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**DEMOCRATIZING THE ARAB STATES.
THE CASE OF MONARCHIES OF THE GULF, 1991-2004**

Democracy deficit in the Arab world

The *Arab Human Development Reports 2002 and 2003*, prepared by a group of leading Arab intellectuals under the auspices of the UNDP and the Arab Fund for Social and Economic Development brought a very pessimistic view of the Arab world.¹ The combined gross domestic product of the 22 Arab countries was lesser than Spain's. Labor productivity in these countries dropped between 1960 and 1990, while it soared elsewhere in the world. Even Africa outperformed the Arab world in rates of economic growth. An exploding population cannot be supported by scarce resources and every other citizen is ready to emigrate. At the same time, the wealthiest 85,000 Saudis have overseas assets of \$700 billions.

At the same time, as Freedom House survey showed, there is also a dramatic gap between the levels of freedom and democracy in Arab countries and the rest of the world.² First of all, there are no true Western-type democracies in the Arab world or really free Arab countries. In particular, none of the 16 Arab majority countries has a democratically elected government. Secondly, in the last more or less three decades, this world, as a whole, has not seen any significant improvement in political openness, respect for human rights, and transparency, contrary to the trends in all other parts of the world. Democracy is now present in states following every major religious or philosophical tradition: Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Muslim and Jewish. It is present in rich as well as very poor states, in big and small countries. But, as Larry Diamond pointed out, "by any category that is meaningful in the world today, there is only one set of countries that is completely undemocratic: the

¹ *Arab Human Development Report 2002 and 2003*, New York, www.undp.org.

² *Freedom in the World 2002: The Democracy Gap*, Freedom House, New York 2002, p. 5.

Arab world.”³ *The Economist* described the state of democracy in all Arab countries in the following table:

Democracy in the Arab world, 2004

Score: 1 – dismal, 10 – perfect

State	Political Freedom ¹	Rule of Law ²	Religious Freedom ³	Press Freedom	Economic Openness ⁴	Women's Rights ⁵	TOTAL
Morocco	4	6	6	6	7	6	35
Lebanon	4	4	6	6	7	7	34
Iraq	4	1	7	7	8	5	32
Jordan	4	6	6	3	7	6	32
Qatar	3	6	4	4	8	6	31
Bahrain	3	6	4	3	8	6	30
Kuwait	4	6	4	6	6	4	30
Palestinian Territories	4	2	5	5	7	7	30
Tunisia	1	3	9	1	7	8	29
United Arab Emirates	1	6	4	3	9	6	29
Oman	2	6	4	1	7	6	26
Yemen	4	3	4	6	5	4	26
Egypt	2	4	4	3	5	6	24
Sudan	3	1	2	5	7	3	21
Syria	1	2	8	1	1	7	20
Algeria	3	2	4	3	2	4	18
Libya	1	2	4	1	2	5	15
Saudi Arabia	0	3	0	2	7	1	13

Source: *The Economist*, April 3, 2004.

¹ The right to vote in fair elections, oust rulers from office, form political parties

² Respect for human rights, independence of judiciary, access to speedy justice, humane treatment in prison

³ Freedom of worship, freedom from state intervention in religion and from religious intervention in state affairs

⁴ Freedom to invest, freedom from bureaucratic control and corruption

⁵ Level of political, economic and social equality

On the 0-60 points scale the most democratic Arab state, Morocco, barely crossed the middle point, while several countries, with Saudi Arabia at the top, did not even reach a quarter of the possible level of democracy.

This situation increasingly worries enlightened intellectuals in the Arab world and Western governments. It is typical for sudden and violent conflicts, which can de-stabilize the whole region of high strategic importance, and for further spread of terrorism. This is why, Arab elites and Western governments try to analyze causes for such state of affairs and propose remedies for change.

³ L. Diamond, „Universal democracy?”, *Policy Review*, June 2003.

According to the authors of *Arab Human Development Report*, the main reason for the dramatic situation in the Arab world is poor governance. "But the wave of democracy that transformed governance in most of the world has barely reached the Arab world... The freedom deficit undermines human development and it is one of the most painful manifestations of lagging political development." A group of experts from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, on the other hand, believe that there have been three major reasons for democracy deficit in the Middle East: (1) lack of previous experience with democracy, which, for example, facilitated transitions in Central and Eastern Europe; (2) lack of the prolonged periods of economic growth and the resulting changes in educational and living standards as well as life styles, which led several Asian countries to democratic changes (in fact there is a socioeconomic deterioration in the Middle East); (3) lack of a positive "neighborhood effect", the regional, locally exerted pressure to conform, which helped to democratize Latin America.⁴ Moreover, what makes the democratization of the region more difficult to achieve is: a fear of illiberal Islamic movements, which have broad support in most of the Arab countries and which can win democratic elections, if introduced, and while in power abrogate democracy itself; the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the fact that is regularly exploited by rulers of the Arab countries to deflect attention of their citizens from domestic problems; the negative perception of the United States, whose promotion of democracy in view of Washington's support of Israel and occupation of Iraq is perceived as a new American attempt to dominate the Arab world.⁵

There are, naturally, a number of more fundamental questions related to the potential democratization of the Islamic states. Is democratization in the Western meaning of the term possible in such states at all, especially in the countries whose rulers use Islam to legitimate themselves and where religious establishment plays significant role in politics?⁶ Opinions on the matter have been diversified.⁷ For example, Samuel P. Huntington in his early works presented the view that "Islam ... has not been hospitable to democracy".⁸ Elie Kedourie believed that "the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam".⁹ Similarly, Lisa Anderson explained, that: "Islam's failure to distinguish the realms of Caesar and God, its insistence that sovereignty rests with God and that the essence of the law is divinely revealed and therefore

⁴ M. Ottaway, T. Carothers, A. Hawthorne, D. Brumberg, "Democratic Mirage in the Middle East", *Policy Brief*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2002.

⁵ Some reformists would not even use the term 'democracy' to describe their plans "because in the Arab world that term has become a codeword for hip-hugger blue jeans, sex on television, dysfunctional family life and all other aspects of western culture the Arabs find objectionable", K. Pollack and D. Byman, "Democracy as realism", *Prospect*, April 2003, p. 27.

⁶ F. G. Gause III, *Oil Monarchies. Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, Council of Foreign Relations, New York 1994.

⁷ See, e.g., R. Kazem El-Solh, "Representative democracy in the Arab region: An overview", in: Y. al-Hassan, *The Dialogue between Civilizations*, The Emirates Center for Developmental and Strategic Studies, Sharjah, UAE 1995, pp. 199-211.

⁸ S. P. Huntington, "Will more countries become democratic?", *Political Science Quarterly* 1984, no. 2, p. 208.

⁹ E. Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*, Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC 1992, p. 1.

beyond human emendation, its discriminatory treatment of women and non-Muslim minorities, all appear quite inconsistent with democratic politics.”¹⁰

According to Adam Garnfinkle, Arab societies, although in different degrees, lack three pre-requisites for democracy¹¹: (1) the belief that the source of political authority is intrinsic to society (“of the people, by the people, for the people”). Muslims believe that it does come from God or from an accepted source outside the society; therefore the idea of political pluralism as well as the legitimacy of a “loyal opposition” cannot be accepted, while tolerance for any other set of social, political or religious principles that the Islamic one amounts to heresy (2) a concept of majority rule; without it, the idea of elections as a mean to form a government does not make sense. Yet Muslims are used to governance through consensus-building so the idea that someone who has won 51 per cent of the vote in an election should get 100 per cent of power, while the person who has won 49 per cent should get none is perceived by them as both illogical and dangerous: an invitation to civil strife. Moreover, in Western democracy, it is the majority view that prevails, but in Islam matters should be decided according to the Koran and the tradition of the prophet Mohammed and not according to the views of the people.¹² (3) equality of all citizens before the law: this idea is in conflict with nearly all Islamic traditional authority, where men are “more equal” than women, the educated more than illiterate, the pious more than non-religious, the elderly more than the youth, and members of the ruling family more than the commons.

At the same time, there are also quite opposite views, explaining that democracy can be implemented in Muslim societies and states. First of all, there are reasonably democratic Muslim states, like Turkey. Then, there are millions of Muslims living in democratic states of Europe, United States or Asia who have successfully combined their religion with demands of the democratic system. According to Huntington, who later changed his mind, the “Islamic doctrine ... contains elements that may be both congenial and uncongenial to democracy” and that the only question is to find out how and under what circumstances elements in Islam favorable to democracy ‘can supersede the undemocratic aspects’.¹³ In turn, Garnfinkle stressed, that “there certainly are theological and cultural predicates for democracy within Islam.”¹⁴

Finally, there are Arab countries, not only the non-Arab Muslim states, that experimented with democracy. Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria all had relatively democratic constitutions during the period of French and British mandate, even if only on paper. Currently, most of these countries, plus Lebanon and Morocco, have functioning parliaments now and at least a certain degree of democracy. They prove that democratic procedures, like elections, can be held in the predominantly

¹⁰ L. Anderson, “Democracy in the Arab world: A critique of the political culture approach”, in: R. Brynen, B. Korany, P. Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, Boulder and London 1995, vol. 1, p. 87.

¹¹ A. Garnfinkle, “The new missionaries”, *Prospect*, April 2003, pp. 22-24.

¹² H. Saleh, “Iraq’s future worries Saudis”, BBC News, May 11, 2003.

¹³ S. P. Huntington, ‘Democracy’s Third Wave’, *Journal of Democracy* 1991, no. 2, p. 28.

¹⁴ A. Garnfinkle, „The new missionaries”...

Islamic states. Moreover, among the Arab countries there is a distinctive group of states, which in recent years, with only few exceptions, implemented political reforms, broadened political participation of citizens, liberalized the media, gave more rights to women, etc. Although they continue to be autocratic regimes, they also did more to democratize themselves than many other countries of the region. This paper analyzes the cases of these countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE): members of the so-called Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Monarchies of the Gulf

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates are conservative Arab monarchies. They have relatively small populations, but abundant natural resources. The number of citizens (nationals) in these states totals almost 22 million, ranging from less than 200,000 in Qatar to almost 17 million in Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Huge oil and gas deposits make most of the GCC states rich and strategically significant for global economy. They possess about 46% of global oil reserves while their production capacity is in the range of 17-18% of that of the world. The GDP per capita places most GCC states among the richest countries in the world.

The character of the GCC regimes – an absolute monarchy – gives rulers great leeway in terms of decision-making, and places legislative, executive and, to some extent, judicial power in their hands.¹⁶ What has been even more important, the rulers themselves have been the *de facto* owners of the oil-related wealth. Moreover, because taxes as state revenues have not been needed, governments have neither recognized the necessity to offer citizens much participation in the decision-making process, nor subjected themselves to the ordinary obligation of domestic accountability (the “no taxation, no representation” rule). Therefore, the people who populate these countries, and who are very slowly becoming citizens (from being just subjects before), have not in most cases been equal partners in the national development.

Nevertheless, people would not protest against such relations as rulers used to be able to meet their aspirations and financial expectations. Moreover, rulers were getting additional credits from the public as defenders of people’s faith, the Islam, against radical Arab nationalism, communism and Zionism.

From the Western point of view, relations between rulers of the GCC states and their citizens looked differently. Taking into account political rights and civil

¹⁵ The total population of these countries is much larger, almost 35 million, ranging from some 700,000 in Bahrain and Qatar to over 24 million in Saudi Arabia. Yet, a large share of the population, on average almost 40%, is composed of temporary foreign labor force with no citizenship rights (ranging from about 25% in Oman and 30% in Saudi Arabia to 80% in the United Arab Emirates). See: A. Kapiszewski, “The changing status of Arab migrant workers in the GCC,” *Journal of Social Affairs*, no. 78, Summer 2003, p.36.

