The Gulf monarchies have faced down different opposition movements over the years, but these have not been broad-based and represented only narrow sections of the indigenous populations. Moreover, the Gulf monarchies have generally been strong and confident enough to placate or sideline any opposition before it has gained too much traction. More recently, however, powerful opposition movements have emerged that have proved less easy to contain, not least because they are making the most of potent new modernising forces that have been less easy for governments to co-opt. As a result, an increasing number of regular Gulf nationals have become emboldened enough to protest against and, often for the first time, openly question their rulers. Since 2011, spurred on by developments elsewhere in the region, these opponents and critics have presented the most serious challenges yet to the ruling families.

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The Gulf monarchies have faced down different opposition movements over the years, but these have not been broad-based and represented only narrow sections of the indigenous populations. Moreover, the Gulf monarchies have generally been strong and confident enough to placate or sideline any opposition before it has gained too much traction. The Gulf monarchies have also been very effective in demonising opponents, either branding them as foreign-backed fifth columnists, as religious fundamentalists, or even as terrorists. In turn this has allowed rulers and their governments to portray themselves to the majority of citizens and most international observers as being safe, reliable upholders of the status quo, and thus far preferable to any dangerous and unpredictable alternatives. When reformist forces have affected their populations – often improving communications between citizens or their access to education – the Gulf monarchies have been effective at co-opting, often bringing such forces under the umbrella of the state or members of ruling families, and thus continuing to apply a mosaic model of traditional loyalties alongside modernisation even in the first few years of the twenty-first century. More recently, however, powerful opposition movements have emerged that have proved less easy to contain, not least because they are making the most of potent new modernising forces that have been less easy for governments to co-opt. As a result, an increasing number of regular Gulf nationals have become emboldened enough to protest against and, often for the first time, openly question their rulers. In 2011, spurred on by developments elsewhere in the region, these opponents and critics have presented the most serious challenges yet to the ruling families. In something of a perfect storm for the incumbent regimes, the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria have not only given hope for those Gulf nationals and Gulf-based movements committed to serious political reform and to unseating the current autocracies, but they have also made it harder for the Gulf monarchies to depict their new enemies as anything other than pro-democracy activists or disillusioned citizens who have recognised the inevitable collapse of the political and economic structures underpinning their rulers. Furthermore, the 2011 revolutions – or at least the first few waves of protest in Tunisia and Egypt – have also helped expose the Gulf monarchies’ strong preference for supporting other authoritarian states in the region and their fear of having democratic, representative governments take shape in neighbouring states. The initial responses of most of the Gulf monarchies
were markedly anti-Arab Spring, even if they later tried to change tack. This has had a massive delegitimising effect on the ruling families and governments involved, as in the eyes of many of their citizens they positioned themselves as part of a distinct and anachronistic counter-revolutionary bloc.

Unsurprisingly the new, post-2011 opposition in the Gulf monarchies has manifested itself in different ways depending on the circumstances and pressures in each state. This has ranged from full-blown street riots complete with killings and martyrs in the poorer Gulf monarchies to more subtle intellectual and even Internet-led ‘cyber opposition’ in the wealthier Gulf monarchies. But in all cases the regimes have responded with more repression than ever before, thus further exposing the ruling families. In some instances brutal police crackdowns have taken place and foreign mercenaries have been deployed while in others political prisoners have been held, judicial systems manipulated, and civil society further stymied. Thus far only Qatar has avoided such heavy-handedness, mostly due to its more favourable circumstances and its rather different stance on the Arab Spring. Nevertheless even its ruling family is not without critics, and there are already indications that opposition is building and greater repression may follow.

**Evolving opposition**

Much of the early opposition in the Gulf monarchies focused on the economic grievances and frustration of merchant or worker communities in the postPEARLING industry era, and – especially in the 1960s and early 1970s – the ruling families’ perceived connections to non-Arab, non-Muslim powers and the need to bring these states closer into line with the region’s Arab nationalist republics. Particular hotbeds were in Dubai, Bahrain, and Kuwait, although there were also some protests in Qatar from indigenous oil workers concerned with the excesses of their ruling family. Several national fronts were established, but only one of these – the Dhofar Liberation Front, later the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf – ever led to an armed insurrection. In many ways the Gulf monarchies were well placed to counter these threats, as Israel’s victories over the main Arab military powers in 1967 and 1973 had taken much of the gloss off Arab nationalism. Moreover, with

