

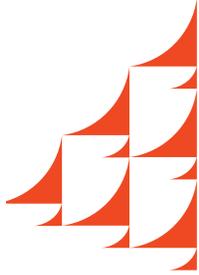
The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding



The Changing Islamist Landscape of the Gulf Arab States

Courtney Freer



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Executive Summary

Independent political movements, Islamist or otherwise, are often overlooked in the Gulf Arab states that benefit from substantial incomes due to oil wealth. It is exactly in such states, however, that Islamism arguably becomes the most plausible means of expressing opposition to the existing order. As Hootan Shambayati explains, “Under normal conditions challenges to the state are economically motivated. Under rentier conditions, however, moral and cultural issues form the basis of the challenge.”¹

The activity of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi organizations in the Gulf states thus influences political discourse and social life. The organizations do so, however, in different ways and to varying extents, depending on government structures and tolerance of independent Islamist movements, the latter of which has become increasingly informed by the role such groups play abroad.

To facilitate analysis of Islamist groups in the Gulf states, this paper will be centered on the smaller states of that region: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. While Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups influence political discourse inside Saudi Arabia, the kingdom’s political landscape is too large and complicated to be included in a paper of this length. Oman’s exclusion is also logical, given that it is influenced by ideologies that differ considerably from those found in the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council states, with Ibadi Islam and Jamaat al-Tabligh more common than Brotherhood organizations or Salafi thought. Due to these differences, the paper will, then, be limited to comparison of the four smallest and most similar states of the Gulf.

Despite recent crackdowns throughout the region, the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely to be superseded by Salafi groups in the four smaller Gulf states, even though Salafis will likely be treated with slightly less suspicion than the Brotherhood due to their informal nature and traditionally apolitical views. However, in Bahrain and Kuwait, where electoral politics reign, Salafis have increasingly come to resemble their Brotherhood counterparts, demonstrating the preeminence of Brotherhood tactics in such political systems. Salafis are thus unlikely to be able to outmaneuver the Brotherhood in these states. Despite the recent increasing political presence of Salafis inside Bahrain and proliferation of new Salafi groups in Kuwait, they lack the organization and unity of Brotherhood groups in the social realm and rely largely on Brotherhood-inspired practices in the electoral sector. As a result, governments in Bahrain and Kuwait have tended to treat Salafi groups similarly to the way they deal with the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Qatar and the UAE, Brotherhood and Salafi branches exert influence on government policymaking, particularly in the social realm, through informal means or through government-granted bureaucratic posts. Because these states lack legislative elections, policymaking remains centralized, leading rulers either to attempt to co-opt or crack down on independent political and social movements. Following the Arab Spring, the Emirati government decisively

¹ Hootan Shambayati, “The Rentier State, Interest Groups, and the Paradox of Autonomy: State and Business in Turkey and Iran,” *Comparative Politics* 26, no. 3 (1994): 310.

cracked down even on informal Islamist activity, while the Qatari government has historically been more receptive to Islamist complaints in the realm of social policies and allows Islamists to remain working within the bureaucracy.

Overall, the persistent presence of both Brotherhood and Salafi groups insures that debates about social policies and the role of Islam in daily life will remain a major part of political discussion in the smaller Gulf states. But, on the whole, Islamist groups of both the Brotherhood and Salafi strands are more likely to be tolerated and co-opted in Kuwait and Qatar than in Bahrain and the UAE, where the leadership seeks increasingly to de-emphasize the role of religion in politics entirely.

In all of these states, governments principally strive to prevent Islamist cooperation with other, secular advocates for political reform, particularly after the Arab Spring. On their own, Islamists are not powerful enough in the smaller Gulf states to pose a major challenge to the existing regimes, nor do they appear to seek to do so. This is not to say, however, that they are politically irrelevant. Indeed, Gulf Islamists lend a voice to widespread concerns particularly about government policies that downplay the traditional and religious nature of these states. Representing a segment of the population resentful of expatriate and Western influence, Islamist groups will remain a major part of the political landscape in the smaller Gulf states.

Introduction

After the loss of initial electoral gains in Tunisia and the fall of the Mohammed Morsi-led government in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been almost universally maligned, facing major crackdowns in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates and unsuccessful government attempts to diminish the group's power in Jordan.² With movement of the oldest and most influential Islamist organization in the Middle East restricted legally in several states and popularly denigrated elsewhere, the future of political Islam in the region appears to be in flux. This paper will focus on the extent to which Salafism could be a viable replacement as the pre-eminent representative of political Islam in one of the least studied environments for political Islam, the Gulf Arab states.

Though political economy literature predicts that wealthy rentier states like the ones under study will not house independent political groups,³ Islamist organizations in fact compete for influence in three different arenas in the smaller Gulf states: electoral campaigns (in Bahrain and Kuwait); charities and NGOs for social influence; and positions in government ministries for direct access to policymaking, as well as for means of enhancing recruitment. Brotherhood and Salafi groups organize themselves differently to perform these same basic tasks and thus have had differing degrees of success in effecting change in the Gulf states where they operate.

The paper begins by examining ways in which branches of the Muslim Brotherhood inside the smaller Gulf states have reacted to the Arab Spring. This analysis will also include assessment of the state of government-Brotherhood relations following the Arab Spring. The paper then traces the emergence and influence of the most powerful Salafi blocs in the smaller Gulf states over the same period, comparing Brotherhood and Salafi relations with these governments, in addition to considering how such links are likely to change in the near future.

Origins and Goals of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna as a social movement seeking to promote Islamic identity in resistance to Western incursions into Arab territories. Muslim Brotherhood groups today are known throughout the Middle East for participating in three main activities in their local contexts: the delivery of material welfare programs, the organization of electoral campaigns, and the provision of an alternate social network for members who are new to the urban areas in which they tend to operate. In Gulf states in which governments provide handsomely for their citizens and wherein tribes provide

² Taylor Luck, "[Reinvention of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood Involves Women – and Christians](#)," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2016.

³ See Hazem Beblawi, "The Rentier State in the Arab World," in *The Rentier State*, eds. Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani (Routledge: London, 1987), 49-62; Giacomo Luciani, "Allocation vs. Production States: A Theoretical Framework," in *The Arab State*, ed. Giacomo Luciani (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 65-84; Hussein Mahdavy, "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. M.A. Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 428-467; Michael Ross, "Does Oil Hinder Democracy?" *World Politics* 53, no. 3 (2001).

powerful social support systems, Brotherhood groups necessarily have different functions. They can also adopt more flexible structures since citizens of the Gulf are not as reliant on them for material services as elsewhere in the Middle East. With few tangible obligations, Gulf Islamists primarily provide ideological inspiration. In Bahrain and Kuwait, however, they are also responsible for the task of preparing for and running electoral campaigns, as these are the only Gulf states in which the Brotherhood and Salafis participate in parliamentary elections. In Qatar and the UAE, which lack legislatures, Brotherhood and Salafi organizations can play only an informal role in influencing popular ideology.

