

# ARAB MONARCHIES

**Chance for Reform, Yet Unmet**

**Marina Ottaway and  
Marwan Muasher**

**MIDDLE EAST | DECEMBER 2011**

**CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT**

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## Summary

Contrary to what ongoing protests across the Middle East and North Africa might imply, monarchs and ruling families in the Arab world still enjoy an extraordinary degree of legitimacy in the eyes of their people. Most citizens of Arab monarchies want to see changes within their ruling governments, not complete regime change. This in turn affords those rulers an opportunity to embark on a path of far-reaching political reform without losing their thrones—all the while gaining acclaim at home and abroad.

Yet, so far, no monarch has made the effort. Sovereigns are not seeking to truly take advantage of their legitimacy to engineer a process of controlled reform from the top that would prevent an escalation of demands from the bottom. These rulers have not accepted that the change sweeping the region is profound, and that the unique opportunity they still have to lead their countries into a decisive program of reform will not last forever.

All monarchs have taken steps to appease their citizens, but they have either provided material benefits to try to placate demands or introduced narrow reforms that give their people a limited voice in governance. Political measures have ranged from ostensibly bold but in reality limited in Morocco, to hesitant and uncertain in Jordan, to practically nonexistent in the Gulf countries. With a few partial exceptions, Arab monarchs are not moving their countries toward the representative governments that protesters are demanding.

With the possible exception of Bahrain, the one place where protesters are calling for a true constitutional monarchy, there is still time for Arab sovereigns to change course. It is less dangerous for the monarchs to act now than to wait until the demand is overwhelming and could indeed spiral into an uncontrolled process of change. Their legitimacy is at stake, and they will likely face more severe challenges if they do not act soon.



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## Introduction

The idea that Arab monarchies would introduce political reforms more easily than republican regimes has long enjoyed a degree of popularity. Monarchies, the argument goes, have a built-in advantage that allows them to reform more easily than republics: a king can renounce much, even all, of his political power, and still remain king, with all the wealth and prestige the position entails. A president, by contrast, becomes a normal citizen as soon as he steps down from office.

The response of the eight Arab monarchies to the upheaval that has shaken the region in 2011 shows that it is true that monarchs and ruling families in the Arab world still enjoy an extraordinary degree of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. In return, this affords them an opportunity to embark on a path of far-reaching political reform without losing their thrones—and conversely gaining acclaim at home and abroad. But it also shows that with a few partial exceptions, Arab sovereigns have not been inclined to take advantage of their legitimacy to move their countries toward the democratic governments that Arab protesters are demanding.

While all monarchs have taken steps to appease their citizens, they have tended to do so either by providing them with material benefits or by introducing narrow reforms that give them a limited voice in the governance of their countries. Political measures have ranged from ostensibly bold but in reality limited in Morocco, to hesitant and uncertain in Jordan, to practically nonexistent in the Gulf countries. Monarchs are not seeking to take advantage of their legitimacy to engineer a process of controlled reform from the top that would prevent an escalation of demands from the bottom. As a result, their legitimacy may be eroded and they are likely to face more severe challenges in the future.

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## Morocco: Keeping Ahead of Protest?

Alone among Arab monarchs, King Mohammed VI of Morocco quickly embraced a significant political reform agenda as soon as protests broke out on February 20, 2011, seeking to defuse demands for change by positioning himself at the forefront of reform. Within two weeks of the start of street protests, he announced that a new constitution would be drafted and submitted to a popular referendum, with early parliamentary elections following



soon afterward. Mohammed's approach followed the well-established pattern of preempting bottom-up demands by offering limited top-down reforms, a model that has characterized the style of the Moroccan monarchy since the final years of Hassan II's reign in the late 1990s. Whether the king's offer will satisfy the public's demands in the politically charged atmosphere of the regional Arab Spring remains to be seen.

### The Constitution

On March 9, just two weeks after the start of protests, the king announced the drafting of a new constitution, despite the fact that the country's protests had been limited compared to those of Tunisia and Egypt. Because he moved quickly and ahead of the protesters, he enjoyed complete flexibility in deciding who would write the document and thus how far it would go in fashioning a new political system. At a time when Egypt and Tunisia were shaken by acrimonious controversy over whether their constitutions should be written by an elected constitutional assembly or by an appointed committee before the staging of elections, Morocco's king answered the question himself before it was asked: the constitution would be prepared by a commission of experts named by the king and headed by one of his advisers, Abdellatif Menouni. In order to make the process slightly more democratic, the king also ordered the formation of a curiously named *mécanisme de suivi*, or supporting mechanism. Headed by Mohammed Moatassim, this body was supposed to serve as liaison between the drafters of the constitution on one side and political parties, labor unions, associations of businessmen, human rights organizations, and other groups on the other. Indeed, the experts' commission received many submissions, some of them entire constitutional drafts and others only suggestions on key points. Participation, however, stopped with these submissions. No follow-up debate was organized and the "mechanism" was not consulted again until its members were summoned on June 8 to hear an oral presentation on the new constitution. They did not see the written draft until June 16, only one day ahead of the general public.

The two most controversial issues in the drafting of the constitution concerned the identity of the Moroccan state and the power and role of the king. The document provided a fairly clear answer to the former question, namely that Morocco is, at least formally, a plural society in terms of religion, language, and culture, and that it is ready to embrace this diversity. The preamble defines Morocco as a Muslim state and Article 3 states that Islam is the state religion—this was inevitable because the Moroccan king is considered to be the "commander of the faithful" and thus religion provides the underpinning for his legitimacy and power. Nevertheless, the constitution also guarantees freedom of religious practices to all faiths. Compared to the text of most Arab constitutions, which proclaim sharia as one of the sources, if not *the* source, of law, the new Moroccan constitution (like the previous one) is quite liberal. It

is important to point out, however, that a recommendation that the constitution should guarantee “freedom of conscience” was rejected. Allowing people to change faiths, it was argued, would release a Pandora’s Box of individual choices more dangerous and unpredictable than organized religion.

