government occurred in March 2004. Many deputies tried to force the resignation of the Minister of Finance, Mahmoud Al Nouri over allegations of mismanagement and squandering public money. Eventually, the minister won the non-confidence vote; nevertheless

the opposition accused the government of applying pressure on numerous deputies to achieve that goal.

In May 2004, the government introduced a bill allowing women to vote and to stand for election. The parliament, however, remained divided on the issue of women's suffrage and has taken no action on the bill yet. At the same time, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, responding to pressure from Islamist parliamentarians, announced *fatwa* "forbidding women singing to men, reveal part of their body and using vulgar words and dancing"³⁸. To attend or watch such concerts and provide any assistance or investment in them was also forbidden. Several Islamist deputies have also been trying to ban musical education from schools as anti-Islamic activity. In December, Islamist deputies accused the Information Minister, Mohammed Abu Al Hasan over allowing "immoral" Western-style concerts in the country, seen by them as violating Sharia law. To avoid questioning in the parliament over the issue the Minister resigned. The situation created additional tensions, as Mohammed Abu Al Hasan was the only Shiite member of the cabinet and was "grilled" by the Sunni lawmakers. Many Shiites, who constitute about 30 per cent of the Kuwaiti population, perceived this move as discriminatory.

Tensions between the government and the opposition occurred also in June 2004, when voting on a long debated bill on reducing the number of electoral districts (to eliminate vote-buying, a strategy that is easy in small districts) was postponed. Liberal deputies accused government and many of their colleagues in the assembly of trying to maintain the undemocratic status quo³⁹. However, if this bill is eventually passed, the government will probably push harder for women's suffrage. The government anticipates that on the whole, women will constitute a moderate, pro-government force, which can mitigate the destabilizing effects that redistricting would have on Kuwait's complex political scene⁴⁰. Including women in the election process would significantly expand the voter base in the country where only approximately 15 per cent

of the population are eligible to vote. So far, however, the bill to allow women to participate in the elections is on hold, as well as the motion to allow servicemen to vote and the one lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. In the meantime, a survey conducted by the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the Kuwaiti chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, showed that 80 per cent of those polled believed that women should only be allowed to vote, but not to become candidates; apparently only five per cent supported the notion that women must participate fully⁴¹.

Tensions continued in the fall of 2004 over a variety of issues, including the government second postponement of municipal elections, originally scheduled for summer 2003- The main reason for the authorities not to call the elections yet has been that the government wants to amend the Municipal Law first, to include the participation of all nationals, women as well as men. This has been strongly opposed by a number of Islamist and tribal parliamentarians.

There are several other important motions recently presented by the lawmakers, which are under consideration. There is a proposal to lower the number of the country's electoral constituencies from the current 25 to 10 in an effort to clamp down on alleged fraud in parliamentary elections. Another motion calls to raise the number of deputies from the current 50 to 60, to reflect the population growth and to allow the cabinet to expand from its current 15 to 20 members as according to Kuwaiti law, the number of cabinet ministers, who are *ex officio* members of the parliament cannot exceed one-third of the parliament; now many of them have multiple portfolios, which hampers effective governance. The last call requires however, to amend the constitution, much more difficult proposal to conduct.

At the beginning of 2005, a large confusion in the Kuwaiti political scene was caused by establishing the Hizb Al Ummah political party by the hard-line branch of the Sunni Islamist salafi movement. Neither constitutional provisions nor regulatory laws

deal with the issue in a satisfactory manner, and so far the government always opposed the idea. Members of the organizing committee of the party were interrogated and a travel ban was imposed on them. The move created a heated debate as, on one hand, all political groupings would have liked to obtain a chance to transform themselves into formal political parties, institutions necessary in each mature democracy, but, on the other hand, liberals and moderate Shiites have been afraid that the move in that direction done by radicals Islamists can backfire and be dangerous for political stability of the country.

The mood at the beginning of the 21st century in Kuwait, in contrast to its Bahraini and Qatari neighbors, is not very optimistic. Many Kuwaitis feel that their country is stagnating, that authorities and parliamentarians are caught up in endless squabbles over minor issues, instead of transforming the country, which many young, innovative rulers of the neighboring GCC states already did⁴². There are voices questioning any possibility of further democratization of the state. Ghanim Alnajjar believes, that “structural and political weaknesses in the Kuwaiti political system continue to hinder the spread of democracy, and may yet cause its failure, which might result in a major future political crisis”⁴³. According to many, the reasons for limited progress toward the more participatory government is the ruling family’s tacit alliance with Islamic fundamentalists (for example, to please them the government in recent years established a committee on Islamization of the law, refused to register civil society institutions except Islamic charities and introduced more religious instruction into school curricula)⁴⁴. “We have lost the 12 years since the liberation because of the resistance of the political Islamic movement” said Saud Nasir Sabah, oil minister and former ambassador to the United States⁴⁵. In general, many believe that Kuwaiti democracy is in trouble. “There is not a democratic system in Kuwait, there is not democracy here”, said Mohammed Qadiri, a former diplomat, who quit the foreign service over the dissolution of parliament in 1986⁴⁶.

Similarly, Nasr Yousef al-Abdali, one of the leaders of the newly launched Justice and Development Movement, noted that "Democracy in Kuwait is a lie. The whole process has been hijacked by the fight between the Islamists and liberals who are not really looking to the future of the country"⁴⁷.

The situation in Kuwait has been, of course, a complex one. By many measures Kuwait has had a more developed civil society than found elsewhere among the GCC states. It has critical press enjoying relative freedom, a tradition of public debate in the *diwaniyyas*, established political groupings and active parliament, which exercises significant influence and control over governance by the ruling family. On the other hand - a fact emphasized every year by the US State Department report on human rights - there is a restricted freedom of assembly, as well as discrimination of women, Shiites and foreign residents, censorship of "morally offensive" materials, and lack of the independence of the judiciary, to mention a few problems only. Altogether, so far, the country remains a tightly controlled hereditary emirate, where the al Sabah family still wield undeniable power.

Bahrain

Bahrain has been a state vulnerable to political conflicts. First of all, the country is relatively poor when compared to its oil-rich neighbors; therefore rulers cannot offer their subjects as much as in the neighboring countries and the unemployment in the country has often been high. Secondly, it is ruled by a Sunni minority, and the Shiite majority in the island have often considered themselves discriminated against. The al-Khalifa family ruling the country had a monopoly on power until the adoption of the constitution in 1973, which provided for a partially elected National Assembly. The Assembly was short lived though. In 1975 the emir called its activities "obstructionist" and dissolved it. With the Iranian

revolution of 1979 and the accompanying spread of its Islamic ideas, resentment among Bahrain's Shiite population against the regime intensified. Since then the Shiites clashed with the government numerous times. In particular, they demanded the restoration of the National Assembly through direct and free elections as mandated by the constitution, hoping that in such a way they may have more to say in the country's affairs.

Tensions grew also after the Second Gulf War. In July 1992 over 200 Bahrainis, both Sunnis and Shiites, signed and submitted to the Emir a petition demanding liberalization of the regime. Rather than complying with their demands, Emir Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa established the appointed Consultative Council. Like its Saudi or UAE counterparts, the Bahraini Council could only review legislation sent to it by the government. Nevertheless, in an attempt to improve relations with the opposition, 30 members of the Council were divided between Sunnis and Shiites, and a Shiite, former minister of transportation Ibrahim I lamidan, became its President. Despite these, protests continued. When the Committee of the Popular Petition, created in 1994, sent another petition to the Emir calling for greater popular participation in government, the leaders of the Committee were arrested, leading to a two-year long wave of demonstrations and riots.