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Considering that the Arabian Peninsula is the birthplace of Wahhabism, which is closely linked ideologically with Salafism⁴ in its emphasis on returning to the early sources of Islam, it makes sense that Salafism holds a degree of popular appeal in the region. Wahhabism differs from Salafism in its emphasis on the work of theologian Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who began preaching in the Najd in the 18th century, at which time his ideology became linked to the ruling al-Saud family. His ideas focused primarily on a strict interpretation of proper forms of Sunni Islam and the elimination practices that he considered idolatrous or challenging the oneness of God.⁵ Wahhabism remains the state religion of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Though various definitions and means of practice exist, a Salafi is generally defined as “one who believes, often to the exclusion of other sources, in the good example of Prophet Muhammad and his companions of the *early* caliphs and jurists: the earlier somehow the better.”⁶ Indeed, the Arabic term *salafi* is derived from the word for ancestors, *salaf*, and so Salafis tend to rely on traditional Quranic interpretations.⁷ Because Salafism lacks a cohesive political theory and instead comprises “an approach to Islamic texts,”⁸ with emphasis traditionally placed instead on personal piety, there is no single Salafi political vision.⁹

In fact, a large subsection of Salafis (the so-called purists) believes that Islam requires obedience to the state’s political ruler, even when his rule is not guided by Salafi religious beliefs.¹⁰ Since the main impetus for the movement is to improve individual behavior, such Salafis explain, they “have very little to say about their preferred system of government. In their mind-set, the

⁴ Wahhabism is considered to be a specific and more conservative strand of Salafism, influenced by different literature, particularly the work of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and closely associated with Saudi Arabia.

⁵ William Oschenwald, “Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Revival,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, no. 3 (1981): 272-73.

⁶ Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 1991), 51.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chatham House, *Identities and Islamisms in the GCC* (London: Chatham House, 2012), 6.

⁹ Bjorn Olav Utvik, “The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait,” *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 5-6.

¹⁰ Bjorn Olav Utvik, “The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait,” *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 5-6.

idea is to return to Islamic norms, and then things will turn for the better.”¹¹ Purist Salafis tend to oppose democracy, then, due to the implication that it grants people the right to elect their representatives, a prerogative that should be left solely to God.¹²

An increasingly prominent contingent of Salafis, however, has rejected traditional obedience to the prevailing political power. When Salafism exists in electoral contexts, the movement tends to become more involved in politics and resemble purists even less. In fact, wherever Salafis become more involved in politics, they ...wherever Salafis become more involved in politics, they tend to come to focus on the institutional and pragmatic above the ideological and intangible; issues of personal morality become second in priority to institutional political engagement.¹³ Politically active Salafis thus have come to resemble Muslim Brotherhood groups more and more, especially in places that allow means of institutionalized political participation through parliamentary governance.

Governments throughout the Middle East have adopted a variety of methods of containing Islamist complaint. In states with active legislatures, particularly since the onset of the Arab Spring, regimes have used tools like changing boundaries of electoral districts, voting rules, and regulations for political associations as means of controlling the Islamist sphere without decimating it. In states like Qatar and the UAE in which the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis do not run electoral campaigns, placing gradual restrictions on such movements becomes more difficult since the extent of their influence and popularity is not easily verified. In these states, the only institutional influence of Islamists is seen in government positions, which are granted by regimes as a means of co-optation. By and large, however, in such states, Islamists are either tolerated, as in Qatar, or shut down, as in the UAE; there is less scope for gradualism than in electoral systems. Islamism in these countries instead becomes a means of reasserting national identity¹⁴ – especially since Qatar and the UAE house the largest expatriate populations in the Gulf.¹⁵

Just as Islamists have different responsibilities in states with parliamentary elections, so too do governments manage such groups differently, depending on opportunities accorded to them to gain political power.

¹¹ Bjorn Olav Utvik, “The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait,” *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴ Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), 160.

¹⁵ As of 2008, Qatar’s population was 87 percent expatriate, compared to 81 percent in the UAE. Martin Baldwin-Edwards, “Labour Immigration and Labour Markets in the GCC Countries: National Patterns and Trends,” *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States* 15 (2011): 10.

Electoral Islamists: The Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis in Bahrain and Kuwait

Though Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi organizations were not created as political groups with the goal of contesting elections, they have increasingly become involved in institutionalized political life throughout the Middle East as a means of securing their influence on government decision making. Initially, “politics only mattered insofar as it served explicitly religious ends,” with Islamist groups adopting agendas focused primarily on securing legislation of or tacit government support for conservative social policies to make society more traditional and thus friendlier for conservative Muslims.¹⁶ Today, Islamist political agendas have become far broader and more pragmatic, even leading Islamist groups, on occasion, to ally with secular political blocs. Such coalitions allow them to further their political influence in the legislature or to increase their access to policymakers and the ruling family.

Because Brotherhood groups in states with electoral systems are divided into a political branch (*hizb*) and social movement (*harakat*), they are able to balance the pragmatic and spiritual: Electoral issues can come to the fore for the party, while the *harakat* maintains its primarily social role. Such a structure is, for the most part, absent in Salafi groups.

Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi affiliates in Bahrain and Kuwait have tried to balance their sometimes oppositional stances to regime policies with the need to remain part of the political system. Meanwhile, in Bahrain and Kuwait, the government has faced its own challenge of balancing the need to maintain its Islamic legitimacy with actions to limit the electoral influence of an assertive Islamic opposition.

The Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring: Loyalist Tendency Remains

As a Sunni monarchy ruling over a Shia majority population, the Bahraini regime’s primary political concern has been Shia opposition movements like al-Wefaq National Islamic Society. As a consequence, the Muslim Brotherhood has not been singled out in a crackdown, as it has been elsewhere in the region since 2011. Instead, the Sunni ruling family has been, for the most part, inclined to trust the Brotherhood. Many members of the Brotherhood are part of the Hawala tribe, long-time residents of the Gulf region, and traditionally part of the merchant elite, so they have a vested interest in maintaining the political status quo.¹⁷ In fact, government ties to the Muslim Brotherhood are thought to be so strong that it is rumored that Bahrain’s Royal Court and Islamic banking sector bankroll the group.¹⁸

The Bahraini Brotherhood consists of a social branch, *Islah Society*, which has, since 1941, run its charity, educational, and social programs, and a political bloc, *al-Minbar National Islamic Society*, established in 2002, which manages electoral campaigns. *Al-Minbar* has won

¹⁶ Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

¹⁷ Ambassador Adam Ereli, “A Field Guide to Bahraini Political Parties,” Manama, November 4, 2008.

¹⁸ Giorgio Cafiero, “[What Bahrain’s Opposition Crackdown Means for Country’s Muslim Brotherhood](#),” *Al-Monitor*, June 27, 2016.

parliamentary seats in all elections since its establishment and tends, inside the legislature, to support the monarchy's political and economic vision, while voicing its demands to implement Islamist social policies like the restriction of the sale of alcohol.

Al-Minbar's loyalist position has not been completely consistent. Most visibly, it cooperated with al-Wefaq prior to the Arab Spring to encourage government reform of land ownership laws, specifically to decrease the waiting period for families to own plots of unclaimed land on which they have been living for decades.¹⁹ This move was ultimately a pragmatic one, meant to protect merchant interests, and did not lead the Brotherhood to join in as many cross-sectarian coalitions as has Bahrain's primary Salafi political bloc.

Government relations with the Bahraini Brotherhood became problematic after Saudi Arabia and the UAE labeled the Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014.²⁰ Struggling to appease domestic and regional audiences, Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa's statements about the Brotherhood were carefully crafted and somewhat contradictory. At a press conference in March 2014, he said that Bahrain would not designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, despite the fact that other Gulf states had done so.²¹ The foreign minister later followed up this statement by saying, on Twitter, that "I never said or mentioned that the Muslim Brotherhood was not a terrorist group."²² He went on to clarify that each country must deal with the Brotherhood in its own state, based on its particular activities in that specific context.²³ For its part, al-Minbar has understood the need to differentiate itself from more oppositional Brotherhood groups elsewhere in the region. In the words of its president, Ali Ahmed, in November 2014 ahead of Bahrain's parliamentary elections: "It is the ideology that we follow, but we do not have the organization in Bahrain - neither do we support it."²⁴

Since it is not considered to threaten the state or its monopoly of political power, the Bahraini Brotherhood has been permitted considerable freedom of activity, particularly following the protests beginning in February 2011, as it was considered a loyal force in the midst of rising Shia opposition. Further, al-Minbar has only ever won eight of 40 seats in the elected house of Parliament and so does not represent an overpowering political

Al-Minbar Representation in Parliament Since its Establishment in 2002

Year	Number of Al-Minbar Representatives (Out of 40)
2002	8
2006	4
2010	2
2014	1

¹⁹ "Bahrain: Change in Law Regarding Land Ownership," *Al Bawaba*, May 22, 2005.