The new constitution also recognizes Amazigh (or Berber) as an official language, despite objections that such recognition would dilute Morocco’s Arab identity. In addition, it contains a reference to the plurality of influences on Moroccan culture, from Andalusian and, more broadly, Mediterranean culture to that of the Saharan people, as well as of Christianity and Judaism.

The message concerning the power of the king is more ambiguous, however. This is, of course, the central issue in Morocco as it will determine whether the palace can maintain control of the process of change, shape reform as it sees fit, and avoid the uprisings that have shaken other countries in North Africa. The constitution does not transform Morocco into a constitutional monarchy (or a parliamentary monarchy, in the language favored by Moroccans) where the king does not govern—that was not the intention. But the constitution does impose new formal limits on the king’s power, stipulating that he must nominate the “president of the government,” as the prime minister is now known, from the party that has received the largest number of votes in the elections. On the other hand, the constitution reserves three crucial areas—religion, security, and strategic policy choices—as the king’s exclusive domain. When such issues are discussed, the king will preside over the cabinet, which automatically ensures that he will have the last word—and probably the first—in any decision.

Between the two extremes there is a vast gray area where the parliament and the cabinet could have broad power if they decide to exercise it but where the king could intervene by declaring a decision strategic. For example, the king does not normally have control over matters of education; decisions in this domain will be made by the cabinet, presided over by the prime minister. Should the king decide that a certain educational issue—say, curriculum revisions—is strategic, however, he can intervene and take the matter back into his own hands. The king has thus far insisted on putting his name on all new policies—as was done in 2001 when he announced the formation of a royal commission to draft a new personal status code (the laws that govern marriage and divorce, among other issues) rather than accepting the recommendations already set forth by women’s organizations and other civil society groups. Further reducing the likelihood that parliament and the cabinet will attempt to expand their domain is a long history of passivity and deference to the king. Analysts argue that even under the old constitution, the parliament and the cabinet could have exercised considerably more influence on policies than they did. It is thus safe to assume that reform in all areas will be tightly controlled by the sovereign.

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The constitutional draft was submitted to a popular referendum on July 1 and, as expected, easily won approval. Official sources reported that 98.5 percent of voters approved the new document, and that voter turnout was 73 percent. The overwhelming referendum victory may have weakened, rather than strengthened, the chances that the constitution will be fully implemented. The absence of discussion about the new constitution suggests that the vote was a declaration of confidence in the king and his leadership more than a declaration of support for a set of rules by which the king is expected to abide.

### Beyond the Constitution

There is a real possibility that the new constitution's passage will not be followed by real political reform, however. This, in turn, could spell trouble for the future. Because of the ambiguity of the text where the power of the sovereign is concerned, the king can still maintain control over most decisions unless he is challenged by political parties in the parliament or the extraparliamentary opposition. However, many of the old parties are palace parties that have no intention to challenge Mohammed. The opposition parties of the Hassan II era, particularly the conservative Istiqlal Party and the once-socialist-oriented

USFP (Socialist Union of Popular Forces), have lost much of their dynamism. Their aging leadership does not appear interested in upsetting the status quo.

Nor is the new Party for Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) a force that will try to transform the parliament into a countervailing power to the monarch. Launched by former minister of interior Fouad Ali Helmi, a personal

friend of the king, shortly before the 2009 municipal elections, the party won the largest number of local council seats. Even more remarkably, it established a strong presence in the parliament without competing in parliamentary elections, due to party mergers, alliances, and other parties' members changing their affiliations. In preparation for the 2011 elections, the PAM, widely seen as the king's party, formed a "Coalition for Democracy" with three older palace parties (the National Rally of Independents, the Constitutional Union, and the Popular Movement) and four small and disparate parties (the Socialist Party, the Labor Party, the Green Left Party, and the Islamist Party of Renaissance and Virtue). The G-8, as the members of the alliance became known, failed to win the plurality of votes; thus it will remain in the opposition. In that role, it will certainly challenge the government, but not the king.

Whether the parliament takes advantage of the greater power granted to it under the new constitution thus depends on the party that won the plurality in the November 2011 parliamentary elections, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD). As required by the new constitution, the king nominated PJD Secretary-General Abdellilah Benkirane as prime minister. While

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the success of the Islamist party worries secularists in Morocco, in reality the party is unlikely to emerge as a forceful advocate for change. First, it only controls 107 out of the 395 parliamentary seats, with the G-8 coming in a close second with 101 seats. It will thus be forced to form a coalition government with the Istiqlal and other smaller parties. Second, the PJD has made it clear repeatedly that one of its major goals is to be accepted as a legitimate political player and to become fully integrated into the political system. This desire for integration was clear in the last parliament, where the PJD, which had won the second-largest number of seats in the 2007 elections, behaved as an extremely loyal opposition, never exercising much pressure for change, despite its theoretical commitment to a stronger parliament.

The king has clearly won the first round of the reform war. He successfully faced the beginning of an uprising by positioning himself ahead of the protesters and preempting their demands. Mohammed has avoided any serious challenge to his authority and has given the country a new constitution that looks good on paper but does not force him to surrender much power. His personal legitimacy remains intact. At least superficially, Morocco looks like a model that all Arab monarchies would be well advised to follow, providing a lesson on how even limited top-down reform, if delivered quickly and graciously, can preempt pressure for more drastic change from the bottom.

