

Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance  
and Globalisation in the Gulf States

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THE CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF  
**GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**



October 2009

Number 5

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The Programme is funded by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

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## **Nationalism in the Gulf States**

### **Research Paper, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States**

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Published in 2009.

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# Nationalism in the Gulf States

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## **Abstract**

The relatively new states of the Arabian Gulf do not have a 'nationalist' history as understood elsewhere in the Middle East. Not born out of a struggle for national self-determination, nor, for much of the modern state era, seeking territorial aggrandizement, Gulf Arab leaders have tended to use tribal and religious identities to reinforce their domestic legitimacy. However, these other identities weaken national coherence. In the current context of internal disquiet about foreign population numbers, Iran's rising regional prominence and sectarian sensitivities within some GCC states, national identity is increasingly being employed as a state-building tool. However, steps to boost national identity do not necessarily create coherent national communities. As the state-led invention of national tradition is stepped up, usually without reference to disparate and sometimes disputatious groups, inclusion is not being felt across the national communities. While progress has arguably been made in some GCC states in at least addressing the limitations to national coherence, nationalism in the Gulf remains a highly contested notion, liable to promote as much as conceal national division.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ruling elites of the independent states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the six-member association of states founded in 1981, are paying increasing attention to *haweeya al-watani* (national identity) and heritage (*turath*) within their countries. However, the concept of nation in the Gulf Arab countries is underdeveloped to the extent that the emergent public debate about ways to protect national identity has not yet defined what is meant by 'national'. According to a UAE academic, 'The national identity assertion doesn't mean Emirati identity so much as indigenous identity, being from this area, [being one of] the indigenous people' (al-Kitbi 2008).

A key factor here is that most GCC members did not become independent countries until 1971 and they are thus all relatively new states. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was created that year as a relatively loose federation of six separate emirates, and Qatar and Bahrain also emerged in 1971 as independent entities after rejecting membership of the UAE federation. Oman, while nominally independent from 1951, looked to British guidance until well into the 1970s, and Kuwait became an independent state in 1961 under a close British defence and advisory role that lasted up to 1971 and residually thereafter. Although al-Saud rule had been

exercised without dependence on external powers since its beginnings in Dirriyah in Najd in 1744, Saudi Arabia was not an internationally recognised sovereign state until 1932.

While the GCC states are the principal political communities within the area, what it means to be a member of these national communities remains unclear. The national identity debate does not reflect a nationalist history of a struggle for self-determination seen, for example, in other parts of the Middle East, nor the national chauvinism and expansionism associated with some European nations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Precisely for these reasons, nationalism is a word avoided by those leading the identity debate in the GCC states. Findlow cites the UAE as an example of states that do not fit the ‘defined by the other’ assumption of traditional notions of nationalism (Findlow 2000). To be nationalist, she argues, the country does not require a conscious (often armed) act of liberation, of bloodletting, to qualify for entry into the club of nations. Findlow states that UAE nationalism represents a ‘positive turning inward’ as opposed to a ‘negative turning outward’ (ibid., p. 16). As I shall argue, this turning inward throughout the GCC states can include a nationalism expressed in the ‘ethnopolitics’ (Longva 2006) of chauvinism towards non-national residents and even fellow nationals judged inadequate by the ‘blue-blooded’ standards of the ‘in’ community within the nation.

The image of the nation presented by various state heritage projects since the 1980s has yet to be superseded by a debate that has properly addressed the histories of those sub-communities whose identity is not part of the ‘imagined tradition’ of the state. The Saudi Arabian National Dialogue launched by King Abdallah in 2003 notably attempted to ‘re-Imagine’ tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) by projecting a new image of the kingdom as inclusive of its different communities. This meant that it included Shia representatives and liberal reformers as well as the clerical establishment, and discussed a number of practical and political challenges including employment and the position of women. The fact that such a dialogue was launched reflected awareness that contradictory internal pressures were threatening national cohesion, especially in the wake of heightened internal and regional sectarian tensions following the US-led invasion of Iraq. The ‘Saudi national’ debate, however, has since reached the limits of both political symbolism and the actual basis of power in the country which prevents too profound a challenge to the internal al-Saud partnership with the religious establishment.

More widely in the GCC, a national identity debate has in the last two to three years been sparked by acute socio-economic concerns about demographic imbalance and existential concerns among a number of Gulf leaders about the internal and regional influence of Iran. While the economic downturn that began in 2008 may slightly ease demographic imbalances, the ongoing practice of rentier politics and the expansion of the service sector economy in many of these states seem unlikely to fundamentally alter population trends. However, the downturn also emphasizes political vulnerabilities among rulers who forged a social contract in the oil era through which political acquiescence among nationals was rewarded with social and economic security. At present, with the partial exception of Bahrain, there is limited evidence that the acquiescence is under any strain. However, national cultural and related regional, political sensitivities are likely to remain.

Defining what constitutes the nation presents a number of difficulties related to the historical trajectories and the manner in which each of the different Gulf states arrived at independence. One of Saudi Arabia's founding national myths, for example, is what the Saudi state officially describes as the 'freeing' of Riyadh in 1902, after the symbolic wresting of control of the Masmak fortress (al-Rasheed 2004: p. 186). This victory, secured for the al-Saud by *muwahiddun* (unitarian) or so-called *wahhabi* fighters was understood as that of a religious cause, and was not conceived as the liberation of a newly born nation.

Ibn Saud, the eventual leader of the independent Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was courted by the Ottomans and in 1914 he accepted the title of *wali* of Najd under their ultimate authority, while the more junior Ottoman title of *qaimaqaam* (sub-regional governor) was bestowed upon the rulers of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar from the 1870s onwards. Port cities such as Kuwait, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Qatar and Dubai had an identity and distinctiveness underlined by the protection from potential *muwahiddun* invasion, however imperfect, given by Britain to the ruling sheikhs. The consolidation of control over territorial space that local ruling families had begun on the southern shore of the Gulf in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also helped to identify the people of these territories with the land (Crystal 1990: p. 20). Tribal sheikhs in the pre-oil and early oil era had shown wavering loyalties at a time when a ruler sought to use external British protection to aid internal territorial consolidation (Onley and Khalaf 2006). By the time of

independent statehood most occupants of these lands had developed an identification with both the ruling sheikh and the territory over which he sought authority, therefore placing the ruling family at the heart of the emergent state-building project. This developing awareness of belonging to a defined physical territory under a local leadership created nascent nations. Their relative youth, however, means that the ‘imagination of tradition’ that Hobsbawm observed as characterizing the state-led creation of ‘nationals’ after the birth of European ‘nations’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992: pp. 263–83), is a project still very embryonic in the Gulf. Gellner defines nationalism as a ‘political principle’ that emphasizes that the key ‘social bond’ is between members of the same cultural community (Gellner 1997: p. 3). While there may be ‘second class citizens’ and residual non-national identities within the nation, ‘it is the anonymity of the [national] membership, the participation in the total nation unmediated by any [other] significant social groupings, which is what distinguishes the modern nation’ (ibid., p. 46). Anderson argues that nationalism is an ideology that ‘imagines’ a community (Anderson 1991: pp. 5–7). This ‘imagined political community’ of the nation exists in the minds of its members, who feel ‘communion’ with those they do not know (ibid.). This notion of nationalism is more flexible than that of Gellner, who also argues that where the community is lacking it is created by force from the body of other states. In all nations, whether forged by force or deepened by state-building, the national community is the primary locus of loyalty and identity.

However, despite Saudi Arabia’s relatively long history, the Saudi national community still struggles to be the principal focus of loyalty within the territory of the state. Likewise, among the newer states of the Gulf the residual strength of other identities, and the specific contradictions of such ‘imaginings’ in the loose federation that is the UAE, emphasizes the still emergent nature of nationalism among the Gulf Arab states. Nationalism in Europe has a longer lifespan. However, the national coherence of many European states continues to be affected by competing authorities within and across state boundaries. Whether due to ongoing political ambitions in the Balkans, for example, or to the integrationist project of the European Union, state-led imaginings and the artifice that this involves remain a contradiction in the nationalisms of the continent that spawned the idea of the nation state.

These kinds of contradiction are very apparent in the GCC states, and this paper seeks to examine the extent to which they are a product of contending internal and external authorities. It will assess what impact nationalism has had on the political development of the Gulf Arab states, what conceptions there were of nationalism in the period leading up to what for many was the defining event of 1971, and how much the current debate reflects a coherent development of national identity in the six states of the GCC. In doing so it will also analyse the importance of other identities, including Arabism, Islam and the role of political Islam, and the *khaleeji* (Gulf) identity. As such this paper will draw on the academic work conducted on national identity in the different countries of the GCC and that addresses the attitude of specific communities to the official discourse. In doing so it seeks to assess how much the ‘national imagining’ has comparable features throughout the region and what the key constraints, and relative successes, are.

