
THE SILENT REVOLUTION: EDUCATION AND INSTABILITY IN THE GULF MONARCHIES

GAWDAT BAHGAT

Since the end of World War II, the global economy has grown dependent on oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. Given the immense reserves in the region, this dependence is likely to increase. The Gulf War of 1991 showed the uncompromising world determination to guarantee the safety of oil fields and shipments. A heavy Western, particularly American, military presence in the region since the Gulf War, has served as a deterrent against any threat to the security of the six Gulf monarchies: Bahrain; Kuwait; Oman; Qatar; Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This alliance, formal and informal, between the Gulf regimes and the Western powers has reduced tremendously the likelihood of another full-scale war similar to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This relative security from an outside enemy does not, however, eliminate other sources of threat to regional oil supplies.

For the last several years, there have been signs of growing internal instability in a number of the Gulf monarchies. The domestic environment reflects a fundamental structural imbalance between economic growth on the one hand and social and political developments on the other hand. The former has surpassed the latter. Due to the huge oil revenues, Gulf citizens have enjoyed a substantial improvement in their standard of living. Meanwhile, social attitudes and political structures have changed at a much slower pace. This imbalance in the speed of change challenges the stability of the region. Increasingly, the six Gulf regimes have been unable to peacefully assimilate the growing number of emerging social forces, particularly educated youths, into existing economic and political structures.

This study focuses on the internal challenges facing the six Gulf monarchies.

Gawdat Bahgat is Assistant Professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He received his master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the American University in Cairo and his Ph.D. in Political Studies from Florida State University. In the past three years he has published three books and numerous articles in English and Arabic on the Persian Gulf. His articles have appeared in international journals in the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway, Italy, Lebanon, Iran and India. The author wishes to acknowledge the support he received from Dr. David Lynch and Dr. Ginger Brown.

chies, particularly in managing the influence of education on social mobilization. For the foreseeable future the stability of the six states and the security of oil supplies from the region will be endangered more from within and less from without. This paper examines imbalances between the educational system and the labor market, between technical training and "academic" studies, between religious and secular education, and between men's and women's participation rates in schooling and employment. In addition, the social, economic and political implications of these mismatches will be analyzed. But first, a discussion of the evolution of the educational system in the Gulf monarchies is in order.

Education as an Object and an Agent of Change

Unlike other issues, such as economic development or the security of the region, education has received much less attention than it deserves. The Gulf monarchies' success in introducing formal education to their populations is impressive, particularly when compared with their levels of education a generation ago. For example, in 1950, 97.5 percent of Saudi Arabia's population was illiterate.¹ In 1995, the percentage dropped to 37.2 percent.² As table I indicates, similar results were achieved in the other Gulf states.

Country	Total	Male	Female
Bahrain	14.8	10.9	20.6
Kuwait	21.4	17.8	25.1
Oman	65.0	n/a*	n/a
Qatar	20.6	20.8	20.1
Saudi Arabia	37.2	28.5	49.8
UAE	20.8	21.1	20.2

Sources: UNESCO, *Statistical Yearbook* (Lanham, MD: Bernan Press, 1997), 1-23 to 1-32; United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 147. *Data not available.

This high literacy rate, in comparison to that of other Middle Eastern countries, can be explained by one factor: oil. In most of the Gulf monarchies, oil was discovered in commercial quantities shortly after the end of World War II. Oil revenues have provided the financial means to initiate and pursue this stunning expansion in education. In addition to eliminating illiteracy, oil revenues provided the resources to establish institutions of higher education, as table II shows.

The expansion of university-level education in the last few decades demonstrates Gulf rulers' attitudes toward investing in human resources in order to secure a better future for their citizens. In line with this policy, education is

Table II
Universities in the Gulf Monarchies in 1996

University	Founded	Teachers	Students
Arab Gulf Univ.	1980	68	368
Univ. of Bahrain	1986	320	6,760
Kuwait Univ.	1962	955	15,500
Sultan Qaboos Univ.	1985	425	5,000
Univ. of Qatar	1973	637	7,794
Muhammad Ibn Saud	1953	1,512	23,922
Islamic Univ.	1961	620	5,500
King Abd Al-Aziz Univ.	1967	1,145	30,773
King Fahd Univ.	1963	635	5,961
King Faisal Univ.	1975	519	4,579
King Saud Univ.	1957	2,768	37,324
Umm Al-Qura Univ.	1981	90	2,000