Yet, several factors could still turn the king's victory into a pyrrhic one. The new constitution has failed to convince the majority of Moroccans that the new parliament will play an important role. Voter turnout was only 45 percent. This was an improvement on 2007, when only 37 percent voted, but not an overwhelming sign of support for the election process, either. In fact, before the election Moroccan pundits argued that voter participation below 50 percent would constitute a repudiation of the king's reform and a message that more is needed. Furthermore, as in 2007, many voters deliberately spoiled their ballots as a sign of protest.

Most important in the long run is the possible awakening of the extra-parliamentary opposition, including the February 20th movement and the perennial dark horse of Moroccan politics, the Islamist al-Adl wal-Ihsan movement. The February 20th protest movement has vowed to continue its fight for deeper reforms. Thus far, it has attracted little support, with demonstrations in Rabat and even in the more rambunctious, gritty Casablanca rarely drawing more than a few thousand protesters. Yet, behind the listless demonstrations lurks much discontent. Morocco suffers from the same economic ills as other non-oil-producing Arab countries—high unemployment, particularly among youth; sluggish growth that suggests a worsening future; a visible contrast

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between the rich and poor; and corruption. These problems exist against a backdrop of increasingly available information that shows people that their fate could be avoided. This latter point is strikingly visible in the vast, tightly packed shantytowns that surround the cities, jungles of rusting corrugated iron and plastic sheeting where every tumbledown shelter is nevertheless topped by a small, white satellite dish.

Potentially more important than the February 20th movement itself are the organizations backing it, particularly al-Adl wal-Ihsan, which is considered to be the largest Islamist organization in the country (although membership figures are not available). The group refuses to participate openly in the political process because it does not accept the legitimacy of the monarchy, the king's role as "commander of the faithful," and a political system it considers highly corrupt. While expressing support for the February 20th movement, al-Adl wal-Ihsan has continued to sit on the sidelines. Although it does not encourage its members to participate in demonstrations, it could quickly become a major player if protests were to resume, and this could be a game changer.

The king has definitely won the first battle, but the outcome of the war is far from certain.

## Jordan: A Reluctant Drift Toward Reform

Jordan's response to domestic protests and the regional uprisings has been considerably more hesitant than Morocco's. Whereas King Mohammed moved boldly to stay ahead of the protesters by introducing reforms, King Abdullah II has thus far only proposed piecemeal reform. Jordan has not experienced large-scale demonstrations; nevertheless, protests have been constant. Demands have ranged from the political, such as calls for a redistribution of power among the three branches of government, to the economic, including demands for social equity and more attention for rural areas outside the capital. The king has appointed two committees, one to change the electoral law and one to suggest constitutional amendments, in a partial response to such demands, but there is no long-term political or economic plan as of yet to address all these challenges.

The difference between Jordan's and Morocco's approaches reflects the profound differences between their political systems. Morocco has a well-developed party system, making for a parliament where parties can play a potentially meaningful role. In Jordan, however, the election law and the politics of the ruling elite have impeded the formation of real political parties. Ultimately, the Moroccan king was able to announce that he would abide by election results in the selection of a prime minister. In Jordan though, not only did the king fail to make such an announcement, but he also could not have done so; political parties need to develop first.

## Widespread Frustration

Jordan enjoys a political system more open than that of many neighboring countries, with legal political parties, a higher press ceiling, and a leadership that enjoys legitimacy. This has allowed peaceful and small demonstrations to take place, dissipating anger. On the downside, however, the containment of such anger may also have prevented the government from properly evaluating the implications of what was happening in the entire Arab world and from embarking on a serious, systematic process of reform. Instead, it is trying to get by with the minimum.

Protesters' demands have focused on changes within the regime rather than on regime change. All constituencies within the country strongly support the institution of the monarchy. While many want to implement serious changes to the governance structure, they also want the king to lead the reform process.

Although the monarchy continues to serve as a security blanket for all Jordanians regardless of their origin—providing protection for the country's various ethnic groups—frustration has been building in recent years. The people are frustrated with a system that has promised political reform too often in the past without serious implementation, and where economic reform efforts have taken place without a system of checks and balances. Many Jordanians feel that the beneficiaries of such reform have been an elite few, rather than the general public. They are tired of the resilience of a political and a bureaucratic layer that benefits from a rentier system, in which loyalties are bought with favors and any reforms that might eliminate its privileges and replace it with a merit-based system are successfully thwarted.<sup>1</sup> Jordanians are united behind a call directed toward the government to battle corruption, which many believe to have dramatically increased in the last few years—in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Jordan fell from 37th (out of 178 countries) to 56th (out of 182 countries) place between 2003 and 2011. Activists want to institutionalize changes to the system to do away with corruption at its roots, not just punish the corrupt individuals as they are caught.

On other issues, Jordanians remain divided by multiple fault lines: not only between East Bankers and Palestinians, as analysts always simplistically stress, but also between the haves and the have-nots and between urban and rural dwellers. Some demands focus on political issues such as the redistribution of power among the three branches of government and a different method of choosing the prime minister and cabinet. The increasing role that the intelligence services have been playing in all aspects of life in the country—going well beyond security needs—has also left a bitter taste among wide sectors of Jordanian society. Protesters have thus called for a limit on the role of the intelligence services in political affairs.

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The gap between the haves and have-nots has increased as a result of economic policies that are perceived to have benefited the elite while neglecting areas outside of the capital. Advancement on economic and social justice issues is thus also demanded. Poorer rural governorates in particular are calling for a more equitable distribution of resources and greater job opportunities.