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increasing oil exports and expanding state treasuries this was also the period when many of the region’s wealth distribution practices were inaugurated. Not only were most Gulf nationals enjoying better lifestyles than hitherto, but many were kept busy with the new activities and opportunities resulting from the first major oil booms. In Dubai’s case, many of the families that had been involved in national front activity and opposition to the ruling family in the 1960s became massively enriched in the 1970s, mostly due to being granted exclusive import licenses for the various products demanded by the emirate’s fast growing economy. And today their descendants, now regarded as key allies of the ruling family, are at the helm of some of the region’s biggest trade and retail empires. Subsequent opposition movements have been more difficult to contain, as most have focused on the illegitimacy of the Gulf monarchies and in particular their manipulation of Islam. Given that they have often been based on religious platforms, or led by disillusioned or discriminated against sections of the populations, these movements have not been entirely placated with material benefits. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the most serious opposition to the ruling family in the 1990s came from a diffuse movement of young religious dissidents and conservative university students. Critical of the official religious establishment’s seemingly hypocritical support for American bases on Saudi territory following the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, this Sahwa or awakening movement was only dealt with by granting more control over social institutions and the education sector to religious conservatives. Confirming a long held view in the ruling family that their main opposition would eventually come from religious circles rather than liberal reformers this was deemed a necessary if unpleasant manoeuvre in order to head off further criticism. Similarly in the UAE and Kuwait, where Muslim Brotherhood organisations or ‘reform associations’ have existed for many years, there was a tacit understanding in place that these groups would be tolerated and given some influence over the religious and educational establishments. In the UAE this led to the Brotherhood’s de facto control over the Ministries for Education and Social Affairs, with its members presiding over curriculum committees and – for many years -


dominating the UAE’s principal university⁴. Up until 2003 senior members of the Abu Dhabi ruling family were even holding meetings with Brotherhood representatives, trying to establish a set of compromises⁵. Following 9/11, the subsequent US-led War on Terror, the CIA’s capture of a major Al-Qaeda figure in the UAE in 2002⁶, and a violent campaign launched against the Saudi oil industry and western expatriates in 2003 by ‘Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula’, the Gulf monarchies have made a volte-face on such Islamist opposition movements. Partly this has been out of fear, with unpublished polls in Saudi Arabia after 2001 indicating that most young Saudi men sympathised with Osama bin Laden and opposed any form of Saudi co-operation with the US over the Iraq War⁷. But it has also been due to the increasing ease they have experienced in simply branding opponents as ‘terrorists’ or alleging their connections to ill-defined Al-Qaeda plots. Indeed, in recent years the Gulf monarchies’ security services have usually been able to arrest activists and repress any Islamist organisations in their territories without fearing any international scrutiny. In many cases these crackdowns won praise from Western powers, being described as part of the Gulf monarchies’ ‘commitment to battling terrorism’⁸.

Overall, the branding of such opposition movements and the positioning of the Gulf monarchies as a better, safer alternative to Islamist-dominated governments or other such scenarios has been highly effective. Indeed, as described in a recent book on the Arab Spring, these “...rulers became well versed in their routine of no alternative argumentation: towards the West, they posed as the only ones able to deter an Islamist takeover”⁹. Moreover, it was argued that there is a now a “…sad irony that the powers in place have ended up believing their own fantasies about the Islamist threat: they not only displayed that card for external consumption, but they also fed their own masses with gory stories about the inevitability of... ruin”¹⁰. And that the Gulf monarchies – and their now fallen Arab autocrat neighbours – have been responsible for “…rushing to enrol in the global War on Terror, provided that their domestic opposition would fall under

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⁴ University of the United Arab Emirates, in Al-Ayn.
⁵ According to a study of the Muslim Brotherhood in the UAE published by Dar Al-Hayat newspaper in Saudi Arabia. Dar Al-Hayat, 12 September 2010.
⁶ Abd Al-Rahim Al-Nashiri was captured in the UAE in November 2002.
⁷ L. NOLAN, May 2011.
¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 74.
the extensive category of Al-Qaeda supporters”. The anti-terrorism legislation and emergency laws that have been used to neutralise opponents have since been heavily criticised for being an “oxymoron to describe the suspension of the rule of law and the absolute vulnerability of the citizen”11.

In much the same way as the Islamist groups, some opposition movements in the region, especially in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia – where there are substantial Shia populations – are now being branded both as terrorists and as part of some greater plot to further Iran’s interests in the Gulf monarchies. Linked to growing hawkishness towards Iran, this has been another relatively straightforward and convenient mechanism in these states with which to portray opponents – no matter how peaceful – as being dangerous fifth column movements serving a foreign power or entity. Again this has allowed the monarchies to discredit opponents in the eyes of other citizens, while also allowing them to demonstrate their willingness to support Western policies on Iran. Frequently in Bahrain, for example, the government has claimed that the opposition is either being funded by Iran or is receiving weapons or other logistical support. In May 2011 military officials claimed that the opposition was made up of ‘traitors and saboteurs’ who were drawing “...guidance lines from Iran that drew the acts of sabotage and barbarism in the kingdom”12. And even following the November 2011 publication of an independent report into Bahrain’s initial crackdown in February 2011 which concluded that the “Iranians are [merely] propagandists and that they can’t be expected not to take advantage of the situation” and that “…to say they were funding, agitating… we found no evidence of this”, Bahraini government officials still claimed that there was a link, stating that they had “evidence you cannot touch or see physically, but we know it is there”13.