The situation began to change only in 1998 when, after the death of Sheikh Isa, his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, decided to liberalize the system. In the beginning of the year 2000, he appointed new members to the Consultative Council, including non-Muslims for the first time: a Jewish, a Christian and an Indian Bahraini, as well as four women. Then, the Emir abolished the emergency laws that were in the force in the country for 25 years and pardoned more than 900 prisoners and exiles; in effect many prominent figures of the former opposition, mostly Shiites, returned to the country. At the same time Sheikh Hamad promised to grant nationality to several thousand of *bidoon*, mostly Shiite stateless inhabitants, which became another source of tension.

The Emir decided also to compensate government employees, mostly Shiites, for salaries lost while they were detained without a trial in connection with the political unrest of the 1990s. As all these measures were welcomed by the Shiite majority, the Emir became ready to reform his country significantly.

In December 2000, the special committee operating under Emir's instructions proposed far-reaching changes to the political system of Bahrain. "The National Action Charter" proposed by the Committee, stated that "there is agreement on the need to modernize the constitution of the country to benefit from the democracy experiences of other peoples in expanding the circle of popular participation in the tasks of ruling and administration"⁴⁸. The Charter, a constitutional declaration, made Bahrain a constitutional monarchy; Sheikh Hamad - the King, and the al-Khalifa family hereditary rulers of the island. A parliament was to be established with two chambers with equal legislative powers: Council of Deputies consisting of 40 members elected by popular vote, and a consultative council, the Shura Council, also composed of 40 people but appointed by the King. The executive power, the legislature, and the judiciary were to be separated. All citizens were made equal in the eyes of law regardless of their religion, sect or social class. Constitutional Court and Audit Bureau were to be established and enjoy full independence.

The changes proposed in the National Action Charter were submitted to a referendum and on February 14, 2001 overwhelmingly approved by the Bahrainis (98.4 per cent), including the Shiite opposition.

On the first anniversary of the referendum, on February 14, 2002, Sheikh Hamad issued royal decrees reinstating the suspended 1973 constitution and amending it to implement the above-mentioned changes, which practically meant the promulgation of the new constitution.

Opposition was not completely satisfied with these developments. They would have preferred the restoration of the old constitution

without changes and reinstatement of the elected parliament. They criticized the fact that most powers remained in the ruler's hands, including full control of the government, right to dismiss the prime minister, and dissolve parliament for any "sufficient reasons", as well as in case of "emergencies"⁴⁹. The opposition also complained about the way the reforms were introduced; the King unilaterally made constitutional changes, contrary to the unambiguous provisions of the 1973 constitution itself, and in the absence of elected legislature. Moreover, the opposition criticized the fact, that the appointed chamber would have a direct legislative role equal to that of the elected chamber and even taking certain precedence over the elected one, as its chairman was to be the speaker of the whole new bi-cameral National Assembly (the government argues that the appointed Shura Council is needed to guarantee that experienced and highly educated public figures would be able to take part in the process of policy making).

Despite the shortcomings of the introduced reforms, in the new situation in the country, numerous political groups, the so-called "societies", ranging from Islamic fundamentalist to liberals and Marxists, came into being. The Bahraini law does not allow to operate a political party in the country, but these societies quickly begun to play the role of full fledged parties. The government tolerates the existence of the opposition holding open forums and issuing weekly magazines. Moreover, non-governmental organizations of all types: cultural, religious, and civic as well as trade unions have mushroomed⁵⁰.

After amending the constitution, the King called for the first elections: at the municipal level. Women as well as foreigners who owned property and were legal residents on the island were allowed to participate. Political groupings actively engaged themselves in the election process. The authorities were criticized for redrawing the map of electoral constituencies to moderate, if not totally eliminate, the effects of the Shiite majority in most regions of Bahrain. Shiites voiced their grievances that "the

government is playing the sectarian card and trying to derail the democratic process through gerrymandering"⁵¹. To calm down the existing tensions, King Hamad decided that all members of the Bahraini Defense Force, the National Guard, the police and security services would not be eligible to vote. Therefore, a solid bloc of approximately 15,000 Sunni voters was removed from the scene, giving more chances to Shiite candidates. The King, addressing the public before the Election Day, called on his subjects "to exercise their constitutional right in complete freedom and responsibility. To exercise this right is a duty because without it democracy will not be able to survive"⁵².

The elections took place on May 9 and 16, 2002, in two rounds of voting. Over 300 candidates, including 31 women, were registered for five 10-seat councils. Voters' turnout was substantial: 40-80 per cent, depending on the district. Religiously affiliated candidates became the major winners, obtaining 38 out of 50 seats (remaining candidates were considered independent runners). The Shiite Islamic National Wafaq Society, generally in opposition to the King, succeeded in placing most of its candidates in the councils. The failure of liberal and leftist candidates to win a single seat meant that they were unable to present themselves to the public as a viable alternative to candidates supported by the clerical establishment. The poor turnout of women was not really surprising in the traditional, male-dominated society, especially as in most cases they ran against male candidates from the same political organizations. Nevertheless, after the elections, all of women candidates urged the King to order an investigation into the "transgressions" witnessed during the elections and to take the necessary steps against those behind them⁵³. They complained that some male candidates used mosques and religious community centers to launch attacks on female candidates. The leading leftist group, the National Democratic Action Society also criticized undemocratic practices exercised by many candidates on the polling day, including illegal campaigning and vote buying.

The municipal elections were not that important in themselves, as the municipal councils are responsible only for public works and roads, but everybody perceived them as the “dress rehearsal” for the forthcoming crucial polls to elect members to the new parliament.

When the parliamentary elections were approaching, in August 2002, 78 Bahraini intellectuals presented the King with a petition, protesting against the ban on the participation of political associations in the elections campaign. Then, four major opposition groups (the Islamic National Wafaq, the National Democratic Action, the Islamic Action and the Democratic Nationalist Tajammu) sent a letter to the King demanding again the restoration of the unchanged 1973 constitution. In response to these protests, the King allowed political associations to participate in the election campaign. Nevertheless, as other demands were not met, major opposition groups decided to boycott the elections.

In such circumstances, only 190 candidates registered, much fewer than for the far less important municipal elections. Eight women decided to run in the elections, receiving highly publicized support from the King’s wife.

The first round of parliamentary elections took place on October 24. Despite calls from the opposition to boycott the elections, 53-2 per cent voters went to the polls, well above most expectations. Nineteen candidates who obtained more than 50 per cent of the vote were elected to the 40-seat Parliament in the first round, including three who ran unopposed. The remaining 21 seats were decided in the run-off elections on October 31-

Elections went smoothly. The Bahraini Human Rights Society was allowed to monitor the polls. Nevertheless, opposition groups said that the government used authoritarian tactics to thwart the boycott. Moreover, voters had their passports stamped, leading to fears among citizens that they might suffer consequences if they did not have the stamp.

Sunni Islamists became the winners of the election, obtaining, together with their sympathizers, a majority in the lower house.