As in all Arab countries, widespread frustration has found expression in the rise of an active youth movement. While many of the youth in the country are

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politically aware, knowledgeable of their rights, Internet savvy, and unafraid to raise issues without inhibition, they also lack political organization. Despite its weaknesses, the youth movement has been able at times to cut across all ethnic lines. As such, it has the potential to play an increasingly important role in the future of the country, given that 70 percent of the population is under 30, particularly if it succeeds at organizing itself politically and breaking away from the traditional ethnic, tribal, and religious lines.

### **Political Reform Efforts Since January 2011**

The Arab uprisings, coupled with regular demonstrations around the country (though the protests have been smaller in size compared to other Arab countries), forced the political elite to move at least marginally from their regularly self-serving lip service on reform. First and foremost, in Jordan, a new election law would be the cornerstone of any serious reform process. The country's one-person-one-vote system allows voters to choose only one candidate even though several are elected from each district—the system favors tribal elites and local notables while discouraging the formation of political parties. This, together with the gerrymandering of districts, has produced structurally weak, unrepresentative parliaments. The election districts are designed to maximize the number of members of parliament from tribal and rural areas—who are traditionally dependent on services from the state—at the expense of those from cities and towns. Unless the system is changed, parliament will continue to be dominated by tribal elements or other unaffiliated candidates, rather than by members of political parties, thus perpetuating the rentier state model.

On March 14, the king established a National Dialogue Committee to discuss this controversial voting system. The National Dialogue Committee has recommended eliminating the one-person-one-vote formula—an important step. Unfortunately, these minor amendments are unlikely to produce parliaments based on strong national parties in the foreseeable future unless the mixed system of voting they call for includes more than a minimal allotment of seats to national lists. As of this writing, even these minor amendments have not been translated into a new election law, which the government of Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh announced will not be ready to be submitted to parliament until March.

One major issue that affects the debate on reform in Jordan is the fragility of a common Jordanian national identity. Sixty-five years after independence, and sixty years after Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war were given full Jordanian citizenship, the issue remains politically unresolved. Public debate on national identity is considered divisive and occasional references to it are emotional, and seldom rational or constructive. The lack of a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict has particularly affected the development of a modern and healthy national identity and has been used by many, in justified and unjustified ways, to hamper the political reform process. East Bankers worry about a dilution of their “East Bank Jordanian” identity if the election law makes for a more representative parliament that includes more Jordanians of Palestinian origin, while Jordanians of Palestinian origin maintain that they are not fully represented. Debate on the matter by representatives of both communities has tended to be highly charged, and the state has not been able to properly address the issue. The National Dialogue Committee has not been able to tackle the national identity issue directly either and has failed yet again to define who is a Jordanian.

In another attempt to address protesters’ demands, on April 27, the king appointed a committee on constitutional amendments to propose new changes to a constitution often amended in the past. Skeptics noted that past amendments have usually strengthened the executive at the expense of the legislature and judiciary, which is the opposite of what protesters have wanted.

The constitutional committee formulated a set of recommendations that were approved, with some amendments, by both houses of parliament at the end of September. The final amendments are positive and important, although the members of the committee, while well respected, did not include any representatives of the opposition. Many of the amendments address demands long put forth by reform groups and the general public. They include the creation of a constitutional court to monitor the constitutionality of laws and regulations; the establishment of an independent electoral commission to replace the Ministry of Interior in organizing elections; the enhancement of civil liberties and the prohibition of torture in any form; and the limitation of the government’s ability to issue temporary laws while parliament is not in session. The amendments also limit the jurisdiction of the State Security Court to cases of high treason, espionage, and terrorism, with citizens being otherwise tried in civilian courts; and they stipulate that parliament cannot be dissolved without the government resigning as well. Furthermore, the outgoing prime minister will not have the right to be reappointed.

Despite this, the amendments are missing several necessary measures. While the king has lost the ability to indefinitely postpone elections, all other powers have been left intact—for example, the monarch still appoints and dismisses

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the prime minister and upper house of parliament. Although the constitutional committee debated adding gender to the list of categories that are forbidden from being discriminated against, it opted to keep gender off the list for perceived religious and political reasons. Finally, while the role of the security services in the political affairs of the country has been slightly limited through some amendments, it has hardly been curbed.<sup>2</sup>

### **Economic Reform Efforts Since January 2011**

Although political reform thus far has been limited, some measures have been enacted. On the economic front, however, reform has been practically nonexistent. Former prime minister Ma'rouf al-Bakhit, who was appointed by the king in February, was not known for being a reformer. Al-Bakhit failed to formulate a long-term economic strategy to deal with the country's chronic problems, including a rising budget deficit that has reached an alarming 11 percent (excluding the foreign grants that traditionally help close the gap and unemployment that still hovers around an official level of 13 percent).<sup>3</sup> He was replaced in October 2011 by Awn Khasawneh, a former judge at the International Court of Justice who is more reform oriented than his predecessor. The new government recently won a vote of confidence from parliament and has not yet announced a long-term economic strategy.

Reforms have been attempted in the past. A strategy to deal with structural economic problems existed in the National Agenda of 2005. That program outlined a ten-year plan to eliminate the budget deficit by 2016, excluding grants. It also aimed to reach a surplus of 1.8 percent and to reduce unemployment to 6.8 percent by 2017. This strategy though was never implemented, nor was a new one formulated. Instead, as the situation worsened in light of the global financial crisis and rising food and energy prices, the government adopted an expansionary fiscal policy that has added significantly to the problem. While this might be understandable in the short term, the government has not introduced a medium-term plan that would assure the maintenance of fiscal responsibility. Grants such as the \$1.4 billion from Saudi Arabia are neither guaranteed in the future nor will they contribute to solving Jordan's structural budget problem where revenues are unable to meet the operational expenses of the government, let alone any capital expenditures.