¹⁶ H. Hamdan Al-Alkimi, “The prospect of democracy in the GCC countries”, *Critique. Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, Fall 1996, pp. 29-42.

liberties, monarchies of the Gulf have not been democratic at all. They have experienced lack of freedom, especially freedom of expression and association there, public participation in government, or democratic elections, women and certain minorities have been discriminated, etc. Therefore, these countries have scored very low on the highly publicized, although controversial, Freedom House democracy scale.¹⁷ Only Kuwait was rated a „partly free” country in 2002, while all other GCC states were considered “not free”, with Saudi Arabia joining world’s ten most repressive regimes (in 2003 Bahrain moved to the “partly free” category). Similarly, in the first worldwide Press Freedom Index published by “Reporters Without Borders” in 2002, out of 139 countries listed, the GCC countries scored low: Bahrain came 67th, Kuwait 78th, and Saudi Arabia 125th.¹⁸

Nevertheless, since 1991, significant political, ‘protodemocratic’ reforms have taken place in most of the GCC states.¹⁹ Rulers of these countries took actions which led towards opening of the regimes in various areas, gave citizens more to say in state politics and broadened people’s freedom. Discussion of the issue of democracy became more open.

In a context of governance, the situation in the GCC states looked quite good in comparison to the one existing in other Arab, or even world, countries.

The *Arab Human Development Report 2002* analyzed major aspects of governance in the Arab world, perceived broadly as the traditions and institutions by which authority is exercised. They include: (1) the process by which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, (2) the capacity of the government to formulate effectively and implement sound policies, and (3) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them. The *Report* used special aggregate indicators describing the governance process, government capacity and respect for the rule of law.²⁰ The GCC states scored in most cases best results among all Arab states and in many clusters also quite good results in comparison with the world mean.²¹ In ‘political stability’

¹⁷ *Freedom in the World 2002-2003*, New York 2003.

	Political rights*	Civil liberties*	Freedom rating**
Bahrain	5	5	Partly free
Kuwait	4	5	Partly free
Oman	6	5	Not free
Saudi Arabia	7	7	Not free
Qatar	6	6	Not free
UAE	6	5	Not free

¹⁸ with “1” representing the most free and “7” the least free.

¹⁹ “Free” countries are those whose ratings average ranges from 1 to 3; “Partly free” from 3 to 5.5; and “Not free” from 5.5 to 7.

²⁰ http://www.rsf.fr/article.php3?id_article=4116. Other GCC states were not evaluated.

²¹ G. Bahgat, “The Gulf monarchies: Economic and political challenges at the end of the century”, *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* 1998, no. 2, pp. 147-175; H. Hamdan Al-Alkim, “The prospects of democracy...”.

²⁰ D. Kaufmann, A. Kraay and P. Zoido-Lobaton, *Segregating Governance Indicators and Governance Matters*, World Bank, Research Working Papers no. 2195 and 2196, 1999.

²¹ *Arab Human Development Report 2002...*, p. 143.

– Qatar, Oman, the UAE and Kuwait were in four top positions in the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia occupying the sixth place. In ‘government effectiveness’ – Oman was on the first place, Qatar on the fourth, Bahrain on the sixth and the UAE on the eighth, all above the mean of the world distribution. In ‘regulatory burden’ – Bahrain occupied the first place, Qatar fourth, Oman fifth, the UAE sixth, all above average indicators. In ‘rule of law’ all the GCC states did better than average, with Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE occupying top four positions among Arab countries. In ‘graft’, measuring the quality of institutions, only three Arab countries had scores above the average, but Kuwait and Qatar were in top two positions among Arab states. Only in ‘voice and accountability’ the GCC states scores low (like all Arab states for that matter); only Kuwait’s score equaled the mean of the world distribution. All other failed below the mean. In *The Economist’s* table of democracy presented above, most of GCC states scored relatively well: they took the 5th, 6th, 7th, 10th and 11th positions among 18 Arab states; only Saudi Arabia ranked last.

The West, aware of oil importance of the region, and convinced that the spread of its type of democratization usually offers better guarantees for peace and stability, has carefully watched all occurrences in the GCC states. Neighbors of the Gulf monarchies and broader Arab world have also been vitally interested in the outcome of changes taking place there; some worry that limitation of rulers’ traditional prerogatives can destabilize their countries and the whole region in general as well as potentially bereave decline the authorities of large benefits of being in power; others, in turn, look for good models to reform their countries as well.

Political participation in the Gulf emirates. The historical background

The issue of political participation became debated in the Gulf emirates very early. There were movements in Bahrain, Dubai and Kuwait that called for the establishment or institutionalization of rulers’ advisory councils in those emirates in the 1920s and 1930s already.²² In Kuwait, a Legislative Council was established in 1938, although the emir dissolved it just six months after its creation. Then, the problem of people’s representation surfaced with all its intensity with the beginning of rapid economic and social transformation related to the oil boom in the latter half of the 20th century. Arab immigrant workers and specialists who came to the Gulf countries from more “progressive” states began spreading ideas of people’s representation that was part of the program of the socialist and Arab nationalist movements to which many of them belonged.²³ In Saudi Arabia, in particular, the so-called Free Officers movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, largely

²² U. Rabi, “The Kuwaiti royal family in the postliberation period: Reinstitutionalizing the ‘First Among Equals’ system in Kuwait”, in: *Middle East Monarchies. The Challenge of Modernity*, J. Kostiner (ed.), Boulder and London 2000, p. 153.

²³ See, e.g., L. G. Martin, *The Unstable Gulf*, Lexington and Massachusetts 1984; R. N. El Rayyes, ‘Arab nationalism and the Gulf’, in: B. R. Pridham (ed.), *The Arab Gulf and the Arab World*, London 1988.

influenced by Egyptians, called for limiting the absolute authority of the monarch and introducing a Western style constitution.²⁴ Such activities, which were perceived a threat to Gulf monarchies, were strongly prosecuted by local authorities. Nevertheless, the issue of political participation surfaced again and was debated in several small Gulf countries while they were gaining independence (Kuwait in the early 1960s, and Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the early 1970s), and was to some extent addressed in the constitutions adopted by those countries.²⁵ Kuwait and Bahrain embarked on parliamentary experiences, establishing partially elected assemblies. The UAE and Qatar set up ruler-nominated consultative bodies but with no real legislative power or exercise of control over government. Oman followed suit establishing its State Consultative Council in 1981. Only Saudi Arabia did not establish any formal structures for political participation, believing that rulers' traditional type of contacts with religious and tribal leaders as well as leading members of the business community were sufficient for that (although elections to the local municipality councils were held in the 1950s and 1960s).

Since the beginning of the oil-related prosperity in the GCC countries, to diminish the potential threat from unequally positioned population, the autocratic rulers decided to share a substantial part of oil benefits with citizens in return for a tacit agreement not to challenge the royal families' ultimate prerogatives. The increased wealth of the general population made such arrangement possible.²⁶ At the same time, just in case, rulers prepared themselves to defend their positions by force. Using huge oil revenues being at their disposal, they constructed large patronage networks, built a bloated government bureaucracy that employs the great majority of working nationals, developed numerous security agencies, and brought organizations of 'civil society', which might form the basis for political challenges to the regimes, under strict control.

However, the ever-growing role of the state combined with expanded education of the citizenry, economic problems arising at certain times, discrimination of some groups, etc., eventually led to conflicts related to political representation as people began to seek a degree of control over governments that so powerfully affected their lives.²⁷ For example, Sunni authorities in Bahrain, concerned about the composition of the Bahraini parliament (which included many Shi'ites and pan-Arab nationalists), dissolved the assembly in 1975, just a year after its inauguration.²⁸ Since then, protests against the limiting of popular representation have been recorded in Bahrain. In Kuwait, as a result of the parliament's frequent criticism of the government decisions, the emir twice suspended it un-constitutionally, giving

²⁴ See, e.g., J. B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West*, USA, Basic Books 1980; M. Abir, *Saudi Arabia. Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis*, London 1993.

²⁵ See, e.g., R. Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*, Ithaca Press 1998; or K. Hasan al-Naqeeb, *Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula. A different Perspective*, London and New York and the Centre for Arab Unity Studies 1990.

²⁶ G. Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State*, London 1990.

²⁷ F. G. Gause III, *Oil Monarchies...*

²⁸ See, e.g., A. Khalaf, *Unfinished Business-Contentious Politics and State Building in Bahrain*, Research Reports in Sociology, Lund University 2000.

rise to pro-democratic demonstrations and prosecution of their organizers.²⁹ In turn, in Saudi Arabia, clashes between the discriminated Shi'ites and government authorities occurred frequently.³⁰

The issue of political representation of citizens, or even the broader issue of democracy as such, was highlighted during the second war in the Gulf (1990-91). The Kuwaiti defeat and the necessity of bringing foreign (especially American) troops to defend the Gulf despite earlier expenditure of billions of 'oil' dollars on military defense, made citizens of several Gulf countries question their governments' ability to protect them and demand more control over government activities. In such a situation, the rulers become aware of the need to reinforce the weakening socio-political agreement with their subjects. For example, the exiled Kuwaiti emir, partially discredited through his poor performance during the Iraqi invasion, held the unprecedented "People's Conference", attended by more than 1000 Kuwaitis, in Taif, Saudi Arabia, in October 1990. In return for the assurance of loyalty and support of the Kuwaiti citizenry, the emir agreed to restore the constitution and the parliament suspended in 1986 upon liberation.

The war also brought other happenings. During the fighting, the authorities in all GCC countries broadcasted live CNN news to keep their population updated about the current situation. It was the first time for the people in the Gulf to be able to watch Western television. This opening broadened their political consciousness, offered them a chance of self-examination, and acquainted them with independent media. In the following years, another lesson for the GCC people to learn from was the democratization of Eastern Europe after the collapse of the communist regimes there.

In effect of all these developments, numerous political reforms began to take place in all the GCC states, either in response to pressures from the opposition, or as precautionary measures against possible protests from the rulers themselves.

Political developments in the GCC states since early 1990s

The most important occurrences for the region took place in Saudi Arabia, although not many deep reforms have been introduced there yet. Kuwait, for decades the most "democratized" monarchy in the Gulf, has not reformed itself much since 1991 and was overtaken by Bahrain and Qatar – two smallest emirates which, under their young new rulers, went through significant political changes in the last few years, opening and liberalizing their regimes. Oman, under the leadership of Sultan Qaboos for more than the last thirty years, has slowly but consequently broadened political representation in the country. Only in the United Arab Emirates, due to the country's stability, wealth, and population structure there have been hardly any noteworthy political actions in the last three decades. Political move-

²⁹ M. A. Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy. Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, New York 2000, p. 70-71.

³⁰ M. Abir, *Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era. Regime and Elites; Conflict and Collaboration*, London 1988.

ments, important undertakings and debated and introduced reforms in each GCC state are presented and analyzed below.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative monarchies in the world, and, according to Western standards, a very authoritarian regime. The King rules by decrees. There is no constitution to regulate affairs of the country, as it is believed that Sharia determines all aspects of not only private but also public life. Political parties, trade unions, collective bargaining, strikes, and public demonstrations are prohibited. Freedom of expression is severely restricted, in particular by prohibitions of criticism of Islam and the ruling family. Women are denied many basic rights and segregated. Judicial independence is undermined by the influence of the royal family and its associates. In general, the Saudi political system constitutes the most complete expression of so-called 'Islamic exception', the general rejection of the Western system of law and support for the view that all legitimacy should come from the Koran and the Sunna.