Two Shiite Islamists were elected as well, despite the fact that their numerous co-religionists stayed home obeying the boycott call from their party leaders. Both woman candidates who made it to the second round run-off were defeated. Therefore, to balance the composition of the state bodies and to lower future potential problems in the legislature, the King himself appointed a large number of pro-government “secularists”, “liberals” and women to the upper house. In particular, he nominated several defense officials and public servants, whose number included six women and a Jewish trader.

Political life in the country intensified further after the parliamentary elections.

The Council of Deputies demanded more legislative and monitoring powers for itself⁴. Several members of the Council submitted a proposal to legalize political parties. The deputies formed a commission to investigate the collapse of two government-managed pension funds. The Commission, despite government objections, submitted in January 2004 a report providing information of extensive mismanagement and corruption by the funds’ senior staff. In result, the deputies question the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Labor, and Minister of State on the matter. It was a significant move as it established a parliamentary tradition⁵⁵. The government, however, managed to gain the upper hand in the proceedings which could lead to no-confidence vote using legal technicalities and ministers remained in their posts intact.

In turn, the nominated Shura Council, trying also to stress its role in the country’s political system, urged the media to play a greater role in the democratization process, and asked the government to draw up a comprehensive national strategic plan of social and economic developments for the next 20 years, to establish the Financial Monitoring Bureau to help combat corruption, and the Administrative Monitoring Bureau to verify the soundness and legality of administrative systems and their compatibility with international quality standards in this regard⁵⁶.

In another important development, six of Bahrain's major political groups, religious and secular, signed in March 2003 a "charter of unity", aimed to coordinate their opposition to the kingdom's amended constitution, which they claimed to have eliminated the principle of separation of power. There were three Islamists groups: The Islamic National Wafaq Society, the Islamic Arab Wasat Society, and the Islamic Action Society as well as three secular groups with left-wing inclinations: the National Democratic Action Society, the Progressive Democratic Minbar Society, and the Nationalist Bloc. All these groups boycotted the parliamentary elections as they insisted that the elected council should have exclusive legislative powers. In April, they started a campaign of collecting signatures on a petition to the King to change the constitution. In their opinion, the government controls the parliament, and the elected house is unable to respond to the public needs⁵⁷. The Bahraini royal court warned organizers that what they were doing was illegal, and that only the National Assembly and the King himself had the right to propose or endorse constitutional changes. Eventually, several activists collecting signatures were arrested. In February 2004, four of these societies (the Wafaq, the Islamic Action, the National Democratic Action and the Nationalist Bloc) organized a controversial "Constitution Conference" to discuss the issue of establishing a genuine constitutional monarchy in Bahrain and for restriction of powers of the Shura Council to solely consultative. Later in the year, the government began talks with these societies aimed to end the stalemate over the constitutional issue and convince them to take part in the next parliamentary elections. The talks were, however, suspended by the government. In response, these groups decided to resort to "pressure tactics" to achieve their demands. In February 2005, they sent to the King a petition signed by approximately 75,000 people calling again for restoration of the 1975 constitution⁵⁸. They plan to organize peaceful rallies and sending delegations to other countries, especially in the West, to meet their legislatures

and rights organization in order to explain the whole picture of the Bahraini situation. The government strongly criticizes these actions as meant to involve foreign actors into Bahrain's domestic politics.

The fall of 2004 brought numerous tensions between different actors on the Bahraini political scene. An arrest of human rights activist Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja after his public criticism of the Prime Minister, the King's uncle, and closure of his Bahrain Centre for Human Rights brought opposition protests and street demonstrations. Then, a parliamentary committee has rejected a draft law proposed by the government to regulate street protests and public meetings, saying it was "unconstitutional" as it would severely restrict freedoms. On the other hand, a new press draft law, proposed by the Shura Council, was warmly greeted by the opposition as a progressive one, improving protection of journalists and granting them better access to information.

To summarize, while many praise King Hamad's actions as really introducing some democracy in the Kingdom, the opposition claims that they have just been a window-dressing, calculated to deflect domestic and international criticism⁵⁹. The Bahrain Human Rights Society acknowledged that Bahrain has taken "a giant step" in liberalizing its political system and extending personal freedoms but stressed that much more needs to be done: "Political rights have been restricted to candidacy and voting in the municipal and parliamentary elections when the issue is much broader one"⁶⁰. In particular, the parliament is so weak that it was unable to pass even a single law in the first years of its existence. Nevertheless, for the first time in decades public protests became acceptable and there have been no arbitrary arrests. More freedom of worship and expression was granted to Shiites, although they continue to be disadvantaged in state jobs.

A possible future source of tensions can be the growing power of religious fundamentalists, both Sunni and Shiite. Some Bahrainis worry that the radicals may eventually move to restrict personal freedoms and attempt to amend constitution to make Sharia the

sole source of the legislation. Religious fundamentalists already demand greater public observance of Islamic practices. First indication of this was their proposal to ban alcohol sales to Muslims, closing down hotels catering for weekend tourists from the GCC states, restricting mixing of sexes at Bahrain's University and stop public concerts of Westernized Arab singers.

Yet, taking all the developments into account, Bahrain can be described as the most advanced GCC country in the democratic process.

Qatar

Qatar, the smallest GCC country, is ruled under the 1970 constitution by male representatives of the Al-Thani family. The Emir holds absolute power, though he consults with leading Qataris on policy issues, and works to achieve consensus with the appointed 30-member Consultative Council (whose members have not changed since 1975).

In January 1992, 54 leading citizens presented the Qatari Emir with a petition criticizing the lack of freedom of expression in the media and unclear laws regarding citizenship and naturalization, as well as demanding the establishment of a new consultative assembly with "wide legislative and investigative authority through which actual political participation is provided"⁶¹. The authors of the petition called for this body to prepare immediately a new constitution "that guarantees the establishment of democracy". The petition did not bring any results. The old Emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al-Thani had rejected any liberalization of the regime, and the broadening of political participation did not begin until his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, assumed power in 1995 (staging a successful coup against his father).

The new Emir abolished the Ministry of Information, a move calculated to demonstrate his willingness to limit government

censorship of the media. Then, in the new atmosphere, the now famous independent al-Jazeera satellite TV channel was opened. The channel introduced controversial and provocative new programs and news bulletins that criticize Arab rulers, governments and policies as well as the lack of rights and freedoms in the Arab world, and advocate the need for significant change in Islamic law. Opposition figures and women often participate in al-Jazeera programs, which quickly became the most popular TV program in the whole Arab world.

Next move by Sheikh Hamad was to call for general elections for the Central Municipal Council, a 29-member advisory body that oversees the work of nine municipalities. The Emir allowed women to vote for and run as candidates for seats in the Council⁶².

This latest move faced certain opposition. Eighteen noted Islamist figures presented a petition to the Emir that criticized the idea, given that such election would afford women "public authority" and the potential for "leadership over men"⁶³. The petition, however, did not have any effect on Emir's policies.

The first election in Qatar, even before the one to the Municipal Council, was for the board of the Chamber of Commerce, whose members had previously been nominated by the Emir. Close to 3,700 Qatari businessmen cast secret ballots in April 1998, electing 17 members of the board. In turn, the Ministry of Education called for the establishment of elected student unions in all schools. In another exercise of democracy, in November 1998, the Ministry of Finance and Economy canceled the elections for the board of al-Muntazah Consumer Association after it had been discovered that the number of ballots cast was higher than the number of eligible voters; new elections were simultaneously called for.