Source: Europa Publications, The World of Learning 1997, Forty-Seventh Edition, (London: Unwin Brothers Limited, 1996).

provided free of charge at all levels. In addition to no tuition fees, states also provide all necessary textbooks and equipment. The education budget has remained high since commercial oil production began, second only to defense expenditures in most of the Gulf monarchies.³ Finally, in order to fully appreciate this progress in education, it is important to note that modern education was introduced in the region much later than in the neighboring countries of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

The traditional educational system was based on the *kuttab*, small religious classes, in which groups of boys or girls were taught to recite the Qu'ran, and sometimes taught basic writing and arithmetic. Mosques, and occasionally private homes, served as the location for *kuttab* learning. Modernization and increasing integration into the international system have introduced change. The Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) participated in promoting education in Saudi Arabia's eastern province and in 1953 Britain built the first school offering a comprehensive curriculum in Sharjah, UAE.⁴ This modern education has not, however, replaced the old religious one. Rather, both educational systems, modern/secular and traditional/religious, co-exist and cause economic and political tensions.

Religious Education and Political Opposition

The predominance of religion in most aspects of the educational system is an important characteristic of Gulf societies. Islamic and Arabic studies continue to dominate school and college curricula. The establishment of several universities in the region was meant, at least partly, to reduce the number of students sent to study abroad for fear that they might be influenced by West-

ern culture. Many schools and universities have a strict policy of gender segregation.⁵ This official endorsement of religious education, as well as the impact of the latter on the political process, needs to be addressed.

For several decades, Gulf regimes have been enthusiastic about the expansion of Islamic studies. A number of political developments can explain this official attitude. First, in order to co-opt the traditional Islamic establishment, the six Gulf states have spent generously to build new religious schools and universities. This policy has consolidated the partnership between the leaders

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of the religious hierarchy and the royal families, particularly in Saudi Arabia. Second, the Kingdom and other Gulf states have sought to expand their cultural and political influence in many parts of the Islamic world. A large number of graduates from religious institutions makes achieving this goal possible. Finally, highlighting the pious character of the state has served as a bulwark against both radical Arabism and Iranian fundamentalism.

Ironically, these Islamic institutions have become a two-edged political instrument, serving both as a primary medium of self-legitimation and as the main venue of protest for opposition elements.⁶ The same schools and universities which were founded by the governments to enhance and promote their religious image have provided economic and ideological incentives for anti-regime activities. For a long time, the graduates of these schools were recruited into the civil service as preachers or sent abroad on reli-

gious missions. The increasing inefficiency of the bureaucracy, as well as the growing number of religious school graduates, has made it harder for the governments to provide them with sufficient employment. Furthermore, the fact that many graduates lack technical training makes it difficult for them to find employment outside the public sector. Accordingly, some remain unemployed for long periods of time and become easy targets for extremist movements and ideas. Finally, the expansion of formal religious education programs in technologically modernizing societies has created some economic dislocation between those equipped primarily with a religious education and those prepared to work in the modern economic sector.⁷

Vocational Education and the Under-utilization of Manpower

Many developing countries suffer from capital shortage and labor abundance. By contrast, the Gulf monarchies experience surpluses of financial resources but lack appropriately trained manpower. This unusual characteristic can be seen as the main reason for the imbalance in the educational system

and the mismatch in the labor force.

In all six Gulf states, humanities and social sciences dominate the curriculum at the expense of hard sciences. Traditionally, technical education has been associated with the lower classes. The great majority of the population values "academic" learning more than vocational training. The majority of students choose the less demanding humanities and social sciences in part because the language used for instruction and in the textbooks is usually Arabic. Only a small minority of students elect to study engineering and sciences where the teaching language and materials are often in English and many of the professors are foreign.⁸ This tendency among students not to choose vocational training had been reinforced, until recently, by the availability of more attractive job opportunities in the civil service. The predominance of humanities in the Gulf states' educational systems is due to insufficient attention to labor-market requirements on the part of policy makers. Decisions to expand education have been made in response to the availability of capital surpluses and not in conjunction with long-term and well-defined national policy. The educational imbalance has caused a distortion of the supply-side of the labor market.