The country was established and has been ruled since 1744 by the al-Saud family in cooperation with the religious authorities of the movement following the strict Hanbali doctrine of Islam, in the West called the Wahhabis after the founder of the movement.³¹ In some matters, the King has complete authority, although he would never dare to make a decision against the religious establishment. In other matters, the *ulama* can be critical of the rulers, but in no way to suggest they might want to see them overthrown. Often, the king asks *ulama* for the approval of decisions, which could be perceived as un-Islamic, before taking them.³² What has weakened the religious appeal of the regime, is the close cooperation between the rulers and the "Satanic West", mainly on the matters of security and economy (protection of the monarchy by the Western powers against regional threats to guarantee free flow of oil and gas to the West), which, however, brings about a significant Western presence in the Kingdom. What has been mostly criticized by the *ulama* is the 'decadent', Western life-style of the ruling elites. To counterbalance these claims, to stress the religious aspect of ruler's legitimization to power, King Fahd bin Abdel Aziz started to use the title of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (in Mecca and Medina).

Despite maintaining a very conservative, Islamic identity, Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the 1990s, has witnessed political activity that, while not directly questioning the religious base of the country's identity and legitimacy of the rulers, has called for changes in the manner of state governance.

First, in December 1990, a group of 43 'liberals' and 'secularists' (academics, writers, businessmen, and government officials) circulated a petition in which they appealed to King Fahd for introduction of basic laws regulating the

³¹ M. Al-Raheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge 2002.

³² P. Lawson, *SAIS Review: Saudi Arabia*, Internet dialogue, June 2002.

functioning of government, and for the strengthening of the principle of equality of all citizens, as well as for the elimination of discrimination based on religion, tribal affiliation, family background and social status. The signatories of the petition criticized the functioning of the legal system and members of the royal family interfering with it. The petitioners urged the King to establish the long-proposed Consultative Council and provide it with a broad range of powers, including the right to oversee the work of executive agencies.³³ They also advocated the establishment of consultative councils in Saudi provinces, more independence to the media, and the introduction of a framework of regulations for issuing *fatwa*, religious edicts on various issues, which, as they suggested, contrary to the existing tradition, should be subject to 'assessment, evaluation, discussion, and response without limit or restriction'.

In turn, in May 1991, over 400 hundred Islamists, including the leading *ulama*, presented to the King a memorandum demanding extensive reform of the political and judicial system and calling for strict application of Islamic norms and values in public life as well as in economic and foreign policy issues. It criticized the corruption of government officials and called for consideration to be given to qualifications and merit rather than to kinship in the process of appointing the government. It also stressed that the planned Consultative Council should be completely independent and should be vested with broad powers. Moreover, the memorandum called for the development of a strong army and for a 'national' foreign policy, not based on foreign alliances with non-Islamic countries.

The very fact of petitions and memorandums, the never before used means of communication with the King, was a sign of serious tensions in the country. Therefore, on March 1, 1992, King Fahd decided to take some actions to calm down the situation. He decreed the long-promised Basic Laws – a constitution-like document, the statute for a new consultative council, and a system of regional government for the kingdom's 14 provinces.

The most important decision taken was that on the Consultative Council, established as a debating assembly consisting of 60 members appointed by the King.³⁴ The Council was to study all government regulations, treaties and international accords before they are promulgated through royal decree, as well as to deliberate upon and evaluate economic and social development programs. It was also to discuss annual reports submitted by ministers and state-owned organizations and present recommendations, and was empowered to question the cabinet members. The Council cannot, however, initiate debates on issues: it either has to obtain permission from the King to do so or await submission from the government. The King retained the power to dissolve or reorganize the Council at will.

The introduction of the Basic Law and the decision to establish the Consultative Council did not satisfy the opposition and calls for political reforms did not stop.

³³ F. G. Gause III, *Oil Monarchies...*, pp. 94-97 and G. Kramer, "Good counsel to the King: The Islamist opposition in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco", in: J. Kostiner, *Middle East Monarchies...*, pp. 263-264.

³⁴ S. J a h e l, "A Parliament According to *Sharia*", *Arabies Trends*, April 1998, pp. 26-31.

In May 1993, several prominent Islamist scholars and academics established the Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights, the first ever opposition organization in the Kingdom openly challenging the monarchy, accusing the government and senior *ulama* for not doing enough 'to protect the legitimate Islamic rights of the Muslims', including political participation. Government authorities disbanded the Committee within two weeks, fired its founders from the state-paid positions and arrested its spokesman. Nevertheless, for the next few years the Committee members managed to question the very foundation of the regime: the contract between rulers and the religious establishment, and criticize the behavior and decisions taken by Saudi authorities, and King Fahd in particular. For that purpose they skillfully used the new media (faxes and Internet), first from within the Kingdom and later from the exile in London.³⁵

Then the Shi'ite leaders also wrote a petition to the King, in which they strongly supported the establishment of a consultative council. At the same time, they demanded the discontinuation of discrimination against Shi'ites in the country, especially in the labor market, universities and the army, as well as the cessation of the harassment they faced while performing their religious functions (Shi'ites are approximately 10 per cent of the Kingdom's population).

Although these petitions brought no immediate results, the sole idea of formulating demands in writing and presenting them to the King established a new, important precedent in the country.

The Consultative Council finally set to work in mid-1990s and quickly established itself within Saudi political system. This is why, in 1997, the Council was enlarged from 60 to 90 members, and the King included three Shi'ite Muslims among the appointed members. In May 2001, the Council was expanded again to 120 members. Members of the Council were chosen from among the country's regions and important constituent groups: religious establishment, government bureaucracy and the business community, followers of both conservative and liberal ideologies. They have usually been highly-educated and experienced people, considered experts in their respective fields (academics, retired senior officers, ex-civil servants and private businessmen), asked to perform the Islamic function of *shura*, meaning provision of counsel. Sheikh Mohammed bin Ibrahim bin Joubayr, a respected Hanbali jurist and former Minister of Justice became the President of the first State Council and of successive ones. The influence of the Council, not grounded in law, has been a function of its members prominence and diversity. It also reflects the tradition of governance, which "prizes consensus, strives to maintain harmony through consultation and is deeply averse to conflict".³⁶ While the verdicts of the Council are neither binding on the King, nor on the government, usually either the ministers accept the recommendations of the Council or the two parties reach a compromise.

³⁵ J. Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou. Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington 2000.

³⁶ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?", International Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 28, Cairo-Brussels, July 14, 2004, p. 6.

Further changes in the Saudi political scene have taken place since Crown Prince Abdullah became *de facto* ruler in the late 1990s due to the deteriorating health of King Fahd. Abdullah has been perceived as a more pragmatic leader than many other, top-positioned members of the ruling family, the man who well understands challenges facing the Kingdom in modern times. He began to enact reforms to offset economic problems, budgetary deficit and unemployment. He also started to work carefully to defuse the biggest potential threat to al-Saud's legitimacy: educated middle-class Islamists, who for years, with the increased intensity, have loudly been denouncing corruption and demanding a change in the country. For that purpose, he released several radical Sunni fundamentalist prisoners, hoping to calm down existing tensions.

Despite these actions, in July 1999, a new 'Memorandum of Advice' was prepared and signed by a large group of more than a hundred lower-level *ulama*, including many members of faculties at Islamic colleges and universities, and sent to Sheikh Abd al-Aziz Ibn Baz, the head of the Council of Senior Scholars and Secretary General (with the ministerial rank) of the Administration of Religious Studies, Legal Opinion, Mission and Guidance.³⁷ The memorandum repeated many themes from the earlier petitions, such as the criticism of corruption, nepotism and favoritism, lack of respect of individual rights, the denial of freedom of expression (for Islamic preachers, teachers and activists) and close cooperation and dependence on Western powers. It requested independent judiciary system and establishment of a consultative council. At the same time the memorandum called for strict application of the Sharia, the abolition of all un-Islamic laws and revision of treaties with non-Muslim states and institutions. The signatories complained that the *ulama* were not being consulted by state authorities in crucial economic, political and military matters and demanded that more power be given to them. In general, the memorandum requested the creation of purely Islamic state.

The attacks on the New York World Trade Center and the Pentagon with hijacked planes on September 11, 2001, had a profound impact on Saudi political scene. Out of 19 hijackers, 15 were Saudis. Then, it occurred that majority of the al-Qaeda soldiers, arrested in Afghanistan and brought to Guantanamo base were Saudis. Osama bin Laden used to be a Saudi citizen and his organization was supported by contributions from Saudis. Thus, many people in the West started to believe that Saudis "waged war" against them, that they were "financing the spread of the idea that free societies must be overthrown and totalitarian Wahhabi Islam must be imposed by force".³⁸ "The country's rulers, its religious beliefs, social customs and educational curricula became targets of endless hostile commentary. The Kingdom came to be portrayed as a breeding ground for terrorism, an anachronistic, backward country that ... teaching its children to hate the West."³⁹ In such an atmosphere, in November 2003, members of the U.S. Congress introduced even

³⁷ J. Kostiner and J. Teitelbaum, "State-formation and the Saudi monarchy", in: J. Kostiner, *Middle East Monarchies...*, pp.142-143; G. Kramer, "Good counsel to the King"..., p. 264.

³⁸ M. Barone, "Our enemies the Saudis", *U.S. News and World Report*, March 6, 2002.

³⁹ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 8.

the draft of the Saudi Arabia Accountability Act, which would impose sanctions on the Kingdom unless the U.S. President certified that Riyadh continued to make maximum effort to fight terrorism. (The legislation eventually went on voting as an amendment to the foreign aid bill requesting to add Saudi Arabia to the list of countries which “has funded terrorists and fostered hatred of the West”, and was rejected, 231-191 as the State Department declared that Saudi Arabia has taken actions to disrupt domestic al-Qaeda cells and improved anti-terrorist cooperation with the U.S.) At the same time President Bush announced the new American policy towards the region, admitting that 60 years of supporting dictatorships in the region had not made Americans safe.⁴⁰ In the carefully chosen words he encouraged political reforms in the Kingdom, saying that “by giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership in the region”. In another speech he added, with an obvious reference to Saudi Arabia, that “suppressing dissent only increases radicalism”.⁴¹

Accusations of supporting terrorism as well as the U.S. pressure to reform their system infuriated many Saudis. Many accused the West, the U.S. in particular, of staging a propaganda war against them. As their anger could easily turn against Saudi authorities closely cooperating with the US government on various issues, Prince Abdullah met with the *ulama* and warned them against staging any campaign on the matter. At the same time, in the wake of a possible Western intervention in Iraq in 2003, the action aimed to replace Saddam Hussein’s regime with a democratic government, Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Abdullah called for reforms in the Arab states. He stated that “internal reform and enhanced political participation are essential steps for the building of Arab capabilities and for providing the conditions for a comprehensive awakening and development of Arab human resources”.⁴²

The reform-oriented groups in the Kingdom decided to use the situation to intensify the pressure for political, social and educational reforms. In 2003, they submitted several petitions to the King calling for change.

The first one, called “A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation”, was prepared in January, among others by Abdullah al-Hamed, an Islamist from Riyadh, Mohamed Said Tayyeb, a liberal lawyer from Jeddah and Jaafar al-Shayeb, a Shi’ite activist. It was signed by 104 academics, businessmen, religious scholars and professionals from various regions and representing different religious and political orientations.⁴³ Staying within the framework of *Sharia*, the signatories called for the convening of an “open national conference” to discuss existing problems, providing the Consultative Council with legislative and control powers and made it an elected body, as well as for an independent judiciary, freedom of expression and the establishment of civil society institutions. They also requested

⁴⁰ President George Bush’s speech to the National Endowment of Democracy, 6 November 2003.

