



## Before the deluge: reforming Gulf states and its illusions in the shadow of an energy transition

Harry Verhoeven

To cite this article: Harry Verhoeven (2021): Before the deluge: reforming Gulf states and its illusions in the shadow of an energy transition, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13530194.2021.1993468](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1993468)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1993468>



Published online: 29 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**From Sheikhs to Sultanism. Statecraft and authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE**, by Christopher M. Davidson, London/New York, Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2021, ISBN 9781787383937

**Rivals in the Gulf**, by David H. Warren, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, ISBN 9780367280628

**Low carbon energy in the Middle East and North Africa**, edited by Robin Mills and Li-Chen Sim, Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, ISBN 9783030595548

Climatic upheaval has upended millions of lives. Both those changes themselves and policy responses to them are redrawing local and global politics. While all regions are vulnerable to these seismic shifts, the stakes for Arabian Peninsula states are particularly high. The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released in August 2021, underscored why: the Gulf is among the areas of the world with the strongest projected increases in heat extremes (even in (unlikely) scenarios where global warming is limited to 2°C), which renders economic activity and habitation in various parts of the Peninsula extremely hazardous—and adaptation very costly. Moreover, the report also highlights the risks posed by extreme precipitation events, the likes of which the Gulf has not historically experienced. But it is not just the changing climate that presents a threat: decarbonization and broader energy transition debates call into question how Gulf economies have been internally organized for the last seventy years and their position in the international system. Could the global economy shed its dependence on hydrocarbons, thereby imperilling the more than one-third of GDP (in the United Arab Emirates) that oil still represents, or the 87% of government revenues in Saudi Arabia that petroleum continues to supply? Can Gulf societies maintain their influence in international politics as the world increasingly shifts to renewable sources of energy? And what will be the effects of the unwinding of (some) subsidies and restructurings of labour markets and trade flows as the lifeblood of rentier states is drained away?

Three new books reflect on reform trajectories being charted in Gulf states and the ways in which state-society relations are being challenged from within and without in the shadow of climatic changes and energy transitions. From the vantage point of poorer states and for external commentators, the rise in global prominence of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar has been unmistakable—by virtue of the massive U.S. bases and extraordinary energy potential (both hydrocarbons and renewables) on their territory, their deepening ties with American and European elites, their media networks with transcontinental reach and their ever-expanding sovereign wealth funds. But from the standpoint of Gulf incumbents, the last 10 years have been anything but privileged or comfortable. The Arab Spring rattled their status: anti-government protests in Bahrain, Barack Obama's decision to forsake America's long-standing ally Hosni Mubarak and the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood were all seen as potentially lethal challenges to ageing monarchies and their internal and external strategies of rule. Fears of Islamist conspiracies, of streets filled with unemployed youngsters, and of American abandonment dovetailed with worries over Iran's expanding regional posture, from Iraq and Syria to Yemen, Sudan and the Red Sea. Compounding this sense of physical insecurity was the looming threat to the business model of royal families on the Arabian Peninsula, as American

shale producers and Iranian cheap energy ate into Gulf market share, oil prices plunged in 2014 and the 2015 Paris Agreement committed the world to unprecedentedly concrete steps towards shedding its hydrocarbon dependency to mitigate climatic changes.

In *From Sheikhs to Sultanism*, Christopher Davidson propositions that it is this sense of existential crisis that paved the way for a rupture in the ruling bargain in the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The ascendancy of the tricenarian Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in the wake of King Abdallah's death in 2015 coincided with a torrent of IMF and media reports predicting two decades of low oil prices, Riyadh running out of foreign reserves and a budget deficit of 15% of GDP, while the US-led international community concluded a nuclear agreement with Iran that seemed to undo Abdallah's policy of isolating and confronting Tehran: '... *the opportunity for MBS to present himself as something of a saviour and the architect of a new "Fourth Saudi State" was undoubtedly enormous, especially given that the "old guard" appeared to have failed to steady the ship*' (p. 91).

Davidson describes how the legions of Western consultants that have long been embedded in Saudi policy-making scaled up their role to sell the message of a 'New Saudi Arabia' to citizens, diplomats and foreign investors. Saudi Vision 2030 promised a neoliberal future of fiscal discipline, energy subsidy reform and a partial privatization of Saudi Aramco, in which the nanny state with its *mutawwi'in* enforcing *hisbah* (public morality- e.g. banning women from driving) is replaced by individual entrepreneurship and commercial dynamism: with its strong emphasis on entertainment and tourism sector, Vision 2030 emphasizes the message of MBS opening the Kingdom to globalizing modernity and depetroliation of growth. However, the net outcome, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism* convincingly demonstrates, has not so much been liberalization or an economy significantly less oil-dependent but rather extraordinary personal control by MBS of the security apparatus, the commanding heights of the economy, and the energy bureaucracy. MBS' emasculation of other wings of the royal family, tribal leaders and regional powerbrokers mirrors that undertaken by Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, as he seized on the financial crisis that threatened to bankrupt Dubai in 2008–2009. Davidson's earlier work expertly detailed how MBZ strongarmed the UAE from a confederation into an Abu Dhabi-dominated federation; jointly (re)analysing it with the Saudi case serves the purpose of arguing how internal dysfunctionality and external crises are leading to a broader reorganization of state-society relations in the Gulf. Davidson's core argument has been made by others in recent years, but the evidence he marshals has not ever been presented so extensively and persuasively.