The elections to the Central Municipal Council took place on March 8, 1999^h® • On the ballot were 227 candidates, including six women. About 95 per cent of eligible voters participated in election in Doha, with only a slightly lower percentage participating in the rest of the country (though the number of registered voters was

only 22,225 people, which accounted for a small percentage of the total local population of approximately 160,000). The winners of the elections were mostly young technocrats and professionals, elected on the basis of personal preference or family and tribal ties. Significantly, two noted political figures, often critical of the government: Najib Muhammad al-Rubai, a former Minister of Justice, and Muhammad Salih al-Kawari were lost in the election. No women were elected, suggesting that Qatar remains a traditional society.

The successful municipal elections made Sheikh I lamad easier about conducting the next step: introduction of a permanent constitution (a temporary one has been in effect since 1972) providing for the establishment of elected parliament to be chosen by all Qataris, regardless of gender. On July 2, 2002, the committee preparing the new constitution, presented a draft of the document. On April 29, 2003, in a popular referendum, more than 96per cent Qataris voted in favor of the constitution (but only 24,000 people registered themselves for voting).

The constitution describes Qatar as a democratic state, grants universal suffrage, and confirms the role of the state in providing for the social, economic, and educational well-being of its citizens. It also confirms Qatar as a hereditary state and specifies Sharia as the main source of legislation. The constitution creates a 45-member council (*Majlis al-Shura*) to legislate, vote on the stage budget, and monitor the government activities with the right to question ministers and to vote them out of office through a vote of confidence. The 20 members of the council are to be elected and the remaining 15 are to be appointed by the Emir. All Qataris of over 18 years of age are eligible to vote and run for office. The constitution provides also for freedom of association, expression and religious practice, as well as an independent judiciary.

Emir Hamad promulgated the constitution on June 8, 2004, although it will not come into full effect for another year. During this period new constitutional institutions will be formed and

appropriate laws enacted. In meantime, in May 2004, Emir issued decrees allowing creation of professional societies and trade unions (with a right to organize strikes).

There are at least two reasons why Emir Hamad decided to broaden political participation in Qatar. First, having some problems with the support from members of the older generation, he wanted to obtain it from younger Qataris, many of whom had obtained Western education and become more cosmopolitan. For many of them, democratization means making Qatar prominent among its neighbors, and obtaining a dynamic and leading role in the region⁶⁵. Secondly, Hamad wanted to win friendship in the West, to oppose threats from his ousted father and to balance off pressures from his more powerful GCC neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia.

Although Qatar is sometimes described as being at the vanguard of democratization in the Arab world, one has to be aware of the shortcomings of its constitution⁶⁶. It qualifies the right of people to assembly and does not allow operation of political parties. The Emir appoints the government and controls its agenda, has the power to block any legislation, can implement laws by decrees, and can dissolve the parliament at will. The legislation becomes law only with the vote of two-thirds majority and the emir's endorsement. But this has to be understood in the country's context. Qatar citizenry is free of sectarian, ethnic, or even significant political divisions. There is no questioning of the legitimacy of the ruling Al Thani family. Therefore, reforms have been promulgated from the top and not as a response to popular discontent.

Reforms in Qatar did not end in introducing a new constitution and organization of a municipal election. In particular, women were allowed to enter the political process. In 2003, Emir Hamad nominated a woman to become the Minister of Education - the first female cabinet minister in the GCC states. At the same time he appointed Sheikha Abdullah al-Misnad from the ruling family the president of the Qatar University and another woman a public prosecutor - the first woman to hold such a post in the GCC

states. Emir's wife, Sheikha Mouza Bint Nasser al-Misnad, has been strongly involved in promotion of education and women's rights.

Oman

Oman has been ruled since the 18th century by the al bu Said dynasty. After a series of internal and external conflicts in the 1950s and 1960s, and most significantly the Dhofar rebellion, Qaboos bin Said al-Said carried a coup in 1970 against his unsuccessful father. Supported by the British, Qaboos won and became the Sultan. He quickly proved to be an effective and modern leader. Under his rule, the country advanced economically despite limited oil reserves; education became a government priority, relations with the neighbors were normalized, etc.

In the 1990s Oman made several strides towards broadening of the political participation; this happened on the sole initiative of the ruler, without any demands from the public (there is practically no opposition in Oman⁶⁷). First, in 1991, Sultan Qaboos established the new Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), replacing the old State Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Istishari lil-Dawla*) existing since 1981. The 59-seat Council was granted the right to debate on economic, social and development issues, review laws, evaluate government plans and question ministers, and hold joint meetings with the government twice a year. At the same time, it has no right to be heard in Oman's foreign, defense, and security policies. The Sultan's decree provided that elders, prominent businessmen and intellectuals from each of Oman's 59 provinces choose two potential assembly members and the Sultan appoints one of those two nominees to represent that province. The president of the Council is appointed by a Royal Decree, while his two deputies are elected by the members of the Council in a secret ballot.

After the end of the first three-year term, in 1994, the Council was expanded to 80 seats, giving the Sultan a chance to nominate more people, especially former government officials, to it. In a groundbreaking decision, the Sultan appointed the first two women members of the Council. It was the first case for women to be allowed to participate in a political process of any kind in all GCC states⁶⁸.

Membership of the Council was expanded to 82 persons in 1997, and to 83 in the year 2000 because of the increase in the country's population. Moreover, the Sultan allowed women to stand for election and to vote for candidates to the Council. Over 20 women were among the several hundred nominees in the 1997 elections, and the Council had eventually two women members.

In 1997, Sultan Qaboos established a new 41-seat consultative body, the all nominated State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*). This Council, akin to an upper house, reviews the proposals of the *Majlis al-Shura* and forwards those it deems important to the government or to Sultan Qaboos; it can also deal with more important political matters. *Majlis al-Shura* and *Majlis al-Dawla* together constitute the *Majlis Oman*, or Council of Oman⁶⁹.

One of the reasons to establish new council was to give the Sultan a chance to accommodate those who were unsuccessful in the elections to the *Majlis al-Shura* and to eliminate potential tensions between rival clans, tribes and businessmen created by the election results. This was clearly visible in the formation of the first *Majlis al-Dawla*, whose nominated members became former ministers, under-secretaries, ambassadors, judges or retired officers. Five women were selected to it as well.

Sultan Qaboos, further supporting the idea of introducing women to the country political life, appointed in 1998-99 the first woman ambassador and named three women deputy ministers in the cabinet. He also included the first woman to the board of directors of the Omani Chamber of Commerce. In March 2003 he appointed a women to become President of the Public Authority

for Craft Industries at the rank of a minister. Finally in 2004, he appointed three other women to the Cabinet, to manage the Higher Education, Tourism and Social Development Ministries.

The electoral body has been consequently expanded; in September 2000 elections to *Majlis al-Shura* the electorate was raised to 175,000 people, a quarter of Omani adults (as compared to only 51,000 in 1997 elections, about three per cent of the population, and 5,000 in 1991), with women accounting for some 30 per cent of the participants.