⁴¹ President Bush’s remarks during the June 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul.

⁴² *Arab News*, January 16, 2003.

⁴³ R. Dekmejian, “The liberal impulse in Saudi Arabia”, *Middle East Journal*, no. 3, Summer 2003; J. A. Russel, “Political and economic transition on the Arabian Peninsula: Perils and Prospects”, *Strategic Insights*, May 2003.

fair distribution of wealth among different regions and introducing measures to fight corruption, bribery and the abuse of official powers. The petition, despite its non-confrontational tone and respectful language towards the monarchy, essentially suggested the establishment of institutions to curb the power of the ruling family and guarantee popular participation in decision-making, replacing a system with ruler's absolute power with the constitutional monarchy in which power is shared with elected representatives.⁴⁴

The end of April witnessed the second petition, prepared in turn by the Shi'ite community and signed by 450 men and women. It was entitled "Partners in One Nation" to reaffirm the Shi'ite loyalty to the state (often questioned by radical Sunni Islamists). It followed the spirit of the January petition but urged government particularly to end the discrimination of Shi'ites in employment and allow them to practice their religious rites.⁴⁵ Moreover, the petition appealed to put an end to "fanatical sectarian tendencies stimulating hatred", unlawful arrests, the deprivation of the right to travel, etc., as well as a public announcement by country's leaders to respect Shi'ite rights and equality with other citizens. (Shi'ites are often perceived by Wahhabi religious establishment as infidels and their veneration of saints and shrines, celebration of the prophet Mohammed's birthday and other rituals as sinful).

The Shi'ite petition should be understood in the context of sectarian tensions, which heightened in Saudi Arabia after the beginning of the Iraqi war. What has happened across the border has an impact on the situation in Saudi Arabia (as well as in other countries with major Shi'ite populations, i.e. Kuwait and Bahrain). Clashes between Shi'ites and U.S. troops in Iraq have inspired feelings of solidarity there, while the vision of a future Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad made some people anxious, as such a development could strengthen demands for far-reaching political reforms in Bahrain or in Shi'ite-dominated Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia. Just before the Iraqi war, on February 3, 2003, an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, subsequently translated into Arabic and reprinted in the region, suggested that the Shi'ite in Al-Hasa region would be willing to separating from the Kingdom, seeking to re-establish their state in that part of the Peninsula. That was accompanied by rumors that "liberating" the Eastern Province in such a way had in fact become official US policy.⁴⁶ To calm down tensions, Prince Abdullah met with the Shi'ite reform group and listened to their complaints, while the nation's most senior religious leader, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah al-Sheikh, declared that accusation of other Muslims, who may obey different doctrine, of being disbelievers is not permitted under Islam and such an approach "results in murdering innocent people, destroying facilities, disorder, and instability".⁴⁷

The lack of visible results of the January petition prompted new appeals. In September 2003, more than 300 Saudis, including at this time 50 women, Sunnis and Shi'ites from all parts of the Kingdom, signed a petition entitled "In Defense of

⁴⁴ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 14.

⁴⁵ T. Jones, "Social Contract for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, no. 228, Fall 2003.

⁴⁶ T. Jones, "Seeking a social contract for Saudi Arabia", *ibidem*.

⁴⁷ K. Murphy, "Saudi Shi'ites take hope from changes next door", *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2003.

the Nation". In it they basically repeated the demands from the previous petition but in the view of the emergence of terrorist activity in the Kingdom, openly blamed the existing political restrictions for its development. "Being late in adopting radical reforms and ignoring popular participation in decision-making have been the main reasons that helped the fact that our country reached this dangerous turn, and this is why we believe that denying the natural rights of the political, cultural and intellectual society to express its opinions has led to the dominance of a certain way of thinking that is unable to dialogue with others... which is what helped create the terrorist and judgmental mind that our country is still plagued with."⁴⁸ Moreover, the signatories of the petition criticized "unilateral and judgmental thinking, pretending to hold and monopolize the truth" and called for "nurturing a pluralistic atmosphere that paves the way...towards the acceptance of the different."

The Saudi government, to improve its image, organized in October, 2003, the international human rights conference, first of its kind in the Kingdom. During the conference, on a call from the dissident, London-based Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, hundred of Saudis, men and women, took on the streets of Riyadh in the first in decades large-scale protest in the country. From the authorities they demanded political, economic, and administrative reforms. Saudi police fired warning shots, used tear gas and arrested many demonstrators. Next week, only a heavy police presence thwarted further demonstrations in several cities. As the follow-up of the conference, the quasi-independent National Human Rights Organization was established in March 2004. It was composed of 41 male and female members, headed by Abdullah ibn Saleh Al-Obaid, former secretary-general of the Muslim World League and member of the Consultative Council. It is supposed to monitor the human rights situation in the Kingdom, including rights violation against women.⁴⁹

As many reformers who signed the January petition decided not to sign the September one as too liberal and anti-Islamic, another petition was prepared in December, this time again jointly by a diversified group of Islamists, liberals and Shi'ites. It was titled "An Appeal to the Leadership and the People: Constitutional Reform First". Calling for the implementation of the reforms outlined in the January petition, the signatories this time went further, demanding adoption of the constitution, which would construct "a modern Arab Islamic state".⁵⁰

In meantime Prince Abdullah called three "National Dialogue" sessions. They were of major importance. The first one, held in Riyadh in June 2003, gathered religious leaders from various Islamic currents and sects: *ulama* from the official religious establishment, popular *salafi* preachers⁵¹, Shi'ites and Sufis. The presence of the last two was of a particular note, as they are not considered brothers in faith by the dominant Wahhabis. The meeting was probably aimed at bringing

⁴⁸ www.arabrenewal.com. Translation by Gwenn Okhrulik and Yara Youssef.

⁴⁹ A. Gha four, "First independent Human Rights Organization established", *Arab News*, March 3, 2004.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Salafis* is the termed used commonly in Saudi Arabia for the orthodox Islamists, that have been termed "Wahhabis" in the West.

some Sunni-Shi'ite understanding, the issue of special significance in times of change in neighboring Iraq, where Shi'ites were growing in power.⁵²

The second session took place in Mecca in December 2003. Entitled "Extremism and Moderation, a Comprehensive View", it gathered 60 intellectuals, clerics and businesspeople, including 10 women (seated in a different room). Problems with the rise of Islamic militancy were openly discussed at the meeting as well as various political, social and educational issues. The meeting ended in the formulation of 18 recommendations which were later formally presented to Prince Abdullah. They included holding elections for the Consultative Council and local consultative councils, encouraging establishment of trade unions, voluntary associations and other civil society institutions, separating the legislative, executive and judiciary powers, developing new school curricula promoting spirit of tolerance, dialogue and moderation as well as broadening freedom of expression.⁵³

The third "National Dialogue" session was held in Medina in June 2004 and was devoted to "Rights and Duties of Women". Although every other of the 70 participants was a woman, the meeting was dominated by conservative men. In effect, controversial topics, like lifting the ban on women drivers, or allowing them to travel without a male guardian, were avoided. This was also why, a delegation of women went separately to see Prince Abdullah and submitted to him an alternative set of specific recommendations, which he promised to consider.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that a few days before the session, a group of nearly 130 religious scholars issued a joint statement asserting that total equality between men and women would contravene Islam. The statement also criticized several Saudi newspapers for being "proponents of Westernization" in relation to women.⁵⁵

Although in Saudi Arabia's political and cultural environment organizing such sessions was a definitive opening on behalf of the authorities to a dialogue with the opposition, their impact should not be overestimated. They were government-sponsored and controlled events, and recommendations adopted by the participants are unlikely to be implemented soon, if at all. Some even believe that the sessions "were essentially gimmicks meant to co-opt critics and project a more acceptable face of the regime to both domestic and international audiences".⁵⁶ In February 2004, 880 participants in the "National Dialogue" meetings along with the petition-writers, frustrated with lack of any signs of reforms, sent Prince Abdullah a letter urging him to announce a timetable for the implementation of the recommendations adopted at the second session.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, organizing the "National Dialogue" sessions was not the only reaction from the authorities to petitions. In general, the reaction was mixed.

On the one hand, the government, allowed Saudi dissidents to speak more openly in public 'to let off the steam', and let newspapers publish articles criticiz-

⁵² "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 16.

⁵³ *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, January 4, 2004.

⁵⁴ *Al Hayat*, June 15 and 18, 2004.

⁵⁵ *Al Quds Arabi*, June 9, 2004.

⁵⁶ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 18.

⁵⁷ www.arabrenewal.com.

ing government (though no criticism of the royal family or publication of the texts of petitions was allowed). One of the prominent Islamist dissidents, Ahmad al-Tuwejjeri, received an appointment to the Consultative Council. Many others have been rewarded with audiences with members of the royal family to air their gripes. Then, what was seen as a remarkable gesture, the Crown Prince Abdullah met with a whole group of signatories of the January petition to discuss their demands and later included some of them in the government-sponsored "National Dialogue" debates. Moreover, the government took a decision to organize elections, choosing the least important and risky, namely, elections to municipal councils. The high-ranking officials for the first time adopted the expression "expanding political participation". Prince Abdullah stated in his address to the Consultative Council that "municipal elections will be the beginning of the Saudi citizens' participation in the political system", while the Foreign Minister, prince Saud Al-Faisal, similarly remarked that Saudi Arabia "has reached a stage in our development that requires expanding political participations". In turn, Prince Turki al-Faisal said that "reforming the Kingdom is not a choice, it is a necessity".⁵⁸ Such vocabulary used to be taboo among the ruling family.⁵⁹

In this liberalized mode, the issue of elections became widely discussed throughout the Kingdom. As Islamist reformer, Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim stated: "It is hard to overestimate the importance of this step in a society where non-interference in politics is considered the condition of good citizenship."⁶⁰ Prince Sultan bin Abdel Aziz, the minister of defense and a key figure in a ruling family told the Consultative Council, that the country leadership agrees with demands that this body should be developed and given further powers, to 'monitor' and 'supervise' the government in particular. Later on, however, Prince Sultan announced that the country was not ready for elections yet.⁶¹ Most of Saudi officials, have continued to be afraid of such a move. They believe that this would pose too great a risk to stability of the country and strengthen the hand of radical Islamists. According to some of them "because conformity to strict religious dogma remains the principal criterion for judging matters public and private ... political debates could potentially turn into religious clashes", while "the culture of democracy accepts the pluralism of opinions and relativity in all things. How can you reconcile relativity with a society that is governed by religion?" and "democracy right now will produce something very similar to the Taliban".⁶²

With such thoughts in mind, the government decided to go ahead only with elections to municipal councils (following a well tested pattern in neighboring Bahrain and Qatar). In October 2003 it was announced that they will be held within the next twelve months. Eventually, in August 2004, it was decided that, first, only half of the seats will be filled in this way (the remaining are expected to be made of

⁵⁸ T. Jones, "Social contract for Saudi Arabia"...

⁵⁹ K. Al-Dakhil, "2003: Saudi Arabia's Year of Reform", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 16, 2004.

⁶⁰ "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 19.

⁶¹ Reuters, March 22, 2004.

⁶² As reported in: "Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?"..., p. 19 and 20.

nominated incumbents with the experience to assist the new members), second, that elections in 178 municipalities will be held in three phases: in mid-November, after Ramadan, in Riyadh, and before and after *hajj* in other parts of the country, ending in January 2005. That approach was for the authorities to take a step and evaluate the impact of elections before proceeding to the next phase. It can be expected that once this is seen to work, the next elections will be for the whole municipal councils, then for regional councils, and eventually for the Consultative Council.

