



*INSS Insight* No. 244, March 6, 2011

## **The Gulf and the "Arab Rage"**

**Yoel Guzansky**

The traditional assessment was that the Arab Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – were largely immune to wide scale protests, the differences among them notwithstanding. With their large oil and gas revenues, the states distribute some of their wealth through widespread subsidies of goods and services. Now, however, the fear that as the Arab rage increases the shockwaves will reach these countries too is not groundless, if only because some of the incendiary issues – including authoritarian regimes that suppress human rights – are found in the Gulf, and because of the highly infectious nature of the protests, which appear to be far from ebbing.

The Gulf rulers have prepared for possible protests in several ways. Some have “responded” to the demands of the masses and made a number of political changes, mostly tactical; others have placed an emphasis on economic reforms in the hope that they will be sufficient to nip any fomenting activity in the bud. While such preventive measures are intended to take the sting out of any possible protest, they testify to the rulers' fears as to the stability of their regimes, and they may even whet the political appetites of the masses further. Another customary step is pointing an accusing finger at foreign involvement (read: Iran) in inciting the riots.

Individual steps by the various regimes have included identifying with the struggle of the Arab masses; making changes in their governments (Bahrain and Oman); raising salaries in the private sector (Oman) and the public sector (Saudi Arabia); releasing Shiite prisoners (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain); increasing security around Shiite areas and oil facilities (Saudi Arabia); increasing internet surveillance; arrests of demonstrators and tightened supervision of Shiite clerics (Saudi Arabia and Kuwait); preventive arrests (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates); and increased control of entry of foreign citizens, especially Arabs (Kuwait).

Thus far, Bahrain has seen the most significant events in the Gulf. The demonstrations in the small archipelago have aroused fear that the minority Sunni regime will not retain power, and that a spillover from the demonstrations, with their clear ethnic dimensions,

may occur in other Gulf states. Although the Shiite protests against the Khalifa rule have occurred intermittently with differing levels of intensity since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, it seems that the scope of the protests has reached new heights in recent weeks.

Bahrain's oil reserves have dwindled, and the country has no significant strategic depth or military power. Its strategic significance stems, therefore, from its location in the central Gulf, which allows it to serve as a central element in American policy toward Iran, American activity in Afghanistan and Iraq, and protection of oil transport from the Gulf. Not only has the attempt by Bahrain's king to expand participation in the political system in order to contain the protests not discouraged the Shiites from continuing the demonstrations; it has prompted more frequent and more severe protests. Even if the reforms instituted by the king are relatively far reaching, his powers relative the overall government system, including the parliament, remain unlimited.

The events in Bahrain are also significant because of their ramifications for the stability of Saudi Arabia, the largest oil exporter in the world and "big sister" to the West. In the 1990s, Saudi Arabia sent military forces both to protect the Khalifa regime and to prevent the spread of the protests to Saudi Arabia. According to several unconfirmed reports it has done this again, albeit with a low profile. The Shiites, who constitute an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the Saudi population, are concentrated in an oil rich area, and some of them have ties with the Shiite population in Bahrain, even though they are not a homogeneous population and may not see Iran as a model for emulation. In light of the events in Bahrain, they are likely to feel more secure in their long struggle against the Wahhabi establishment.

Saudi King Abdullah returned from his sick bed in Morocco to once again taken up the reins of state. This is perhaps an indication of the seriousness of the events, but also perhaps of the behind the scenes succession struggles and the lack of faith in the abilities of the sultan, the crown prince, to run things in his absence. Thus far oil revenues have allowed Abdullah to invest billions in education and infrastructures, and to effectively block the opposition, especially from the direction of al-Qaeda. However, the king, who enjoys the support of the religious establishment and has good control of the security forces – an indication of the stability of his regime – has not institutionalized the reforms he adopted after the September 11 attacks under pressure from the Bush administration. Thus, for example, all criticism of the Wahhabi religious approach and the royal house remains taboo.

In an outburst of "generosity," Abdullah announced a series of edicts, at a cost of \$36 million, that was intended in part to help with housing solutions, encourage the employment of young people (people under the age of thirty constitute 60 percent of the population; of them, 30 percent are unemployed), and expand the social safety net. Thus far, these steps have not been accompanied by essential political steps, in spite of the increasing calls for a fight against corruption, a separation of powers, elections to the

Shura Council, more rights for women, and a gradual move to a constitutional monarchy. Another challenge will be integrating citizens, especially the younger population, into the labor market at the expense of the 9 million foreign workers, in an attempt to reduce unemployment.

The Gulf leaders have warned against the fall of Bahrain and against the intervention in their affairs by “states in the region.” Indeed, since the outbreak of the protests, Iran has attempted to present them as an Iranian achievement. Even if Iran itself is likely to be a target, the events are a window of opportunity for it: an opportunity to weaken the “moderate” Sunni front and appropriate for itself the achievements of the masses, with the claim that will copy the achievements of the Islamic Revolution. Thus the Gulf states fear the tipping of the regional balance in Iran’s favor, with their friends in the “moderate” camp undermined and the threats to security growing given the collapse of the old order around them.

On the international front, the West, which has once again proven the extent to which its position is based on continued free access to the area's natural resources, hopes and expects the rulers to survive the approaching storm. Nevertheless, the confidence of these rulers in the United States has been undermined. In their view, the Americans are apt in the future to abandon them, as they abandoned a staunch ally like Mubarak.

The Gulf elites are equipped with relatively good tools to cope with the wave of protests, but it will be hard to do this for a prolonged period. With the continued shockwaves in the Arab world, there will be no escaping an increase in the pace of reforms, beyond cosmetic changes. This is particularly true of states such as Bahrain that do not enjoy high oil revenues and that have a delicate ethnic fabric.

In spite of the political, cultural, and linguistic similarity in the Gulf, the demographic, ethnic, economic, and geostrategic conditions differ from country to country, which has implications for the ability of each state to cope with potential protests. Thus far the masses in the Gulf have sought mainly to change the conduct of the regimes, not to replace them. There is indeed little reason to change the regimes as long as the populations enjoy the profits. Ironically, the regimes are even likely to profit indirectly, as long as oil prices climb because of the fear in the West that the instability will reach the Gulf states. This will make it even easier for them to cope with the instability, assuming that it is possible to buy stability.

In recent years, these states have responded to the demand from within for political reforms mainly by reaching deeper into their pockets. Toward the outside world, the elites, who have not yet decided the direction in which to lead their societies, have engaged in efforts from trial balloons to paying lip service to criticism from the West. This is all likely to change.