#### **SAUDI ARABIA**

Saudi Arabia secured independence through a series of territorial conquests that led to international recognition of the al-Saud kingdom as we know it today. Other forms of dynastic rule in the Gulf were the product of local tribal alliance-building that had consolidated control before a decision by the external protector, Britain, designated them as independent states.

In common with many states outside the region, the Saudi leadership has partly defined the Saudi state in terms of what its founders were opposed to. There was opposition to both the Ottomans and their Arabian allies, and later to British attempts to constrain al-Saud power in the Peninsula. In 1818, the so-called first kingdom of the al-Saud lost control of the Hijaz, including the holy cities of Makkah and Medina, to the Ottomans, who then went on to take control of the central Arabian province of Najd. However, the al-Saud retook the Najdi city of Riyadh only a few years later, before expanding their second kingdom eastwards until their defeat at the hands of the Ottoman-backed al-Rasheed in 1891. Control of Najd was resecured with victory over the al-Rasheed in 1902 and followed by conquest of the Ottoman foothold in Ahsa on the eastern shores of Arabia. The southerly province of Asir was then incorporated into the emergent Saudi state post-Ottoman collapse, and by 1925 the former Ottoman-backed Hashemite rulers of the Hijaz had also been defeated by the al-Saud.



Despite the successful unification of the Hijaz, Asir and Eastern Province under the al-Saud, distinct regional traditions are maintained, with sometimes sharply contrasting social norms (Yamani 2004). This has led to the suggestion that the more important battles of Arabia cannot be commemorated even in the cautious manner of the marking of the ‘freeing’ of Riyadh, because Saudi rule is viewed in some parts of the country as essentially ‘Najdi’ (al-Rasheed 2004: p. 195). Furthermore, heroic victories on the battlefield are not presented in the official historiography as the bloody birth pains of the new Saudi nation, even if some ‘pre-state’ poetic references expressed the determination to defend the *watan* (nation or country) (al-Dakheel 2009).

It is notable that the Saudi National Museum presents the expansion of the kingdom at the expense of other local leaders’ territories as the growth of Islamic belief and in particular of *tawhid*, the conception of the unity of God. The unification of territory and of peoples and the expunging of ‘polytheistic’ belief and practice is presented as an emancipatory act for Islam, not for a notional Saudi nation. The partnership between the *muwahiddun* and the al-Saud is portrayed as the marriage of religious reform and of religiously sanctioned leadership. The king is referred to by the *ulema* as *imam*, in this context meaning leader of the community, or *wali amr* (‘guardian’ or ‘just ruler’), confirming his status as ruling within Islamic precepts (Zubaida 2003: p. 153). The clerics themselves are what Zubaida has called ‘main legislators’ (ibid.), in that they control the process of interpretation (*ijtihad*) of religious law and therefore need to sign off any government policy innovations that could be interpreted as having Islamic implications.

Religion is often part of national myth, even if in the West it has become less significant in the promotion of national communities. After all, the nationalism of the Arab Revolt, as refracted through the ideological lens of Sherif Hussein in 1916, made the Arabs the harbingers of what was conceived of as a return to Islamic governance within at least some Arab-populated territory. This was not a call for national self-determination but for a religiously motivated liberation of territory from a perceptibly un-Islamic form of governance (Dawn 1973: p. 79). The pan-Arabism dominant in the Nasser era more assertively imagined a single, united, Arab national state, but did so without reference to *shariah*. Its secular conception of Arabness stressed common language (Tibi 1997: p. 89), but in doing so reflected an identity intimately

linked to an Islam that had both popularized and made sacred their ‘national’ tongue. As Gellner observed, there is one Arab culture ‘insofar as God speaks Arabic’ (Gellner 1997: p. 86). The ‘historic’ Saudi national project has been imagined in a manner not that different from Hussein, who sought an ‘Arab country’ (Dawn 1973: p. 77) but not one that had to include all territory inhabited by Arabs.

The religious mission in Saudi Arabia is officially presented as something akin to nation-building, in that the Islamically unacceptable *fitna* (chaos) wrought by tribal division is supposedly overcome by the unifying effect of restoring ‘correct’ practice under religiously sanctioned leadership. Religion’s contradiction of national imagining, however, lies in the limits it can sometimes put on the nation as an inclusive community. While a Gulf Arab state’s imagining of nationals as well as the nation will usually ignore issues that may divide the national community by sub-group (Khalaf 2008: p. 66), Saudi Arabia’s highly conservative Sunni *ulema* effectively define who is a member of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups in the Saudi state, helping to prioritize the Sunni sect at the expense of the Shia, and the conservative Najdi tradition over that of other regions, thereby undermining the effectiveness of a state-led conception of the nation.

According to the Saudi analyst Turki al-Rasheed, ‘Any ruler will use two swords – the sword of religion and of tribalism’ (al-Rasheed 2009). Religion in Saudi Arabia undermines the building of a coherent national community by representing a parallel loyalty to that of the nation, and by legitimizing the leadership of the state rather than the importance of the state per se. To Saudi academic Khalid al-Dakheel, ‘the notion of religion [as an identifier] tends to dilute the nationhood identity [within the] realm of the state’ (al-Dakheel 2009), so much so that the commemoration of the seizing of the Masmak fortress in Riyadh from the al-Rasheed tribe, which was marked very publicly outside the kingdom in 1999<sup>1</sup> as a pivotal national event, was a low-key internal affair, due to the judgment by the senior *ulema* that only the Islamic festivals of Eid al-Fitra and Eid al-Adha should be celebrated. Despite the historic authority of Ibn Saud he was not able to secure the backing of senior *ulema* for a Saudi national public holiday to mark

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<sup>1</sup> For example, full-page advertisements commemorated the event in some British newspapers, while the Saudi government sponsored a ‘King Abdel Aziz and the Founding of Saudi Arabia’ conference at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies in Whitehall, London.

the date when the modern kingdom was declared in 1932, an event that became a public holiday only as recently as September 2005. Interestingly, the annual national holiday is fixed on September 23 according to the Gregorian (Christian) calendar, reflecting the clerical need to separate such an event from the Islamic year.

Despite these constraints on the state in its attempts to marshal national sentiment, religion is used equally to bolster the authority of the royal family. The location of the *haramain* (Makkah and Medina) within the territory of the state is an important part of this legitimacy, as is the emphasis on the title *khadim al-haramain* (custodian of the two holy places). This became stronger from the 1960s, first in response to the Arab nationalist power Egypt and subsequently to the ideological challenge of the Iranian revolution. Repeating a quote attributed to Ibn Saud, the former Saudi judge Abdel-Aziz al-Gassim observed that ‘Religion is like the falcon; he who captures it will hunt with it’ (al-Gassim 2007). However, al-Dakheel draws a distinction between the expansionary religious mission of the *muwahiddun* and the statecraft of Ibn Saud, who helped to fix the idea of the Saudi state within defined territories by making agreements with neighbouring states at the behest of the British. Through this process Ibn Saud also crushed what al-Dakheel presents as a challenge to state authority, the 1926–9 ‘Ikhwan’ revolt of two key tribes.<sup>2</sup> Had their demands for political power and financial reward for their role in the *muwahiddun* been accommodated, the authority of the nascent kingdom would have been weakened. In contrast to these particularistic tribal demands, it has been argued that the *muwahiddun* were essentially an anti-tribal force keen to eradicate such allegiances (al-Dakheel 2009) and identities (al-Fahad 2004). The founder of *muwahiddun* thought, Mohammed ibn Abdel-Wahhab, saw the bedouin (non-settled) as backward, even as unbelievers, and his followers (*wahhabis*) were encouraged by Ibn Saud to become *hadhari* (settlers) in dedicated communities that, through warfare, would expand the realm of the al-Saud. Asserting the authority of the royal family and making sure that its princes occupied positions of governor across all the regions of the country helped to solidify the authority of the emergent state. More

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<sup>2</sup> The *ikhwan* (brothers) were the zealous armed fighters who followed the teaching of Abdul Wahhab and whose expansionism helped to establish the frontiers of the Saudi state. Saudi leader Ibn Saud’s decision to rein them in provoked a revolt among their leadership, who raised religious as well as political and financial complaints.

specifically, it represented the victory of an alliance that bound together the al-Saud family, loyal tribes and religious fighters.

Loyalty in the kingdom today, argues al-Dakheel, is to the Saudi state or to a tribal sheikh, and not to the royal family. However, while a sense of nationhood within Saudi Arabia and all the GCC states has been bolstered by the relative neutrality of the state's welfare provision and by the state's increasing 'imagining' of national tradition, the identity of the state and loyalty to it remain bound up with the identity of, and loyalty to, the ruling family. According to Turki al-Rasheed, in Saudi Arabia and the wider region 'loyalty [is] to the person and not to the state; this is the major weak point' (al-Rasheed 2009). This is exemplified by Ibn Saud's practice of extending support from key tribes, including those drawn from the country's disparate regions, through repeated marriages to the daughters of senior tribal elders, while retaining the option of divorce as a tool of alliance building (al-Rasheed 2002). The tribe, argues Turki al-Rasheed, takes 'low level pay' in political terms and is incorporated, whereas other groups in society, such as the professional classes, are politically more expensive, with their demands for 'transfer of power, transparency and checks and balances' (al-Rasheed 2009). Thus Saudi Arabia is not a political community resting solely on tribe; rather, tribes are one of a series of clients woven together in a practice of statecraft which emphasizes the relatively new state's traditional features.

