



## After the sheikhs: the coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies

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## BOOK REVIEW

**After the sheikhs: the coming collapse of the Gulf monarchies**, by Christopher M. Davidson, London, Hurst, 304 pp., ISBN 978-1-84904-189-8

This is a most timely book. It is neither the first and certainly not the last book to be written on the Gulf monarchies. Yet, it is, from a Western perspective, a most valuable and incisive account about the Gulf States. It is well written, well documented and quite analytical. Many such books fall into the trap of providing a descriptive narrative in lieu of in-depth analysis.

The book has been praised since its publication. The copy under review is the first edition, but in its fourth impression, an indication of the book's success. Indeed, events since 2011 in the Arab world have spurred an increased interest in the region with many questioning the traditional conventional wisdom about Arab society, polity, politics and its future, especially as far as 'stability', 'resistance to democracy', etc., are concerned.

Some commentators have lauded the book as an important account of the prospects for the Gulf region (Ian Black in *The Guardian*<sup>1</sup>) since the publication of Fred Halliday's landmark *Arabia Without Sultans* (1974). Dirk Vandewall, an academic from Dartmouth College, advised that Davidson's audacious predictions that Gulf regimes will be gone should not be taken lightly. Mehran Kamrava, Director of the Center for International and Regional Studies for Georgetown University in Qatar, said that it 'is a book of tremendous value. It applies a rigorously constructed theoretical framework to a rich array of empirical data in order to assess the long-term survivability of some of the world's last authoritarian holdouts' (inside page of the cover).

The book is 304 pages long including notes, bibliography, a postscript and index. The contents are displayed in 244 pages divided into an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a postscript. The chapters are more or less balanced in length (with a minimum of 16 pages for the introduction, and the rest ranging from 30 to 44 pages (Chapter 4). The bibliography is quite extensive where 138 different authors have been listed.

However, the number of Arab scholars referred to by the author is rather limited. Only 23 Arab authors, writing in English, have been mentioned. Yet, the basic drawback or flaw is the total absence of Arabic sources notwithstanding any reference to the publications from the Center of Arab Unity Studies, admittedly the most important Arab library on contemporary Arab issues. Although the author has resided for some-time in the Gulf where he was an assistant professor at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it does not seem that he has a working knowledge of Arabic that would have allowed him to use Arabic sources. Hence, at best, he provides a partial view of the picture in the region.

Davidson makes several arguments about traditional scholarship on the Gulf. Such scholarship was based on the premise that ‘the most acute threat to Gulf monarchies in the early 1970s was deemed to be some sort of sweeping socialist or Communist revolution, likely supported by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the People’s Republic of China’ (p. 3). Davidson seems to agree. The best example of such argument is Halliday’s *Arabia Without Sultans*. However, Davidson identifies another set of scholarship discussing ‘long-term’ threats to such monarchies: luminaries such as Daniel Lerner and Martin Lipset, Karl Deutsch, and Samuel Huntington. Davidson’s take on such scholarship is that the predictions made about the demise of the monarchies were proved to be wrong (p. 5). He believes that such scholarship ignored the mechanisms of survival. Indeed, he devotes two full chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) to that issue where he discusses at length the domestic and external factors that have helped the survival of such monarchies.

A significant argument made by the author explaining the survival of the monarchies is their co-optation of Islam. Since the 1950s and 1960s these monarchies have succeeded in co-opting Islam against their domestic and regional adversaries. The contribution of such monarchies to the Cold War culminated in the Afghan War and most recently in the Arab Spring. Islam was used to consolidate domestic power such as in Saudi Arabia and to fight the ‘external threat’ of Arab nationalism and the spread of progressive ideas. The author correctly identifies that co-opting religion is ‘a double-edged sword’ as it is both a ‘threat and an opportunity for the Gulf monarchies’ (p. 72). He points out that ‘Islamist movements – both intellectual and militant – have frequently questioned the status quo in these states’ (p. 73). Their main source of grievances is ‘the un-Islamic behavior of the various ruling families, the slide into autocracy, the reliance on non-Islamic foreign powers for security, and rampant corruption’ (p. 73).