A National Employment Strategy that would, among other things, replace guest workers with local ones was announced in March but has not been published as of this writing. Furthermore, the government has sent confusing signals about its policy. In September, for example, the governor of the central bank was dismissed for his "liberal views," his belief in a "market economy," and his disagreement with the government over its economic policy. The state has essentially been trying to placate public opinion with a mixture of increased civil servant salaries, additional subsidies, and the creation of a "development

fund” for rural governorates, which will be financed by the Saudi grant. No plans have been announced on how the money will be spent. The economic response to the unrest thus has not incorporated any real reform measures.

In May, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which consists of the six Arab Gulf monarchies, announced that it would welcome Jordan and Morocco as members, and negotiations started in September. Jordan hopes that full membership will entail free movement of labor, and thus greater remittances and lower unemployment. The GCC has also announced a five-year economic plan to support Jordan, the details of which will be discussed by its heads of state at their next meeting in December.

The Jordanian public is uncertain about this issue, and the amount of debate taking place is unprecedented. Many Jordanians are no longer satisfied with economic measures that may ease their financial plight but also imply restrictions on political change by an organization representing countries that have long rejected political reform. While neither the Jordanian government nor countries like Saudi Arabia have said that there is a political quid pro quo to GCC membership, many Jordanians suspect that this might, in fact, be the case. Recent statements by the foreign minister of the UAE that Jordan’s membership in the GCC does not yet have consensus within the group have cast further doubt on the issue.

## Looking Forward

Jordan’s response to the uprisings thus far has been mixed and ad hoc. The government still lacks a comprehensive strategy. Politically, the amendments represent a good first step. They are, however, still far from a more comprehensive, institutional, inclusive, and measurable reform process that offers a more extensive vision for Jordan’s future—one that can successfully incorporate the demands of the different constituencies in a way that leads to a healthy, pluralistic, and prosperous future for the country. Only an inclusive process of dialogue that involves all the major forces in society can lead to a common understanding on charting a course that might finally transition from a rentier-based system to sustainable development for the country.

One of this piece’s authors recently visited Jordan. On the ground, it was clear that Jordanians are not satisfied with the reforms thus far, but hope that the process is more serious and leads to concrete results, rather than another round of unfulfilled promises. Yet, it is also equally clear that the population—with all of its ethnic and social diversity and its various political and economic aspirations—wants the monarch to lead this reform process. The king seems well aware of the challenge, even recognizing that he must counter the forces that work for the preservation of the status quo—forces that often come from

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within the political elite and traditional constituency of the regime. While the status quo is unsustainable in Jordan, top-down reform can succeed, and in fact, it is the only way forward in a country where organized political forces are weak. The question is whether the political elite who prevented change in the past will be lulled by the absence of massive protest into believing that it has weathered the storm and can return to business as usual.

## The Gulf States: Still Waiting for Reform

With the exception of Bahrain, the Gulf monarchies have been largely untouched by turmoil, and they have not taken advantage of the calm to introduce reforms from the top in order to avoid future problems. Although the magnitude of the economic benefits they have distributed to their populations suggests that they are extremely conscious of the potential for turmoil, they appear unable to take decisive action.

### Bahrain: Between the Arab Spring and Iran

Bahrain is the only Gulf monarchy to have experienced large-scale, protracted protests similar to those of the Arab Spring. Since February, Bahrain has seen continuous demonstrations, which have been quelled neither by early attempts to buy off discontent with economic largesse nor by later severe repression, including an intervention by the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force of mostly Saudi and Emirati troops.

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Two elements make the situation in Bahrain unlike that of other Gulf monarchies or of other Arab countries experiencing widespread popular uprisings. First, protests have had a strongly sectarian character, pitting overwhelmingly Shi'i demonstrators against a Sunni-dominated government. Second, the Bahraini uprising is a reiteration of an earlier conflict that continued through the 1990s and was

shakily settled by agreement on a new National Action Charter in 2001. As in the past, the most recent set of protests continue to take place against a backdrop of Shi'i socioeconomic grievances, as well as in the context of the failed 2001 political agreement which introduced a new constitution and an elected parliament without curbing the power of the king. Complicating matters further, Iran has been a vocal supporter of the Bahraini protesters—and from the point of view of the government, this external support is the real cause of continued strife.

When the protests first started, the king tried to appease participants by ordering that every family be granted \$3,000 to mark the anniversary of the National Action Charter. But demands in Bahrain were much more political than economic and unrest continued. By mid-February, protesters took over

the Pearl Roundabout to demand a functioning democracy, the release of political prisoners, and the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, an uncle of the king who has occupied his position since 1971 and is considered to be highly corrupt. They also demanded more housing and job opportunities. Attempts to start dialogue between the protesters and the crown prince failed, despite strong pressure by the United States, which saw negotiations as the only way to solve not only Bahrain's predicament, but also its own: Washington found itself caught between its proclaimed support for the Arab Spring and the imperative of maintaining good relations with the country that hosts the American Fifth Fleet.