#### **TRIBAL ASABIYYA**

Tribes in the Gulf Arab states today are still central to national leadership, and are presented by that leadership as part of the national construct. Bassam Tibi draws on a key concept of the fourteenth-century philosopher Ibn Khaldoun to write of 'new *asabiyyas* in nation state guises' (Tibi 1990: p. 132), when modern Arab polities also practise group (i.e. tribal) solidarity (*asabiyya*) but repackage it as leadership of a national community. Tribe in this reading has not gone away. In fact the leaderships within the Gulf are the dominant families of ruling tribes that emerged in the struggle for authority in the pre-independence phase or, in the Saudi case, a ruling family aligned with powerful, religiously inspired, warriors. Ibn Khaldun argued that *asabiyya* and Islam were the two key instruments of leadership by Arab rulers.

This does not mean that tribe is the only significant client in Saudi Arabia or among its Gulf neighbours. Within the kingdom the de facto al-Saud partnership with the ‘religious establishment’ means that the latter have their own interests as senior clerics with a political and economic relationship to the state. Khaled al-Habbas argues that in modern Saudi Arabia, tribe is one of several significant groups, and those whose identity is still fundamentally rooted in this way can feel disadvantaged in terms of the educational gains, for example, displayed by what he sees as the urban elites: ‘the technocrats, intelligentsia and the businessmen’ (al-Habbas 2009). On the other hand, the state has enabled ministries to be used as patronage networks, with tribal configurations sometimes repeated in official guises throughout the Gulf. Authority in Gulf Arab societies – pre- and post-independence – needed financial credibility to underscore the effectiveness of its practice of *asabiyya*. ‘Rent’ was therefore as much a feature of pre-state leadership as it is a key characteristic of the mostly energy-rich Gulf Arab states of today. So rather than as nationally integrated bodies, the Gulf Arab states emerged with new structures that replicated the old tribe and kinship basis of authority. Van der Meulen cites the example in Saudi Arabia of a new ‘state class’ that, like the private sector, would distribute largesse on the old tribal basis (Van der Meulen 1997: pp. 64–5).

Although the state is often used by tribal as well as other sub-national leaders to enhance their own patronage powers, the tribe is seen by some as more reliable than the state. Saudi analyst Turki al-Rasheed says that there is an attitude of: ‘I go back [to the tribe] because I feel more secure – it will secure me more than a country or civil society’ (al-Rasheed 2009). Sectarian identities can also be enhanced when the state struggles to meet expectations, as reflected in the sense of economic injustice motivating Shia oppositionists in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,<sup>3</sup> for example. Attempts to constrain aspects of the social contract at times of economic duress have in the past been popularly resisted in Saudi Arabia,<sup>4</sup> suggesting that a sustained

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with Shia figures, Saudi Arabia (2005, 2007, 2009) and Bahrain (2008).

<sup>4</sup> For example, opposition in Saudi Arabia in 2000 caused the government to back down from a proposed major hike in what, despite some earlier increases, were highly subsidized electricity prices. Electricity and water remain subsidized for nationals throughout the GCC countries. Notably, over 1980–2000 Saudi state revenues per capita fell by around two-thirds due to population growth in this comparatively populous GCC state. Although this trend, and concurrent economic pressures, were eased by high oil revenues over 2003–7, the oil price weakening in the downturn of 2008–9 further emphasized the pressure on state provision.

challenge to a Gulf state's patronage capabilities could test national coherence and further deepen different sub-national identities.

### **Tribalism in the smaller Gulf states**

Unlike Saudi Arabia, the use of tribal authority in the smaller Gulf states is combined with a relatively light Islamic touch. Carefully managed religious leaderships sanction the authority of the rulers who do not overtly draw on religious legitimation (Van der Meulen 1997).

Underpinning this maintenance of *asabiyya* is the use of state machinery to disburse patronage selectively in order to maintain alliances based on family, tribe and region. The politics of patron–client relations exist alongside the formally neutral role of the state. In Abu Dhabi in the late 1960s the Zaab tribe was added to the Al-Nahyan's circle of allies, lending its name to a district in the city and its members took up a significant number of foreign ministry jobs, having previously been loyal to, and located in, Ras al-Khaimah, an emirate ruled by a branch of the al-Qassimi (Khalifa 1979: p. 100; Dresch 2006: p. 207). The Shehi tribe originated in the Omani Musandam Peninsula, but have acquired Emirati nationality in recent years, and many have settled in neighbouring Ras al-Khaimah. Given the conception of a number of the Omani elite that the UAE is essentially Omani, this is not seen in Oman as threatening but as acknowledgement of the two countries' shared history (as argued by an Omani academic, 2008). Omani elites are conscious of a history that links the dominant Emirati tribal alliance, the Bani Yas, with the emergent tribal victors within Oman, the al Bu Said, today's ruling family. For some Omanis, discussion of what their nation means to them cannot be conducted without reference to the former 'Trucial Oman', today's UAE. The Omani academic stressed in this respect that contemporary 'political borders are not the borders of identity'.

Among some of the UAE leadership, however, there is sensitivity about the historic Omani role, especially when some Emiratis can trace their family and or tribal origins to Oman. With the UAE offering a home to a number of disaffected Omani tribal members (Chatty 2009), this could increasingly be the focus of competing attempts to garner tribal loyalty in a manner seen in the 1950s between Abu Dhabi and Oman (along with Saudi Arabia) over the Buraimi Oasis, for example.

In the Sultanate of Oman a ‘tribal state’ is in evidence when tribal sheikhs, even lower level sheikhs, are appointed by the sultan. According to an Omani academic, this is about ‘manipulating old traditional leaders and behaviour in a political way. ‘[The state] looks modern but deep down it’s traditional’ (unattributed Omani academic, 2008). These examples suggest that what is being publicly imagined by the state as a national community is operating under a non-invented tradition of leadership that has transferred itself to the state, whereby the means of patronage and influence can be operated with more sophistication than at the pre-state tribal level. However, in common with neighbouring rulers, some of this state tribal manipulation has been practised for the sake of the modern enticements of oil (Chatty 2009: p. 42). There are also some highly invented traditions surrounding the increasingly grandiose nature of the sultan’s rule in Oman which borrow from the rituals and regalia of some European monarchs. These emphasize the contrast with the *majlis* system of consultation practised in other GCC countries, and cause antagonism among those tribes no longer being favoured (Chatty 2009).

#### **ARAB NATIONALISM**

National imagining in the Gulf has seen national disputes over territorial space and is encouraging further state-led efforts at internal consolidation. However, state-specific nationalism did not dominate the politics of the Gulf in the pre- or post-independence era. The nation that loomed large for some within the Gulf merchant families in the 1950s and 60s was that of the distinct ‘Arab’ nation, which offered liberation from what were seen as the artificial state boundaries of a colonial inheritance. This was the clearest conception of nationalism to shape the politics of the Gulf entities, their leaderships’ priorities and their foreign policies, from the 1950s to the late 1960s and even, residually, to the present day. However, Arab nationalism was not a construct so deeply rooted in Gulf merchant elites that it helped shape their leader’s decisions and their state’s identity to the extent evident in the Mashreq or in Egypt (Barnett 1998). However, as far back as the 1930s merchants were influenced by the politics of Arab capitals more alive to this national conception, and this affected their own demands in a number of Gulf sheikhdoms and in Saudi Arabia for a voice in political decision-making. This can be seen in the various merchant movements of Kuwait, Bahrain and Dubai in the 1930s, and in the political stances among merchants and even among some nationalist-inclined members of the

ruling families of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s. This included demands for political reform or greater distance from Britain and correspondingly closer relations with Egypt. In the conduct of external relations, however, these were not the only concerns of Gulf rulers. In what for most was the pre-independence phase of the 1950s, the local rulers' assessment of where the 'balance of threats' (Walt 1987) lay in the region included that posed by Arab nationalist ideology. While Arab nationalism was popular among some of the Gulf domestic elites, it was used by Egypt and other self-declared Arab nationalist leaderships to delegitimize the Gulf rulers' own authority. Independent Saudi Arabia was equally a target of these pressures from without and from within, a factor that encouraged its growing relationship with the United States. However, Arab nationalism was not just an element of threat needing to be deflected by discreet western alliances whilst expressing fealty to Arab causes, including the question of Palestine. It also reshaped the regional environment. The failure of what was known in the Arab world as the 'triple aggression' of 1956, when Egypt was invaded in a planned attack by Britain, France and Israel, led the British government to see its overt role in the Gulf and beyond as unsustainable. This also encouraged some local rulers to recognize that they needed to take on greater authority for their own affairs, even if the coastal Gulf leaders had not wanted the United Kingdom to terminate its defence commitment completely by 1971. Arab nationalism therefore has a direct bearing on the independence of five separate Gulf states, beginning with Kuwait in 1961. Their establishment, and what Kuwait announced as its voluntary decision to terminate the British defence commitment several years later, were presented and celebrated in the Gulf and the wider Arab world as victories for the Arab nation. In this respect the formation of a Gulf federation, the UAE, however much its negotiation had been encouraged and eventually shepherded by the British, continues to be articulated as the only successful exercise in Arab unity, in contrast to more short-lived efforts elsewhere in the region. At the beginning of the 1970s resource nationalism was popular throughout the Middle East. In the Gulf, local rulers felt an economic and political imperative to nationalise Western oil interests, in the process asserting their leadership, the identity of their state and their Arab national fealty.

