

The Political Economy of Sectarianism in the Gulf

JUSTIN GENGLER

Arab Gulf rulers face incentives to develop non-economic sources of legitimacy to maintain popular support while maximizing scarce resource revenues. By sowing communal distrust, highlighting threats, and emphasizing their ability to guarantee security, regimes can reinforce domestic backing and dampen pressure for reform more cheaply than by distributing welfare benefits. Survey data from four Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar) demonstrate that governments can effectively cow populations into political inaction even as the economic benefits citizens receive are dwindling.

Key Themes

- Gulf regimes establish electoral and legislative rules that institutionalize cleavages based on identity politics.
- Official national narratives in the Gulf are frequently exclusive, highlighting differences among citizens and privileging certain population segments over others.
- Gulf regimes increasingly treat even peaceful opposition and dissent as veritable threats to national security, rather than as ordinary political challenges.
- Some Gulf Cooperation Council states have conducted an assertive, adventurist foreign policy that has contributed to regional instability and promoted a militaristic nationalism.
- Feelings of insecurity are heightened by government promises of radical economic reorganization in the face of dwindling oil and gas revenues.

Findings

- Analysis of survey data from the region reveals that more security-minded Gulf citizens are willing to accept lower levels of economic performance by a government in return for stability. For them, the state's provision of security represents a substitute for the financial benefits expected by citizens in oil-rich states.
- In this way, Gulf governments can capitalize on the security concerns of citizens to purchase popular political support more cheaply than through the standard distribution of material benefits.
- Gulf regimes thus have economic and political incentives to embellish or manufacture domestic and external threats, in order to heighten popular concerns over security and so lower the cost of accruing political support.
- Gulf rulers are often unable to manage social tensions once unleashed, and some have ended up stoking the very dissent they wished to suppress. This is a precarious strategy that carries serious risks to citizen welfare and the long-term survival of regimes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin Gengler is research program manager at the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) at Qatar University, where he heads the SESRI Policy Unit.

CONTACT

Tara Medeiros
Deputy Director of Communications
+1 202 294 3996
tmedeiros@ceip.org

Clara Hogan
Media Manager
+1 202 939 2241
chogan@ceip.org

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