²⁰ "Saudi Arabia Declares Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Group," *BBC*, March 7, 2014; "UAE Lists Muslim Brotherhood as Terrorist Group," *Reuters*, November 15, 2014.

²¹ "Al-Bahrain La Tuatabar al-Ikhwan Jamaat Irhabia," [Bahrain does not Consider the Brotherhood a Terrorist Group], *Al Jazeera*, March 20, 2014.

²² Habib Toumi, "Bahrain Confirms Full Support to Saudi Arabia, UAE," *Gulf News*, March 22, 2014.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Alex MacDonald, "Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections," *Middle East Eye*, November 20, 2014.

movement in Bahrain as it does elsewhere in the Middle East. Still, divisions among the Gulf Cooperation Council states over the Muslim Brotherhood during the Arab Spring made the group problematic, allowing an opening for Salafi movements.

Bahraini Salafis after the Arab Spring: Ties to the Regime Highlighted

Al-Asala Islamic Society, founded in 2002, the same year as al-Minbar, is Bahrain's primary Salafi organization. It has close links to Saudi Arabia and, due to the demography of Bahrain, has historically held pro-government views. In fact, al-Asala's voting record has led many Bahrainis, particularly members of the political opposition, to consider it "a pawn of the royal family's interests."²⁵ When asked about the relationship with the al-Khalifa family in 2009, its chairman, Adel Al-Moawdah, hardly denied the claim, instead stating that "even if we are affiliated to the Royal court, there is nothing wrong with that."²⁶ Further, after protests broke out in 2011, the group, like al-Minbar, publicly restated its loyalty to the ruling family, highlighting its allegiance in the face of Shia political challenge.

Despite its broad tendency toward loyalty, al-Asala has, more frequently than al-Minbar, criticized government policy, even joining with non-Islamist blocs to do so. This is likely due to al-Asala's economic base. While the Brotherhood appeals more to merchants and professionals, Salafi groups find most supporters from among new immigrants, members of the tribal population, and members of the security forces and other government employees – segments of society that are less economically powerful and thus less vested in maintenance of the political status quo.²⁷

In 2009, al-Asala outspokenly criticized a government proposal to tap phone lines and record Friday sermons.²⁸ It even voted with al-Wefaq to demand that the government be required to draft legislation within five months of Parliament proposing it.²⁹ Further, al-Asala supported an amendment to grant Parliament the power to edit laws issued by the king by decree when Parliament is out of session (they are currently only accepted or rejected entirely).³⁰ The Salafis in Bahrain, then, seemed more committed to a political reform agenda than the Muslim Brotherhood branch. This dynamic changed after the uprisings of the Arab Spring, when al-Asala, having seen the crackdown on protests, was careful to maintain close ties with the regime since opposition increasingly became associated with Shia activism.

²⁵ Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 66, no.3 (2012): 415-16.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 54-55.

²⁸ Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 3 (2012): 415.

²⁹ Ibid., 414.

³⁰ Ibid.

Ultimately, "Al-Asalah's criticism falls short on political issues – issues dealing with succession or the regime's executive authority."³¹ Al-Asala's strategy in terms of electoral politics is ultimately to enhance Sunni representation in politics, which is also in the Sunni ruling family's interest. Still, it, like al-Minbar, has not enjoyed substantial representation in Parliament, holding six elected seats at its height.

Since the outset of Shia-led protests in 2011, Sunnis increasingly organized pro-government rallies, yet, this countermobilization has tended to be more populist and less associated with the established Sunni Islamist political blocs.³² The Gathering of National Unity (TGONU) emerged as a new government-backed organization as protests continued. Azharis and Arab nationalists came to dominate TGONU's Central Committee, leading many prominent Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis to leave the group. The creation of Sahwat al-Fatah, a youth-focused group linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, occurred around the same time that Brotherhood and Salafi groups lost influence in TGONU, further contributing to political tensions. TGONU has openly accused the government of trying to use it to bolster regime authority against Shia opposition, yet it ultimately became pro-government and lost any political clout it had gained.³³ Showing its limited appeal, TGONU failed to win a single seat in the 2014 parliamentary elections, and today is politically impotent.³⁴

Al-Asala Representation in Parliament Since its Establishment in 2002

Year	Number of Al-Asala Representatives (Out of 40)
2002	6
2006	5
2010	3
2014	2

Another major and related development since the protests of 2011 and subsequent regional fallout is increasing sectarian polarization in Bahrain. In such a context, Sunni loyalty is considered more genuine than that of Shia members of the population since Shias have increasingly been portrayed as a fifth column of Iran. In May, al-Wefaq was suspended,³⁵ its leader was given an extended prison sentence, and activists were prohibited from attending a meeting of the U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva.³⁶ In June, leading Shia cleric Isa Qassem was stripped of his citizenship accused of using his position "for political purposes to serve foreign interests."³⁷

³¹ Steve L. Monroe, "Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf," *Middle East Journal* 66, no. 3 (2012): 416.

³² Justin Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf: Rethinking the Rentier State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 24.

³³ Elizabeth Dickinson, "Bahrain F1 Race: How a Sunni Backlash Kept an Uprising at Bay," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 22, 2012.

³⁴ Justin Gengler, "Electoral Rules (and Threats) Cure Bahrain's Sectarian Parliament," *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

³⁵ Kristin Smith Diwan and Michael Esfahani, "Bahrain's New Order," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, August 19, 2016.

³⁶ "Bahrain Crackdown Fans the Sectarian Flames," *Financial Times*, June 21, 2016.

³⁷ Raf Sanchez, "Bahrain Risks New Sectarian Tensions by Stripping Shia Cleric of Citizenship," *The Telegraph*, June 21, 2016.

Now that Shia-led protests have been, for the most part, successfully squelched, the state fears the political consequences of an organized and coherent Sunni movement – especially one that has become more reform oriented than al-Minbar or al-Asala. Certainly, “Sunnis working together temporarily to block a Shia-led coup attempt is one thing – indeed, an act of loyalty to the ruling family – but Sunnis engaged in a sustained fight to secure a parliamentary majority over reliably pro-government tribal independents is a far more dubious project not to be taken passively by the state.”³⁸ The pro-government group Citizens for Bahrain

The pro-government group Citizens for Bahrain has emerged as a new model for loyalist organizations, decrying the role of religion in politics and emphasizing the need for dialogue to diminish extremism and sectarianism.