Arab nationalism as a construct still has some residual force in the region. In the Gulf Arab state context this is expressed in the language of unity (*wahda*), which is ambiguous



enough to allow policies of solidarity with Palestine and other symbols of Arab brotherhood to suffice. However, this is tested when regional divisions in recent years have helped to fracture the Palestinians, making the expression of solidarity problematic for foreign Arab governments.<sup>5</sup> The commitment to a common Arab nation had its political high-water mark at the outbreak of the Six Day War on June 4 1967, just before Israel occupied large swathes of Arab territory, and its death knell sounded on 16 January 1991, when Arab states joined the US-led attack on Iraq to liberate Kuwait (Barnett 1996).

By the beginning of the 1970s the assumption by Gulf rulers of an ongoing British role had been overturned, and Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran would, until 1991, prove the dominant Gulf actors. The newly independent Gulf leaders were obliged to consolidate their domestic authority whilst discreetly encouraging an increased US role as a way of avoiding too close a relationship with any of the three local powers. In some cases the US role was already under way. In Bahrain, the US navy soon replaced the British, who departed in 1971, which to some extent provided reassurance for other Gulf states, and in 1981 the United States secured a basing agreement with Oman in response to the sultan's concern about threats from Iran. In Saudi Arabia the United States had first naval and then air force access from 1945, albeit very low key until the latter part of Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s. Internal Saudi opinion remains sensitive to the ruling family's relationship with the United States, and the pronounced US regional military role from inside the kingdom from 1991 was highly controversial.

Ideational delegitimization in the form of Arab nationalist criticism could come from within and without, although it largely took the form of nationalist propaganda attacks from Iraq. This only accentuated the importance of a legitimate local identity bound up in the two established factors of local rule: *asabiyya* and Islam. The latter became more important, however, with the growth of political Islam, a construct that re-imagined the Islamic past to proffer an alternative political future based on new political structures (Tibi 1997: p. 118) that seemingly would have no place for the ruling sheikhs. Saudi Arabia was better placed to try

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<sup>5</sup> This tension between, for example, the interests of the Saudi state and the expected expressions of loyalty to the 'Arab' nation was noted during the Israeli attack on Gaza over December 2008–January 2009 by a Saudi academic, Khaled al-Dakheel. Interview, 2009.

to cope with this tide, although all Gulf countries asserted a more conservative domestic order in response.

### **ISLAM AND THE NATIONAL POLITY**

As elsewhere in the Arab world, Islamists had been promoted in public life in a number of the Gulf states in the 1970s, in response to changing regional politics and in order to counterbalance ongoing pressure from leftists and Arab nationalists. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 it appeared more risky to be giving domestic Islamists a public role that effectively helped to legitimize ideas that would, at minimum, reorder the state. However, it was assumed that the public engagement of Islamists by inclusion in the Kuwait parliament, and as officials in the *awqaf* (Islamic affairs), education and justice ministries in the UAE, for example, would incorporate them politically and by extension, aid the state in its projection of a conservative and Islamic image. In recent years, however, the UAE has been removing a considerable number of Muslim Brotherhood figures from such positions and from the government altogether (Emirati analyst 2008). This does not prevent Dubai in particular from receiving conservative criticism from the Brotherhood and more mainstream elements in the emirate and the wider UAE. For GCC state leaders, a correct Islamic image at least was, and continues to be, promoted, while the substance is largely resisted. Dubai, for example, is planning a Prophet Muhammad Museum as part of a series of cultural initiatives designed to balance its rather more brash cultural image in other respects. In Kuwait in 1996 the parliament segregated public university education without concerted opposition, and since the 1980s there has been greater state regulation of social and cultural activity. However, the government rejects the Islamists' demand for changing the state constitution to make *shariah* law the main source of legislation, as opposed to a main source of legislation, which is its current status in the Kuwait and most other GCC countries' constitutions.

While Gellner referred to Islam as a national culture, it is plainly not exclusive to the national culture of any one Gulf Arab state, despite the impression created at the Saudi National Museum. The GCC states, collectively and individually, emphasize Islamic fealty in policy statements and public projects, and all have emphasized Islam as part of the recent focus on national identity. States have also been anxious to ensure that a 'government-friendly' Islam is

nurtured through control of Friday sermons,<sup>6</sup> and there has been a growth of public broadcast Quran recitation contests in the UAE. It is implied, although never overtly stated, that the GCC states are respecting traditional values without falling victim to the militant posturing seen elsewhere in the region. Qatar, for example, has sought to project Islamic fealty alongside radical educational reforms that have given a fairly open platform for foreign higher education providers and an increasing use of English in government schools. A high-profile Islamic Museum opened with much pride and fanfare in Doha in December 2008, and many Arab and other Muslim leaders lent their support to the Qatari leadership's eye-catching cultural statement. Qatar is also renowned for striking populist, including Islamist-friendly, regional political stances and provides a public platform for the popular Egyptian cleric Yusuf Qaradawi. Oman has sought to 'nationalize' religion through state promotion of a 'consensual' Islam which papers over Ibadi and Sunni differences, and regulates the content of sermons from their shared and state-provided mosques (Valeri 2007). In Oman and other GCC states, the Shia have fallen outside state provision, but in Oman specifically their relative wealth (and Indian as opposed to Persian origin) enables their inclusion in the concept of the nation (Omani academic 2008).

#### **BEDOUIN EXCLUSIVENESS**

One of the difficulties for the, mostly recent, emphasis on strengthening national identity among the GCC countries is that the selective re-imagining of the past cannot avoid tribal identity. Efforts within the UAE during its 'Year of National Identity' in 2008 included the construction of bedouin-style tents in the airports of a number of the separate emirates that provided traditional-style hospitality to visitors, who could sit cross-legged and drink coffee. Sensitivities over the impact of large-scale immigration into the UAE have encouraged an emphasis on chronicling oral history and educating both nationals and non-nationals about the traditions of the country. The heritage industry is now thriving throughout the GCC, with a state funding boom in recent years. In some cases old souk areas have literally been reinvented in order to provide nationals as well as visitors with a connection to a reconstructed past. Although this reconstruction is often selective and avoids explicit references to differences within the nation, it

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<sup>6</sup> In Dubai, for example, the text of the Friday sermon is available online in Arabic and English the same day it is delivered. Deviation is reportedly allowed, but the essential message must be maintained.

does not prevent the communication of the preferred version of local history. For example, the Arabian bedouin desert traditions extensively on show in the UAE's heritage areas do not have much to say to the large proportion of the national population whose forefathers settled in Iran and among whom speaking Persian at home is not uncommon, as is the case with other *hawala* communities in the Gulf.<sup>7</sup> In the context of growing fears about Iran this is not surprising, but ignoring divergent traditions by the state has long been the common practice of Gulf Arab states and emphasizes what is generally a difficulty about publicly embracing internal aspects of a country's past that do not fit with the preferred national identity projected by its leadership.

### **TRIBE AND FEDERATION**

The emphasis on a bedouin-style cultural past even as nationals are overwhelmingly part of settled communities is interesting, given the importance of tribal alliances that remain important features of the authority of local emirate rulers. This in turn underscores the separate identity and history of the individual emirates, for whom the notion of the wider Emirati nation is a construct with, by definition, a short-lived history. It was said of the UAE thirty years ago that, 'political loyalty to one's tribe has not as yet given way to loyalty to the state as an abstract political concept' (Khalifa 1979: p. 99). That the state is made even more abstract by being made up of seven emirates in an ambiguous and ill-defined relationship with each other plainly does not help. There have been several developments since the federation's formation, however, which suggest that a (federal) Emirati national identity may have taken on more coherence. Two public leadership crises in the emirate of Sharjah – in 1972 and 1987 – were resolved using the formal mechanism of the (federal) Supreme Council and, in 1972, the deployment of federal as well as Abu Dhabi troops (Van der Meulen 1997). In both crises the eventual agreement of the Abu Dhabi ruler Sheikh Zayed and the Dubai ruler Sheikh Rashed on whom to support for the leadership of Sharjah, and the Sharjah ruling family's acceptance of their intervention, suggested the ability on the part of all to look to the federation and its emergent ruling body as the primary locus of authority, albeit that it suited their respective emirate-level interests to do so.

