

BOOK REVIEW

From Sheikhs to Sultanism: Statecraft and Authority in Saudi Arabia and the UAE

Davidson, Christopher M.

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The Arab states of the Gulf have usually been characterized as ruled by conservative and stable royal families. While palace coups, in effect, occurred in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Sharjah, among others, in the past, leadership transitions have generally been fluid as the accession of the new Kuwaiti emir in September 2020 indicates. Hereditary monarchy is well-established, even if the line of succession is at times horizontal, passing to close male relatives, rather than vertical and patrilineal, passing from father to son. That the position of crown prince is a cornerstone of this system was recognized by the new Omani sultan, Haitham bin Tariq—a cousin of Sultan Qaboos—when he created the position for the first time for his eldest son in the constitutional changes of January 2021, despite running counter to traditional Ibadi doctrine that rejects hereditary rule.

Two heirs apparent have become particularly prominent. In fact, “MBS” and “MBZ” have acquired notoriety beyond the region that the rulers have notably lacked. Having been elevated by an unceremonious sacking of his predecessor, Mohammed bin Salman established patrilineal succession, though not primogeniture, in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Zayed, the half-brother of the ailing Emir Khalifa, is not only the designated successor but also the *de facto* ruler of Abu Dhabi and thus of the federal United Arab Emirates. Though of different generations, with the older MBZ often portrayed as a mentor to MBS, the two are thought to be close, or at least have similar visions. Both, certainly, have acquired similar reputations for controlled modernization, energetic albeit ill-judged foreign policy, and ruthless control.

That the kingdom and the UAE are governed by authoritarian regimes is not a revelation, but it is opportune to reconsider why. The standard explanation joins neo-patrimonialism and rentierism to account for a hierarchical system whereby rulers use the considerable resources of the state to assure or compel the loyalty of the population. Oil wealth has simultaneously enhanced the repressive capacity of the state and the co-optation of society, and structural factors indisputably explain the potential for authoritarianism. Even in late rentierism, in Matthew Gray’s formulation, when economic diversification, nation building, and societal openings have evolved to some extent, the regimes have not been overturned or seriously challenged.

This dominant rentier paradigm’s explanation for the Gulf states’ political trajectory has, however, been challenged from time to time. Some believe that nation or state building presents a more nuanced approach to understanding interconnected but often incongruent lines of top-down and bottom-up development. Others emphasize that society has gained some autonomy as demands, whether from the young, women, or Islamists, have become more pressing and consequential than the dependent-population assumption suggests. Still others point to an international and

conservative alliance and trading system that binds the Western powers and local regimes together in security and economic self-interest and sustains a stable political status quo. What is generally missing in analyzing the developed Gulf Arab states of today is serious consideration of the rulers' capacities to manipulate and even dominate the state-society relationship. Enter Christopher M. Davidson where post-Saidians have hesitated to venture.

Davidson makes an outstanding contribution by adapting and applying the idea of sultanism. Clearly built on the Orientalist trope of the Middle Eastern potentate, Max Weber's invention nonetheless captured recognizable and generalizable traits of personalized, non-ideological rule reliant on a culture of fear. Yet, in the tribal societies of the Gulf, sultans have seemed to many observers less emblematic than sheikhs: both have relied on the power of patronage, but whereas the former suggested domineering and capricious rule, the latter were largely depicted as collectivist and consensus-bound. Madawi Al-Rasheed and others, however, have dispelled any idea of benevolence and put violent treatment of religious and tribal elements at the heart of regime solidification. Davidson has built on this more skeptical view of sheikhly rule and, in the process, recast the Weberian model into what he suggestively calls "advanced sultanism."

A subtype of sultanism, it is hybrid. It is autocratic, individual-centric rule that controls the military and security apparatus as well as civil society, oversees command of the economy and the patronage networks it funds, and exploits Western strategic linkages for its own advantage. But it also generates social and legal reforms, fosters closer integration with global markets, and acquires a discernible measure of public support. Hybridity can be an elusive quality to describe, but the author does an admirable job of showing why, if we want to understand these important countries, a mixed picture of hegemony as well as an appreciation for "'pick and mix' strategies" (p. 242) is necessary.

The architectural exoskeleton of centralized and personalized rule consists of protective and multi-layered circles of retainers. The crown princes have carefully constructed supportive core and secondary elites made up largely of non-royals while being detached from, even hostile toward, senior royals and tolerating the rulers themselves for the validation they can provide. In both the Saudi and Emirati cases, the centers of power—MBS and MBZ—are so far unchallenged, and while their enablers are variably rewarded or punished with the traditional "light-touch" (p. 140) or the recently more noticeable harshness, they are always played. The up-down-up fate of Saud al-Qahtani, is illustrative: a close confidant of MBS, he was kept at a distance after the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi (and the US Treasury's sanctioning), despite no doubt carrying out the wishes of his patron, and is now restored to a measure of influence.