Opposition intensifies – A ‘Gulf Spring’?

Most of the Gulf states now seem to be caught between unsustainable wealth distribution mechanisms and increasingly powerful modernizing forces that can no longer be controlled or co-opted by elites. The former dynamic continues to manifest itself in widening wealth gaps and increasing real unemployment, despite ramped up public spending

11 Ibidem, p. 75.
programs and urgent public sector job creation schemes. These
counter-revolutionary spending efforts are likely to keep spiraling – the
International Monetary Fund has already predicted that even the
wealthiest of the monarchies will run budget deficits within a few years.
And in the poorer states, where this strategy is now increasingly
inapplicable, street protests keep growing and regimes have had little
option but to openly crack down on dissidents.
As for modernizing forces, notably including social media, a veritable
battle in cyberspace has now begun. New legislation has been introduced,
or is about to be introduced, in all six monarchies, with the aim of tightly
policing online dissent and meting out heavy punishments to all would-be
critics. But this strategy seems as unsustainable as sky-high public
spending: Several of these states now having the highest social media
usage rates in the world – massive online political discussions have made
Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube the region’s new de facto parliament.
Detailed, substantiated criticism of governments has become
commonplace, with exposés of ruling family corruption and public insults
directed at hitherto unchallengeable elites being digested by millions each
day. Such disparagement of rulers was almost unimaginable prior to 2011,
but now it is almost fashionable for young Gulf nationals to question their
autocrats.

With regards to Bahrain – still the vanguard of the region’s revolt – the
past few months have witnessed only further tragedy and despair. Despite
fresh promises of dialogue and some minor political concessions, including
promotions for supposed moderates, the ruling family and its allies in
Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have firmly held the line. The island’s elites have
refused any significant reforms and kept hundreds of activists behind bars,
thus distancing themselves more than ever from the majority of the
population. Bahrain’s extensive public relations campaign to depict the
long-running uprising as primarily a sectarian conflict, or part of an
Iran-Arab struggle, has continued unabated – albeit with declining
plausibility. With a resurgence in mass protests in February 2013,
resulting in further deaths and clashes, it seems increasingly unlikely
that the Bahraini monarchy can regain its legitimacy. As such, the ruling
Al Khalifa family will effectively become the first of the Gulf dynasties to
have been publicly rejected by the majority of its subjects.
Across the causeway in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, the protests
have also continued to gather pace. While modest in size for much of 2012,
not least due to announcements from senior clerics and government officials that protests are ‘un-Islamic’ and illegal, they had become much larger by the end of the year. Following the death of a young man at the hands of security services in December 2012 – thought to be the 12th such killing of the year – an estimated tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, many chanting slogans opposing the ruling family. The nascent protests in predominantly Sunni provinces of the kingdom are in some ways even more problematic for the House of Saud. These demonstrations are much harder to frame as a sectarian clash, and have mainly been campaigns for the release of political prisoners. In the northern Al Qassim province, for instance, large numbers of women and children have taken to the streets. In some cases, demonstrators have burned pictures of key ruling family members and resisted arrest. Several other ‘trigger incidents’ have taken place in Saudi Arabia, underlining how brittle the state is becoming despite its enormous public spending spree. These include the jailing of leading human rights activists, public outrage over the apparent unaccountability of various ministers, the disappearance of activists from other Arab monarchies in Saudi territory, and the arrest of numerous social media users. Last year also witnessed the highest rate of executions in the kingdom yet – many of which were widely debated and criticized, as they included beheadings and crucifixions for crimes such as blasphemy and ‘sorcery’. In Kuwait, authorities have grown alarmed at the seemingly uncontrollable discussion of their government’s shortcomings, and have been arresting online activists with alacrity over the past few months. The crackdown has continued offline too, with key critics – including leading former parliamentarians and members of powerful tribes – having been imprisoned after what have been described as ‘show trials’. As with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia’s elites, the ruling Al Sabah family’s increasingly repressive tactics seem to be losing them support from significant constituencies: Parliamentary elections in December 2012 were largely boycotted, thus denting the Kuwaiti elite’s ability to keep employing ‘liberal autocracy’ strategies. Perhaps most worryingly for the monarchy, the previously fragmented opposition groups – ranging from youth movements, to Islamists, to disaffected tribes – seem to be slowly coalescing. A broad-based opposition coalition was formed in March 2013, and it is pushing for a multi-party system with a ‘democratic rotation of power’. The coalition seems poised to
become the first properly organized Gulf group to press successfully for significant political reform, with constitutional monarchy as its minimum demand.