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<sup>7</sup> This is the case even as one of the heritage showpieces in Dubai, the Bastakia, reinvents an Emirati past in an area whose very name is taken from the town of Bastak in southern Iran to which some UAE nationals can trace their family's origins and whose distinctive wind towers were first developed on the other side of the Gulf.

In 2003 the replacement of the crown prince of Ras al-Khaimah brought angry tribal members onto the streets, but wider UAE backing for, and possibly the instigation of, the change resulted in federal troops deployed to enforce the transition (*Gulf States Newsletter* 2003). Commenting in 2008, the Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla asserted, ‘To the credit of the [UAE] state, they managed to make an Emirati identity the overriding identity’ (Abdulla, interview, 2008). Yet while National Day in the UAE is celebrated with genuine and growing popular enthusiasm – in contrast to the more muted atmosphere seen in Bahrain, for example – Abdulla and others concede that since the death of the widely respected Sheikh Zayed, ‘localism’ has been on the rise throughout the UAE. The impact of the credit squeeze on the Dubai economy and the resulting depth of intervention by Abu Dhabi through formal and informal support suggests for some that localism may be coming to an end. However, whether Dubai will radically alter its external relations and comparatively open economic platform, not least for Iran, remains to be seen.<sup>8</sup> A federation that, after very long-drawn-out constitutional deliberations, could agree only on a loose association and that to this day is managed more by informal cooperation based on mutual interest than institutional development seems unlikely to cohere too deeply.

#### **TRIBE AND STATE IDENTITY**

The importance attached to tribe within a number of the GCC states is imbued in those for whom tribal practice is a less vivid part of their lives than for their forefathers. Qatar and UAE national students, for example, will often emphasize the particular importance to them of tribe as something long-standing whose identity should be upheld.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, national identity is much more contemporary and, correspondingly, can seem less significant. At the same time polling of Emirati nationals reveals that, for nearly half of them, a key indication of national identity is their ‘common cultural values and traditions’ (YouGovSiraj 2008), suggesting that there is something specific about being Emirati that has meaning for them. The same poll showed that a common

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<sup>8</sup> Dubai has a significant proportion of nationals who are *hawala* – those whose ancestors lived in Iran – and a large Iranian population is resident in the emirate. This has encouraged a historically significant business relationship even during the 1980s Iran–Iraq war and today in the face of pressure from Abu Dhabi and the United States to constrain Iran’s opportunities in Dubai.

<sup>9</sup> Based on author’s discussions with students in the UAE and Qatar in October and December 2008 respectively.

religion and common goals and aspirations represented key determinants of being a national for 21 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.

Ensuring that marriage is within the tribal group is identified by Qatari female students as an important way to maintain traditions that appear to some to be under threat.<sup>10</sup> The very development of their country is also identified as being at odds with these traditions. It may be that students will give expression to the wisdom of parents and grandparents who in many cultures can express exasperation with the pace of change. However, such opinions suggest a genuine concern among youth over that change and a conception of their identity that is in part dependent on traditions that are neither national nor of the state.

Exasperation with the importance given to tribe as one of several sub-state identities can often be found among Gulf intellectuals who are keen to dissociate their country from the backward image that, for some, tribe suggests. However, it is also acknowledged that state weakness in the Gulf and more widely in the Arab world reflects the difference between an 'elite' who form part of the inner circle and are therefore protected and consequently 'championing the national cause', and those who are outside it and therefore see themselves more in terms of family or tribe. This is not loyalty to the state but to the sheikh (academic, Qatar, 2008). Sadeq Lawtaya, a consultant with the Oman Research Council, argues that in Oman 'there are different loyalties to that of the state: everybody knows this is [an] inhibiting force in the evolution of society' (Lawtaya 2008).

Other Omani academics emphasize the difficulty of those such as Swahili-speaking Omani Zanzibaris who are 'looking for Omani identity' but are without Omani passports (unnamed Omani analyst, 2008). Historical Oman and the 'national' identification that went with it was based on a very different territorial and therefore 'state' concept, extending into eastern Africa and at different times having authority over some of the key tribes of today's UAE. Contemporary Omani national identity therefore means something quite different from that sense of belonging felt in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even for those minorities with Omani nationality, such as the Baluch, there is a sense of 'dual belonging', whereby they do not enjoy a 'complete sense of belonging to Oman' (Omani analyst). The different regions of the territory of

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<sup>10</sup> Author's discussion with a class of female students, University of Qatar, December 2008.

the contemporary state of Oman reflect what until comparatively recently were different political identities. It was not until the late 1970s that violent separatist ambitions in Dhofar, initially encouraged by an ideological overlap with what had been anti-British fighters in the south of Yemen, were completely brought to an end. Oil ambitions encouraged the British-promoted eviction in 1955 of the Imam from the interior. The consequent absorption of the territory of the old Imamate into what had simply been the Sultanate of Muscat ensured that within a few years a new nation could be forcefully conceived of. A struggle for power between the interior and the northern coast dating back to the ninth century appears to have been resolved by the imagining of first ‘Muscat and Oman’ and then simply the Sultanate of Oman, which today blends the different religious and cultural traditions of these formerly disputatious regions in one. The physical mobility of contemporary Omanis, not so tied to their family birthplace and often gravitating to the capital Muscat for economic reasons, is arguably helping to undermine these old divisions (Omani consultant).

#### **CITIZENSHIP**

The founding of the state in the Gulf, argues Baqer al-Najjar, is, as yet, an ‘incomplete process’, where the notion of equal and active citizenship is not fully understood. Citizenship is not ‘established in the practice of the state nor in the attitude and practices of the people’ (al-Najjar 2008). This official conception of *muwatina* (citizenship) is therefore indistinguishable from *jinsia* (nationality), and promotes what officially speaking is an inclusive notion of national community that contradicts officially sanctioned inequalities in citizenship.

Even when the territorial boundaries are largely concurrent with the ‘nation’, the idea of a national community can be a problematic concept when issues of defining and equally applying nationality enter the equation. While some notions of nationalism, including what became the dominant Arab nationalist discourse, can be ethnically exclusive and inherently anti-democratic (Tibi 1997), the national imaginings of individual Gulf Arab states promote an inclusive agenda, at least among those who hold nationality. However, holding the *jinsia* of a given country does not necessarily translate into being a full ‘citizen’ and, even where it does, there are concerns about equality in terms of political and economic opportunities. In Qatar there are effectively two classes of citizenship. So-called ‘naturalized’ Qataris, representing an estimated two-thirds of the

population, are judged to have settled in the country since 1930. They differ from so-called 'native' Qataris in that they have no automatic right to be candidates or to vote in municipal or prospective national legislative elections. Classifying the majority of the population as effectively second class reflects the state leadership's distrust of many of its 'citizens'. Specifically, it excludes a perceptibly errant tribe, the al-Murra, some of whom were allegedly willing to work with Saudi Arabia in a 1996 coup plot to restore the former Qatari ruler Sheikh Khalifa, who had been overthrown by his son Hamed, the current Qatari ruler, in 1995. More significant in numerical terms, the 1930 cut-off also ensures that those thought of as 'Persian' are excluded from a stronger voice in national affairs.

Persians, or *ajam*, in the Gulf states can include the so-called *hawala* or 'returning' Sunni Arabs, some of whom went to Iran in search of work four or five generations previously. Others are genuinely of Persian ethnic stock. This separate but apparently equal factor applies in the UAE, where most national passport holders enjoy a full and undifferentiated national status. However, only a small proportion can vote in elections to the UAE's consultative body, the Federal National Council. Furthermore, a significant minority throughout the GCC states either are not in possession of the full entitlements of nationals (those often referred to as *ajam*) or are *bidoon* (literally 'without', i.e. stateless). The latter can represent anywhere between 1 and 10 per cent of the national populations of GCC countries and are usually descendents of those who in the twentieth century immigrated from neighbouring countries. In the Kuwaiti case the *bidoon* issue overlaps with historic sensitivities about Iraqi influence inside the emirate; many who continue to be denied Kuwaiti nationality are believed to have originated from Iraq.

There are major sensitivities around the issue of belonging, even among those with full nationality. These sensitivities often revolve around whether certain groups are considered to be what one Emirati thinker termed the 'pure Arab thoroughbred stallion' (al-Qassimi 2008). The issue of national belonging is plainly being distorted by these other perceptions of belonging, while legal measures effectively enforcing inequality suggest that the state itself is not based on a conception of national inclusion. This legal and perception problem is particularly controversial in Bahrain. On the face of it, Bahrain is the most inclusive of the GCC states in terms of giving all nationals equal citizenship entitlements, including an equal right to participate in elections.



