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Rentier militaries in the Gulf: coup-proofing comes at a price

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Oil and dynastic rule have led to an idiosyncratic pattern of state formation in the Gulf – and in few parts of the state are the idiosyncrasies more pronounced than in the security sector. Oil income has allowed GCC ruling families to engineer a relatively softer, rent- and patronage-based authoritarianism with multiple centers of power and huge institutional redundancies. The way they have constructed their police and military forces helps to explain the resilience of their monarchical rule, but also the haplessness of their armed forces.

GCC armed forces tend to be fragmented. There are two main reasons why: First, and similar to some of the republican Arab regimes, regime elites have historically built up rival security forces and an “army to watch the army” to reduce the risks of a military takeover. Officers from outside of the ruling family have planned a number of coups in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, but none of the plots got very far.

Second, and more specific to the GCC, ruling elites have in important instances created parallel military institutions so as to satisfy the ambitions of different members of the ruling family and to balance different family factions. This follows a broader pattern of state-building in which rulers have tended to settle conflicts and build alliances within the ruling family by creating new institutions, positions and sources of patronage also outside of the security sector. This has led to an cumulative and redundant state-building process that has stabilized dynastic rule, but has imposed great long-term costs and has made policy coordination in important areas difficult (Herb 1999, Hertog 2010).

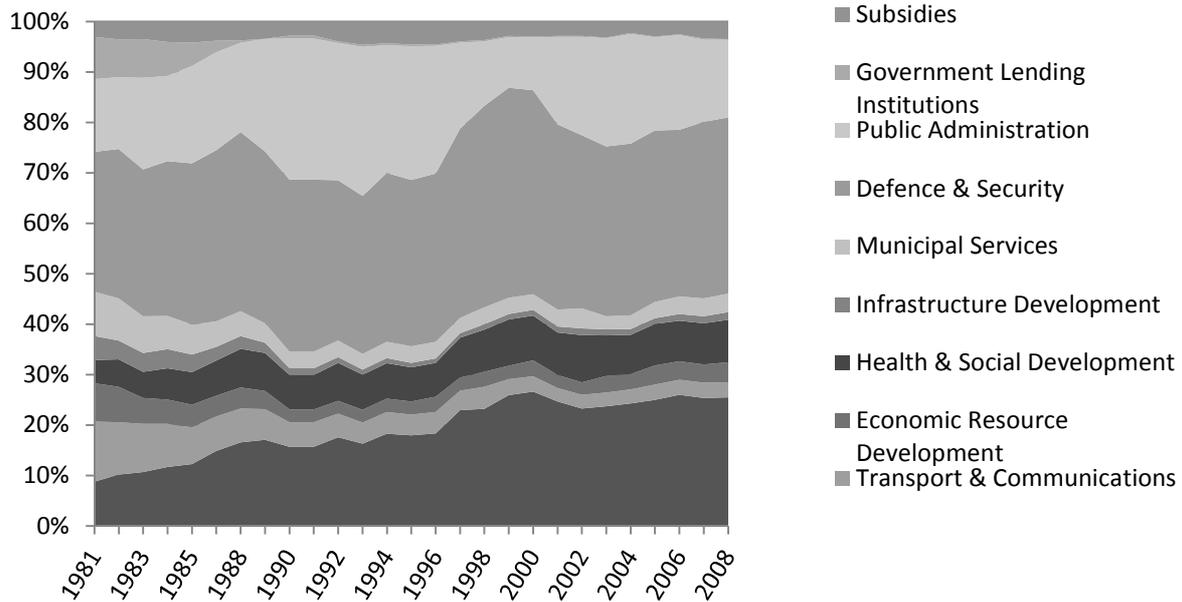
Ruling families have of course expanded also into the military apparatuses of some Arab republics, notably Syria, Yemen and (oil-rich) Libya. But the resources for the full-fledged emergence of parallel militaries have been more limited and the family networks to be served have been less expansive.

In Saudi Arabia, the current set-up of parallel security agencies dates back to the final phase of the struggle between King Saud and Crown Prince Faisal in 1962-63. When Faisal emerged as the victor, he rewarded his senior allies in the ruling family with the Ministries of Defense and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of Interior and the National Guard. In the course of rapid state growth in the 1970s, all three emerged as veritable “states within the state” with not only parallel security forces, but also parallel infrastructures in housing, education, and health. The princes in charge repeatedly sparred over budgetary allocations and made sure none of their rivals would gain a technological edge. Procurement and military planning were accordingly incoherent.

The three institutions are still controlled by the same prince, a full brother and a son of the 1963 incumbents, respectively. The Ministry of Interior alone reportedly employs more than half a million individuals and has been granted another 60,000 “military” positions in March 2011, when King Abdullah issued a number of expansionary job creation and welfare decrees. The use of the term military in the context of an agency tasked with domestic security and police work is striking.

The share of royally controlled security agencies in total state spending has been consistently high and protected throughout all economic crises, offering scope for patronage employment as well as rent income in the course of procurement. Hundreds of princes are employed throughout the armed forces according to first-hand accounts.

Composition of annual budgets since 1981



The situation in most other GCC countries is similar: Military budgets are huge, the security forces often fragmented and shot through with informal patronage, and senior ranks include many members of the ruling families. Levels of centralization differ somewhat however: After Dubai opted to disband its own military, UAE forces have been unified under the command of Abu Dhabi's crown prince Mohammad bin Zayed, and Oman – a state in some ways built around the security forces – has fewer ruling family members in the security forces and the state apparatus more broadly.

GCC security forces have come to include some a number of small, crack divisions over the decades. More broadly, however, military employment has often been used as a tool of patronage rather than capacity-building. In some cases, armies have been kept deliberately weak and unprofessional. Archival records on the Saudi military in the 1960s and 1970s report low levels of motivation, training and – different from most non-GCC regimes – limited social status of military employment. The officer corps' "new middle class" ethos that has led to successful military coups in other Arab countries seems to never have taken hold on the Arabian Peninsula, where most commoner officers remain subordinate clients of individual princes.

The reluctance to give the military social prominence has also led GCC regimes to by and large forego conscription, despite repeated debates about the issue. GCC militaries are neither vanguards nor "people's armies", but rather large, passive and dependent clienteles of individual regime figures. That GCC regimes have never been led by military elites might explain the relatively low levels of coercion with which most of them rule their populations, but also the secondary status of their militaries.

The size of GCC military budgets only underlines the focus of patronage as opposed to efficiency, as the focus is on acquiring high-tech kit rather than training. Arms purchases have often been a function of rent-seeking of different family camps, and have served to buy military protection from the exporting countries rather than to build up operational capacity that would rival that of the GCC's more populous neighbours. The UAE have recently worked on seriously improving their military capability, but are hampered by their thin demographic base. By contrast, the military of

Saudi Arabia, by now a populous country of 19 million nationals, seems to have stagnated, as reflected by its lacklustre performance during the 2010/11 campaign on the Yemeni border.

As the age of the military coup seems to have passed in most of the Arab world, and the security alliance with the US has come under some strain, GCC ruling elites might seek to build more effective and unified national militaries. For the time being, however, they are hampered by an institutional legacy from a time when “coup-proofing”, ruling family politics and patronage employment were the predominant motives shaping their armed forces.

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