The United Arab Emirates’ rulers – or more specifically the tight-knit group of brothers surrounding the crown prince of Abu Dhabi – also seem more resolute than ever to tackle their opposition head on. That has effectively sidelined their late father’s well-honed social contract with his subjects, in favor of the sort of strategies employed by a police state. The dozens of political prisoners seized over the course of 2012 swelled to nearly 100 by the beginning of 2013, with a ‘national security trial’ beginning in March 2013. The defendants stand accused of trying to ‘seize power’, and were even accused of setting up a ‘military wing’. All foreign media have been banned from the courtroom, and foreign observers from NGOs and law firms were barred entry to the country. Though the defendants are made up of academics, lawyers, students, judges, and even a member of the ruling family – most of whom identify with a well-established and peaceful indigenous Islamist organization that has been gently pushing for parliamentary elections – the authorities seem determined to find a link between them and outside powers.

Given the fairly homogenous makeup of the UAE’s population, it has proven harder to present opposition groups through a sectarian lens. Instead, the detainees are regularly portrayed in the state-affiliated media as in league with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. But disturbingly for the authorities, the detainees appear to be enjoying growing support across the country: Widespread online discussion about the case is taking place, often in the defendants’ favor, and members of their extended families have campaigned loudly for their release. In the past few months, the UAE has also played an increasingly active role in guaranteeing the collective security of the Gulf monarchies. It has joined Saudi Arabia in providing significant financial assistance to Bahrain and Oman, and denied entry into the country to academics, journalists, and lawyers who have expressed support for the opposition in Bahrain.

While Oman has not yet seen further protests, the country is perhaps best understood as being in a holding pattern. The various promises made by the government, especially regarding public sector employment, have not yet been fulfilled, and there is growing discussion about the sustainability of a system that relies on substantial Saudi and UAE grants. Youth groups appear more restive than ever – several online activists have been
arrested and charged with insulting the aging ruler, while intellectuals now openly talk of the vacuum that will develop in the wake of his death. With billions of dollars now invested in Oman’s survival, much will rest on the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis’ willingness to permit some kind of political opening at that stage rather than encouraging the same sort of repression that is now being used in Bahrain.

To the surprise and disappointment of many, the past few months have weakened Qatar’s credentials as the last remaining liberal autocracy in the Arab Gulf. The detention and trial of a well-known poet who had expressed solidarity with Arab Spring movements elsewhere in the Middle East, and had implicitly criticized the Gulf monarchies, was followed closely, not least by the country’s substantial expatriate population and al-Jazeera’s journalistic community. Given Qatar’s media, financial, and even military support for the Arab revolutions of 2011 and 2012, most had expected a full pardon for the prisoner – but to widespread dismay, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for insulting the ruler, later commuted to a 15-year sentence.

Given the sensitive subject matter, the Qatar-funded al-Jazeera was unable to report properly on one of the most important stories in its own backyard. Its coverage of the incident was initially non-existent and then poor, reflecting the reality of having to operate within the confines of a traditional Gulf monarchy. Since then further Qatari activists have been seized and jailed. With most citizens continuing to enjoy an extremely high standard of living in gas-rich Qatar, the possibility of protests or large rafts of political prisoners is undoubtedly still very low. But recent events have led to palpable tension, provoking more outspoken comments from intellectuals and sections of the elite. Meanwhile, youth activists seem to be following the regional trend – taking their dissent online and participating in often critical discussions of ruling elites.

With further, even larger protests on the immediate horizon and with increasingly direct challenges to the Gulf monarchies from their citizens now all but certain, the window of opportunity for the region’s autocratic rulers to retreat peacefully to some sort of compromise solution – possibly constitutional monarchies with elected legislatures – seems to be tightening each month. With only minor exceptions, these regimes have adopted zero-tolerance, often brutal policies on dissent, regardless of the cost to their long term legitimacy and prosperity. Any hope of meaningful negotiations with opponents, as opposed to existing time-buying dialogues,
seem unlikely to take place any time soon. Thus, even though the Gulf version of the Arab Spring may look a little different to its manifestations in North Africa and Syria, and inconvenient as it may be to international allies and partners, it is now a real phenomenon.