

# Book Review: Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies by Courtney Freer

*In Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies, Courtney Freer explores the complex history of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, arguing that the political economy of these states gives rise to a particular form of political Islam – rentier Islamism – by which the Muslim Brotherhood exercises political capital through informal and gradual means. Hasan Alhasan recommends this an indispensable resource for both students of political Islam and of the Arab Gulf states.*

*If you are interested in this book review, Dr Courtney Freer will be launching the book at LSE on Tuesday 16 October 2018. Further details on the event and how to attend can be found [here](#).*

***Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies. Courtney Freer. Oxford University Press. 2018.***

Find this book: 

Excluding ISIS, arguably no Islamist group in the Arab world today makes headlines as often as the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation, active in the Gulf since the 1950s, has recently been mired in a vicious crisis pitting Qatar against Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt since June 2017. The situation reflects the divergent views that these states have come to hold of the Muslim Brotherhood, its nature and the role that it should be allowed to play in the region.

[Courtney Freer's](#) new book, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies*, is a powerful reminder of the organisation's complex history in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE. It argues that the political economy of these rentier states – which derive most of their income from natural resources – gives rise to a unique form of political Islam, i.e. 'rentier Islamism', whereby 'Muslim Brotherhood affiliates exercise political capital through informal and gradual means' (182). Accordingly, the book charts the rise of local Muslim Brotherhood groups in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE through informal social charities and the bureaucracies of the education and justice ministries from the 1950s onwards, illustrating their desire to build influence by working through – rather than against – the system.

Freer's account, however, takes a sharp turn in Chapters Four and Five as it approaches the 1970s: the period in which the trajectories of these various Muslim Brotherhood groups began to diverge. In Kuwait, the presence of an elected parliament channelled the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts towards formal institutional involvement, including electoral politics and law-making. Accordingly, by 1991, the Muslim Brotherhood evolved into a formal political party – the Islamic Constitutional Movement – which has since become a mainstay of Kuwaiti politics. In Qatar, for reasons that are not entirely clear, the organisation disbanded in 1999 following years of internal deliberation, preferring to remain an informal social presence instead. In the UAE, the state came to view the organisation during the 1990s as a security threat and eventually even as an outright terrorist group, forcing it to operate underground.

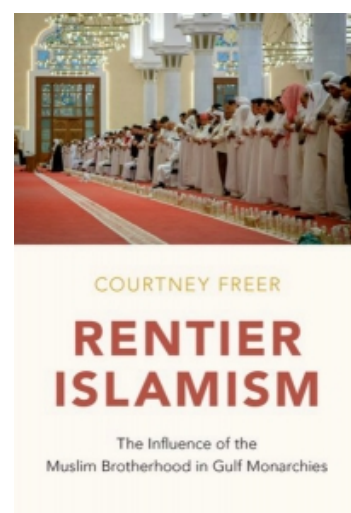




Image Credit: Dubai skyline, UAE ([Chris Combe CC BY 2.0](#))

To explain these divergent trajectories, Freer argues that the presence of formal political institutions was the most important factor in determining the organisational form that Muslim Brotherhood groups took in each of the three countries. Kuwait, whose political life is by far the most institutionalised, succeeded in transforming *Islah* – its local Muslim Brotherhood branch – into a mainstream political party that has been as concerned with pragmatic coalition-building as it has been with achieving its ideological objectives. In Qatar and the UAE, by contrast, where political life lacks a formal institutional dimension in the modern Western sense, Muslim Brotherhood groups have retained an informal – although by no means inconsequential – presence.

Yet, Freer's institutional explanation does not account for the entire picture. It stops short of explaining why Muslim Brotherhood groups in Qatar and the UAE took acutely different historical trajectories despite the similar nature of political institutions in the two countries (159, 176).

In the Qatari case, Freer broadly argues that the informal nature of Qatari politics and the state's provision of welfare made the presence of an organised Muslim Brotherhood movement unnecessary. In doing so, however, Freer paints a rosy image of politics in Qatar and too readily dismisses alternative explanations. She describes Qatar as a place where 'citizens are assured that their grievances are heard and oftentimes addressed' which contributes to 'general contentment' inside the country (120-22). This description ignores the fact that the government has [delayed the election of an advisory council](#) on several occasions since 2004, for instance, even though – in a 2011 opinion survey cited by the author – 80 per cent of Qataris described living in a democracy as being 'very important' or 'important'. Although fear of government repression is also cited as a potential explanation for the Muslim Brotherhood's dissolution at one point in the narrative (91), it is later discarded in the book's explanatory section in Chapter Eight in favour of an emphasis on the nature of Qatar's political system instead (179-80).

In the Emirati case, meanwhile, the book ought to have asked why the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood refused in 2003 to follow in the footsteps of its Qatari counterpart and disband, even though the space for organised political activity ('opportunity structures') available to them was largely the same. Instead, the author summarises the Emirati Muslim Brotherhood's decision in less than two lines: 'After months of talks, *Islah* rejected the government's invitation to continue engaging in *da'wa* [religious preaching or proselytising] without an organizational structure' (130). This omission is unfortunate, since it eclipses a crucial lesson of the Emirati experience: no matter how restrictive the political opportunity structure seems, social and political agents enjoy a fundamental ability to ignore or defy it, irrespective of how irrational their course of action may appear.

The book's failure to acknowledge this issue is not simply the result of historiographical neglect, however, but rather the outcome of a fundamental theoretical problem. It derives in part from the book's tendency to locate causality squarely at the structural level of domestic institutions, thereby depriving the social and political actors in question, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood, of agency. The Muslim Brotherhood, in other words, is treated as a homogenous unit or black box that adapts to the 'opportunity structure' or the space that the state and its political institutions afford for collective political mobilisation. Consequently, the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders, internal dynamics and decision-making processes are at times relegated to the background and end up overlooked even at key junctures of the historical narrative.

Yet, despite these shortcomings, Freer successfully foregrounds the complexity of political life in the 'super-rentier' states of the Gulf, mounting a credible challenge to the simplistic assumption that citizens of rentier states are motivated primarily by the desire to seek or preserve rent. Moreover, her suggestion that the unique political economy of rentier states allows for a gradualist form of Islamist politics to emerge is interesting and worthy of further investigation. Finally, Freer's extensive use of footnotes and primary sources – which can be difficult to come by in the Gulf states' current political climate – complements the lucidity of her prose and the clarity of her argumentation, all of which combine to produce a manuscript that is both enjoyable and highly informative.

To conclude, the book deserves praise for its historiographical value, theoretical contribution and accessible style, despite the occasional blind spots in the narrative and the limitations to the theoretical framework. For these reasons, *Rentier Islamism* should be viewed as an indispensable resource for both students of political Islam and of the Arab Gulf states.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*