

Review - After the Sheikhs

Written by Kenneth C Upsall

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KENNETH C UPSALL, SEP 18 2013

After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies

By: Christopher M. Davidson

London: Hurst, 2012



The current environment of transition, civil unrest and civil war in the Middle East breeds questions about the future of the Arab Spring, how the popular uprisings of 2011 translate into current discussion within the region, and how the monarchies in the region have been able to resist the changes which have swept autocratic rulers aside. An argument to be made is that the Gulf Monarchies are not very different from longtime strongmen in the region and they too, will eventually succumb to popular uprisings. Christopher M. Davidson's *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, attempts to detail why and how the Gulf Monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and The United Arab Emirates will quickly be swept away in a wave of democratization. The author's analysis falls short of the title's stated purpose however, as he fails to present any kind of hypothesis or scenario for the collapse of Persian Gulf Monarchies.

Davidson does manage to provide a well researched overview of the history and soft power acumen of the Gulf Monarchies though most of the information the author presents can easily be unearthed through casual reading in

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other sources. He spends a great deal of the project focused on historic examples of how the Gulf Monarchies are resilient to the changing tides of the world around them. The flow moves from external issues to internal ones, but never really exposes the cracks in the foundation until near the conclusion, where mounting internal pressures are discussed. The conclusion remains only an overview of known factors and never becomes the conversation piece it is attempting to be.

The first three chapters detail the formation of the Gulf Monarchies and how British hegemony in the region during the 19th century helped provide initial legitimacy to what Davidson deems, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, artificially created governments. Davidson hits early on the modernization theory which has remained conventional wisdom for the eventual fall of the monarchical system in the region, which states the lack of historic legitimacy combined with an ever evolving society is the perfect recipe for eventual government collapse. The rentier economy in Gulf Monarchies is the basis for this argument. Built on a foundation of massive oil revenues which the Gulf economies have long used to avoid levying taxes on their citizens, the oil economy has helped the rulers to maintain governments of liberalized autocracy which has historically been able to function outside the realm of public support.

A labor force based on expatriate workers ranging from a quarter of the population in Saudi Arabia to 70% in Kuwait (p.63) is another factor in the longevity of the monarchies' tenure. "As long as wages in foreign countries are higher than ones potentially earned at home the expatriate labor force within Gulf Monarchies will continue to be a factor" (p.12) in providing "a loyal, silent support base for the ruling families" (p.63). Davidson mentions the *kafala* system- an arrangement allowing for citizens to be sponsors of foreign run and managed businesses, becoming silent partners because local legislation requires citizen owned enterprises- as another catalyst for economic conditions in the Gulf. The system allows "well placed nationals (to) essentially sell their status as citizens to foreign partners" (p.59) while taking little part in the working of the enterprise.

The best contribution to the book comes in Davidson's elaboration on the contemporary soft power projection ability of the monarchies. Vast sovereign wealth funds (\$1.7 trillion combined, p.42) built from oil revenues have allowed the monarchies to project their seeming stability within the region and benevolence toward their people as positive signs of their staying power and as status quo powers in the region. One such example is the French commitment to Abu Dhabi as a result of the Emirates' financing of the Louvre Museum. As stated by President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009, "France is on your side in the event your security is at risk. France... is ready to shoulder its responsibilities to ensure stability in the region" (p.97). Financing for global events like Formula 1 Racing in Bahrain and the 2022 World Cup in Qatar give the area a positive polish. Davidson also highlights large monetary donations to western universities and research centers, stating "most of these gifts have no strings attached per se, and there is generally no follow-up control after the gift is made. However, donors have usually been able to rely on a culture of self-censorship taking root in the recipient institutions" (p.98). While this section provides an excellent glimpse into the soft power projection capabilities of the Gulf Monarchies, it does little to forward the central thesis of the book.

Chapter 4 contains a brief though interesting section on censorship of press freedoms in the Gulf Monarchies. According to Davidson the growing censorship of the press comes because the governments are attempting to maintain control of the political and economic narratives within the monarchies. This strategy is an attempt for the governments to assert themselves over growing opposition forces. Davidson highlights the evolving opposition groups, presenting examples of their new tactics and strategies involving the use of technology, in particular social media, in order to broaden their support. Davidson does a good job of citing examples, but places too much faith on social media outlets as a means to topple a government.

Davidson attempts to highlight growing human rights concerns coupled with recent social unrest as the catalyst for the coming collapse of state power in the Gulf. This argument loses credibility when the relative peace and stability of the Gulf Monarchies is compared to the alternatives: Iranian-style theocracy or the near-anarchy of Egypt and Syria, all examples of far worse human rights situations. Current practices denouncing protesters have "allowed rulers and their governments to portray themselves to the majority of citizens and most international observers as being safe, reliable upholders of the status quo, and thus far preferable to any dangerous and unpredictable alternatives" (p.191). These alternatives, as current events show, could greatly destabilize the region. The collapse of one or several Gulf Monarchies would greatly exacerbate the contemporary problems with government transition in the

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region. This line of thinking is not even addressed in the book and would provide a good point of debate for making Davidson's point that collapse of the monarchies may be beneficial to long-term regional development.

Davidson contends that overbearing state control has skewed the legitimacy of Gulf rulers. The argument Davidson attempts to make is that the overthrow of the Gulf Monarchies will come through the catalyst of social media outlets. This contention ignores the fact that these demonstrations are general in subject and leaderless in execution, making the prospect of a non-contested transition remote. The "coming collapse" never materializes. A nine page conclusion leads to a very abrupt ending which leaves the reader wondering what the coming collapse will look like, how the region would react both initially and in the long term to such changes, and what the landscapes of the Middle East would look like after such a collapse. After all, Davidson is suggesting that within two years (and this has to be searched for within the book itself if you skip the jacket cover) half of the states in the Middle East will have a new kind of government. Considering that civil war and civil unrest are metastasizing throughout the Middle East, such a paradigm shift in the region would have serious consequences for just about every foreign policy calculation in the Western world as well as for an ascendant China and energy hungry India. Davidson fails to provide evidence to convincingly support his thesis and misses the opportunity to explore deeper questions that his theory uncovers.

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