As the protests escalated, violence and gross violations of human rights by the police did as well. This was well documented by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which was given the task of investigating allegations of human rights abuses during the uprising, as discussed below. In response to the continued unrest, in March troops from a number of Gulf nations, including Saudi Arabia, arrived in Bahrain at the request of the government. Although such repression failed to restore social peace, it calmed the situation sufficiently for the government to attempt a new dialogue with the opposition in July, in an effort to draw up "common principles for the relaunch of the political reform process." The government invited a wide array of largely pro-government groups to participate in the dialogue, while giving only a few seats to the al-Wefaq political society, the largest Shi'i bloc in parliament. Inevitably, al-Wefaq soon withdrew from the talks and the dialogue became a conversation among pro-government forces. Equally ineffective was a second attempt by the king to increase the salaries of civilian and military personnel and pensioners.

In a more meaningful concession, the king established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry to investigate the government's response to the February protests. Headed by M. Cherif Bassiouni, a respected jurist with experience in conducting war crimes investigations, the commission presented a surprisingly candid report on November 23. It denounced gross and systemic violations of human rights, as well as measures that amounted to "collective punishment" of the Shi'i community. It suggested that the government needed to undertake a systematic investigation of its policies and to retrain its security forces to deal with unrest. Initial responses by the government suggest that it intends to comply with the letter of the recommendations but not with the spirit—it failed to include credible members of the opposition or even independents in the committee it set up to devise a plan to implement the Bassiouni Commission's recommendations.

No measure has succeeded thus far in breaking the Bahraini cycle of protest and repression. Furthermore, a settlement appears to be a distant prospect as the government increasingly portrays all Shi'i opponents as radicals close to Iran and the protesters harden their position, demanding a transition to a true constitutional monarchy rather than mere political reform.

### Saudi Arabia: Buying Domestic Peace

The wave of protests across the Arab region has been both a domestic and foreign policy challenge for Saudi Arabia, forcing it to pursue contradictory policies. Domestically, the Saudi regime has taken an extremely firm stance against all manifestations of discontent while at the same time lavishing a vast amount

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**Saudi action seems to imply thus far that reform is inevitable and even acceptable in many countries, except within the Kingdom's own borders and in neighboring Bahrain.**

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of money on salary increases, housing benefits, and support for a broad range of institutions throughout the Kingdom. In its foreign policy, however, Saudi Arabia has been forced to come to terms with the demise of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia and the Mubarak regime in Egypt; it is trying to ease President Saleh out of power in Yemen, joining other Arab countries in supporting Western intervention to remove Qaddafi in Libya, and voting to expel Syria from the Arab League. Closer to home, however, Saudi Arabia

has dismissed the Bahraini uprising as the result of Iranian machinations. On March 14, the Kingdom responded to a “request by Bahrain for support” to clear activists from the streets after the imposition of emergency rule and sent at least 1,200 troops across the causeway as part of the Peninsula Shield operation. Saudi action seems to imply thus far that reform is inevitable and even acceptable in many countries, except within the Kingdom's own borders and in neighboring Bahrain.

The Saudi public has remained passive so far. An attempt led by youth in late February to call for a “Day of Rage” on Facebook fizzled. Although hundreds reportedly signed up online to participate, only a small group of foreign reporters and a lone protester showed up at the appointed time and place. Limited protests eventually took place in Riyadh, where a gathering of a few dozen family members of prisoners who had not been charged or tried gathered in front of the Ministry of Interior, and in the Eastern Province town of Qatif, where several hundred Shi'a (a minority in Saudi Arabia, but a majority in the Eastern Province) demonstrated several times throughout the month of March and again in November and December. A small number of women also continued to demand the right to drive, engaging in civil defiance by driving around Jeddah and Riyadh, despite a countrywide ban. The limited number of participants and their chaperoning by family members (as required by law), however, indicates that Saudi Arabia is far from witnessing an uprising by women.

The absence of political pressure from below allowed the Kingdom to avoid any real discussion of political reform. The government has announced the formation of an anticorruption commission and some measures to improve the efficiency of the judiciary. It also said that women would be allowed to vote and run for office in the next municipal elections, which are set to take place in 2015. The impact of this announcement was limited by its timing, however, coming just after the most recent municipal elections were held.

Despite the extremely limited nature of protests thus far, the government remains worried about the possibility that the Arab Spring protests may overtake Saudi Arabia as well. This fear is shown by the extraordinary amounts the government has allocated to support economic measures meant to stave off discontent. Expanded budgets and economic measures have not been allocated to support economic reform or new economic initiatives but rather to place more cash in the pockets of individuals and families.

Within weeks of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, King Abdullah announced a set of economic measures that added up to \$37 billion and included a 15 percent pay raise for state employees.<sup>4</sup> The package also incorporated loan benefits, social security assistance, education funding, and the creation of jobs, among other grants and subsidies.<sup>5</sup> Just days after the fizzled “Day of Rage,” King Abdullah appeared in a rare televised address in which he praised the population for displaying national unity and loyalty in the face of “advocates of sedition”; in other words, he commended the Saudi Arabian people for failing to take to the streets. He then issued a royal decree which gave an additional \$93 billion to various programs. Part of the funds were allocated as new handouts to the population in the form of unemployment benefits, housing, and improved health care. The remaining portion was dedicated to strengthening the country’s religious institutions.

The latter provisions show how the Kingdom has attempted to use religion as an antidote to political protests. About \$53 million was allocated to establish a bureau for the General Presidency for Religious Research and Ifta, including the creation of 300 jobs; \$133.32 million for the renovation of mosques; \$53 million to support the country’s Holy Quran Memorization Associations; \$80 million for the Bureau of Call and Guidance at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Call and Guidance; and \$53 million to complete regional headquarters for the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Funding has also been provided to establish a *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) complex. Although the decrees involved the creation of a commission to combat corruption and other potentially positive developments, they also involved a prohibition on the defaming of the grand mufti and the members of the Senior Ulema Council in the media, raising questions on essential issues like censorship and freedom of speech.<sup>6</sup>

Saudi Arabia remains largely untouched by the popular uprisings spreading across the Arab world. The extensive benefits provided to the population suggest, however, that the government does not believe that Saudi Arabia is immune to the unrest that has shaken other countries.