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Future Outlook for Bahrain’s Islamists

Al-Asala and al-Minbar’s representation in Bahrain’s present Parliament was seriously compromised through the expansion, in the run-up to the 2014 elections, of constituencies in the blocs’ strongholds, leaving previously “safe seats” open to challenges from pro-government, and often tribal, candidates.⁴⁰ Electoral districts in Sunni-dominant southern neighborhoods were also increased and came to encompass new areas, thereby weakening candidates with localized support bases in the Sunni neighborhood of al-Riffa.⁴¹ Meanwhile, districts like Saeedi, which often house Islamist members of parliament, were consolidated, forcing competition among Sunni incumbents. Though the Salafi and Brotherhood sanctuary of Muharraq was not redistricted, it was the only governorate whose number of seats was not increased in this series of changes.⁴²

Such a move demonstrates the degree to which Bahrain is susceptible to regional pressures. As Justin Gengler puts it, “It’s no secret that Bahrain is under pressure from Saudi Arabia and others to limit the way those Islamist groups are able to operate and limit their influence upon politics.”⁴³ The government also may have sought to decrease Brotherhood and Salafi representation in the 2014 Parliament to diminish the prevalence of sectarian politics in a state with a prominent Shia-Sunni divide and to prevent cross-sectarian alliances. Cementing its stance against any strand of political Islam, in June, the government formally banned the mixing of religion and politics and prohibited clerics from joining Parliament.⁴⁴

³⁸ Justin Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf: Rethinking the Rentier State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 156.

³⁹ “About Us,” [Citizens for Bahrain](#), accessed November 10, 2016.

⁴⁰ Alex MacDonald, “Sunni Islamists Could Face Uphill Struggle in Bahrain Elections,” *Middle East Eye*, November 20, 2014.

⁴¹ Justin Gengler, “Electoral Rules (and Threats) Cure Bahrain’s Sectarian Parliament,” *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

⁴² Justin Gengler, “Electoral Rules (and Threats) Cure Bahrain’s Sectarian Parliament,” *The Washington Post*, December 1, 2014.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Bahrain King ‘Bans Mixing Religion and Politics,’” *The New Arab*, June 12, 2016.

The power of Bahrain's Sunni Islamists, of both the Brotherhood and Salafi strands, thus is likely to be diminished in the electoral field in the near future. Their influence will still be felt socially and through government posts, however. Indeed, despite such setbacks, it is unlikely that the traditional Islamist groups al-Minbar and al-Asala will become more oppositional in the short to medium term. The regime has fairly successfully linked opposition to Shias and Iranian meddling – to such an extent that “the fear of association with this opposition has precluded many Sunni citizens from forcefully voicing grievances they nonetheless share.”⁴⁵ Cooperation between Shia and Sunni Islamists that sporadically occurred in the past is almost unimaginable today. The government, having seen the dangers of sectarian politics, will continue fostering the emergence of secular groups like Citizens for Bahrain, while Sunni Islamists will likely work to maintain the existing, relatively stable, state of political affairs.

Kuwait's Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring: Reform Takes Priority

The Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, in quite a different example from the Bahraini group, has come to concentrate on political reform, in particular the creation of a constitutional monarchy, though it once enjoyed close relations with the regime. Like the Bahraini Brotherhood, it has both a social arm, Islah, (or the Social Reform Association), established in 1951 to host educational and charitable activities, and a political branch, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), created in 1991 to run its parliamentary campaigns.

Since the advent of the Arab Spring, the government has hampered the broader political opposition's reform efforts. The regime has endeavored to prevent secular and Islamist cooperation, having seen the power of opposition unity in demanding the restoration of Parliament after the 1990-91 Iraqi occupation and in the 2006 elections, when a secular and Islamist coalition successfully pressured the government to decrease the number of electoral districts from 25 to five.⁴⁶

When secular and Islamist political blocs began gathering in anti-corruption protests in 2011, the government moved swiftly against such opposition unity with dissolutions of Parliament (two in 2012 alone), including the unprecedented replacement by the

Constitutional Court of the February 2012 pro-opposition Parliament with the pro-regime 2009 National Assembly. The emir also worked to revise electoral laws to favor traditionally

ICM Representation in Parliament Since its Establishment in 1991

Year	Number of ICM Members of Parliament (Out of 50)
1992	5
1996	5
1999	4
2003	2
2006	6
2008	3
2009	1
February 2012	4
December 2012	0 (boycott)
July 2013	0 (boycott)

⁴⁵ Justin Gengler, “[Are Bahrain's Sunnis Still Awake?](#)” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 25, 2012.

⁴⁶ Mary Ann Tetreault, “[Kuwait's Annus Mirabilis](#),” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 7, 2006.

pro-government candidates, ultimately imposing changes to voting laws ahead of December 2012 polls, which allowed voters only one vote each.⁴⁷ In response, the ICM, along with other opposition blocs, boycotted the last two parliamentary elections. Even when it did participate, the ICM formally never held more than six seats out of a 50-member Parliament. Yet through coalitions with other members, it joined an opposition holding 35 seats at its height in 2012.⁴⁸

Outside of Parliament since 2012, the ICM has voiced its support for a pro-democracy agenda also backed by secular groups. In early 2013, the ICM signed on to a document articulating demands for reform, drafted by secular opposition leader Musallam al-Barrak, former ICM parliamentarian Jamaan al-Harbash, and Tariq al-Mutairi of the secular Civil Democratic Movement, signaling a reawakening of the cross-ideological cooperation that had helped provoke the government to restore Parliament in the aftermath of the Iraqi occupation and led to the change in electoral law in 2006.⁴⁹ The document on which these groups agreed calls for expanded parliamentary authority, an independent judiciary, and a modified criminal code – signaling the primacy of a reform agenda over a traditionally Islamist one for the ICM. Some members of Salafi groups inside Kuwait have similarly come to push for greater political reform.

Kuwaiti Salafis after the Arab Spring: Activist Strand Comes to the Fore

Kuwait's Salafi political landscape became fragmented in the aftermath of the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait: One branch of Kuwaiti Salafis resolved to become politically active since it disapproved of the government's handling of Iraq's occupation,⁵⁰ while purist, or politically inactive, Salafis remained opposed to political action. Though the latter group dominated the Salafi landscape prior to the invasion, focusing primarily on enhancing individual piety and eschewing involvement in institutions of political power, politically active Salafis became increasingly powerful in the decades that followed.

Kuwait's Salafis first organized themselves as the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (RIHS) in 1981, inspired by the ideology of Egyptian cleric Sheikh Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq, who encouraged Salafi political participation, despite objections from Saudi clerics who promoted traditional Salafi quietism.⁵¹ As a result, Kuwait's 1981 election marked the first time anywhere in the world that Salafis participated in parliamentary elections, with the RIHS winning two seats.⁵² Shortly after the liberation of Kuwait, however, the RIHS became less politically active and more closely aligned with the government.⁵³ Indeed, many

⁴⁷ Sharmaake Sabrie and Pekka Hakala, "[Kuwait's Political Crisis Deepens](#)," *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, January 2013, 11.

⁴⁸ Mary Ann Tetreault, "[Kuwait's Annus Mirabilis](#)," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 7, 2006.

⁴⁹ E.A.D., "[Kuwait's Opposition: A Reawakening](#)," *The Economist*, April 17, 2014.

⁵⁰ Bjorn Olav Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait," *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵² Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014, 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

members of the RIHS have, since the 1990s, enjoyed government positions and are said to continue to dominate the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and Islamic Affairs, once a Brotherhood stronghold, demonstrating that the bloc is far more co-opted than politically active Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁴ The Islamic Salafi Association (ISA) formed in 1991 as a branch of Salafis willing to become involved in parliamentary politics after effective co-optation of the RIHS. It has historically been the largest Salafi bloc in Parliament, focused primarily on social morality and notably loyal to the government.

The Salafi Movement, created as an offshoot from the ISA in 1996, aims to reform the existing political system, rather than continuing to bolster it. The movement has been one of the most outspoken of Salafi blocs in voicing its desire to increase political participation and has taken an intensifying oppositional stance toward the government.⁵⁵ Perhaps the only Salafi group more vocal in its opposition to the government is the Umma Party, founded in 2005 as an offshoot from the Salafi Movement as a self-proclaimed political party, despite that political parties are formally banned in Kuwait.⁵⁶ The Umma Party is the most similar to the Muslim Brotherhood of any of the Salafi groups in Kuwait, with the group heavily focused on calling for more participatory government.⁵⁷ Salafi groups in Kuwait thus seem to have become progressively more politically active and oppositional since the 1990s.