Voters were chosen by tribal councils selected by the *walis* or governors and their representatives in the country's 59 *wilayats*. Out of them 114,567 - or 65 per cent - registered for voting, with 87.8 per cent actually casting their ballots. The total of 541 candidates, including 21 women, were in the fray (but only two women were successful, both from the Muscat governorate). In a move towards the goal of having the whole *Majlis al-Shura* elected directly, in 2000, candidates with the highest numbers of votes were for the first time automatically given seats on the Council, rather than being picked from among the top scores by the Sultan.

In the 2003 elections, for the first time, all Omani citizens who have attained the age of 21 (approximately 822,000), both men and women, were eligible to vote. Nevertheless, only 262,000 (i.e. 32 per cent) registered, and only 74 per cent of the registered, that is around 194,000 actually cast their votes on October 2. The elections did not bring much change in the composition of the *Majlis al-Shura*. Only 15 women stood for election, out of 506 candidates, and, as before, only two (actually the same as during the previous term) were elected, despite even the fact that a third of registered voters (95,000) were women.

Consultative councils quickly started to play an important role in the country's political life. They met regularly, debated important social and economic matters, reviewed new laws, questioned government's officials. Hearings at the *Majlis al-Shura* have been broadcasted live on television.

Another action of crucial importance for the development of democracy in Oman, was the introduction of the Basic Law - the first *de facto* constitution - in 1996. It promulgated the principles governing the Sultanate, highlighted the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and, above all, defined the powers and duties of the executive. It provided for an independent judiciary, due process of law, freedom of press and of assembly, and prohibition of discrimination of any kind. Several laws and regulations required to implement these provisions were enacted in the following years. In particular, the Supreme Court in Muscat as well as courts of appeals in various *wilayas* were established, and the new press and publication law was introduced.

Oman has a relatively liberal environment, although the sultanate is an absolute monarchy with no political parties⁷⁰. All matters are subject to the Sultan's interpretation and decrees. He has a complete authority over all decision-making. The Sultan is both the head of the state and the prime minister, as well as the commander-in-chief of the armed force; moreover, he controls the portfolios of defense and foreign affairs. But at the same time, Sultan Qaboos is a fair-minded, liberal ruler who tries to maximize the support base for his policies by taking advice from as broad a spectrum of people as possible, but especially from tribal leaders, in accordance with Omani tradition and cultural norms. His gradual approach to democratization of the country and political reforms has often been praised in the Gulf as the best possible way to do so.

The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of tribally-based sheikhdoms, established as a unified state structure in 1971. Thanks to huge oil revenues, the UAE managed to transform itself in a short period of time into a very modern and wealthy country. Under the constitution, rulers of the seven emirates make up the

Federal Supreme Council, the highest legislative and executive body. The Council elects a state president and the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi emirate, was the President of the country from 1971 till 2004. When he passed away, the presidency was taken over by one of his sons, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed.

The UAE have the least developed system of political representation among the GCC states. The male-only, ruler-nominated, 40-person-strong Federal National Council plays only an advisory role, cannot introduce bills or debate any matter of public concern if the government objects (that is, "if it is detrimental to the higher interest of the union")⁷¹. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, the number of issues discussed by the Council, and the number of cabinet ministers appearing before it (including some members of the ruling family) increased. In some emirates, in Sharjah in particular, local consultative bodies to advise rulers have also been developed.

For approximately a quarter of a century, the UAE did not have a permanent constitution, as numerous attempts to approve one failed due to lack of agreement among the emirates on the prerogatives of the federal authorities; small emirates have traditionally worried that large and rich emirates, like Abu Dhabi, would dominate them. The temporary 1971 constitution became eventually permanent in 1997, though practically no changes were introduced to it at that time, despite the criticism that it contains outdated laws.

Like in all other GCC states, the judicial system comprises both Sharia and the secular courts. The judiciary is not independent; its decisions are subject to review by the political leadership, but the basic due process of law does exist. Media are controlled by the government but non-censored foreign television broadcasts via satellite and internet are widely available. The government limits freedom of assembly and association. Nevertheless, in general, the country, especially the highly cosmopolitan emirate of Dubai,

has been much more liberal and open to the world than other GCC states.

Women are well represented in the workforce and are well educated. Until recently they did not hold any high-level positions in the government. Only the progressive ruler of Sharjah, sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, appointed in the early 2000s several women to his local consultative council. In the interesting occurrence, the Crown Prince of the emirate of Ras Al Khajmah was dethroned by his father in June 2003, apparently largely due to the activity of his wife, criticized by conservative members of the ruling elite for being a women's rights activist⁷². Finally, in November 2004, a woman was appointed the UAE Minister of Planning and Economy.

Among limited recent political moves, the UAE, under the pressure from the International Labor Organization, have initiated measures to allow formation of workers' organizations in the country. Moreover, the election of officers was allowed in certain public institutions, including the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, suggesting that authorities are testing the possibility of introducing such democratic procedures in other public bodies.

The issue of the establishment of an elected parliament in the UAE has been put forward only very recently. Earlier, there was no pressure from the public at large to change the situation as the enormous wealth of the country had continued to make most people satisfied; there has been no opposition or any political groups operating in this rentier state. It was only after the Saudi municipal elections and the Iraqi expatriates' voting organized in the UAE (the out-of-country voting managed by the International Organization of Migration for the Iraqi elections of January 30, 2005) that some members of the Emirates' Federal National Council and the country's academics raised the issue. They stressed that when millions of Arabs in Palestine, Iraq, and even Saudi Arabia had gone to the polls, the UAE could no longer continue to lag behind⁷³. Thus, they began calling for elections to the consultative council and

municipalities as well as for transparency in the government, freedom of expression and independence of the judiciary. These calls were encouraged by the decision of the ruler of Sharjah who, in February 2005, announced the establishment of nine local municipal councils, with members who at the moment are still appointed but are promised to be elected in future.

Gulf parliament

At the GCC level, the Consultative Council (often called the Consultative Commission) has functioned since 1997. It consists of 30 appointed members (five from each of the GCC states) and is charged with studying matters referred to it by the GCC Supreme Council. Nevertheless, so far it has been a meaningless body. During the December 2004 GCC summit, Bahrain submitted a proposal from its country's Council of Representatives to establish a GCC parliament to replace the current Consultative Council. No decision on the matter was taken yet.

H

Summig up, the Gulf monarchies - notwithstanding the actions mentioned above undertaken to improve the electoral process and expand the power of the consultative councils and parliaments in the GCC states - could hardly be labeled full-fledged democracies. The following facts attest to that:

- In Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, women still cannot participate in the elections.
- In the UAE there are no elections at all; In Saudi Arabia, only municipal elections can take place.
- In Bahrain, electoral districts are drawn with the intention of under-representing the country's majority Shiite population; In Kuwait, small electoral districts make vote-buying easier and favor tribal candidates.

- In Oman and the UAE, the consultative councils can neither introduce legislation nor dismiss ministers, nor can the Saudi *Shura* Council dismiss Cabinet members.

- In Bahrain and Qatar, the elected lower chamber can dismiss ministers only with a two-third majority, which is very difficult to attain.

- Bahrani and Qatari parliaments need a large majority to block legislation, and the Omani and the UAE Consultative Councils cannot block legislation at all.