In addition to that, the royal decree of November 29, 2003, enhanced also the Consultative Council rights to act as a partly legislative as opposed to purely advisory body. In particular, individual members were granted authority to propose new legislation and to have more power in disputes with the cabinet. At the same time, it was decided to begin, for the first time, televised coverage of the weekly sessions of the Consultative Council. That became an interesting development, as Saudis have a traditional aversion to public debate, preferring instead deciding matters behind the closed doors.

Some reforms were introduced also to the judiciary. A new bill regulating the rights of defendants and suspects before courts and police came into effect, in particular allowing lawyers to present arguments in criminal courts. In February 2004, the international organization – Human Rights Watch, was granted access to the Saudi judicial system, including its prisons.

Steps were also taken to change the situation of women. In the year 2000, Saudi Arabia finally ratified the UN convention on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Thanks to the efforts of Prince Abdullah, women were for the first time allowed to present their grievances to the Consultative Council, in particular complaints about their marital status and dowries. A female member of the royal family was appointed Undersecretary at the Ministry of Education – the highest position ever held by a Saudi woman. The government began issuing identity cards to women thus allowing them to be listed as citizens rather than dependents on husband's or father's cards. Responding to long-time popular pressure for reform of the neglected female education, the control of the General Presidency for Girl's Education, run by the religious establishment before, was transferred to the government's Ministry of Education, which added prestige and financial capacities to the education of girls. Finally, in May 2003, the Council of Ministers issued a decree allowing women to obtain commercial licenses in their own names, without the need for a male guardian permission. At the same time, the document appealed to government departments and Chamber of Commerce to create more jobs for women. That was especially important as, according to official figures, only about 5 per cent of Saudi working age women were employed.

On the other hand, conservative forces continue to oppose any changes in the status of women. For example, Saleh bin Humaid, speaker of the Shura Council, stated that talk about women members of the Consultative Council "was premature".⁶³

⁶³ R. Muhammed Salih, "No role for women in Saudi council", *Aljazeera*, October 27, 2003.

On January 17, 2004, there was an interesting incident at the Jeddah Economic Forum, attended by such personalities as Bill Clinton. The keynote address was given by Lubna Olayan, a leading Saudi business woman, connected to the ruling family. She was introduced by Prince Mohammed Al Faisal, the grandson of King Faisal. Women attending the Forum were separated from their male colleagues by a partition only (i.e. not segregated into a separate room). Pictures of Olayan's unveiled face appeared next day in some Saudi newspapers, making her the first Saudi woman appearing in such a way in the media.⁶⁴ In reaction to that incident, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom leading religious official appointed by the government, strongly condemned such a behavior. Yet at the same time, *Akbaria*, an all-news Saudi TV channel began featuring three non-*muhajaba* women anchors, and *Okaz*, a popular Saudi daily ran a photo of them. Another cultural border was crossed.

All of these, in the Saudi context, were significant moves. But altogether the issue is so emotional and symbolic, and always ready to mobilize wide opposition that the government cannot go much further with granting women more rights.⁶⁵

The Saudi press, to a great extent privately owned, continues to play an increasingly important role in the political discourse. "While refraining from either publishing or discussing any of the reform petitions, they opened their columns to unprecedented criticism of [...] such matters as education (accused of inadequacy as well as of inculcating extremism), poverty, unemployment, drug use, the mistreatment of foreign workers and more generally problems confronting the younger generations. Some opinion writers have called into question elements of the Wahhabi discourse, suggesting a link between certain attitudes promoted by the religious establishment and the rise of violent extremism."⁶⁶ A good example of the openness of newspapers is a commentary written on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks by Rasheed Abu-Alsamh in the *Arab News*:

First, we must stop denying that any of the hijackers were Saudis or even Arab. We must also stop saying that the September 11 attacks were a CIA-Zionist plot to make the Arabs and Islam look bad. That is utter nonsense. We must be mature and responsible enough to admit that these sick minds that hatched and perpetrated these dastardly attacks, were, sadly, a product of a twisted viewpoint of our society and our religion ... We must stop the hatred being taught to our children in schools.

Since the suicide bombings of Western residential compound in Riyadh on May 12, 2003, in which 35 people died, newspapers have run a series of unusually bold editorials on the problems of Saudi society.⁶⁷ The extraordinary article was published by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador to Washington, in *Al-*

⁶⁴ Earlier only pictures of non-Saudi women could appear in the media.

⁶⁵ F. G. Gause III, "Saudi Arabia at a crossroads? Notes from a recent visit", *Strategic Insights*, vol. 3, February 2004, p. 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ N. Blanford, "Reformist impulse in Saudi Arabia suffers setback", *Christian Science Monitor*, June 5, 2003.

Watan, on June 1, 2004. The Prince recognized the Saudi effort against terrorism as 'feeble', and went on saying that terrorism "has nothing to do with America or Israel or the Christians or Jews... So let us stop these meaningless justifications for what those criminals are doing and let stop blaming others while the problem comes from within us." Elsewhere in the article he noted that the Kingdom's religious scholars "have to declare *jihad* against those deviants and to fully support it, as those who keep silent about the truth are mute devils." The Saudi-owned, but London-based, *Asharq al-Awsat* followed the line of that argument. Turki al-Hamad wrote in it: "the official clergy in Saudi Arabia denounce violence, but theoretical base of Wahhabism is a problem. It is not enhancing or encouraging violence directly, but if you analyze the creed itself, you will reach these results."⁶⁸

But it is difficult to find much support for such ideas in the Kingdom. The reality has been different. "The attempt to expose and uproot the ideological and theocratic influences used to justify terrorist attacks were suppressed by the religious establishment, [the same] which helped the Saud family consolidate its rule when the Kingdom was founded more than 70 years ago".⁶⁹ The religious establishment and those members of the ruling elite who follow their guidance promote a different viewpoint. According to them, "the perpetrators of these heinous crimes are influenced by ideologies alien to our country and to the nature of our people, who throughout the ages advocated tolerance and coherence." Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, governor of the Eastern Province and the son of King Fahd, was quoted as saying after the Khobar attacks: "Those militants are the outcome of Guantanamo, Abu Gharib, Sharon and the American policy of the region; they are angry against anything foreign and want to retaliate against anything foreign". For Muh-sen Awaji, a prominent Islamist lawyer, "it was not Wahhabism which produced them, they were the other circumstances in the region."⁷⁰ Such views are prevailing among the Saudis. Most of them greatly resent the implication that their religion has any connection to terrorism.

Under such circumstances, broadening the freedom of the press was, of course, possible only because its criticism of certain matters, especially extremism, coincided with the official viewpoints. With the un-written boundaries violated, journalists continued to pay a heavy price. For example, a well-known editor of *Al-Watan* was dismissed in May 2003 after the newspaper aroused the religious establishment by publishing a series of articles critical of the clerics.

Altogether, the press scored certain victories in recent years. In March 2002, press criticism of behavior of the head of religious institutions in charge of girls' education forced him to resign, the first such case in the history of the Kingdom, after the scandal surrounding the death of 15 schoolgirls in a fire in Mecca. In 2004, journalists obtained important concession from the government, which approved the establishment of a long-sought Saudi Journalists' Association, an organization aimed to protect the rights of reporters.

⁶⁸ "The Saudis. Whose side are they on in the war on terror", *Time*, September 15, 2003.

⁶⁹ N. MacFarquhar, "The Saudis fight terror, but not those who wage it", *New York Times*, June 6, 2004.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

All the events mentioned above are political in nature and could happen only because of the demands of the opposition and willingness of the authorities to introduce certain changes. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the government, the ruling family, or at least a large part of it, was content with these happenings. They totally opposed such proposals as independence of the judiciary, redistribution of wealth or transparency of public finances, as reforms in these areas would seriously jeopardize their socio-economic position in the country.⁷¹ Prince Nayef, the Minister of Interior, when asked about the January petition remarked: “no to change, yes to development”.⁷² “Change means changing something that already exists. Whatever exists in the Kingdom is already well-established; however, there is a scope for development – development that does not clash with the principles of the nation.” With such opinion common in the government, it became obvious that at certain moment the authorities must restrict actions of the reformers. It happened in December 2003, when Prince Nayef summoned a group of opposition figures and threatened them with arrest if they continued their activities.⁷³ A few weeks later, Crown Prince Abdullah, usually perceived as more open and pragmatic person in the ruling family than the others, also warned the reformers: “...the state will not allow anybody to destroy national unity or disturb the peace of its people under the pretext of reforms ... We will not leave the security of the nation and the future of its people to the mercy of opportunists, who start with provocation and end with arbitrary demands.”⁷⁴ Finally, in March 2004, the authorities arrested several pro-reform activists, including al-Hamed and Tayyeb, and asked them to sign pledges that they would cease their activism.

The government does not have much flexibility in terms of reforms, even if one assume that it is interested in them at all. As it is engaged in a fight against extremists who accuse it of deviation from the path of Islam, the regime cannot afford to jeopardize his relations with religious forces that also oppose violence, justify its legitimacy and are supported by the majority of conservative Saudi society. And these forces are strongly against certain reforms, a dialogue with various groups and elections in particular. The domestic pro-reform movement and external pressures seem not to be strong enough to enforce far-reaching changes, especially in times of terrorist attacks in the Kingdom. The age of the rulers and problems with succession additionally limit the potential for change. Therefore, what can be expected consists only of cautious steps toward reforms, while occasionally cracking down on reformers. The only phenomenon which can speed up the process is the Saudi changing society. In probably the first, relatively independent opinion pool on the matter conducted in the latter half of 2003, 85 per cent of re-

⁷¹ J. A. Russel, “In defense of the Nation”....

⁷² T. Jones, “Social contract for Saudi Arabia”...

⁷³ *Financial Times*, January 17, 2004.

⁷⁴ *Arab News*, January 15, 2004. There is quite a disagreement among Saudi experts about divisions in the royal family into ‘pro-reformers’ and ‘conservationists’. See J. A. Russel, “In Defense of the Nation”: Terror and reform in Saudi Arabia”, *Strategic Insights*, October 2003; and M. Scott Doran, “The Saudi paradox”, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2004.

spondents thought that political reform would be beneficial for the country, 90 per cent wanted to grant more rights to women, and fewer than 59 per cent supported the official clergy.⁷⁵ Unemployment was the most pressing concern for respondents (80 per cent), while political reforms, corruption, education, or religious extremism did not exceed 10 per cent. Somewhat contradictory, only 12 per cent of respondents had a positive view of liberal reformers, probably because they associated them only with the writing of inefficient petitions.

It is also worthwhile to point out that, at least to some extent, the issue of reforms in Saudi Arabia is not so much between those who want them and those who do not. A growing number of people, including some members of the ruling family and the religious establishment, probably favors changes in the face of rapid modernization of the country and its population growth. The problem hinges on the kind of reforms that different groups want. Here, the key issue (and disagreement) are the relations between reforms and secular modernity. A large part of the Saudi religious establishment, in the tradition of the conservative reformist, Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, believes that modernization comes only at the cost of secularization and for that reason must be rejected. Some reformers believe however, that it is possible to have modernization without secularization and therefore call for enhancing political participation, greater transparency, rights for women, etc., at the same time claiming that it can be done within the framework of their conservative, Islamic values. Yet, as nobody talks about secularization of the public life, Western type of political reforms are very unlikely. Pessimists go even further. "No matter what happens in Saudi Arabia, whether the insurgents actually unseat the ruling family, or the Saudis manage to accommodate the militants, there will be no 'liberal reform' in the Kingdom for a long time", wrote Lee Smith.⁷⁶ "In all likelihood, that country is going to become even more conservative."