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Zoltan Pall observes that the politically active strand of Kuwait's Salafi community cemented its role as the most influential Salafis after the 2011 uprisings.⁵⁸ These groups have, interestingly, also pursued greater cooperation with other Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood through the Kuwaiti League of Preachers, united by their desire to effect political reform.⁵⁹ Khalid Sultan bin Issa of the ISA has been particularly active in trying to unite various parts of the opposition to eventually create a more powerful political party.⁶⁰ In fact, he has thus far united Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri, leader of the Principles of the Islamic Nation, who was formerly staunchly against Salafi political action, along with the Salafi Movement and Umma Party, into an organization that is expected to be unveiled formally in 2016.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism after the Arab Uprisings: The Reconfiguration of the Power Balance](#)," *Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, Middle East Insights*, April 15, 2015, 4.

⁵⁵ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014, 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁷ Bjorn Olav Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait," *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 23.

⁵⁸ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism after the Arab Uprisings: The Reconfiguration of the Power Balance](#)," *Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, Middle East Insights*, April 15, 2015.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism after the Arab Uprisings: The Reconfiguration of the Power Balance](#)," *Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, Middle East Insights*, April 15, 2015, 4

Entry into parliamentary politics has, understandably, and undeniably, altered Salafis' activities, structures, and even ideology.⁶² As Bjorn Olav Utvik argues, while they begin with a "moral watchdog approach" to gain followers, these supporters begin to expect the organization to gain more influence on government policies, pushing it to enter politics.⁶³ In parliamentary systems, the primary priority of both the Brotherhood and Salafis tends to shift from spreading a message about the proper role of Islam in modern society to a more pragmatic approach aimed at gaining tangible representation in government institutions.⁶⁴ Having gained a following by opposing the Muslim Brotherhood's politicization, increasingly vocal politically active Salafis tend to come to resemble Brotherhood members in order to maintain political relevance in electoral systems.

Future Outlook for Kuwait's Islamists

After the ICM's recent announcement that it plans to participate in the November parliamentary polls,⁶⁵ the cross-ideological opposition coalition's unity has been ruptured, with partners openly decrying the ICM's decision.⁶⁶ Despite this disagreement, recent government action against the broad-based opposition has again united the various political blocs. A June amendment to electoral law prohibits the participation in parliamentary elections of anyone who has been "convicted in a final court order of insulting the Almighty Allah, the prophets and the Amir."⁶⁷ The ICM, National Democratic Alliance, Kuwaiti Democratic Forum, and Kuwaiti Progressive Current released a joint statement dubbing the new law "a serious violation of constitutional rights and human rights charters."⁶⁸

With the government hoping to diminish opposition representation in Parliament and with the Brotherhood's participation in November's parliamentary elections shattering the opposition's united front, it remains to be seen whether the government will succeed in reducing the opposition voice in Parliament. Salafis, meanwhile, have become divided. Members of the purist strand, primarily represented by the RIHS, have been co-opted through government positions while also enjoying representation in Parliament. On the other hand, the ICM, alongside activist Salafi blocs like the ISA, Salafi Movement, and Umma Party, has become increasingly focused on effecting broad-based political reform, and so greater unity among them could emerge in the upcoming polls and could bolster Islamist representation in the next legislature, depending on which groups decide to end their boycott. The ISA, Salafi

⁶² Bjorn Olav Utvik, "The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait," *Middle East Critique* 23, no.1 (April 2014): 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁵ "[Bayan al-Harakat al-Dusturia al-Islamia bi-Shan al-Intikhabat al-Barlamaniat al-Muqbilat](#)" [Statement of the Islamic Constitutional Movement on the Forthcoming Parliamentary Elections], al-Harakat al-Dusturia al-Islamia [Islamic Constitutional Movement], May 26, 2016.

⁶⁶ Tariq Nafa al-Mutairi, "[Abth al-Musharika ma Sulta al-Abth](#)" [The Futility of Involvement with Futile Authority], *Sabr*, accessed November 10, 2016.

⁶⁷ "[New 'Election Law Becomes Effective.](#)" *Kuwait Times*, June 29, 2016.

⁶⁸ "[Bayan Mushtarak min al-Quwa al-Siyasia bi-Shan al-Mawqif min Taadil al-Mada al-Thania min Qanun al-Intikhabat](#)," [A Joint Statement from the Political Powers on the Situation of Modifying the Second Article of the Electoral Law], *Kuwait Democratic Forum*, June 26, 2016.

Movement, and Umma Party have announced their intention to boycott the upcoming polls, on grounds that the electoral law needs to be changed before meaningful elections can take place. Meanwhile, the RIHS will contest the polls, as will a substantial number of independent Salafis. The rise in independent Salafi candidates suggests frustration with bloc policies of boycotting and an inability to unite Salafis from different blocs. It may also signal a new strategy of running independently as a means to circumvent the 2012 electoral law, which many Kuwaitis believe was implemented to erode support bases of organized blocs.

Islamist Action in Nonelectoral Systems of the Gulf: Examining Qatar and the UAE

In states like Qatar and the UAE, which limit institutionalized political participation, Islamist politics become focused on the social sphere. Brotherhood branches in these states are not divided into hizb and harakat. Far from functioning solely to advance political aims, then, Brotherhood affiliates and Salafi groups endorse social organizations, schools, charities, and businesses.⁶⁹

Islamic groups become more difficult for governments to regulate due to these informal structures. Without the formal controls available in electoral systems, strategies of crackdown or co-optation are the means of managing Islamist groups. Still, both the Emirati and Qatari governments have historically granted bureaucratic positions to members of Muslim Brotherhood organizations, from foreign and local branches, and have allowed them to maintain social influence through their charities and social groups, in an effort to appease them. Their ties with Salafis have tended to be less formal and weaker. On the whole, though Qatar has not changed its pre-Arab Spring policy of tolerating Islamists while trying to co-opt them through the offer of bureaucratic positions, the UAE has decidedly continued its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood that began in the 1990s and seems willing to extend this crackdown to Salafi groups as well.

The Qatari Muslim Brotherhood: Soft Co-optation Remains

The Qatari Muslim Brotherhood officially existed only from 1975 to 1999, when the group's members voted to dissolve it. Due to the group's largely informal nature and the absence of political openings in Qatar, whose only elected body, the Central Municipal Council (CMC), lacks political power, the Qatari Muslim Brotherhood has tended to focus on social policy rather than structural political reform. Indeed, the organization never formed a political arm and lacked any tangible impact on political life inside Qatar. Nonetheless, many of the organization's members gained a foothold in the Ministry of Education during the 1950s and 1960s.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Shadi Hamid, *Temptations of Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11-12.

⁷⁰ Abdulla Juma Kobaisi, "The Development of Education in Qatar, 1950-1966 with an Analysis of Some Educational Problems" (PhD diss., Durham University, 1979), 122-23.

In terms of its activities today, Qatari Brotherhood sympathizers still gather largely informally, fundamentally unaffected by developments of the Arab Spring. The organization exists on a structural level only at the simplest unit, the *usra* (family), in which Brotherhood members read the Quran and engage in *tafsir* (interpretation of the Quran) and theological debate.⁷¹ Without means to disseminate its ideology through an official publication or even a formal meeting place, the Qatari Brotherhood does not appear to harbor ambitions beyond continuing intellectual and spiritual pursuits. As their goals of *dawa* (proselytizing) and Islamic education are achievable without the implementation of a structure that the state may find objectionable,⁷² the two are able to coexist without conflict or tension.