In most cases, changing these realities would require constitutional revisions, which are very difficult to carry out. Michael Herb, an expert in the field, recently summed up the state of affairs in a commentary simply titled, "Parliaments in the Gulf monarchies are a long way from democracy".⁷⁴ At the same time, however, Herb underlined that "Gulf elections are much fairer than those organized by most authoritarian regimes." In particular, "Kuwait's elections compare well to those of many emerging democracies". Furthermore, the Kuwaiti parliament is able to successfully block legislation, and has the power to mount a very serious challenge to the primacy of the ruling family, as it can remove any ruler's minister through a no-confidence vote. The situation is also improving in Bahrain since political reforms were introduced there in the last couple of years.

Prospects for further broadening of political participation in the Gulf monarchies. The GCC and Western (American) democratization agenda

Will the broadening of political participation in the GCC states continue? Can the occurrences presented above actually lead towards the Western type of democracy?

On the one hand, there are many obstacles to the democratization process.

First of all, as time has shown, Gulf monarchies are quite stable regimes, contrary to stereotypical views in the West, where they are frequently seen as anachronistic systems and destined to

disappear with modernization. Thus, rulers do not always see the necessity to transform their regimes quickly and extensively to stay in power. Moreover, they do not think they need the support of their people to govern; constitutions and traditions legitimize their positions. They also feel secure given that the United States and other Western countries, despite their occasional rhetoric of criticizing non-democratic regimes, do not like to de-stabilize the region further after the Iraqi experience and with few exceptions continue to be committed to the maintenance of the GCC countries' status quo due to strategic importance of oil they possess. In such circumstances, rulers often perceive the broadening of political participation in their countries as another gracious gift they may offer their subjects, rather than an action required to satisfy the vital needs of their populations. The circumstances have seemed different only in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait, where pressure from the West and the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in the first place, the demands of the Shiite-led opposition in the second, and the activities of the Islamists political groupings in the third, are factors strongly influencing the change.

In turn, the "subjects" at large, maybe except of the Shiite population, so far do not look for major political reforms themselves, being worried that change could negatively affect their socio-economic situation. They have generally been satisfied with what they get from their governments, and even the existing extensive control the regimes exercise over them do not dispose them negatively to their rulers. This is why, for example, even the demands of opposition groups have only called for reforms, not for revolution: the opposition has wished to improve the operation of the existing regimes, not to overthrow them⁷⁵. The middle class in the GCC states - usually the main reformist, pro-democracy grouping in other parts of the world - has little reason to support the downfall of the monarchy, which allows the monarchies to prosper. Similarly, the military and majority of tribal sheiks, large beneficiaries of the existing regimes, usually strongly support the

oilers. So far, there has been no “revolutionary proletariat” in the GCC states; in future, only a growing number of young, unemployed school graduates may lead to the establishment of such a group. Last but definitely not least, most people lack political awareness; the civil society, the ultimate source of political change, is in the very preliminary stage of development.

On the other hand, there are many factors which can further enhance the broadening of political representation and the “democratization drive”.

First of all, as has already been mentioned, in several GCC states: Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, there are significant groupings pushing for democratization. Moreover, the presence of active parliaments and free media, wherever they are present, boosts democratization process⁷⁶.

Then, the economic situation can have a significant impact on the process. At the beginning of the 21st century, the GCC countries were earning far less than they used to during the oil bonanza three decades earlier (the very high oil prices in 2004 temporarily improved the situation, but it is unlikely that they will stay at that level for a long period of time). While these states are still relatively rich, several are running budget deficits, borrowing nationally and internationally, and are turning to expense cutting. Moreover, while until recently many services were free in the GCC countries, some regimes have begun to charge their citizens for them, and have even considered introducing income taxes. Should citizens be obliged to pay for the running of the state, the state will be forced to open up to their scrutiny. “No taxation, no representation” rule began to change already to “some taxation, some representation”.

Another factor that can influence the change is the population of the GCC countries: not only is it growing at a rate that makes the maintenance of so generous welfare states problematic, but it is also becoming more literate, educated, and urban: features that are characteristic for other societies that, in similar conditions,

have usually experienced a political upheaval leading to further democratization.

Young new leaders, who may replace old leaders of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but also of the UAE and Oman in the not so distant future, may also speed up reforms, as occurrence in Qatar and Bahrain showed already.

Events in the neighboring states: Egypt, Iran, Yemen, and the new Iraq, which all have more political representation of citizens in the process of governance, indirectly influence also the peoples' thinking across the borders; mostly through media reports but also through their citizens living in the GCC states in large numbers.

Finally, there have been numerous attempts coming from the West, and the United States in particular, to democratize the Arab world. They relate to the situation in the GCC states as much as in other Arab countries. First of all, after 9/11, with the US-proclaimed "war on terror" there have been a number of voices in the United States calling Washington to "save the Arabs from corrupt autocrats and radical Islam as it once was about saving the world from communism" and to "pressure Arab states to democratize rather than shielding them"⁷⁷. Rohan Gunaratna in his book *Inside al Qaeda* asks: 'Why are so many terrorists produced by Saudi Arabia? Because it's not democratic, it's not representative of the people'⁷⁸. Commenting on elections in Bahrain, S. Rob Sobhani wrote in the *Washington Times* on November 25, 2002, that "the United States has a vested interest in the success of King Hamad's reform movement because tiny Bahrain can be a model for the rest of the Arab world, especially in neighboring Saudi Arabia. Shi'ite compromise a majority in the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where 25 per cent of the world's remaining oil reserves is located. Therefore Bahrain should be rewarded and singled out for its bravery, friendship and pursuit of democracy".

Since 9/11 the goal of democratizing the Arab Middle East has become elevated by the American government from a verbal ideal to national security imperative⁷⁹. Therefore, first, the administration

decided to reorient US diplomacy and American foreign aid policy to lend support to pro-democracy movements in the region. In January 2003, the United States introduced the "US-Middle East Partnership Initiative", which was aimed to spread democracy and political reforms in the Middle East. Then, in March, President George W. Bush decided to go to Iraq, believing, among other things, that overthrowing Saddam Hussein would allow rapid democratization of the country, which, as result, would produce a democratic boom in the Middle East, comparable to the successful one which occurred earlier in Eastern Europe and put the end to the Cold War.

On November 6, 2003, President Bush delivered the now-famous address on the need to strengthen democracy around the world and, in particular, to support its development in the Middle East. He called to end "sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East" and to adopt "a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East". In the follow-up, US authorities began working on the details of what later became known as "The Greater Middle East Initiative". The project called for economic transformation "similar in magnitude to that undertaken by the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe".

The leakage of the draft version of the project to the London-based *Al Hayat* in February 2004, was met with strong criticism from Arab governments, intellectuals and media, who all saw in it an unacceptable interference with their internal affairs⁸⁰. In particular, Bahrain's Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, asserted that "the imposition of any foreign view is not in the interest of the countries of the region". The Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal said that the US proposal did "include clear accusations against the Arab people and their governments that they are ignorant of their own affairs... those behind this plan ignore the fact... that we are able to handle our own affairs"⁸¹.

In such a situation, facing all this criticism, the US government scaled down the original proposal and presented it under the new name "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative" at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia, on June 8-10, 2004⁸². The resolution adopted at the meeting called for "partnership for progress and a common future with the region". In particular, that goal is to be achieved through the establishment of the 'Forum for the Future', a framework for regular ministerial meetings as well as parallel meetings of civil society and business leaders to discuss political and economic reforms⁸³. A call to settle down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the idea conspicuously absent from the earlier version of the plan, causing wide criticism, was that time included in the document. The plan also acknowledged that reforms cannot be imposed from outside and that different societies will change at different rates.