It is difficult for the royal family to move against the Islamists. After the Islamic militants took over the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 and held hundreds of pilgrims hostage, the authorities, to avoid similar occurrences in future, decided to accommodate the Islamists. "The royal family handed over education, the courts and cultural affairs to the imams. Many of the rigid features of modern Saudi life: no women on television, no music in any media, an overdose of religion in schools, stores closed during prayer times, increased powers for the religious police were passed in the early 1980s."⁷⁷ Now the authorities are afraid that if they take on the religious establishment, "the imams will stop preaching about infidels and start talking about royal family decadence".

The radical Islamists are generally against reforms. They are afraid that reforms may de-Islamize the Kingdom. A good example of that attitude was a statement released by 156 Salafi scholars and judges in December 2003, protesting the educational reform, meaning mostly a deletion of material offensive to Christian and Jews.

⁷⁵ The survey was conducted by the independent Saudi National Security Assessment Projects. See: N. Obaid, "What the Saudi public really thinks?", *Daily Star*, June 23, 2004.

⁷⁶ L. Smith, "The Saudi civil war. Who is fighting? Who will win?", *Slate*, June 18, 2004.

⁷⁷ F. Zakaria, "The Saudi trap", *Newsweek*, June 28, 2004.

They accused the government of capitulating to American pressure on the matter and called teachers and parents to oppose the new curriculum.

On the other hand, there is an agreement between moderate Islamists and secular modernists that what Saudi Arabia needs are some political, economic and social reforms. According to these factions, these could “head off the collision between the two extremes – Bin Laden’s Islam and George Bush’s America – that could ultimately destroy it”.⁷⁸ The trouble is that the terrorist attacks in the Kingdom make significant reforms unlikely, because the terrified regime is afraid to make any moves which potentially could destabilize the situation even further. On the other hand, terror make reforms more necessary, because it has been causing exodus of the now dramatically targeted foreign nationals, which results in the drying up of foreign investment, and in consequence worsening of the socio-economic situation, which in turn helps to breed the militants.

What also weakens the chances for substantial reforms is that those who stand for them are mostly intellectuals and academics – not a strong political force in the Saudi society. The business community at large is not generally against reforms, which, if implemented, can give it a greater say in the economy of the liberalized country. At the same time, however, businessmen are often unwilling to get actively involved in the reform movement because of their dependence of the government and risk of losing the already possessed privileges.

Commenting on the Saudi reform movement, Khalid Al-Dakhil stressed that unlike the opposition of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the ‘new liberals’ declare that the Saudi monarchy is legitimate and reflective of the social, religious and political reality and the history of the Saudi society.⁷⁹ Therefore, they provide an important framework for maintaining national unity. At the same time, reformers criticized government for ignoring the fact that social reality is not constant, that the country and its people transformed dramatically over the decades and these changes need to be reflected in the political and legal institutions of the state and in the domestic and foreign policies. According to these liberal reformers, when the government responds to their demands at all, it does so maintaining old values and traditional institutions, to please the most conservative *ulama* and preachers. “In this sense, the threat to the Saudi state comes not only from the spread of religious radicalism, but also from the government’s response to this radicalism.”

To conclude, it is worth noticing that a large share of analysts believe that Saudi Arabia cannot afford a lengthy debate on its reforms. The rapid pace of globalization risks leaving the Kingdom behind the rest of the world unless it accelerates the pace of change.⁸⁰ Saudi Arabian author Turki al-Hamad remarked that “ten, twenty years ago, we had the luxury of time. We could choose the kind of reform pace we wanted. Now, we either reform quickly or collapse.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ “Kingdom threatened by collision of worlds”, *The Guardian*, May 14, 2003.

⁷⁹ K. Al-Dakhil, “Saudi Arabia’s reform movement: a historical glimpse”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2003.

⁸⁰ N. Blanford, “Reformist impulse in Saudi Arabia suffers setback”...

⁸¹ Associated Press, February 9, 2003.

Kuwait

Kuwait has been ruled by the al-Sabah family since 1756. When the country gained full independence in 1961, the constitution confirmed this situation, giving the Emir broad executive powers. In particular, it is he who appoints the prime minister and the cabinet. At the same time, the constitution established a partially elected parliament with some legislative powers; for several decades it had been the only national assembly in the GCC states of that kind.⁸² The parliament has never been a rubber-stamp and always discussed openly the vital Kuwaiti issues. Its criticism of the government, or from the other perspective, its activities perceived as threatening the political stability of the country, caused the Emir to dissolve it in 1976 (until the reestablishment in 1981) and again in 1986. When Saddam Hussein attacked Kuwait, the parliament was still disbanded. After the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi forces, the Emir, Sheikh Jabir al Ahmad al-Sabah was not eager to keep his earlier-made promises of prompt restoring the assembly. Only after the mobilization of all Kuwaiti political factions, culminating in the presentation of a petition in the spring of 1991, did the emir agree to hold parliamentary elections in October 1992.

The election campaign was very lively.⁸³ Individual candidates in their *di-waniyyas* as well as various voluntary and professional associations were effective in articulating critical views, helping to increase political awareness and activities of different groups of society. In effect, the election brought to the parliament a majority of opposition and independent deputies, critical of the existing political arrangements in the country.

Right after the election the opposition called for the separation of the previously combined offices of prime minister and crown prince, as traditionally in Kuwait, the crown prince (as well as the whole al-Sabah family) were not subject to any criticism and control. Only when in a conciliatory move, the Emir appointed several members of parliament (who retained some credibility due to the fact that they had been popularly elected) as ministers for the first time, the opposition eventually gave up and accepted the status quo. Nevertheless, parliamentary committees initiated a series of investigations including inquires into the events leading to the Iraqi invasion, government responsibility for the Kuwaiti defeat, alleged corruption and mismanagement in the Kuwait Investment Office (which manages the country's overseas capital), and the cost-effectiveness of arms-deals with Western powers. These were very sensitive issues whose investigation led to confrontation with top government officials, including members of the ruling family. This was the first time in the history of the GCC countries that such people were pub-

⁸² J. Crystal and A. al-Shayehji, 'The pro-democratic agenda in Kuwait: Structures and context', in: R. Brynen, B. Korany, P. Noble, *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, Boulder and London 1995, vol. 1, pp. 101-125.

⁸³ S. Ghabra, 'Kuwait: Elections and issues of democratization in a Middle Eastern state', *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies* 1993, no. 1.

licly questioned, strongly criticized and forced to take responsibility for their actions. The whole term of parliament was alive with heated debates over the issue of power and wealth sharing, corruption and waste in defense expenditure, the way the privatization was conducted and other important issues. The parliament also decided to broaden the base of its electorate, extending the right to vote to the large number of sons of naturalized Kuwaiti citizens (naturalized men are eligible to vote only if they have held Kuwaiti citizenship for at least 20 years).

After tough experiences with dealings with the opposition, the government made serious efforts to influence the results of next elections, and the parliament chosen in October 1996 was not as confrontational as the previous one had been. Nevertheless, tensions between Islamist groups and the government did not subside. First, in 1998, the parliament blocked the government deal with the US to buy the so-called Paladin artillery due to irregularities in the procurement process. Secondly, in 1999, the Islamists attempted to bring down Sheikh Saud Nasser al Sabah, the Minister of Information. His ministry had permitted around 160 books critical of Islamic orthodoxy to be displayed in the international book fair in Kuwait. The minister had to resign. The government perceived the action of the opposition as a breach of the unwritten agreement that Islamists would never attack members of the ruling family. The Crown Prince and Prime Minister, Sheikh Saad al Abdallah al-Sabah warned that criticizing the ruling family jeopardize the security of the country, and that this security would be always put "over and above democracy".⁸⁴ The Islamists, however, continued to criticize the government. In turn, they attacked the Minister of Religious Affairs for publishing a version of the Koran with typographical errors. Tensions increased. When the whole cabinet threatened to resign, the Emir dissolved parliament and called for new elections.

The election campaign was again characterized by intense activity on the part of various political groupings.⁸⁵ During traditional political meetings in *diwaniyyas*, candidates openly charged the government with conspiracy, interference in the elections, incompetence, corruption, etc. Women's political rights became a central issue in the campaign as the Emir, in a surprising move, announced his intention to award women the right to participate in future elections. Islamic groups opposed the decision and the Emir's decree was eventually defeated in the all-male parliament. Another highly debated issue was the suspended right to hold tribal primaries, whose results had significantly affected previous general elections.

Altogether, 288 candidates competed for the 50 parliamentary seats during the elections of July 3, 1999. Only 113,000 men out of a total Kuwaiti population of 793,000 cast their ballots. Six groupings played a crucial role in the elections campaign and won seats in the parliament: the Islamic Constitutional Movement (closely connected to the Muslim Brotherhood), the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum (the alliance of liberals, Arab nationalists, leftists, and independents), the Islamic Popular Bloc (an orthodox Salafi group demanding strict implementation of the

⁸⁴ Y. Al-aonueh, "Islamists Movements", *Arabies Trends*, June 1998, pp. 15-16.

⁸⁵ G. Alnajjar, "The Challenges Facing Kuwaiti Democracy", *Middle East Journal* 2000, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 242-258.

Islamic law), the Salafi Movement (a splinter of the Popular Bloc), the National Islamic Alliance (a Shi'ite Islamist group) and the National Democratic Bloc (a liberal group connected with the academic and business communities). In the elections the Islamists won 18 seats altogether: six went to Shi'ite candidates and remaining 12 to Sunnis. The main losers were the pro-government candidates, with 11 major incumbents losing what earlier had been considered secured seats.

The winning Islamists, in a short period of time, undertook a number of actions in the new parliament. In effect an entirely new Sharia-inspired version of the penal code was adopted together with a ban on festivals and concerts "that are against tradition and morality". Later the Islamists also managed to force the government to re-introduce gender segregation at the Kuwaiti university. In general, Islamists have wanted to widen the role of the Islamic law. They would like to amend the constitution, changing the clause that Sharia is "a main source of legislation" for "the source of the legislation". They also requested the right that no law may be promulgated unless it has been passed by the National Assembly.⁸⁶ Finally, they would like to get Kuwait's political parties licensed and formally written into the country's legal system.

In 2002 a new crisis between parliament and the government occurred when the Finance Minister, Youssef al-Ibrahim was accused of abuse of power and misappropriation of public funds. In particular, Islamist and independent deputies wanted him to acknowledge officially that senior ruling family members authorized the expenditure of billions of dollars without the supervision of the Audit Bureau, the legislature watchdog for monitoring state finances. The interpellation proceeded to a vote of confidence. But when Sheikh Sabah, the Acting Prime Minister, threatened that the whole cabinet would resign if the minister lost the vote, the majority of deputies decided not to support the no-confidence motion. Another crisis was avoided.

The following parliamentary elections were held on July 5, 2004. They were affected by the political situations in the region.⁸⁷ Removal of Saddam Hussein influenced the campaign as government could not use the Iraqi threat any more to secure support for its candidates. In times of change in the Gulf, liberals pushing for modernization of the country expected to obtain more seats in the assembly. On the other hand, Shi'ites also hoped to do better thanks to internal mobilization of the group, caused by developments in Iraq, with the Shi'ite majority gaining power, after years of discrimination under the Ba'ath party regime. Tensions between the US and Iran, in the period when Kuwait was improving its relations with the Islamic Republic, were also expected to influence the election results. Those expectations proved wrong. First of all, liberals suffered a stunning setback. Both members of the Democratic Platform present in the previous assembly, including prominent opposition leader Abdallah al-Nibari, lost their seats. Independent liberals went down from six seats to four. "Shock and horror. Parlia-

⁸⁶ W. Kristianasen, "'We don't want to box Islam in'. Kuwait's Islamists, officially unofficial", *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2002.