Another argument the author makes is the distribution of wealth where dissidents were co-opted and provided with the opportunity to become wealthy. To a large extent it has worked. However, what the author seems to have forgotten is that the distribution of wealth is ingrained in the Arab ethos. It is not the particular genius of Arab petro-monarchies to have invented a survival mechanism. It is rather the application of a tradition over 1000 years old. But this is a debate beyond the core of this review, and illustrates to what extent Western scholars seem oblivious to the impact of Arab history. An Algerian scholar, Ahmad Henni, writing in French and residing in France, has written about the culture of wealth distribution in the Arab city in history (Henni 2007). We have also written extensively that Arab societies are essentially rentier societies and that has been the case over more than 1500 years (Hafez 2009). The culture of wealth generation is not predicated upon effort but about ‘capturing’ the value added produced by ‘others’. The writings of Ibn Khaldun shed light on the attitude of Arabs about ‘effort’ and the generation of wealth. The culture of raids and taking the spoils is the capture of ‘others’ wealth by force. Commerce, on the other hand, is the capture of the value added generated by ‘others’ by consent. In modern parlance, hostile takeover of corporations is a reminder of that culture of capturing wealth by force, not by generating it.

On the other hand, Arabs have a well-developed culture of wealth distribution. The solidarity system (*al takaful*) is the ancestor of social security. Hence, the distribution of wealth by Arab Gulf monarchs is not new and is not predicated upon any particular contribution to the survival mechanism.

Needless to say, the distribution of wealth as practised by petro-monarchs is directly linked to the spread of corruption. Strangely enough, the book is rather silent on that matter, though it does point out that ‘squandering wealth [ . . . ] is arguably just as damaging [ . . . ]’ (p. 121). It is the opacity of the political system that is the cause of such waste. Wealth distribution as practised by the petro-monarchs has neutralized possible dissent as accountability becomes a hindrance for receiving the largesse of the ruling families. Squandering wealth took the form of a race to build the ‘tallest skyscrapers’ and largest airports – clearly under-utilized because of the large number of facilities built in relatively small countries (p. 123). It is quite a surreal scene for a visitor to Saudi Arabia to see the sprouting of such skyscrapers given the traditional aversion of Saudis for the gender mixing in public spaces that would be caused by the use of common elevators. In the 1980s a block of high-rise apartments was empty for over a decade because of this aversion. Suddenly we see a race for building towers and various skyscrapers and shopping malls leading to a further squandering of wealth.

The book does not refer to high-profile cases of corruption reported in the British press revolving around the Yamama military transaction between the Saudi Ministry of Defense and British Aerospace. The corruption that has brought down many Arab regimes is threatening also to bring down many monarchies in the Gulf as it is providing fuel for dissenting groups such as the Islamists.

The author does a good job of listing the various ailments of Gulf societies such as voluntary unemployment (pp. 117–121), poverty and unemployment (pp. 129–134), discrimination, statelessness, and sectarianism (pp. 134–145).

The book’s main value added is its analysis of the ‘coming collapse’ (Chapter 6). In some 35 pages it provides a quick panorama of the situation in the Gulf countries. Starting with the ‘rage and retribution’ in Bahrain (pp. 205–209), to the ‘protests and promises’ in Oman (pp. 209–211), through the ‘cracks appearing’ in Saudi Arabia (pp. 211–216), and with the emerging opposition in the UAE (pp. 220–226), and ending with Qatar questioning its role as ‘a champion or charlatan’ (pp. 226–229).

This reviewer has sensed that the author is more comfortable dealing with the UAE than with the rest of the Gulf monarchies especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). There are many gaps in depicting the picture of the KSA, but perhaps the constraints of space did not allow for a fuller deconstruction of the regime. Indeed, many of the points relatively briefly raised by the author would command almost entire books on their own to be dealt with properly.

The book is quite clear about the future of the Gulf monarchies. Bahrain by far has ‘the bleakest future, with little hope that the ruling family can restore significant legitimacy to ever govern again without resorting to martial law and extensive repression’ (p. 232). Even in the KSA, apparently more stable than the rest of Gulf countries, the system is ‘equally unsustainable and probably prone to implosion within the next couple of years’ (p. 233). This is a remarkable prediction by any standard and time will show whether the author is correct. We tend to agree with him.

Despite many shortcomings, of which some have been highlighted, the book is timely and interesting. It does constitute a contribution to the discussion on the future of the region and especially the Gulf.

A final note: though the book appeared in 2012 in the UK one can note with some amusement the interest it is raising nowadays in the United States. The bimestrial journal published by the Council of Foreign Relations, *Foreign Affairs*, has recently devoted considerable space to the author. Is there a subliminal message?

**Note**

1. See <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/28/after-the-sheikhs-christopher-m-davison-review/>.

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