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### **Qatar: Supporting Change—But Not at Home**

Qatar presents a unique case of a country internally untouched by either unrest or reform but supporting reform and regime change elsewhere.

Domestically, not much has happened in Qatar since the beginning of the Arab Spring. The absence of demonstrations and demands for change have given the government the freedom to maintain the status quo, not resorting to economic measures that a number of other monarchies have attempted to buy peace and taking only small, inconsequential political steps.

In a surprise move on November 1, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani announced that, for the first time, two-thirds of the Shura Council positions would be contested in elections in 2013. In itself, this announcement is not a significant step, as the Shura Council enjoys little power. The decision, however, is telling about Qatar's attempt to manage its image by realigning its domestic policies, however minimally, with its support for change elsewhere. Throughout the Arab Spring, Qatar has played an active role: it has sought to mediate between the government and protesters in Yemen and Syria; it was one of the main drivers of the Arab League's decision to expel Syria in November; it has offered \$500 million in aid to Egypt in order to support the transition; and it provided military training and weapons to the Libyan insurgents early in the uprising—a complete picture of the extent of Qatar's role in Libya still remains unclear.

### **Oman: Calls for Reform Rather Than Regime Overthrow**

Normally quiet and politically uneventful, Oman was the first Gulf country to experience unrest after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Throughout January and February, small-scale demonstrations broke out in several cities with demands for a more powerful Shura Council, anticorruption measures, and greater employment opportunities. Despite dissatisfaction, calls stopped short of demands for a true constitutional monarchy, let alone Sultan Qaboos bin Said's ouster. In an effort to quell continued demands and with the help of a Saudi Arabian pledge that provided Oman with a \$10 billion grant over ten years, the sultan increased the minimum salaries of private sector workers by 43 percent, raised the stipend received by university students, and announced the creation of a consumer protection bureau, while also reshuffling the cabinet. In March, Qaboos promised the creation of 50,000 jobs, the broadening of legislative powers for the country's consultative council, and an additional \$2.6 billion package of benefits.

Although these handouts were sufficient to placate most protesters, a small, determined group continued to express their dissatisfaction. In an attempt to eliminate the last vestiges of unrest, in May, Sultan Qaboos broached the idea of increasing decentralization to make the administration more responsive to the needs of the citizens, ordering feasibility studies for the establishment of

governorates in all regions across the country. He also announced the development of a second public university.

As protests continued in October, Qaboos finally addressed calls for political reforms by introducing a number of amendments to the country's Basic Law, or constitution. Under the new changes, the Council of Ministers must now refer draft laws to the Shura Council, rather than issuing them without consultation. The Shura Council will also review the annual budget and development projects, as well as have a say in deciding the successor to the throne, in theory giving the people a greater voice in governmental affairs.

Ultimately, although the government's gradual economic and minimal political concessions leave many demands unanswered, Sultan Qaboos continues to enjoy popular support and a sense of stability pervades the country.

### **The United Arab Emirates: Absence of Protests and Preventive Development Measures**

With a population that is largely content due to extensive housing and social security benefits, a high GDP, and an impressive quality of life, the United Arab Emirates has been left untouched by the region's unrest. Yet, the government is taking no chances. In April, it promptly arrested five bloggers who had called for democratic reforms on the UAE's Hewan website, a discussion forum established in 2009 to promote open debate of national issues. From March to May, it entered into negotiations with major suppliers to reduce and fix the prices of up to 200 staple food products. At the same time, it stepped up efforts to improve conditions in the poorer, less developed areas of the north, investing \$1.55 billion in infrastructure projects to expand water and electricity supplies.

On the political front, the government has not taken on any major initiatives. However, it continued the process of increasing the number of citizens allowed to cast votes for the members of the Federal National Council. On September 24, it held elections for 20 seats of the 40-member Federal National Council; the remaining 20 seats were directly appointed and the council only serves an advisory role, however.<sup>7</sup> Somewhat more significant is the fact the 129,000 citizens were allowed to vote in these elections, nearly 20 times more than were eligible in the UAE's first elections.<sup>8</sup> Voter turnout was low, however.

### **Kuwait: A Dysfunctional Parliamentary System Faces the Arab Spring**

There has been considerable turmoil in Kuwait since the onset of the Arab Spring. Yet, Kuwait, the only Gulf monarchy with a real parliament that is willing to challenge the ruler, is always in a state of turmoil, so it is unclear whether recent developments are related in any way to the regional upheaval—Kuwaitis, convinced their country is truly exceptional, claim that they are not.