⁸⁷ A. Ali Hassan, "First parliamentary elections in post-Saddam Kuwait", *Al-Hayat*, June 30, 2003.

ment topples liberals” was the headline in the daily *Al Anbaa*. The Islamist traditionalists, both Sunni and Shi’ite, became the election winners, taking 21 of the 50 seats. At the same time, the members of parliament affiliated with existing political groupings went down from 32 to 25, probably due to government’s efforts to weaken all the unofficial political parties. The so-called “service” candidates, who emphasized their constituent services rather than political or ideological platforms, did also well in a number of districts. Interestingly, two of three Islamist political groupings also lost seats. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (in the past connected with Muslim Brotherhood) went from five to two seats, while the National Islamic Alliance (Shi’ite) went from three seats to one. In turn, the *salafi* groupings gained seats, with the Salafi Movement rising from a single seat to three. Independent Sunni Islamists went up from five seats during the previous term to six and independent Shi’ite Islamists – from two to three. The defeat of liberals was probably much influenced by the American politics in the Middle East. President Bush’s initiative to bring democracy to the region while occupying Iraq “sends many native liberals and democrats under their beds”, worrying of being labeled as American puppets.⁸⁸ Elections were not completely clean: there were accusations of increased vote buying, switching districts and registering in different areas.⁸⁹

The election polarized the Kuwaiti political scene into “the triumvirate of the incumbent regime, the tribal center, and opposition Islamists”.⁹⁰ Most other political groupings in between were discredited. Many tribal voters, who in the past used to support government policies, moved in the other direction to support the opposition. The issue of extending vote to women became again an important issue in the campaign, especially among liberals. Some women voted in a mock election as a demonstration of their desire to obtain more political rights in the country.

Right after the elections, Kuwait’s Emir, Sheikh Jaber, appointed Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al Sabah the prime minister. For the first time in the history of Kuwait, the post of the prime minister was separated from the post of the Crown Prince, officially as a response to the public demand, in reality maybe only due to the poor health of Crown Prince. The decision placed the prime minister before legal inquires in the parliament, which had been impossible in the past as the Kuwaiti constitution grants full immunity to the ruler and the crown prince. Moreover, despite expectations, the new cabinet was not constructed as a counter-balance to Islamist dominated parliament and a pro-reform body. “Separation between the posts of crown prince and prime minister did not bring any positive changes”, Musallam al Barrak declared in the parliament.⁹¹ “The government does not really want reforms”, wrote former Kuwaiti Minister of Information, Saad al Ajmi.⁹²

The first major clash between new parliament and the government occurred in March 2004. After inquiry, many deputies tried to force the resignation of the Minister of Finance, Mahmoud Al Nouri over allegations of mismanagement and

⁸⁸ R. G. Khuri, “Kuwait’s election and the freezing of Arab politics”, *Daily Star*, July 10, 2003.

⁸⁹ S. Al Ajmi, “Gerrymandering and reform in Kuwait”, *Gulf News*, June 25, 2004.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁹¹ “Kuwait MPs lament corruption, nepotism in government sector”, *Gulf News*, February 12, 2004.

⁹² S. Al Ajmi, “Gerrymandering”...

squandering public money. Eventually, the minister won the non-confidence vote (by four votes); nevertheless the opposition accused the government of applying pressure on numerous deputies to achieve that goal.

In May 2004, the government introduced a bill allowing women to vote and to stand for election. The parliament, however, has remained divided on the issue of women's suffrage and has taken no action on the bill yet. At the same time, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, responding to pressure from Islamist parliamentarians, announced *fatwa* "forbidding women singing to men, reveal part of their body and using vulgar words and dancing".⁹³ To attend or watch such concerts and provide any assistance or investment in them were also forbidden. Several Islamist deputies have also been trying to ban music education from schools as anti-Islamic activity.

Tensions between government and the opposition occurred again in June 2004, when voting on a long debated bill on reducing the number of electoral districts (to eliminate vote-buying, a strategy that is easy in small districts) was postponed until the fall. Liberal deputies accused government and many of their colleagues in the assembly of trying to maintain the undemocratic status quo.⁹⁴ However, if this bill is passed, the government will probably push harder for women's suffrage. The government anticipates that on the whole, women will constitute a moderate, pro-government force, which can mitigate the destabilizing effects that redistricting would have on Kuwait's complex political scene.⁹⁵

One of the important factors in the politics of the Kuwaiti opposition, composed mostly of well-educated, wealthy businessmen, has been that it does not aim at overthrowing the al-Sabah rule. The opposition has wanted a stronger say in the decision making process, constitutional guarantees for the existence of political opposition and free expression, a merit-based government willing to share some power with them, and more opportunities for their private businesses, but not the change of the existing regime.⁹⁶

Democracy in Kuwait is not limited to the holding of elections and the functioning of the parliament. While it is true that the parliament is a foundation of Kuwaiti democracy, the press, being mostly privately owned newspapers, has also played an important role in safeguarding the democratic principles in the country. Furthermore, many public associations and organizations, despite expanded government control, have been able to undertake certain political activities and hold free elections for officers, educating a broad range of people on the basics of democratic procedure. On the other hand, journalists highly criticize the existing press and publications laws enacted in 1961. According to Saoud Alanezi, editor of the left-wing *Al Talee'ah* weekly: "you could get life imprisonment for something

⁹³ BBC News, May 24, 2004.

⁹⁴ S. Al Ajmi, "Gerrymandering"...

⁹⁵ H. Abdulrahman Al Mughni, "The politics of women's suffrage in Kuwait", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 19, 2004.

⁹⁶ U. Rabi, 'The Kuwaiti royal family'..., pp. 159-160.

you write, even execution".⁹⁷ The amendments to these laws have been debated since 1999, but have not been approved yet. Moreover, political formation has been almost a taboo subject in Kuwait. The justifications put forward for not permitting establishment of formal political parties have been very feeble. "It is maintained in official circles that political parties would upset the delicate social balance which includes local nationals with more rights than others, tribal powers, stateless Arabs and influential trading families." But Ahmed Al Khateeb, a former deputy speaker of the parliament, called such justification "phony".⁹⁸

The mood at the beginning of the 21st century in Kuwait, in contrast to its Bahraini and Qatari neighbors, is not very optimistic. Many Kuwaitis feel that their country is stagnating, that authorities and parliamentarians are caught up in endless squabbles over minor issues, instead of transforming the country, which many young, innovative rulers of the neighboring GCC states did already.⁹⁹ There are voices questioning any possibility of further democratization of the state. Ghanim Alnajjar believes, that "structural and political weaknesses in the Kuwaiti political system continue to hinder the spread of democracy, and may yet cause its failure, which might result in a major future political crisis".¹⁰⁰ According to many, the reasons for limited progress toward the more participatory government is the ruling family's tacit alliance with Islamic fundamentalists (for example, to please them the government in recent years established a committee on Islamization of the law, refused to register civil society institutions except Islamic charities and introduced more religious instruction into the schools curricula).¹⁰¹ "We have lost the 12 years since the liberation because of the resistance of the political Islamic movement" said Saud Nasir Sabah, oil minister and former ambassador to the United States.¹⁰² "There is not a democratic system in Kuwait, there is not democracy here", said Mohammed Qadiri, a former diplomat, who quit the foreign service over the dissolution of parliament in 1986. "We are marginally better than our neighbors, but this is not democracy."¹⁰³ In turn, Ahmad al Khateeb said: "Many Kuwaitis believe there is democracy in our country but the whole world believes the opposite". As women, soldiers and youth between 18 and 21 cannot participate in election by law, only about 15% of the Kuwaitis actually vote. "That turned democracy into a democracy of a minority".¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Saad Al Ajmi stated in June 2004, that "the time has come for Kuwaitis to admit that their country is not a democracy."¹⁰⁵

Widespread corruption ranks highly among other issues criticized by re-

⁹⁷ T. Goudsouzian, "Amend press law, says journalists", *Gulf News*, April 23, 2004.

⁹⁸ B. Za'za, "Former deputy speaker says democracy in Kuwait is a sham", *Gulf News*, January 23, 2004.

⁹⁹ N. MacFarquhar, "Infirmary of its senior sheiks leaves Kuwait stagnating", *The New York Times*, June 13, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ G. Alnajjar, "The Challenges facing Kuwaiti democracy"..., p. 258.

¹⁰¹ S. B. Glaser, "Democracy in Kuwait is promise unfulfilled", *Washington Post Foreign Service*, February 27, 2003.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ M. al Rumaihi, "Democracy in Kuwait", *Al-Hayat*, July 23, 2003.

¹⁰⁵ S. Al Ajmi, "Gerrymandering"...

formist deputies. "Elections are precooked as some parliamentarians buy votes", stated Ahmed al Khateeb, former deputy speaker of the assembly".¹⁰⁶ "The Kuwait City Municipality has become the seat of corruption in the country", alarmed Ahmed Saadoun in the parliament.¹⁰⁷ Although such comments did not bring immediate results, they show, on the one hand, a large degree of freedom of expression in Kuwait, and on the other the depth of the analysis of the existing problems in the country.

Among several reasons for this lack of progress toward modernization of the country, the most important is probably the relatively weak leadership caused by the old age and the poor health of the leaders. The ailing Emir, Sheikh Jabir past 75 years of age in 2003, having been on the throne for more than 25 years. Crown Prince Saad Abdallah Sabah is about the same age and is also ill.

The situation in Kuwait has been, of course, a complex one. By many measures Kuwait has had a more developed civil society than found elsewhere among the GCC states. It has critical press enjoying relative freedom, a tradition of public debate in the *diwaniyyas* and active parliament, which exercises significant influence and control over governance by the ruling family. On the other hand – a fact emphasized every year by the US State Department report on human rights – there is a restricted freedom of assembly, as well as discrimination of women, Shi'ites and foreign residents, censorship of "morally offensive" materials, and lack of the independence of the judiciary, to mention a few problems only. Altogether, the country remains a tightly controlled hereditary emirate, where al Sabah family still wield unquestionable power.

Bahrain

Bahrain has been a state vulnerable to political conflicts. First of all, the country is relatively poor when compared to its oil-rich neighbors; therefore rulers cannot offer their subjects as much as in the neighboring countries and the unemployment in the country has always been high. Secondly, it is ruled by Sunni minority, and Shi'ite majority in the island has often considered itself as discriminated against. The al-Khalifa family ruling the country since 1783 had a monopoly on power until the adoption of the constitution in 1973, which provided for a partially elected National Assembly. The Assembly was short lived though. In 1975 the emir called its activities "obstructionist" and dissolved it. With the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the accompanying spread of its Islamic ideas, resentment among Bahrain's Shi'ite population against the regime intensified. Since then the Shi'ites clashed with the government numerous times. The opposition demanded the restoration of the National Assembly through direct and free elections as mandated by the constitution, hoping that in such a way it may have more to say in the country's affairs.

¹⁰⁶ B. Za' za, "Former deputy speaker says democracy in Kuwait is a sham"...

¹⁰⁷ "Kuwait MPs lament corruption"...

Tensions grew also after the Second Gulf War. In July 1992 over 200 hundred Bahrainis, both Sunnis and Shi'ites, signed and submitted to the Emir a petition demanding liberalization of the regime. Rather than complying with their demands, Emir Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa established the appointed Consultative Council. Like its Saudi or UAE counterparts, the Bahraini Council could only review legislation sent to it by the government. Nevertheless, in an attempt to improve relations with the opposition, 30 members of the Council were divided between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and a Shi'ite, former minister of transportation Ibrahim Hamidan, became its President. Despite that protests continued. When the Committee of the Popular Petition, created in 1994, sent another petition to the Emir calling for greater popular participation in government, the leaders of the Committee were arrested, leading to a two-year long wave of demonstrations and riots. At the same time the difficult economic position of the country, with no major oil or gas deposits and ineffective administration, increased tensions.