Since 2011, additional restrictions on the sale of alcohol have been imposed;⁷³ statues considered religiously offensive have been removed or covered;⁷⁴ and a national campaign for modesty (especially in dress) has been revived with government support.⁷⁵ Though such campaigns for more conservative social policies elsewhere in the region are often led by the Brotherhood, they seem informal and spontaneous in Qatar – so informal, in fact, that it is difficult to definitively link the group to such policy changes. The demand for such social changes could be a reflection of traditional Wahhabi conservatism or an active, though largely informal, Salafi affiliate. Either way, it is noteworthy that the government has been receptive to the types of demands traditionally supported by Brotherhood and Salafi groups, especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Qatari Salafis: Informal Influence Persists

While no formal Salafi organization exists inside Qatar, Salafism still exerts influence inside the state. Because Wahhabism is Qatar's state religion, it is natural for Salafis to have a foothold in that country. Indeed, Qatar has in many ways supported and promoted the spread of Salafism, with the state a major benefactor of the movement.⁷⁶ Especially since the early 2000s, the Qatari capital of Doha has become a haven for Gulf Salafis, with government ministries hosting several events with Salafi clerics.⁷⁷

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Further, the dominant Islamist influence in the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs is said to be of the stricter Salafi strand, rather than that of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁸ Despite a tendency toward more conservative Islam in Qatari mosques, it is unlikely that this

⁷¹ Author interview with Abdulaziz al-Mahmoud, Doha, Qatar, October 28, 2013.

⁷² Author interview with Abdulaziz al-Mahmoud, Doha, Qatar, October 28, 2013.

⁷³ Benjamin Barthe, "Gloom Grips Qatar's Arab Riviera after Alcohol Ban," *The Guardian*, February 21, 2012; Lesley Walker, "Qatar Hotels Told Not to Sell Alcohol in Run-up to Eid Al-Adha," *Doha News*, April 27, 2015.

⁷⁴ Susan Hack, "Qatar's Billion-Dollar Art Collection Causes Controversy," *Bloomberg*, October 2, 2014.

⁷⁵ Lesley Walker, "Modest Dress Campaign Revived with New 'You Matter in Qatar' Slogan," *Doha News*, May 4, 2015.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Dickinson, "The Case Against Qatar," *Foreign Policy*, September 30, 2014.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Author interview with Gulf scholar, Doha, Qatar, November 1, 2013.

is formally affiliated with any specific Islamist movement.⁷⁹ The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs has endeavored to maintain a balance between conservative and more moderate Islam. For instance, one Egyptian imam whose sermons favored more radical anti-Western opinions was removed from his mosque in 2012, demonstrating state attempts to temper the anti-Western thought sometimes associated with Salafism.⁸⁰

Still, several Qatari charities are touted as strongholds for Salafis, especially after the Arab Spring when more causes emerged in need of support. A 2014 report dubbed Qatar's Eid Bin Muhammad Al-Thani Charitable Association "probably the biggest and most influential activist Salafi-controlled relief organizations."⁸¹ Its director, Abd al-Rahman al-Nuaimi, has been accused of going far beyond promoting Salafism to funding jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.⁸² In the face of such allegations about terrorist funding, the Qatari government in September 2014 issued a new set of regulations for charity organizations, stating that those "indulging in politics, or sending or receiving money to/from other countries without approval from the regulatory authority will face action, including termination of their activities."⁸³

While Salafi funding is more straightforward to monitor, activities, such as those seeking to alter social policy, are more difficult to measure. One Gulf scholar refers to those pushing for the "Salafization of the public sphere" in Qatar as one of two increasingly polarized forces, both present in the ruling al-Thani family.⁸⁴ While Sheikha Moza bint Nasser al-Misnad is seen to represent the strand of the al-Thani ruling family pushing for modernization and Westernization, Salafis are pushing in the opposite direction – and even more so as they consider themselves under fire both from the large expatriate majority and from segments of the ruling family. Complaints about the diminishing of local culture and religion in Qatar are widespread, with many nationals feeling that "society is developing too quickly."⁸⁵

While Salafi funding is more straightforward to monitor, activities, such as those seeking to alter social policy, are more difficult to measure.

Future Outlook for Qatar's Islamists

The Qatari government became more supportive, both in language and deed, of Islamist groups internationally after the Arab Spring. This did not have a major impact on the ability of Islamists to influence policymaking inside Qatar, where something of a soft state co-optation has dominated Qatari policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis. Islamists can and do influence the social sphere through informal collective action as well as through access to the

⁷⁹ Author interview with former advisor to Qatari emir, Doha, Qatar, December 4, 2013.

⁸⁰ Author interview with former advisor to Qatari emir, Doha, Qatar, December 4, 2013.

⁸¹ Zoltan Pall, "[Kuwaiti Salafism and Its Growing Influence in the Levant](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2014, 12.

⁸² Robert Mendick, "[Al-Qaeda Terror Financier Worked for Qatari Government](#)," *The Telegraph*, October 12, 2014.

⁸³ "[Stricter Rules to Regulate Charities](#)," *The Peninsula*, September 16, 2014.

⁸⁴ Author interview with Khaled al-Hroub, Doha, Qatar, September 18, 2013.

⁸⁵ Author interview with Steven Wright, Doha, Qatar, September 23, 2013.

ruling family through bureaucratic positions. As a result, these groups are not at odds with the government and are not likely to be, as long as the government continues to be responsive to Islamist concerns about social policies.

UAE: Brotherhood Quashed after the Arab Spring

Islah Society, the Emirati branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1974, initially concerned itself primarily with traditionally “Islamist” topics concerning social policy, such as the development of Islamic education, censorship of Western materials, restriction of the sale of alcohol, and the encroachment of foreign (particularly Western) businesses and culture in Emirati society.⁸⁶ Though Islah initially resembled the Qatari Brotherhood in its focus on social policies and education, it also developed a political reform agenda, pressing for more representative government and more equal distribution of wealth.⁸⁷ Still, it had no institutionalized means of effecting political change, with the UAE’s only elected body, the Federal National Council, lacking legislative authority and representing less than half of the voting-age population.

Despite the absence of an institutionalized political opening, the Emirati Brotherhood found means of influencing portions of the local populace through prominent positions in the educational sector, as in Qatar. Unlike in Qatar, however, in the UAE, the government began to restrict power of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s, fearing that its members had become too influential.

Due in part to the imposition of restrictions beginning in the 1990s, Islamist groups became less organized, existing as little more than an informal social network.⁸⁸ Facing government restrictions and inspired by Arab Spring uprisings elsewhere, Islah joined forces with secular advocates for political reform to write a petition in March 2011 demanding more representative government, leading the regime to decisively move against it through a widespread campaign of arrests. As in Bahrain and Kuwait, the government has been careful to squelch opposition unity, particularly after the Arab Spring. In April 2012, seven Islah members (the so-called UAE7),⁸⁹ who were signatories to the petition and whose citizenship had been stripped in December 2011, were sent to prison after they did not leave the country as the government

⁸⁶ See Abdullah Abu al-Hadi, “Why Ban Islamic Magazines?” *al-Islah* 30/50 (1982), Qtd. in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 2*; “The University between Hope and Social Impact,” *al-Islah* 50, no. 49 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE*, ed. Ali Salem Humaid (Dubai: Al Mezmaah Studies and Research Centre, 2013), 1; “Our Children and the Lovely Pig,” *al-Islah* 34, no. 49 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 1*; “Readings into Some Curricula of Private Schools in the Emirates,” *al-Islah* no. 57 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 2*; “We Are Waiting for Final Ban,” *al-Islah* 7, no. 50 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 1*; “Frugality and Extravagance,” *al-Islah* 50, no. 51 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 1*; Omar Abdul Rahman, “The Devil Kai and the English Language,” *al-Islah* 26-27, no. 49 (1982), in *The Roots of Conspiracy Against the UAE 1*.