Despite a new, better form, the G-8 reform plan initially received a cold reception in the Arab world. Only five Arab countries accepted President Bush's invitation to its launch at the summit (from among the GCC states, only Bahrain). The most important Arab countries: Saudi Arabia and Egypt (as well as close US allies: Kuwait and Morocco) turned the invitation down, making it clear that they would have nothing to do with the project. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, not invited to the summit due to controversies related to his Al Jazeera TV station's anti-American reporting, stated cautiously that "the calls for reform coming from abroad need reflection by the people of our region"⁸⁴.

Nevertheless, after a while, Arab governments and civil society activists produced several declarations on the need for broad political, social, and economic reforms, which were definitely inspired by the G-8 plan⁸⁵. In particular, on June 3-4, 2004, the Qatar University hosted a conference of Arab democracy advocates: civil society activists, professors, journalists and members of political movements from across the region. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in his widely reported speech opening

the event stated that: (1) Arab states should consider US proposals for democratic reform rather than reject them outright; (2) there are many problems “of our own creation that have nothing to do with the outside world”, and that in particular “do not spring only from the Palestinian cause”; (3) many Arabs have claimed that “if popular participation is broadened it would only result in bringing in those who would endanger peace and put an end to security. Yet, the adoption of reforms has always been the right way to stability”⁸⁰. There are not many Arab leaders who would so openly say such things, opposing popular Islamist standpoint. The conference adopted “The Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform”, calling all Arab states to get modern, democratic institutions; hold free, fair and regular elections; place limits on executive powers; guarantee freedom of association and expression; permit the full participation of women in political life; and end extra-judicial procedures, emergency laws, and torture. It also called for the creation of a body to monitor Arab governments’ progress on reform and to track the fate of other reform initiatives launched recently in the region. Finally, the declaration stated that “hiding behind the necessity of resolving the Palestinian question before implementing reform is obstructive and unacceptable”.

Only time can show whether such declarations will bring any real change in the GCC states. It remains to be seen whether the rulers of these countries will be bold enough to introduce further reforms. Democratization is always a long lasting process. One can foresee future developments in the GCC states, which can lead towards that goal, but there are also many obstacles which can slow it down, or even reverse. One can agree with the opinion of Hassan Hamdan al-Alkim that “although democracy may not be realized within the coming decade, it is acquiring a significant importance in the GCC states political life. Thus, its realization becomes a matter of time”⁸⁷. A thought that, however, should always be taken into account, is that democratization may not

immediately produce more peaceful and stable GCC regimes. The political reforms can weaken the existing regimes, or even destabilize the countries. The opposition forces in the GCC states, where they exist, are to a large extent rooted in Islamic fundamentalism, which, if coming to power through otherwise praised democratic elections, can reform the political system into a much less democratic - of the religious theocracy type - than the present one. An indication of such approach can be found in the latest parliamentary elections in Kuwait and Bahrain where the Islamists won the majority and continue to press for Islamization of the countries⁸⁸. So far, however, the development of the electoral process in the GCC states, as well as the enhancement of their parliaments' activity, as compared to political reforms, or rather lack of them, in many other Arab countries, allows to look at the future of the democratization process in the monarchies of the Gulf with cautious optimism.

Notes

¹ *Arab Human Development Report 2002 and 2003*, New York, www.undp.org.

² Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, Amy Hawthorne, Daniel Brumberg, "Democratic Mirage in the Middle East", *Policy Brief*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (October 2002).

³ Thomas Carothers, "The end of the transition paradigm", *Journal of Democracy*, No. 1 (2002), pp. 5-21.

⁴ David Potter, David Goldblatt, Margaret Kiloh, and Paul Lewis (eds.), *Democratization* (Cambridge, Mass., Polity Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁵ Bruce Russett, "A Structure for Peace: A Democratic, Interdependent, and Institutionalized Order", in: Tokashi Inoguchi, Edward Newman, and John Keane (eds.), *The Changing Nature of Democracy* (Tokyo, United Nations University Press, 1988), p. 32.

⁶ *Freedom in the World 2002-2003* (New York, Freedom House, 2003). In 2003 Bahrain moved to the "partly free" category.

⁷ Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Democratizing the Arab States. The Case of Monarchies of the Gulf, 1991-2004", *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, 2004, 3, pp. 78-80.

⁸ Selim Jahel, "A Parliament According to Sharia", *Arabics Trends*, April 1998, pp. 26-31.

⁹ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", *International Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 28*, Cairo/Brussels, July 14, 2004, p.6.

¹⁰ Municipal elections were held in Makkah, Madina, Taif, Jeddah, Yanbu and Qunfunha in the past, between 1926 and 1967. Anita Pratap, "Saudi women make gains", *Saudi Gazette*, October 16, 2004.

¹¹ Richard Dekmejian, "The liberal impulse in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, No. 3 (Summer 2003); James A. Russel, "Political and economic transition on the Arabian Peninsula: Perils and Prospects", *Strategic Insights*, (May 2003).

¹² "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", p. 14.

¹³ www.arabrenewal.com. Translation by Gwenn Okhrulik and Yara Youssef.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, January 4, 2004.

¹⁶ The survey was conducted by the independent Saudi National Security Assessment Projects. See Nawaf Obaid, "What the Saudi public really thinks?", *Daily Star*, June 23, 2004.

¹⁷ Toby Jones: "Social contract for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, No. 228, Fall 2003.

¹⁸ Khalid Al-Dakhil, "2003: Saudi Arabia's Year of Reform", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 16, 2004.

¹⁹ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", p. 19.

²⁰ As reported in: "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", p. 19 and 20.

²¹ For example, Saudi Arabia Justice Ministry advisor was quoted in *Okaz*: "There is no reason to stop them from participating in the elections... Trends coming from the West which are beneficial and do not contradict our laws and religion should not be banned"; www.aljazeera.com, December 4, 2004. The decision not to allow women to vote was announced by the Interior Minister Prince Nayef on October 11, 2004.

²² "Women shut up of upcoming Saudi vote", The Associated Press, October 12, 2004. The reasons cited by the government were: lack of women to run women's only registration centers and polling stations as well as the fact that only a fraction of Saudi women have the photo identity cards needed to vote. Moreover, a Saudi law prohibits men and

women to work together - a major problems if a women became a council member.

²³ Apparently only 46 women out of 2,750 women members in the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry participated in the elections; *Arab News*, December 1, 2004.

²⁴ Reuters, March 22, 2004.

²⁵ As reported in "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", p. 21.

²⁶ Reuters, January 26, 2004.

²⁷ Simon Henderson, "Saudi Municipal Elections: Royal Caution and Citizen Apathy", *Policy Watch* * 937, January 3, 2005.

²⁸ Mohammed Alkhereiji, "Riyadh's polls, a window into Saudi social dynamics", *Daily Star*, Febaiary 19, 2005.

²⁹ Jill Crystal and Abdallah al-Shayaji, 'The pro-democratic agenda in Kuwait: Structures and context', in: Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World* (Lynnie Rennier Publishers, Boulder and London, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 101-125.