However, the demographic of a majority Shia Arab population, among whom a significant minority are of ethnic Persian origin, in a country ruled by a Sunni Arab family who dominate the executive, is encouraging selectivity in the granting of nationality to those born outside the country. Estimates of numbers vary between official and opposition sources, but nobody is seriously denying that the growth in outsiders awarded nationality since 2002 is benefiting Sunni Arabs. The political process in Bahrain appears more stable than in the 1990s due to establishment of a part-elected legislature involving the participation of some important members of the Shia community. However, a political polarization that prevents the adoption of common legal norms and procedures for the operation of family law (Toumi 2009), periodic violence involving those Shia highly critical of the reform process, and occasional arrests of figures alleged to be involved in plots against the government, make it difficult to talk of a coherent national community, let alone a nationalism that reflects and/or entrenches a common identity. In the 1950s and 1960s the Bahraini political class would organize across communal lines even as they would sometimes have different clubs and associations. A national identity measured in terms of opposition to the presence of Britain and its influence on Bahraini affairs did not transfer into a positive inclusive national conception amidst the vastly different reactions of the two communities to events in Iran from the late 1970s. The Kuwaiti national identity suffers from a comparable if less starkly polarizing dynamic, with the estimated one-third plus of its population who are Shia periodically having their loyalty questioned by sections of the Sunni majority.

#### **WHOSE TRADITION IS BEING IMAGINED?**

In Bahrain the national image in the media and education, on the one hand, papers over the country's diverse traditions by talking of one community (former official, Bahrain, 2008). On the other hand the official national heritage revival, as represented at the Bahrain National Museum, stresses the importance of pearling to the country's origins. However, most of the indigenous Shia of Bahrain (Baharna) did not engage in pearling, and agriculture, in which they were more liable to have been involved, is ignored (Louer 2008). Official Bahraini renovation projects emphasize both historic settlement and the country's more contemporary culture, where the roles of elite, Sunni and often ruling family figures are highlighted (Nawwab 2008).

In Kuwait pearling is also central to the imagining of national identity (Khalaf 2008) and is also relatively exclusive, effectively cutting out the bedouin who were not present in the country when the pearling industry was at its height. While subsequent nationality reforms have made it easier to incorporate the bedouin (or *bedu* (i.e. non-settled)) into the ruling family's internal political balancing, 1920 functions as a cut-off year for Kuwaiti *bedu*, who are viewed less favourably than those *hadharis* (settled) who had contributed to one of the country's key 'national' myths: the battle of Jahra, when *wahhabi* fighters were repelled with the aid of the British. The *hadharis* include a number of the Kuwaiti Shia, however, helping their assertion of being an in-group. On the other hand, their involvement in the battle is contested by some Kuwaiti historians, thereby feeding Shia resentment. Kuwait's politics of descent parallels official differences in citizenship in Qatar and elsewhere in the GCC, creating what Longva argues is a 'civic ethnocracy' in which there is a societal downgrading of those nationals without pure descent. (Longva 2006: p. 119). This politics of descent also feed into the non-nationality of an estimated 100,000 Kuwaiti *bidoon*, who are without Kuwaiti (or any other) nationality. While Gulf states will manipulate the sense of difference among *hadhari* and *bedu*, the extent to which there are also common entitlements suggests that, as Longva argues about Kuwait, this is 'a nationalization of tribe, rather than the tribalization of the nation' (Longva 2006: p. 181). Indicative of the common entitlements that can create state loyalty, in Kuwait and the UAE for example, are financial incentives for a national male to marry another national as his first wife. Such intra-national marriage is further encouraged by the patriarchal feature of denying nationality to the children of a national woman who marries a non-national.

#### **POLITICAL REFORM AND NATIONAL INCLUSION**

Legislative bodies in some of the GCC states are taking on more importance. It can be argued that they will give substance to the notion of the state as embodying national identity and can represent an institutional strength in the face of other non-state identities such as religion or tribe. However, the extent to which they have, or are developing, meaningful authority will in part depend on their ability to draw in the key communities. For the most part this trend of empowering legislatures cannot be traced to the intensification of the national identity debate or to oil price-related economic pressure on the social contract; rather it has been a government

response to different internal, regional and international pressures. These include Kuwait's pluralistic tradition, Bahrain's relatively recent reinvention of its pluralistic past to try to accommodate growing pressures from the Shia majority, and US encouragement post-1991 to Gulf leaders to provide more scope for formal input from at least partly elected legislative bodies.

The most advanced example of the authority of a parliament in the GCC is that of Kuwait, founded in 1963, although it was unconstitutionally suspended for eleven years of its existence. It has been argued that Kuwait's so-called 'parliamentary experiment' represents the clearest attempt to bridge the gap between political leaderships in the Arab world and essentially tribal societies, and that 'developing constitutional bodies ultimately means breaking down tribal and family bonds and replacing them with a sense of belonging to the wider notion of a state' (Haydar 2008). Haydar rightly notes that the Kuwaiti example has been afflicted by polarizing confessional divides inflamed by wider regional politics. However, in what he also notes is the attempt by some religious trends to assert the power of the parliament vis-à-vis the ruling family, the limitations of parliament have also been starkly revealed as the ruling family uses the assembly to play out its internal leadership struggle.

Furthermore, the dominant role of tribal representatives in parliament emphasizes how it has evolved from a platform for institutionalizing the authority of senior merchants to promoting the tribal allies of the ruling al-Sabah family. This was to offset pressure from Arab nationalist merchants and demands from some Islamists and liberals for greater legislative power at the expense of the al-Sabah. While those of bedouin origin have long held a status unequal to those of the *hadhari*, the former have had an important role in counteracting the demands of the latter. At times the interests of tribes and Islamists will also combine to directly frustrate the ruler, which until 2005 prevented women's participation in the electoral process. Kuwait's parliamentary theatrics encourage some other GCC governments to move only very cautiously towards empowering their legislative bodies. For those keen to deepen state institutions in their own country, however, the Kuwait parliament is seen positively, because, as the Saudi analyst Khalid al-Dakheel argues, it shows how 'the circle of the [ruling] family mesh with the notion of the state' (al-Dakheel 2009).

With the exception of Saudi Arabia, all other GCC countries have moved over the last decade or so towards setting up partly elected legislative bodies. However, their powers are relatively limited, ranging from a solely consultative role (UAE) to a constrained legislative role (Oman, Bahrain). Qatar has long been planning a bicameral legislature, in which election to the lower house would partly depend on the quality of citizenship enjoyed – something that may be preventing the poll from going ahead (Al-Mahmoud 2008). The power of the planned body remains unclear, although an unelected upper house, as in Bahrain, is likely to constrain its legislative impact. Saudi Arabia responded to the very divergent pressures within and without the kingdom after the 1991 Gulf War by taking, from the *ulema*'s perspective, controversial steps to effectively constitutionalize the powers of the al-Saud and the authority of Islam and Islamic law (and therefore of the clerics themselves) and of the newly proposed *majlis al-shoura* (consultative council). The *majlis* draws in the *wahhabi* religious establishment and the relatively liberal business and academic elites, but only by appointment, and it remains a purely consultative body. Thus the recently announced enhanced inclusion of Shia representatives is dismissed by pro-reform Saudi Shia (Murphy 2009). With limitations on both electoral participation and authority, the importance of these legislative bodies as 'national' institutions is in doubt. Furthermore, when demands are expressed in the more vocal legislatures, such as in Bahrain, the ruling family is careful never to appear to be responding to popular pressure but will co-opt ideas and present them as their own (Bahraini journalist 2008). In this way legislative bodies are prevented from growing as sources of national empowerment, as concessions become the 'gifts' of the patron.

The initial structuring along tribal lines of the election and candidature of some of the partly elected *shoura* bodies has in the case of Oman given way to the operation of a universal franchise. However, in Oman its impact is constrained by tribal influence, popular apathy and a hand-picked and veto-wielding upper house (*majlis al-dawla*). In the UAE the Federal National Council, first elected in 2006 by an officially selected elite group drawn from senior families, is witnessing demands among some of its members for more authority to be given to their deliberations (Matthew 2008). There is, however, no profound sense in the UAE of impatience

with the current arrangements, as distinct emirates and informal consultation provide the focus of most political activity.