The relationship between the ruling family, whose members control the most important ministries, and the parliament, a mixture of scions of historically powerful families and politicians of all possible coloration, is always complex. Parliament frequently challenges the regime, summoning ministers, including those from the royal family, for “grilling”—just the word used to denote what in most other countries would be called “testifying” says a lot about rela-

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**Given the normal state of turmoil in Kuwaiti politics, it is impossible to determine whether recent political strife represents something that is qualitatively different or is simply the continuation of the same game**

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tions between the government and parliament. In return, the emir tends to disband the parliament and call for new elections to avoid putting members of the ruling family on the stand. Given the normal state of turmoil in Kuwaiti politics, it is, at this point, impossible to determine whether recent political strife represents something that is qualitatively different or is simply the continuation of the same game, particularly since protest has been muted. In February, Kuwait witnessed protests when Bidoon (stateless Arabs) took to the streets to demand citizenship. Although this was not a new demand, clashes between security forces and demonstrators ensued, leading to a number of arrests and injuries. As demonstrations continued through March, the Kuwaiti cabinet resigned in order to avoid the “grilling” of three ministers. The emir formed a new cabinet, but the new government’s relations with the parliament remained as contentious as ever. Again, protesters called for the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al Sabah and the granting of greater political freedoms. Tension continued to mount. In June, two Kuwaiti citizens were arrested and put on trial for criticizing the ruling families in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as well Kuwait’s emir. A June statement by the emir warned that Kuwait would show “zero tolerance” to anyone threatening the country’s security. Still, unrest continued, fueled by accusations of corruption against ministers, leading the government to approve a record budget of \$70 billion, of which 90 percent was set to go to fuel subsidies and salary increases in the hope of buying off discontent.<sup>9</sup> In November, dozens of protesters stormed parliament and demanded the resignation of the prime minister, indicating that discontent remains.

In response to the turmoil, the emir dismissed the government on November 28 rather than allowing the prime minister to be subjected to a grilling; then on December 6 he disbanded the parliament, opening the way for new elections in sixty days. In the meantime, government ministers and members of parliament continue to trade accusations of corruption.

Kuwait may have reached a turning point, but it is more likely that the current unrest is part of the same competition among rival elites that keeps the politics of Kuwait perpetually turbulent while the system remains intact.

## Conclusion

The potential for reform from the top is high in all Arab monarchies. The legitimacy Arab monarchs still enjoy could potentially protect them from the danger that all reforming monarchs experience, what Samuel Huntington defined as “the king’s dilemma”: any reform could trigger demands for more radical change and in the end lead to the demise of the reforming sovereign. There is never a guarantee against the law of unintended consequences, but uncontrolled calls for change seem unlikely in the Arab monarchies where demand from the citizens has so far been very limited. Indeed, it would appear less dangerous for the monarchs to act now than to wait until the demand is overwhelming and could indeed spiral into an uncontrolled process.

Only Bahrain may have reached the point where it may be difficult for the king to control the reform process. The country is caught in a new round of strife, repression, and unsatisfied political demands like the one that engulfed it in the 1990s. In the eyes of the country’s Shi’i majority, the monarchy has already lost much of its legitimacy. It seems unlikely at this point that discontent could be quelled except by reforms that truly curb the power of the king. But stonewalling on reform does not appear to be a solution either. During 2011, the absence of reform has led more of the protesters to demand a true constitutional monarchy or, in the case of the more radical voices, a republic. There should be a cautionary tale here for other countries.

The response of the various states so far has been more of a continuation of past policies than a clear indication of the willingness to embark on a process of change. In Morocco, the king swiftly announced a new constitution curbing the monarch’s powers and enhancing those of the elected parliament. Closer analysis suggests that in reality the king may not have to surrender much power because the political parties still appear to be unwilling or unable to play a more decisive role. This could lead to stalled reform or to an uprising if the extra parliamentary political organizations mobilize.

Continuity with the past is also striking in Jordan. Once again, the king has promised reform and created commissions to make proposals, but little has changed in practice and it is far from certain that the country has reached a turning point.

Saudi Arabia has reacted to the potential for unrest by using its wealth to buy off discontent, lavishing benefits on the general public and special constituencies. The words “political reform” have seemingly never been uttered by Saudis in official positions; and while the government took a tiny step in the direction of social reform when it announced that women will be allowed to vote and even run for office in the municipal election four years hence, the timing of the announcement, when elections are still far off, decreased its political significance.

Usually quiet Oman has experienced some unrest but has reacted, again in keeping with the past, with mild steps and little repression. The United Emirates and Qatar have not been challenged and thus have not had to make tough decisions. Kuwait meanwhile still seems to be caught in the same old struggle between the parliament and the ruling family, and it remains unclear whether recent demonstrations and protests mark a turning point away from an intense political game played by elites and toward the realm of political participation by a larger public.

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**Arab monarchies have not accepted that the change sweeping the region is profound, and that the unique opportunity they still have to lead their countries into a decisive program of reform from the top will not last forever.**

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Despite the continuity with the past and thus the differences among them, Arab monarchies seem to share a common trait in their reaction to the Arab Spring. So far, they have not accepted that the change sweeping the region is profound, and that the unique opportunity they still have to lead their countries into a decisive program of reform from the top will not last forever. With the possible exception of the king in Bahrain, Arab monarchs still have legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. Protesters are asking for an enhanced role for the parliament and some limitations to the king's power, rather than for a full-fledged constitutional monarchy. Demands for a republican form of government are rare. Any Arab sovereign willing to introduce real political reforms would be acclaimed by his citizens and go down in history as the person who started realigning Arab monarchies with twenty-first-century governance systems, without completely renouncing his political role. None has risen to the challenge so far.

## Notes

- 1 See Marwan Muasher, *A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System*, Carnegie Paper, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2011.
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- 3 An estimated average of 10.7 percent of GDP excluding grants (JD1.6 billion) in 2009–2010 to an average of 11.4 percent of GDP in 2011–2012, according to Economist Intelligence Unit estimates.
- 4 “Saudi Arabia imposes ban on all protests,” BBC News, March 5, 2011, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12656744](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12656744).
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- 9 Liam Stack, “Seeking to Avoid Uprising, Kuwait Escalates Budget,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2011, [www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01kuwait.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01kuwait.html?_r=3).







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