A high level of unemployment among the national labor force is paradoxically accompanied by the presence of a huge number of expatriates. In 1995, foreign workers represented more than 80 percent of the labor force in the United Arab Emirates and constituted the majority in other states such as Qatar and Kuwait.⁹ This can be explained by the gap between the academic education many nationals have received and the technical training their modernizing societies need. The great majority of nationals are employed by their governments; it is estimated that more than 90 percent of Kuwaiti, Saudi, and other Gulf employees work for the public sector.¹⁰ The private sector relies heavily on foreign labor.

The "oil boom" of the 1970s explains this asymmetrical distribution of employees between the private and public sectors. The immense revenues Gulf states received after the huge jump in oil prices incited them to initiate ambitious social and economic plans. Given their small populations and lack of indigenous trained labor, they invited expatriates to build a state of the art economic infrastructure. Expansion of the education system was designed to prepare nationals to replace foreign workers in developing industries. At the same time, Gulf bureaucracies expanded partly to secure governmental control over the economic, social and political lives of their citizens and partly to provide job opportunities for the increasing number of graduates. This policy

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of guaranteeing public sector employment to all graduates produced inflated and inefficient bureaucracies, and an under-utilized labor force.

An increasing realization of the need to diversify resources by introducing industrialization and financial and commercial services, as well as the growing conviction that the private sector plays a crucial role in securing improved

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economic performance, has reinforced the need to nationalize the labor force. For the last several years, there has been talk of the "Bahrainization," "Saudization," and "Omanization" of the labor force. The general goal of these policies is to make it more expensive and harder for private corporations to hire foreigners and simultaneously to raise the technical skills and qualifications of the indigenous labor force.

To consolidate this policy of greater dependence on national manpower, requires at least three steps. First, a slow process of changing public attitude toward vocational education must be pursued. Recently, both King Fahd of Saudi Arabia and Sultan Qaboos of Oman called on their citizens to be more willing to appreciate manual work. Second, a balance between technical training and "academic" learning needs to be achieved. More funds should be invested in professional and scientific education.

Gulf monarchies need fewer PhDs and more mechanics. Third, women should be integrated into the labor force. The high ratio of educated women should be reflected in the labor force and in public life in general.

The Gender Gap

A fundamental social change in the contemporary Persian Gulf is the emergence of women in the previously exclusively male world of public affairs. Education is an important and visible component of this change.¹¹ In considering women's education and their changing social role, three main questions emerge. How successful have women been in gaining their share of public education? Who is behind this momentum and what is the impact of more educated women on the political systems?

Given the varying degrees of conservatism among the six Gulf societies, no one uniform policy has been implemented in regard to women's education. In countries such as Bahrain and Kuwait, women gained the right to be educated at an earlier date and with little opposition. By contrast, in the more conservative Saudi Arabia, granting the right of public education to women took longer and caused serious debate. Objections from concerned parents and *ulama* (religious scholars) to girls' schools, based on the fear that they might have undesirable effects on girls, delayed the establishment of these schools

by the government until 1960. In order to open girls' schools, force was used against some conservative elements and the *ulama* were given the right to administer the schools.¹² Two years later, in 1962, four women were allowed to join a Saudi institution, King Saud University.¹³ Since then, Gulf women have made dramatic advances as can be seen by their relatively high level of literacy (table I) and by the number of female students enrolled at all levels of education.

This impressive achievement does not mean that the conservatives have lost their influence over women's education. They have not. Still today, the purpose of educating girls in some of the Gulf monarchies is to bring them up in a proper Islamic way, to perform their duties in life: as ideal and successful housewives and good mothers, prepared to do things which suit their nature, like teaching, nursing and giving medical treatment.¹⁴ Accordingly, at the university level women are allowed to specialize in education, liberal arts and medicine, but they are not offered specializations in fields such as engineering or geology because these graduates would be required to work with men or carry out duties in public. This strict policy against gender integration is also demonstrated by two other practices. Male teachers communicate with women students only through closed-circuit television. Second, women going abroad to study have to follow the *mahram* rule, whereby women are not allowed to travel without their closest male relative as a chaperon.