⁸⁷ Pekka Hakala, “[Opposition in the United Arab Emirates](#),” *European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies*, November 15, 2012, 2.

⁸⁸ Wanda Krause, *Women in Civil Society: The State, Islamism, and Networks in the UAE* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 104.

⁸⁹ The seven included Sheikh Mohammad Abdul Razzaq al-Siddiq, Ahmed Ghaith al-Suwaidi, Ali Hussain al-Hammadi, Shaheen Abdullah al-Hosani, Hussain Munif Abdullah al-Jabri, Hassan Al-Jabri, and Ibrahim Hassan al-Marzouqi.

requested.⁹⁰ They said they had been “unjustly targeted for their political views” since they had signed the petition on behalf of Islah.⁹¹ These arrests marked only the beginning of the crackdown on Islah.

By the end of July 2012, 54 Islamists had been arrested, including academics, activists, and even Sheikh Sultan bin Kayed al-Qasimi from the ruling family of Ras al-Khaimah.⁹² Attorney General Ali Salim al-Tunaiji accused Islah of “plotting ‘crimes against state security’ and of opposing ‘the UAE constitution and ruling system,’” yet presented no evidence to that effect.⁹³

The government’s crackdown on the Brotherhood may indicate that the organization held more popular support than was previously believed, despite having been under state surveillance since the 1990s. More likely, however, it reflects the leadership’s long-held worry about potential Islamist takeover. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, in leaked U.S. diplomatic cables from as early as 2006, claimed that “if there were an election [in the UAE] tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood would take over.”⁹⁴ This paranoia became more acute after the outbreak of the Arab

Spring, despite that Islah members by no means represent a majority of Emirati citizens and did not hold a formal political agenda. For their part, members of Islah insist that it remains “pacifist, civilian and moderate and has never, and will

Instead of choosing soft co-optation in the Qatari style, the Emirati government appears fully committed to squelching any influence of political Islam, even Salafism that had previously been tolerated.

never, choose to take up arms.”⁹⁵ Nonetheless, after its members expressed their support for political reform within the UAE, cooperating with secular advocates for reform to do so, the government decided that it could no longer tolerate Islah.⁹⁶ Instead of choosing soft co-optation in the Qatari style, the Emirati government appears fully committed to squelching any influence of political Islam, even Salafism that had previously been tolerated.

Emirati Salafis: Increasingly Marginalized Post-Grozny

Aware of the Brotherhood’s eagerness to participate in political debate, Abu Dhabi’s government promoted the emergence of other, more politically quietist, Islamic ideologies instead, specifically Sufism and Jamaat al-Tabligh.⁹⁷ In other, subtler ways, the Emirati government in the past fostered limited support for purist, or politically inactive, Salafism,

⁹⁰ “‘There Is No Freedom Here’: Silencing Dissent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE),” *Amnesty International*, November 2014, 7.

⁹¹ Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 225.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ “‘There Is No Freedom Here’: Silencing Dissent in the United Arab Emirates (UAE),” *Amnesty International*, November 2014, 7.

⁹⁴ Christopher M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 14.

⁹⁵ Islah statement, Qtd. in “UAE Islamists Deny Forming Military Wing,” *Ahram Online*, September 22, 2012.

⁹⁶ Author conversations with Islah members, London, June 2016.

⁹⁷ Ali Mohammad Khalifa, *The United Arab Emirates: Unity in Fragmentation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 94.

perhaps signaling its local popularity. Indeed, despite government controls over most of the philanthropic sector, one of the most prominent charities in the UAE today, Dar al-Birr Society, is a “Salafi foundation linked to Saudi Arabia,” active in funding a number of educational institutions within the UAE. It also circulates a magazine, broadcasts a radio show, and runs several retail businesses.⁹⁸

In another departure from a government policy of promoting so-called “moderate” Islam, Egyptian Islamic scholar Omar Abd al-Kafi, director of the Quranic Studies Centre associated with the Dubai International Holy Quran Award, has been allowed to retain a prominent public role inside the UAE. In addition to his official role, Kafi has hosted a number of radio and television programs and helps organize and judge heavily publicized government-sponsored Quranic recitation contests. He “is seen as a link between the Egyptian Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood,”⁹⁹ and is useful as such, appealing to a largely conservative population of Emirati nationals. Kafi’s sermons tend to highlight cultural issues like whether Muslims should greet Christians on Christian holidays.¹⁰⁰ He thus engages with debates about maintaining the Emirati and Islamic nature of the state without being prescriptive in political matters.

Egyptian Salafi Sheikh Mohammed Hassan’s writings are also available in Emirati mosques and mainstream bookstores, and he is regularly featured on Emirati television channels.¹⁰¹ He supports national campaigns like Charity Dubai, is outspoken about the UAE’s role in the Muslim world, and even spends six months of the year in Abu Dhabi, where he is said to give sermons at Ibn al-Kim mosque, and is a preacher at the Sharjah Campaign of al-Fajer for Hajj and Umra.¹⁰² By allowing platforms to such figures, Emirati rulers enhance their own religious legitimacy while also helping to control the religious narrative, similar to the Qatari government’s approach, yet pursued on a much more limited scale.

A narrow Wahhabi presence also remains in Ras al-Khaimah, which formerly housed Al Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Al Islamiyya, a Saudi Wahhabi university, as well as in Sharjah. The ruling al-Qasimi family of both emirates has been “historically more conservative and outspoken,” in large measure due to its close financial ties with Saudi Arabia.¹⁰³ It seems that the Emirati government, similar to the Qatari, has historically allowed for the limited influence of Salafism within its own purview.

This stance appears to have changed, however, in the aftermath of the Grozny Conference, held in the Chechen capital at the end of August. The event, “Who are Sunnis?” was partially funded by the UAE’s Taba Foundation and involved some two hundred Sunni scholars, including the grand mufti of Egypt, grand imam of Al-Azhar, advisors to the Egyptian president, influential

⁹⁸ Noorhaidi Hasan, “Saudi Expansion, The Salafi Campaign and Arabised Islam in Indonesia,” in *Kingdom without Borders: Saudi Political, Religious and Media Frontiers*, ed. Madawi al-Rasheed (London: Hurst, 2008), 275.

⁹⁹ Author interview with Richard Gauvain, Dubai, UAE, March 2, 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Hammond, *Pop Culture Arab World!: Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 226.

¹⁰¹ Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (London: Routledge, 2012), 357.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Author interview with researcher based in Ras al-Khaimah, UAE, March 3, 2014.