Repression and elite manipulation are only part of the ruling formula, however. Also integral to each regime are populist economic and social transformations. Social researchers find Gulf countries difficult to penetrate, but Davidson has supplemented an exhaustive review of published material in widely diverse sources with in-depth interviews and surveys conducted with Saudis and Emiratis. Together, these provide a unique and striking snapshot of informed public opinion, which shows unqualified support for economic-reform programs, such as Vision 2030, and a growing sense of attachment to Saudi and Emirati nationalisms rather than broader Khaleeji or Arab ones. Even moves to restrain the religious establishments and to allow for greater women's roles have met with approval. It is not entirely surprising that "state functionaries," "citizen stakeholders" (e.g., p. 97), and social-media users would hold positive views of official policy, nor that a directly expressed opinion on regime longevity would be a question too far for many informants. Davidson could not be expected to reach some quarters of opinion, of course, but one may still wonder what others less tuned in to the system, such as Wahhabi conservatives in Saudi Arabia's Qassim or the Shia in the Eastern Province, let alone migrant workers in the UAE, would think.

Earlier data available on Saudi recruits to ISIS point to what are perceived as religious and political injustices, rather than poverty, social isolation, or poor education, as critical shapers of attitude.

The threat of radicalization has provided opportunities for punitive policies but also for various other methods to avoid or defuse it. As this work usefully shows, the promotion of a non-violent, even modernizing, Islam has had resonance among the young; what might be called a “tolerance industry,” such as the UAE’s National Tolerance Program or Forum for the Promotion of Peace, has an added advantage of enhancing the personal reputations of MBS and MBZ. Davidson correctly notes that religious opponents are depicted as undifferentiated—the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda/ISIS thrown into the same basket—and that, in any case, the threat is largely overstated or at least contained. One could go further and say that this securitization of Islamism is itself dependent on the conflation. The state policy of “moderate Islam” (*al-Islam al-wasati*) requires a prior anathematizing of Islamists—a potentially troublesome policy given the discernible appeal of Salafi ideas, often, Islamist *avant la lettre*. One may also wonder about resistances: not just the longstanding disdain of the radical Islamists, but also the objections of the established *ulama* to social reforms and Sufi and other religious influences now given some official sanction.

Writings on sultanism have dealt with its disorderly demise, neither perpetual personalistic autocracy nor democratization. While it would have been interesting to have a direct engagement with the authoritarian resilience literature—often in the past applied to Middle Eastern regimes like the Syria of the Assads—it is to this work’s immense credit that it avoids sensationalized predictions. Rather, it provides a cogent and incisive analysis of how advanced sultans gain, manipulate, and sustain power through tight state institutional and societal controls and Western support, but also through courting popular approval with neo-patrimonial largesse and reputational bur-nishing. The iron fist is never absent, as evoked by the image of princes sleeping on the floor of Riyadh’s Ritz-Carlton, but so too the velvet glove, as shown by the perception that economic and social reforms have been beneficial.

Davidson is doubtless correct to dissent from other treatments of sultanism, or indeed of Islam, that assume it is incompatible with capitalist development or inevitably leads to its collapse. The record clearly shows otherwise in both countries, though the longer-term, transformative effect on social patterns and attitudes is unclear. There is no doubt that the advanced sultanism of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is the product of modernizing advances over a half-century and the facilitator of further changes. But the larger import of Samuel Huntington’s famous “king’s dilemma” remains: while centralized monarchical rule is adept at managing modernization, it does not easily accommodate the organized political and social claims that arise from it. *From Sheikhs to Sultanism* is more compelling on two pillars of stability, cooptation and repression, than a third, legitimation. Even if religion has been “repurposed”—although it is premature to conclude that—any implication that it *merely* provides a fig leaf or “cover” (p. 243) minimizes its role. Here is a perhaps paradoxical conjecture: a non-ideological, transactional regime might be more dependent on reformulated religious and kinship framing than it would wish or acknowledge—not so much “post-traditional” (p. 19) as reinvented traditional.

Christopher Davidson has given us, in this vivid and lucidly written book, both a captivating account of recent political developments in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and, more important, a way to think about them. Structural elements, such as oil wealth, state institutionalization, and alliance support are part of the ruling formula, but in explaining how these sustain modern auto-crats, he puts the nature of leadership at the analytical core. He builds on rentierism but, in elucidating the modern transformations that have made sheikhly sultans possible, he reimagines “regime agency” (p. 255) and gives a more sophisticated view of personalized rule. In so doing, he

avoids both earlier Orientalist assumptions of arbitrariness and irrationality and the consultation-and-consensus representations of authority that have been common in political analyses of the region. Although he is modest about claiming too much, it is clear that Christopher Davidson's thought-provoking book will have well-deserved resonance in wider circles of political analysis and become a classic on the Gulf.

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