Despite these restrictions, women have made significant gains in public education. These achievements were largely made possible by initiatives taken by female members of the royal families, such as King Faisal's wife Iffat in Saudi Arabia, President Zayid's wife Fatima in the UAE, Emir Hamad's wife Moza in Qatar, and Crown Prince Saad's wife Latifa in Kuwait. Without this royal encouragement, women in the Gulf would probably not have come as far and as fast as they have.

The spread of women's education has spurred their increasing integration into the labor force.

Country	1970	1990
Bahrain	05	17
Kuwait	08	23
Oman	06	12
Qatar	04	11
Saudi Arabia	05	10
UAE	04	12
Developing Countries	37	39

Source: United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report 1997* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 182.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the table. First, women in all six Gulf monarchies have made significant progress, doubling their share of the labor force in just two decades. Second, a comparison with other developing countries suggests that women in the Gulf still have a long way to go. It is also worth mentioning that the rising number of educated and working women

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has had a positive spillover on women's political rights. At the time of this writing, Iran (1963) and Iraq (1967) are the only Gulf states in which women can vote. In the six monarchies, important steps have been taken toward achieving women's suffrage. Not surprisingly, Kuwait, the only state with an elected legislature, has taken the lead. In 1982 a bill was presented to the National Assembly requesting an amendment of the Electoral Law to allow women to vote. The bill was rejected 27 to 7 with 16 abstentions.¹⁵ In 1997 a similar bill was introduced. This time, a strong argument for enfranchisement has been made based on the important role Kuwaiti women played in resisting the Iraqi occupation. Con-

sequently, the argument goes, those who were willing to give their lives for their country should have the right to a say in its political future.¹⁶

In Oman, two women, Shukur bint Muhammad Al Ghamari and Tayba bint Muhammad Al Ma'wali were nominated in 1994 as members of the Omani Consultative Council by Sultan Qaboos.¹⁷ In Bahrain, Munira Al Fakhro, a professor at the University of Bahrain with a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and other prominent figures, have been active in mobilizing public opinion and urging the government to restore an elected assembly in which women can vote and hold elected office.¹⁸ In the United Arab Emirates, women have been allowed to join military academies to train in various paramilitary functions.¹⁹ Finally, in conservative Saudi Arabia, in contrast to a general stereotype, women have made significant progress, particularly in business and the professions. In 1995, it was estimated that 40 percent of the Kingdom's private wealth was owned by women.²⁰ The number of women registered with the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce has increased more than five times in the last few years.²¹ Despite the fact that women in the Gulf have not achieved full political rights, the substantial rise in their educational level has increased their participation in public life, which has been incrementally transformed into political leverage.

Prospects for the Future

Both the discussion and figures presented in this study illustrate the presence of two contradictory characteristics in the social fabric of the modern Gulf societies. All six monarchies have succeeded in dramatically increasing literacy rates in a short period of time. Furthermore, the high level of student

enrollment at all levels is impressive. Measured by the quantity of education, the six Gulf states have made great strides. But this is not the whole story. There are some basic holes in this educational fabric. The discord between religious and secular schooling, between academic learning and the job market, and between women's education and their role in public life are important sources of tension in all six Gulf societies.

In the near future, this tension is likely to become more intense for two reasons. First, the high population growth rate in all six states means there will be more graduates and more job seekers. The current economic policies and systems have failed to generate enough jobs to keep up with the growing number of young people. Second, the growing need to diversify and privatize the economic structure requires a more skilled and professional labor force. Bluntly, the current educational systems do not enable the indigenous populations to meet these needs. The socioeconomic and political tensions produced by the current discordance could threaten the stability of the ruling regimes. The six Gulf monarchies need to reform their education systems to achieve coherence between their educational goals and their socioeconomic needs.

Notes

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4. Helen Chapin Metz, (ed), "Persian Gulf States: Country Studies" (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1994), 210.
5. In July 1996, the Kuwaiti parliament voted to segregate Kuwait University within five years. See Mary Ann Tetreault, "Designer Democracy in Kuwait," *Current History* 96: 606 (January 1997): 37.
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20. "Saudi Arabia: Silent Revolution," *The Economist* 334:7900 (February 4, 1995): 39.
21. *Ibid.*