### **SHIA EXCLUSION**

The extent to which the Saudi ‘religious establishment’ is a major stakeholder in the Saudi political system has a direct relationship to the relatively lowly status of the Shia, the sub-state community acknowledged by al-Dakheel to be among the most forthright in the kingdom in seeking to give substance to the idea of a Saudi nation-state. Modest reforms were announced in February 2009 which will put representatives of other Sunni *madhabs* (legal schools) on the Grand Ulema Council for the first time. This means schools other than the Hanbali school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), on which *wahhabi* scholars base their interpretations (Murphy 2009). However, Shia *madhabs* will not be included, and anything other than conservative new Sunni appointments to the body, and other public bodies in which the original religious mission has been institutionalised, would be a profound surprise. A number of influential Shia leaders, both clerical and non-clerical, returned in the 1990s after exile spent in Iran and the United Kingdom in the 1980s. From the vantage point of relative political exclusion they proved themselves more willing than the majority Saudi Sunnis to open up the debate about how a more meaningful notion of *watan* – homeland or nation – could be constructed. Partly adopting assumptions drawn from European history about the link between citizenship (*muwatana*), sovereignty and nation, some leading Saudi Shia thinkers argued that citizenship is not simply about being a national but implies rights as well as responsibilities (Ibrahim 2006: pp. 223–5). This has implications for whether sovereignty is vested in the monarch or, at least partly, in the nationals, ultimately affecting what is meant by ‘nation’. If the idea of nation is inherently bound up with that of the al-Saud ruling family and their (pre-state) alliances, then this is not a nation-state that embodies national culture and identity. These arguments appear to confine previous Saudi Shia Islamist conceptions to the history books. For example, a separation of mosque and state is envisaged by these Saudi Shia for all Saudi citizens, made perhaps more feasible by the demand that the focus of Shia religious loyalty (*marja’*) be allowed by the Saudi state authorities to be within the country’s borders rather than in Najaf or Qom (Saudi Shia political leader 2007). Saudi Shia emphasize that their national objectives mark a break with former identifications that linked

their leaders with Iran, for example. However, the highly imaginative post 9-11 speculation among sections of the research fraternity in the United States about breaking up Saudi Arabia and increased Shia hopes after the US-led regime change in Iraq did encourage some Saudi Shia to use the word ‘secession’ to leverage their internal demands (Louer 2008: p. 32; Shia political activist, Saudi Arabia, 2005). In the Saudi leadership and among some Saudi Sunnis there remain high levels of distrust of this national minority and a tendency to see local incidents through the prism of regional tensions. This tendency has been constant since the birth of the Iranian Revolution and was more recently underlined by Saudi Shia protests over Israeli attacks on Gaza in January 2009 and by rioting by Shia pilgrims in Mecca the following month (*The Economist* 2009).

In the politics of many GCC states the Shia are plainly not immune from extra-national pressures that lead the state and the identifiably ‘in’ communities to question their loyalty. Iran and residual sympathies for both its political and religious leaders have continued to play a fluctuating part in this since the Revolution, as have the frustrations of the local Shia Arab communities themselves. For the time being state-promoted notions of the ‘national’ community that can encourage a de facto downgrading of some Sunni ‘thoroughbreds’ will struggle to provide an inclusive national vision that incorporates the more obvious ‘out group’, the Shia. The politics of rent enables cooption, as evidenced by Kuwaiti Shia MPs, to a more limited extent paralleled in Bahrain, making use of the patronage afforded by their membership of the parliament. Despite the *hadhari* origins of a number of the Kuwaiti Shia, in the 1980s this community’s loyalty was questioned due to Iranian-related attacks that took place inside the emirate, a concern that appeared to have been offset by the role of Shia in resisting Iraq in the 1990 invasion. However, the arrest in March 2008 of two of the then four Kuwaiti Shia Islamist MPs, and of two former MPs (including an ex-minister), after they had participated in a Kuwait rally for the slain Lebanese Hizbollah leader Imad Mughniyyeh, heightened national tensions (Economist Intelligence Unit 2008a: pp. 9–10). Many Kuwaitis believe that Mughniyyeh was behind the hijacking of an aircraft in the 1980s that led to the killing of Kuwaiti nationals (*ibid.*).

Since 2007 there have been two rhetorical challenges from senior advisers to the Iranian supreme leader, asserting historic Iranian claims over Bahrain, which have compounded

sectarian tensions. At the same time the Bahrain government has presented its political reform programme, which has drawn in some leading Shia participants, as encouraging a stronger sense of ‘national’ community, an objective that citizenship education also seeks to promote, however superficially (former official, Bahrain, 2008). Bahraini Shia politicians, however, assume that the country’s leadership also encourages some Sunni Islamist MPs to question their national loyalty, particularly when such Iranian statements heighten regime sensitivity.

### **INWARD-FACING CHAUVINISM**

Gellner argues that the overlap between culture and nation has historically seen either acceptance of second-class status for those not forming the in-group, or secession. In the latter instance he argues that the attractions of being the new dominant elite within one’s own territory have provided a historic impetus for national independence (Gellner 1997: p. 35). In Europe the new states led by these emergent ‘national’ elites defined themselves as much in terms of what they were not as what they were, what they had freed themselves from as what they had become. As we have seen, the Arab nationalist impetus that some within the Gulf bought into had aspects of this culturally motivated elite political ambition. Secessionist impulses have not, however, been a feature within the GCC states, although latent regional and sectarian tensions have sometimes seen such sentiments expressed in Saudi Arabia.

The growth of identity politics generally, including that seen in emergent nation-states worldwide, is, argue some, related to the impact of globalization. This suggests that globalization does not so much threaten national identity as facilitate the communication of a variety of identities, among which national identity, enjoying the everyday ‘banal’ advantages of public media and constant repetition, is able to fend rather well (Tomlinson 2003: pp. 270–5). The ‘inward-facing’ nationalism identifiable in the GCC states since their independent statehood is not inclusive, as identity is partly measured against internal demographic ‘threats’; however, this chauvinism is not defined outwardly against other nations. This can be related to the fact that they do not have what Emirati observer Mishaal Gergawi calls the ‘colonial baggage’ of some Arab states. Gergawi quoted the founding president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, as saying ‘they [the British] built schools and helped us discover oil; I don’t call that colonialism’ (Sharjah Museums Department 2009). However, a significant part of the current UAE drive to

deepen awareness of national identity is born of a sense of cultural threat caused by population inflows without a corresponding, ‘inwardly’ defined sense of what national culture and therefore the nation actually is. Bemoaning what he called the ‘tossed salad society’ in the UAE as opposed to a melting pot, Gergawi said, ‘We are extremely apologetic about culture; [we] don’t promote it.’ The director of Sharjah Museums Department, Manal Ataya, has observed that there should be a concerted government effort to connect museums with schools and universities in order, as she revealingly puts it, ‘to create a collective memory’ (ibid.).

It does at least appear clear what is meant by ‘national’ in this growing debate. For one thing, some of the old terminological ambiguities have gone. The word that is being used in official government discourse is *watan* or *watani* – that is, ‘nation’ or ‘national’ – with its clear emphasis on the existing territory of the separate states, rather than the ambiguities of an Arab or Islamic ‘nation’ (*umma*), for example. However, the component parts of what is Emirati or Kuwaiti that are often cited in the national imagining – Arab and Islam – are constructs that previously, and to some extent today, offer alternatives to the local nationalisms. Arabism has been reduced in the Gulf, although the extent to which that was ever much more than financial generosity and exceptional and well-managed Palestinian solidarity demonstrations is questionable. However, the Arabic language is a key definer of what it means to be Arab, and the demographic pressures experienced, in the UAE and Qatar especially, have reduced it to an effective second language in an increasing portion of national life. The UAE reacted to this in the 2008 ‘Year of National Identity’ by promoting Arabic as the ‘official’ language, and has proven cautious about the extensive use of English seen in government schools in Qatar and Oman, for example (Partrick 2009). Yet English is increasingly spoken in those Emirati and Qatari households whose children attend private schools in which the language of instruction is invariably English, thereby reducing the Arabic capabilities of younger nationals (ibid.).

Islam offers a loyalty beyond state boundaries, in relation to which the traditional construct of the secular nation comes perhaps a poor second. However, tackling national (local) needs through a deepening of education reform and the (related) promotion of entry into the non-public-sector job market (nationalization) necessarily requires a further de-emphasizing of Arabic and, in Saudi Arabia at least, a reduction in the amount of attention given to Islam in the



education sector. Yet it is the Arab and Islam constructs that are central to the official local narratives about what ‘national’ means.