'Reform' in the last decade has further strengthened the ruler's authority over other key actors in society. As Gulf sovereigns attempt to render their external environment more conducive to their domestic agenda, David Warren draws attention to how ulema have increasingly buttressed the state's action radius in Qatar and the UAE, infusing the foreign policy of both small states. *Rivals in the Gulf* underscores the difference between Saudi Arabia -where the relationship between the Al-Sauds and the clergy led by the Al ash-Sheikh family has often been symbiotic, but never without constraints and trade-offs- and Qatar and the UAE which historically do not have an autonomous, indigenous class of ulema. Doha and Abu Dhabi host prominent foreign scholars who use royal patronage to craft distinct religious messaging that dovetails with the unique state identities that the Al-Thanis and Al-Nahyans have projected into the world. Both Qatar and the UAE have since the 1990s differentiated themselves from Saudi Wahhabism by promoting Islamic doctrines at once neo-traditionalist (in a nod to the conservative segments of society, emphasizing the rootedness of their very new states in a long history) and innovative in responding to *al-waqi* (social reality) through *wasatiyya* (rejecting extreme interpretations).

Warren skilfully explains how the two literati most closely associated with neo-traditionalist *wasatiyya*, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Abdallah Bin Bayyah, arrived at their respective theologies. Their paymasters have broadcast the sermons of Qaradawi and Bin Bayyah across the Islamic world, turning them into 'global muftis' who challenge the hegemony of historical centres of religious authority such as Medina and Al-Azhar. If Qatar's influence peaked during the Arab Spring as Qaradawi used Al-Jazeera to propagate his *fiqh al-thawra* (jurisprudence of revolution) which lionizes protests against unjust rule and free elections, the UAE's riposte has been bin Bayyah's 'Jurisprudence of Peace'. In line with MBZ' (anti-Muslim Brotherhood) external interventions in Egypt and Libya and inspired by the horrors of the Algerian Civil War, Bin Bayyah criticizes popular sovereignty and democracy, seeing them as secondary to stability enforced by a benign ruler. Yet for all the differences between Qaradawi's Qatar-based International Union of Muslim Scholars and Bin Bayyah's Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, 'each brand [of Islamic reformism] shares the key aim of cultivating the continued investment of the United States in maintaining its security'(p. 2) As *Rivals in the Gulf* notes, both doctrines reflect strategic bets to position the Al-Thanis and Al-Nahyans in global politics during perilous times: being seen to promote democracy in line with Obama's agenda for liberalization (Qatar) vs the containment of Islamism and showcasing the encouragement of religious freedom under Trump (UAE).

Global powers' waxing and waning perceptions of the usefulness of Gulf actors has been a crucial feature of regional politics for decades and is unlikely to decrease in importance as both climatic changes and the call for decarbonization intensify. Although five of the 10 countries with the deepest ecological footprint on the planet are Gulf states (which have come in for strong environmentalist criticism), their financial reserves, potential in renewables and worldwide connections could facilitate the evolution to a different economic model and prevent them falling off a domestic and international cliff. The volume edited by Robin Mills and Li-Chen Sim takes stock of efforts to stimulate low carbon energy across the Middle East and North Africa but most chapters concentrate on the Gulf kingdoms. The contribution by Paasha Mahdavi and Noosha Uddin advances the traditional liberal-rationalist argument for why the likes of Kuwait and Qatar should end the rentier state as we know it: breaking their economic dependency on hydrocarbons is '*an opportunity for these states to broaden and diversify their sources of economic and international political power*' (p. 239) If rents from oil and gas allowed monarchs to forego societal clamours for representation by not taxing populations, Mahdavi and Uddin see it as probable that low carbon-intensive oil producers in the Gulf will find the costs of embracing the energy transition manageable and that doing so will spawn '*diversified economies that mobilize demands for inclusive governance and democratic institutions*' (p. 247).