³⁰ Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait: Elections and issues of democratization in a Middle Eastern state", *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies*, No. 1 (1993).

³¹ Youssef Alaonueh, "Islamists Movements", *Arabics Trends*, June 1998, pp. 15-16.

³² Ghanim Alnajjar, "The Challenges Facing Kuwaiti Democracy", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 54, No. 2 (2000), pp. 242-258.

³³ Wendy Kristianasen, "'We don't want to box Islam in'. Kuwait's Islamists, officially unofficial", *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2002.

³⁴ Ammar Ali Hassan, "First parliamentary elections in post-Saddam Kuwait", *Al-Jlayat*, June 30, 2003.

³⁵ Some Kuwaiti women have for a long time been involved in political activity. For example, Rasha Al Sabah, a cousin of the emir, has held her own *diwanyyas* for years. Several have been active in business and in professional associations. One Kuwaiti ambassador is a woman, there are also a few women undersecretaries in the government. In the 1990s, the Kuwaiti University had a woman president.

³⁶ Rami G. Khuri, "Kuwait's election and the freezing of Arab politics", *Daily Star*, July 10, 2003-

³⁷ Saad Al Ajmi, "Gerrymandering and reform in Kuwait", *Gulf News*, June 25, 2004.

³⁸ BBC News, May 24, 2004.

³⁹ Al Ajmi: "Gerrymandering".

⁴⁰ Haya Abdulrahman Al Mughni, "The politics of women's suffrage in Kuwait", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 19, 2004; Mary Ann Tetreault, "Women's rights and the meaning of citizenship in Kuwait", Middle East Report Online, February 10, 2005.

⁴¹ "Majority favours only right to vote", *Gulf News*, November 10, 2004.

⁴² Neil MacFarquhar, "Infirmity of its senior sheiks leaves Kuwait stagnating", *The New York Times*, June 13, 2002.

⁴³ Alnajjar: "The Challenges facing Kuwaiti democracy", p. 258.

⁴⁴ Susan B. Glaser, "Democracy in Kuwait is promise unfulfilled", Washington Post Foreign Service, February 27, 2003- Since the late 1970s, the Kuwaiti ruling family have courted the Islamists, perceiving them as safer for the regime than the secular Arab nationalist or other liberals.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Gulf News*, December 19, 2004.

⁴⁸ Quoted after Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Bahrain: Democratization by

decree", paper presented at the British Society for Middle East Studies, Edinburgh, July 2001, p. 4.

⁴⁹ Hamza S. Olyan, "Royal Bahrain's journey to democracy", *Daily Star*; February 24, 2002.

⁵⁰ Interview with the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, *Gulf News*, June 29, 2003.

⁵¹ Abdulhadi Khalaf in *Daily Star*, May 20, 2002.

⁵² *Daily Star*; May 8, 2002.

⁵³ *Gulf News*, May 20, 2002.

⁵⁴ "Bahrain's House seeks more powers", *Gulf News*, January 22, 2003.

⁵⁵ Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Bahrain's parliament: The Quest for a Role", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 16, 2004.

⁵⁶ "Bahrain Shura Council urges press to play greater role", *Khaleej Times*, January 31, 2003-

⁵⁷ "Bahrain warns opposition groups", *Gulf News*, April 28, 2004.

⁵⁸ Mohammad Almezal, "Groups 'will resort to pressure tactics to achieve their demands'", *Gulf News*, February 19, 2005.

⁵⁹ Abdulhadi Khalaf, *Daily Star*, December 3, 2002.

⁶⁰ "Bahrain needs to do more to provide equality", *Gulf News*, February 21, 2003.

⁶¹ F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies. Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (Council of Foreign Relations, 1994).

⁶² Louay Bahry, "Elections in Qatar: A window of democracy opens in the Gulf", *Middle East Policy*, vol. VI, No. 4 (1999), pp. 118-127. In fact, this was not the first experiment in Qatar with elections to the Municipal Council. The first elections of this kind took place in 1963 and lasted for a few years.

⁶³ Bahry: "Elections in Qatar", p. 126.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Andrew Rathmell and Kirsten Schulze: "Political reform in the Gulf: The case of Qatar", *Middle Eastern Studies*, No. 4 (2000), p. 15.

⁶⁶ Amy Hawthorne, "Qatar's New Constitution: Limited Reform from the Top", *Carnegie Endowment - Arab Reform Bulletin*, June 11, 2003.

⁶⁷ Only in 1994, around 200 people were detained in connection with an alleged plot to destabilize the country. Some people were also arrested in January 2005 for alleged plotting to carry on terrorist attacks during the Muscat Festival.

⁶⁸ Abdullah Juma Alhaj, "The politics of participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: The Omani Consultative Council", *Middle East Journal*, no.4 (1996), pp. 560-71.

⁶⁹ Abdullah Juma Alhaj, "The political elite and the introduction of political participation in Oman", *Middle East Policy*, No. 3 (June 2000), pp. 97-110.

⁷⁰ "Oman - Ruling Structure", *APS Review Gas Market Trends*, February 23, 2004; J. E. Peterson, "Oman: Three and a half decades of change and developments", *Middle East Policy*, 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 125-37.

⁷¹ Hassan Hamdan Al-Alkim: "The prospect of democracy in the GCC countries", *Critique. Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, Fall 1996, p. 34.

⁷² *Gulf Studies Newsletter*, June 2003.

⁷³ *Khaleej Times*, February 24 and 27, 2005.

⁷⁴ Michael Herb, "Parliaments in the Gulf monarchies are a long way from democracy", *Daily Star*, December 4, 2004.

⁷⁵ Gawdat Baghat: "The Gulf monarchies: Economic and political challenges at the end of the century", *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, No. 2 (1998).

⁷⁶ Michael Herb, "Emirs and parliaments in the Gulf", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, No. 4 (2002), p. 47.

⁷⁷ Susan Sachs, "Remembering how to rig a democracy" *The New York Times*, June 30, 2002.

⁷⁸ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁷⁹ Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Democracy Promotion in the Arab World: The Bush Agenda", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, No. 3 (2004), pp. 65-92.

⁸⁰ As reported in Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 17, 2004.

⁸¹ As quoted by K. Gajendra Singh, "America's democracy initiative in Middle East", South Asia Analysis Group, paper No. 1052, www.saag.org.

⁸² The term "greater" in the draft version was changed for "broader", as some countries objected to the first one as having some negative political connotations.

⁸³ Marina Ottaway, "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: A hollow victory for the United States", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 12, 2004.

⁸⁴ Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, "Out of the fog through Arab reform", *Daily Star*, June 21, 2004.

⁸⁵ Main conferences were held in Saana, Yemen and in Alexandria, Egypt. Moreover, the Arab League for the first time took a position on the political reform issue at its summit in Tunis in May 2004. See Kapiszewski: "Democratizing the Arab states", pp. 127-129.

⁸⁶ Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani: "Out of the fog through Arab reform".

⁸⁷ Al-Alkim: "The prospect of democracy", p. 41.

⁸⁸ Marina Ottaway, Thomas Carothers, Amy Hawthorne, Daniel

Brumberg, *Democratic mirage in the Middle East* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, October 2002); **Vahan Zanoian**, "Time for making historic decisions in the Middle East", Kuwait, Center for Strategic and Future Studies, November 2002.