#### **NON-IMAGINING OF THE ‘OTHER’**

‘Civic ethnocracy’ contains group divisions, but when the majority of the inhabitants of the country are not nationals and are therefore a perceived ‘external threat ... [this] ensures group solidarity’, argues Longva (2006: p. 127). In the UAE the national identity debate largely deals with the majority population as a threat to ‘nationality’. The outspoken Dubai police chief, Dhahi Khalfan al-Tamim, advocates easing what he considers the demographic threat by cutting the number of foreign nationals and forging a political union of the GCC states, thereby ensuring that there are more Gulf nationals than non-nationals (Keyrouz 2008). Jamal al-Suweidi, a senior advisor to the Abu Dhabi crown prince, has argued that the demographic fight is ‘lost’ and that ‘coexistence’ is needed. This was taken by an influential Emirati academic, Abdel-Khaleq Abdulla, as indicating that citizenship and therefore power would eventually be ceded to foreign nationals (Al-Mezel 2008; Abdulla, *Gulf News*, 2008). Indicative of what Abdulkhaleq Abdulla fears, another Emirati writer has advocated offering a special permanent residency status to those long-term residents sharing the cultural values and (official) language of the country (al-Gergawi, *The National* 2008). It has been argued that any discussion of nationality without considering the national affinity of long-term residents in the GCC with their adopted countries is to ignore what nationhood means. A senior Emirati journalist and academic commented, ‘the mix of the country creates nationhood, not the nationhood of Emiratis alone; this is simply the falsification of reality’ (Analyst, UAE, 2008). However, even modest accommodatory steps would be taken very warily in the UAE. Nor is it likely that any such moves in this direction would occur in neighbouring Kuwait, for example, where the enforced departure of Palestinian and other long-term residents in 1991 reflected the Gulf state’s profound distrust of the long-term foreign Arab community. The Gulf crisis of 1990–1 encouraged a shift in the GCC states to draw in foreign workers from non-Arab countries. Despite sometimes coming from countries that were historic trading partners, these workers were much further away in cultural terms and therefore judged to be politically safer, in addition to being cheaper.

### **A KHALEEJI NATION?**

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the subsequent reliance on the United States as the principle bilateral defence partner of the Gulf Arab states underlined contradictions with the Arab and Islamic constructs used by these states when presenting themselves to both domestic and regional audiences. It also confirmed that a growing set of Gulf (*Khaleeji*) institutions through the mechanisms of the GCC itself were a reflection of a top-down construct that had not fundamentally altered an essentially realist, state-orientated way of managing their individual affairs. GCC agreement in 1986 on a limited collective defence capability (Peninsula Shield) proved that the states were prepared to go beyond the narrow state interests envisaged by realism. However, the fact that a larger force could not be agreed and that even Oman, the strongest advocate of such a body, wanted to constrain its cross-border authority due to fears of Saudi encroachment, suggests limited interdependence. It has been argued that, prior to 1991 at least, the GCC, while failing to be a coherent ‘security community’ that sought collective solutions to a defined common threat perception, was making progress in the ‘institutionalization of collective decision-making’ on security matters, reflecting a joint concern at the overlap between external Iranian and Iraqi threats and their own internal stability (Barnett and Gause 1998: p. 177). However, this ‘institutionalization’ did not bind the members of the GCC, even if the ‘norms’ of GCC activity in the 1980s required an *ex post facto* collective signing-off on individual initiatives (ibid.: p. 175). This is what one Emirati academic called ‘projecting an image ... of a somewhat collective foreign policy’ (Abdulla 1999). The development of the GCC promoted the notion of *haweeya Khaleeji* (Gulf identity) as a conscious alternative to the delegitimizing radical Islamism of the newly born Iranian Republic and of the rival resurgent assertions of Arab nationalism being expressed by Iraq as a tool of its own national interests. However, nationals of the GCC states did not think of their Gulf identity as a political construct. There is a sense of a *shakseeya Khaleeji* (Gulf personality, i.e. common cultural traits), but one Emirati analyst argues that this was ‘a minor thing’ in political terms. Rather it is ‘a manifestation of shared history’ reflected in pearling and shared cultural and familial experiences (unattributed interview 2008). Says academic Ebtisam al-Kitbi, ‘The GCC didn’t create a feeling between the people ... [rather] it is something we feel [for example] when we travel outside the country’ (al-Kitbi 2008). Others have pointed to similarities in dress codes, noting also, however,

that the obligation to dress in 'Khaleeji' styles, with local variations, has become much stronger in the last three decades.

The GCC was not founded as a 'security community' that would pool sovereignty to advance common defence needs, even if it provided a symbolic reassurance until 1991. The GCC's founding charter issued in 1981 describes the organization in its Foundations and Objectives as an 'institutional embodiment of a historic, social and cultural reality' reflected in what it calls 'deep religious and cultural ties' that link the six states, and given that 'strong kin relations prevail among their citizens' (GCC 1981). Among what are clearly defined as separate states, albeit with overlapping identities, there was to be coordination to effect common regulation in economic and educational affairs (ibid.). In the economic sphere the GCC continues to have meaningful institutional discussions and presents a common front, for example in negotiations with the European Union to try and secure a customs union. Progress in intra-GCC economic cooperation since 2002 has made some people optimistic about what has been achieved in substantive political terms. According to Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, the GCC has 'already passed the point of no return' in terms of deepening economic cohesion (Abdulla, interview, 2008). However, in May 2009 the UAE joined Oman in opting out of the planned common currency. Jealously guarded sovereignty and inter-GCC competition continues to constrain economic integration, just as it has limited political and security cooperation. Resolution of a number of the border disputes among GCC states, and between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, over the last 10 years has to some extent reflected a shared imperative to cooperate in the face of external threats. However there are still some territorial tensions among the Gulf Arab states, principally in the case of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The deepening of the bilateral relationship with the United States after 1991, with which (in addition to the United Kingdom and France) all the GCC states except Saudi Arabia signed a formal defence agreement, underlines their separate state identity. However, this strategic relationship can also conflict with the terms in which that identity is locally and regionally expressed. The GCC states' forward role in US and UK military pressure on Iraq throughout the 1990s and close friendship with the United States was made uncomfortable by Arabism and this was compounded after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. This, combined with an internal Saudi religious compact that was increasingly

subjecting the al-Saud to radical criticism, necessitated the departure of US troops from the kingdom in 2002, although it did not prevent a discreet Saudi role in the subsequent invasion. The GCC states were not ‘imagined’ as the embodiment of resistance to a foreign power as seen in the national myth that underpins Syrian and Iraqi identity for instance. As such, their relations with the United States, sometimes difficult and embarrassing domestically and regionally, do not feed local nationalism. Rather, unpopular US regional policies can encourage state leaderships, mindful of local and to some extent Arabist sensitivities, to distance themselves from Washington, just as fear of Iranian regional gains helps to underscore the value they place on the bilateral defence relationship with the United States.

### **CONCLUSION**

Historically speaking, single state nationalism has not been a driving force in the politics of the Gulf Arab states. Local rulers kept faith with local norms; the al-Saud upheld the legacy of their political compact with the *ulema*, and in general local rulers adhered to Arab and Islamic identities. Even in its heyday Arab nationalism was largely an instrument constraining local foreign policy options, due to fear of ideological delegitimization by more powerful neighbours. Today Arabism requires Gulf states to keep some distance from unpopular US policies and to downgrade or avoid engagement with Israel. To some extent this Arabism fits naturally with a critical stance towards Iran. However, Iran’s increased regional influence is handled differently by each of the GCC states as a mixture of strategy, domestic political and religious opinion, US influence and business interests affect attitudes to Tehran. Iran’s more assertive regional posture has been one of the factors feeding the more active national imagining of recent years as state leaders have, as they did in the 1980s, responded to regional insecurities by reinventing tradition.

Nationalism in the GCC today centres on an increased desire on the part of local leaderships and, to a lesser extent, other local elites to emphasize the national above other competing identities, assert a claimed indigenous culture and, commensurate with what are mostly market-friendly economies, to put some limit to the inflow of foreign nationals. State leaders remain central to national concepts and therefore, as in the pre-oil age, remain at the centre of authority construction through alliances and the telling of the national narrative. The rulers’ sensitivity to sub-national groups within the community whose identity does not fit the

traditionally constructed national narrative has also encouraged them to intensify state coherence but without addressing some often controversial and disputed histories. As a consequence rulers have sometimes deepened resentments among perceptibly ‘out’ groups.

Preferred histories can exclude key communities, while claimed distinct national cultural trademarks offer a fairly limited variation in what are largely standard *Khaleeji* social traits and (reinvented) dress codes. These social aspects relate to whether the policing of Islamic virtue is pronounced (Saudi Arabia) or relatively soft-pedalled (elsewhere) and dependent on maintaining respect for essential norms. To some extent this reflects how much Islam and Islamists have a role in the public space of each GCC state. To different degrees a public platform for clerics or identifiable Islamists can be found in all GCC states, although Saudi Arabia is exceptional in giving the *ulema* a de facto partnership role in governance. As a result even the public commemoration of ‘national’ events is problematic in the kingdom. Elsewhere in the GCC, a largely inward-looking and state-led nationalism preoccupies itself with protecting and deepening a national identity that focuses on Arab and Islamic norms as seen through the specific prism of the local states and educational and employment reforms to facilitate the entry of greater numbers of nationals into the workforce. Underlining these concerns is a nationalist-style sensitivity to the impact of foreign residents, who are perceived as diluting local identity but whose significant numerical presence is unlikely to fundamentally alter. In short, existential fears are deepening the state-building efforts of largely new nations whose leaders are ‘inventing’ the national community without regard to the sometimes contradictory elements that underpin authority and the differing sub-communities who are not being equally ‘imagined’. Nationalism in the Gulf, it seems, is set to remain a diffuse and contested notion.

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This research paper was written under the auspices of the Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States at the London School of Economics and Political Science with the support of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