That rosy outlook is not shared by most other essays in the volume. Faris Al-Sulayman identifies a decade of missed opportunity; '*the low oil price environment . . . provided a unique political opportunity to publicly justify the reduction of subsidies, allowing government to deflect some blame, if and when prices do recover, on market forces now far beyond their reach*'. (p. 94) Energy subsidies remain part of the social contract between rulers and citizens: services in exchange for acquiescence. Moreover, while the narrative of crisis bolstered the grip of sovereigns, it did not result in a meaningful energy transition. The share of low carbon energy in the electricity mix remains significantly lower in the Middle East and North Africa than everywhere else in the world -as Mills and Sim recall in the introduction- and installed renewables capacity barely exceeds 2000 MW across the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. If optimists point to a plethora of 'transformation' targets, the recent expansion of solar in the Emirates and the growth of Saudi FDI into renewables from Morocco to South Africa, more sanguine voices underline how little this has amounted to in relative terms. Jim Krane's chapter trenchantly exposes the UAE's self-promotion as an environmental champion and

host to the International Renewable Energy Agency. In view of the whopping expansion of coal use in the Emirates—‘by 22% per year over the decade to 2018’ (p. 60)- and Dubai’s construction of the Hassyan coal-fired plant (which on its own will generate more megawatts than all renewables across the Gulf combined), it is time to cool the ‘transformation’ rhetoric of the last decade: ‘Solar installations have received outsized attention but [have] not contributed a material part of the UAE’s power output (p. 81)’ If Davidson made the case for understanding ‘reform’ as above all the centralization of power, Krane reminds us that the language of transition served a concomitant goal, ‘to transform global public perceptions of the UAE from an autocratic petrostate ... to a progressive haven for ambitious environmental goals’(p. 65). Mills’ and Sim’s timely volume underscores the enduring importance of critically thinking through facile assumptions and stylized narratives woven by governments to frame climate-induced ‘reform’ and ‘adaptation’.

While the three books cover a lot of ground, China, and how it impacts energy transitions, is notably absent: despite its growing importance as a consumer of Gulf hydrocarbons in recent decades and as a global political force, its posture in international climate negotiations, the changing structure of its trade and its involvement in global finance barely feature in the collection of Mills and Sim. Similarly, Davidson startlingly mentions Belarus more often than China. Despite his book’s theoretical ambitions – mainly the proposition of ‘advanced sultanism’ as a new regime type in the political science universe – it engages little with the broader international context of the withering of liberal order and the re-invention of various forms of authoritarianism in the last fifteen years- and the pivotal role of China in those developments. *From Sheikhs to Sultanism* tells us how the manoeuvres of MBZ and MBS echo features of Somoza’s Nicaragua and the Marcoses’ Philippines but fails to offer any kind of global account of the contemporary reworking of state–society relations and the rise of a cyber-surveillance state.

Arguably, each of the three books could have made more of the ideational dimensions of the various types of ‘reform’ that are their core. Warren’s *Rivals in the Gulf* is chiefly concerned with the ideological specificities of competing modes of wasatiyya but leaves the reader wondering how these are received by their target audiences and actually shape intellectual debates and transnational educational and charitable networks. The focus mainly rests on their ties to Emirati and Qatari foreign policy, but how exactly the reform messages of Qaradawi and Bin Bayyah are spread, contested and interpreted around the Islamic world will need to be tackled elsewhere. For its part, *From Sheikhs to Sultanism* refers tantalizingly in several passages to the mounting emphasis on nationalism in Emirati and Saudi society. New ideas of belonging at home and in the world are engineered from the top through education, labour markets and military service, but are confined to the book’s bowels and remain underexplored, at least to this reader. The infatuation with high-modernist tropes of political and social order by MBS and MBZ could have been historicized and articulated more strongly, as could its global impact: how other states perceive, resist and/or try to emulate developments in Saudi Arabi and the UAE is crucial, given the fascination around the world with their experiments, which Davidson rightly underlines. That also applies to the edited volume of Mills and Sim: many of the chapters lack an articulation of the global importance of Middle Eastern struggles around how ‘decarbonization’ and ‘energy transition’ are understood and operationalized. The collection contains references to Saudi obstructionism in climate negotiations and to the Middle East’s contribution to sustaining the global nuclear industry, but the changing nature of globalization, the centrality of historically contingent understandings of growth and modernity, and how Gulf imaginaries and policies might affect transitions in South Asia or the Horn of Africa remain, unfortunately, in the distant background.

Such lacunae do not detract from the contributions these books make to documenting the extraordinary decade Gulf states have lived through, their responses confronting a sense of acute crisis and the possibilities of, and limits to, reform. It is hard to read these works and not be bedazzled by the pace of announcements and initiatives, as everyone repeats that a different era has begun; newness and change appear omnipresent. But are they really? Gulf sovereigns are gambling that domestic institutional reconfigurations and shrewd external positioning can change everything so it can stay the same- before as after the deluge. Much of the rest of the world -and perhaps of Saudi, Emirati and Qatari society- is not so sure.

Harry Verhoeven

*Columbia University*

 [hv2229@columbia.edu](mailto:hv2229@columbia.edu)

© 2021 Harry Verhoeven

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1993468>