Yemeni cleric Habib Ali Jifri, and the grand mufti of Syria.¹⁰⁴ More notably, Salafis, Wahhabis, and the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to members of violent jihadist organizations, were excluded, as were Qatari and Saudi clerics.¹⁰⁵ The conference's final communique included a new definition of Sunnis, which excluded Salafis and by extension Wahhabis, while also indirectly criticizing such groups for religious intolerance and exclusion of groups the conference considered Sunni, like Sufis.¹⁰⁶ The Muslim Brotherhood responded by expressing its "deep sorrow" and stated that the conference "ignited fires of discord among Muslims around the world."¹⁰⁷ The conference, though not directly linked to the Emirati government, was supported by a Chechen leader with alleged ties to the Abu Dhabi government.¹⁰⁸

Future Outlook for Emirati Islamists

Islah continues as an organization, primarily from abroad, especially the United Kingdom and Turkey. The group also uses its website to demand the release of its detained members and has called for the prosecution of government officials whom it believes to have tortured Islah detainees to obtain false confessions from them about the group's militant nature.¹⁰⁹ Those inside the UAE who remain sympathetic to the Brotherhood, "are very careful and keep it quiet" and appear to have no influence on policymaking.¹¹⁰

Salafis have historically had slightly better fortune in the UAE, but this will likely change. The government-supported crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Grozny Conference, and that the UAE's political economy is dependent on a degree of economic and social liberalism objectionable to Islamists, make the Emirati leadership's negative stance toward independent Islamist activism unsurprising. Though the leadership seemed to have distinguished between the Brotherhood and Salafis at one point, allowing more independence to the latter, it seems to be doubling down on its oppositional stance toward political Islam, considering all strands associated with it to be dangerous.

Conclusion: The Future of Islamism in the Gulf

The activities of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi organizations in the smaller Gulf states undoubtedly influence political discourse and social life. They do so, however, in different ways and to varying extents, depending on government structure and tolerance of independent

¹⁰⁴ Abbas Kadhim, "[The Sunni Conference in Grozny: A Muslim Intra-Sectarian Struggle for Legitimacy](#)," *The Huffington Post*, September 9, 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Hala Aldosari, "[Saudi Arabia's Struggle for Sunni Leadership](#)," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 7, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Yaroslav Trofimov, "[Excommunicating Saudis? A New Fracture Emerges in Islam](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 22, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Robert Fisk, "[For the First Time, Saudi Arabia is Being Attacked by Both Sunni and Shia Leaders](#)," *The Independent*, September 22, 2016.

¹⁰⁹ "Nashitun Yutalibun Shuyukh al-Dawla al-Ahrar bi-I-Tadakhkhu li-Waqf Hamaqat Jihaz al-Aman bi-Haq Ahali al-Mutaqalin" [Activists Demand the Shaykhs of the Free State to Intervene to Stop the Follies of the Security Apparatus against the Detainees' Families], *Jamiat al-Islah wa-l-Tawjih al-Ijtimai*, April 4, 2013.

¹¹⁰ Author interview with Dubai-based Gulf correspondent, Dubai, UAE, March 6, 2014.

Islamist movements. By and large, though, Salafis do not have a definitive advantage over Muslim Brotherhood affiliates. Sunni Islamists seem to be viewed largely through the same prism by smaller Gulf governments after the Arab Spring, leading such regimes either to accept or reject Islamism wholesale.

Historically, it has been difficult for Gulf governments to completely ban such organizations, since their legitimacy relies at least to a certain extent on their commitment to Islam. Nonetheless, there seems to be increasing appetite to do so, at least in Bahrain and the UAE, as a means of promoting political stability after Islamist groups featured prominently in protests of the Arab Spring. In Kuwait and Qatar, Islamists are more likely to be tolerated and co-opted, since Brotherhood and Salafi organizations are, by and large, not considered threatening to the existing systems: In Kuwait, Islamists are accepted as a decades-old part of the political system, and in Qatar, they have been co-opted.

Increasingly, international events have also come to influence government policies toward Islamist groups in the Gulf, as Islamism is more and more portrayed as a transnational, rather than a local, force. Its rise as the primary opposition movement during the Arab Spring only fueled existing worries in the Gulf about the potential spread of Islamism there. Further, the international spread of Salafi jihadist ideology has only driven the perception that Islamism necessarily crosses borders and often fuels violence. The more that this strand of violent jihadism is associated with Salafism, the more likely the movements will be suppressed. Further, state collapse in Iraq and Syria has only heightened concerns about Gulf insecurity, which became reawakened during the Arab Spring. The changing balance of power with Iran, seen most clearly with the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, has additionally enflamed sectarianism and brought to the fore worries about waning international influence of the Gulf Arab states, leading to a general reassertion of nationalism throughout the region.

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Due to these trends, Salafis are not likely to replace the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gulf. Though initially it seemed that Salafis would be treated with less suspicion than the Brotherhood due to their informal nature in states like Qatar and the UAE, the Grozny Conference signals a sea change, at least for the Emirati regime.

In states where electoral politics reign, such as Bahrain and Kuwait, Salafis tend to resemble their Brotherhood counterparts, demonstrating the power of Brotherhood tactics in electoral politics. Salafis are thus unlikely to be able to overshadow Brotherhood influence in such states, since they lack the organization and unity of Brotherhood groups and rely largely on Brotherhood-inspired tactics. This is particularly the case in Kuwait. In Bahrain, Brotherhood and Salafi groups do resemble one another, but mainly in their primarily loyalist stance toward the government.

Because Muslim Brotherhood groups came to power elsewhere in the Middle East through elections after the Arab Spring, it makes sense that those Gulf states with electoral systems have imposed restrictions either on Islamist representation in Parliament or on cooperation

between Islamists and other oppositional political blocs. Still, the Kuwaiti government has focused principally on preventing strong opposition cooperation, while the Bahraini rulers have taken a definitive stand against Islamism, largely because permitting Sunni Islamists makes it more difficult to ban Shia Islamists.

Because Brotherhood and Salafi groups exist informally in Qatar and the UAE, the UAE's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and support for the Grozny Conference make less sense, yet likely reflect internal fears that Islamism could unite segments of the Emirati population. Further, the economic model of Dubai and Abu Dhabi mandates a degree of economic and social liberalism rejected by Islamists and threatening to their survival.

The most significant post-Arab Spring changes with regard to Islamists have thus been in Bahrain and the UAE, even though the UAE did not face major protests. These policies, which initially targeted the Brotherhood, seem now to have come to affect Salafis as well, as a blanket ban on political Islam is being encouraged. The Kuwaiti government has not shifted its strategy toward Islamists, despite having faced some of the largest protests in its history, though it has tried to crack down on Salafi fundraising with 2013 legislation that criminalized terrorist financing.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, Qatar's strategy of soft co-optation worked before the Arab Spring and continues to be effective today and so has not been altered.

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Upcoming legislative elections in Kuwait in November 2016 and Bahrain in 2018 will give a good indication of how much popular support Brotherhood and Salafi blocs hold in such states after the Arab Spring. However, it remains difficult to measure the impact of these groups in Qatar and the UAE. Islamists' behavior inside Parliament, as well as government reactions to it, will also be important. Future crackdowns are most likely to focus on opposition coalitions rather than on Islamists, however, since they are perceived as having been weakened by the overthrow of Morsi's Brotherhood-led government in Egypt in 2013. Nonetheless, Sunni Islamism has a genuine, if informal and segmented, following inside the Gulf and is thus likely to continue to influence domestic political debate.

Even though Brotherhood and Salafi organizations influence political debate almost equally inside the smaller Gulf states, these groups do not pose a serious threat to ruling regimes. Their ability to affect political discourse as well as social boundaries, inside some of the world's wealthiest rentier states, however, should not be overlooked. Because Islamism can exist as an ideological pillar even in places where it has been squelched structurally, Gulf leaders should take into account major Islamist demands as they move forward with economic, political, and social reforms, rather than widening their crackdown to all strands of Islamism that they consider oppositional. The more that leaders conflate Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups and treat them with the same policy of repression, the more likely they will unite to enhance their political impact.

¹¹¹ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "The Terrorist Funding Disconnect with Qatar and Kuwait," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 2, 2014.