The situation began to change only in 1998, when after the death of Sheikh Isa, his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, decided to liberalize the system. In the beginning of the year 2000, he appointed new members to the Consultative Council, including non-Muslims for the first time: a Jewish, a Christian and an Indian Bahraini, as well as four women. Then, the Emir abolished the emergency laws that were in the force in the country for 25 years and pardoned more than 900 prisoners and exiles; in effect many prominent figures of the former opposition, mostly Shi'ites, returned to the country. Moreover, the Human Rights Committee was set up. At the same time Sheikh Hamad promised to grant nationality to several thousand of *bidoon*, mostly Shi'ite stateless inhabitants, which became another source of tension. The Emir decided also to compensate hundreds of government employees, mostly Shi'ites, for salaries lost while they were detained without a trial for up to three years in connection with the political unrest of the 1990s. As all these measures were welcomed by the Shi'ite majority, the Emir became ready to significantly reform his country.

In December 2000, the special committee operating under Emir's instructions proposed far-reaching changes to the political system of Bahrain. "The National Action Charter" proposed by the Committee, stated that "HH the Emir possesses the ambition to achieve a democratic way of life" and that "there is agreement on the need to modernize the constitution of the country to benefit from the democracy experiences of other peoples in expanding the circle of popular participation in the tasks of ruling and administration."¹⁰⁸ The Charter, a constitutional declaration, made Bahrain a constitutional monarchy; Sheikh Hamad the King and the al-Khalifa family hereditary rulers of the island. A parliament was to be established and consist of two chambers with equal legislative powers: Council of Deputies consisting of 40 members elected by popular vote, and a consultative council, the Shura Council, also composed of 40 people but appointed by the King. The executive power, the legislature, and the judiciary were to be separated. All

¹⁰⁸ Quoted after A. Khalaf, "Bahrain: Democratization by decree", paper presented at the British Society for Middle East Studies, Edinburgh, July 2001, p. 4.

citizens were made equal in the eyes of law regardless of their religion, sect or social class. Constitutional Court and Audit Bureau were to be established and enjoy full independence. The Ombudsman was to be appointed to investigate complaints from the public.

On February 14, 2001, the changes proposed in the National Action Charter were submitted to a referendum and overwhelmingly approved by the Bahrainis (98.4%), including the Shi'ite opposition.

On the first anniversary of the referendum, on February 14, 2002, Sheikh Hamad issued royal decrees reinstating the suspended 1973 constitution and amending it to implement the above-mentioned changes, which was practically the promulgation of the new constitution.

Opposition was not completely satisfied with these developments. They would have preferred the restoration of the old constitution without changes and reinstatement of the elected parliament. They were further dissatisfied with the new constitution that confirmed most of the powers in the ruler's hands. The king's prerogatives include control of the government, dismiss the prime minister, and dissolve parliament if he has a "sufficient reason" to do so, as well as in case of "emergences".¹⁰⁹ The opposition also criticized the way the reforms were introduced; the King unilaterally made constitutional changes, contrary to the unambiguous provisions of the 1973 constitution itself, and in the absence of elected legislature. Moreover, the opposition criticized the fact, that the appointed chamber would have a direct legislative role equal to that of the elected chamber and even taking certain precedence over the elected one, as its chairman was to be the speaker of the whole new bi-cameral National Assembly (the government argues that the appointed Shura Council is needed to guarantee that experienced and highly educated public figures would be able to take part in the process of policy making).

Despite the shortcomings of the introduced reforms, in the new situation in the country, non-governmental organizations of all types: cultural, religious, political and civic have mushroomed. By January 2004 there had been 322 registered political, social and professional organizations as well as 38 trade unions.¹¹⁰ In particular, numerous political groups, the so-called "societies", ranging from fundamentalist to Marxists, came into being. They have practically played the role of political parties but have not been allowed neither to assume the name of party nor operate as such.

After amending the constitution, the king called for the first elections: at the municipal level. Women were allowed to participate as well as foreigners who owned property and were legal residents and other GCC states' nationals residing on the island. Political groupings actively engaged themselves in the election process. They tried to secure as much democracy in the process as possible. In particular, senior Shi'ite clerics voiced their grievances that "the government is playing

¹⁰⁹ H. S. Olyan, "Royal Bahrain's journey to democracy", *Daily Star*, February 24, 2002.

¹¹⁰ Interview with the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, *Gulf News*, June 29, 2003.

the sectarian card and trying to derail the democratic process through gerrymandering".¹¹¹ The authorities were criticized for redrawing the map of electoral constituencies to moderate, if not totally eliminate, the effects of the Shi'ite majority in most regions of Bahrain. King Hamad himself was trying to mend fences with the opposition and decided just before the polling day that all members of the Bahraini Defense Force, the National Guard, the police and security services would not be eligible to vote. Therefore, a solid bloc of some 15,000 Sunni voters was removed from the scene, giving more chances to Shi'ite candidates. The King, addressing the public before the Election Day called on his subjects "to exercise their constitutional right in complete freedom and responsibility. To exercise this right is a duty because without it democracy will be not able to survive."¹¹²

The elections took place on May 9 and 16, 2002, in two rounds of voting. Over 300 candidates, including 31 women, were registered for five 10-seats councils. Voters' turnout was substantial: 40-80%, depending on the constituency. Religiously affiliated candidates became the important winners, obtaining 38 out of 50 seats; remaining candidates were considered independent runners. The Islamic National Wafaq Society, a coalition of Shi'ite clerics, networks and individuals, generally in opposition to the King, succeeded in placing most of its candidates in the councils. The failure of liberal and leftist candidates to win a single seat in the municipal councils meant that they were unable to present themselves to the public as a viable alternative to candidates supported by the clerical establishment. The poor turnout of women was not really surprising in the traditional, male-dominated society, especially as in most cases they ran against male candidates from the same political organization. Nevertheless, after the elections all of women candidates urged the King "to order an investigation into the transgressions witnessed during the elections and to take the necessary steps against those behind them."¹¹³ They complained that some male candidates used mosques and religious community centers to launch attacks on female candidates. The leading leftist group, the National Democratic Action Society also criticized undemocratic practices exercised by many candidates on the polling day, including illegal campaigning and vote buying.

The municipal elections were not that important in itself, the municipal councils are responsible only for public works and roads, but everybody perceived them as the "dress rehearsal" for the forthcoming crucial polls to elect members to the new parliament.

When the parliamentary elections were approaching, in August 2002, 78 Bahraini intellectuals presented the King with a petition, protesting against the ban on the participation of political associations in the elections campaign. Then, four major opposition groups (the Islamic National Wafaq, the National Democratic Action, the Islamic Action and the Democratic Nationalist Tajammu) sent a letter to the King demanding again the restoration of the un-changed 1973 constitution. They believed that the new parliament would not be able to perform its legislative

¹¹¹ A. Khalaf, in: *Daily Star*, May 20, 2002.

¹¹² *Daily Star*, May 8, 2002.

¹¹³ *Gulf News*, May 20, 2002.

duties as the amended constitution gave equal power to the appointed council. In response to these protests, the King allowed political associations to participate in the election campaign. Nevertheless, as other demands were not met, major opposition groups decided to boycott the elections. Only some minor groups decided to participate in it, like the ex-Marxist Progressive Democratic Tribune.

In such circumstances, only 190 candidates registered, much fewer than for the far less important municipal elections. Eight women decided to run in the elections, receiving full, official and highly publicized support from the King's wife.

To improve the atmosphere before the elections, the new labor and trade unions law was introduced by King Hamad, giving more rights to the already existing unions, giving workers the possibility of collective bargaining and strike, and allowing foreign workers to join unions. Trade unions were, nevertheless, not satisfied with the new law, due to some ambiguous provisions it incorporated.

On October 24, the first round of parliamentary elections took place. Despite calls from the opposition to boycott the elections, 53.2% voters went to the polls, well above most expectations. Nineteen candidates who obtained more than 50% of the vote were elected to the 40-seat Parliament in the first round, including three who ran unopposed. The remaining 21 seats were decided in the run-off elections on October 31.

Elections went smoothly. The Bahraini Human Rights Society was allowed to monitor the polls. Nevertheless, opposition groups said that the government used authoritarian tactics to thwart the boycott. Moreover, voters had their passports stamped, leading to fears among citizens that they might suffer consequences if they did not have the stamp.

Sunni Islamists became the winners of the election, obtaining, together with their sympathizers, a majority in the lower house. Two Shi'ite Islamists were elected as well, despite the fact that their numerous co-religionists stayed home obeying the boycott call from their party leaders. Both woman candidates who made it to the second round run-off were defeated. Therefore, to balance the composition of the state bodies and to lower future potential problems in the legislature, the King himself appointed a large number of pro-government "secularists", "liberals" and women to the upper house. In particular, he nominated several defense officials and public servants, six women and a Jewish trader.

Immediately after the elections, the King enacted a new press and publishing law, by some perceived as very progressive, but criticized by others as again giving too much power to the executive. He also issued a highly controversial edict extending impunity to all government officials, civil servants, security and military officers, for all acts committed in the past. This outraged the opposition, who claimed that the real democratic transformation must include dealing with the past and punish people responsible for repressions, misrule and corruption.

Political life in the country intensified further after the parliamentary elections. The Council of Deputies demanded more legislative and monitoring powers

for itself.¹¹⁴ Several members of the Council submitted a proposal to legalize political parties. In April 2003, the deputies formed a commission to investigate the collapse of two government-managed pension funds. In January 2004, despite government objections, they submitted a report providing information of extensive mismanagement and corruption by the funds' senior staff and recommended that the deputies question the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Labor, and Minister of State on the matter (the first step before a vote of no-confidence). Eventually, the three ministers were questioned, a move with historical significance as it established a parliamentary tradition.¹¹⁵ The government, however, managed to gain the upper hand using legal technicalities. Ministers were not asked certain questions or were held accountable for certain actions; finally they remained in their posts intact. At the same time, the government promised to rescue two pension funds and compensate members for their losses.

In turn, the nominated Shura Council, trying also to stress its role in the country's political system, urged the media to play a greater role in the democratization process, and asked the government to draw up a comprehensive national strategic plan of social and economic developments for the next 20 years, to establish a Financial Monitoring Bureau to help combat corruption and an Administrative Monitoring Bureau to verify the soundness and legality of administrative systems and their compatibility with international quality standards in this regard.¹¹⁶

Six of Bahrain's major political groups, religious and secular, signed in March 2003 a "charter of unity", aimed to coordinate their opposition to the kingdom's amended constitution, which they claimed to have eliminated the principle of separation of power. There were three Islamists groups: The Islamic National Wefaq Society, the Islamic Arab Wasat Society, and the Islamic Action Society and three secular groups with left-wing inclinations: the National Democratic Action Society, the Progressive Democratic Minbar Society, and the Nationalist Block. All these groups boycotted the parliamentary elections as they insisted that the elected council should have exclusive legislative powers. In April, they started a campaign of collecting signatures on a petition to the king to change the constitution. In their opinion, the government controls the parliament and the elected house is unable to respond to the public needs.¹¹⁷ The Bahraini royal court warned organizers that what they were doing was illegal, and that only the National Assembly and the king himself had the right to propose or endorse constitutional changes. Eventually, in May 2004, several activists collecting signatures were arrested. In February 2004, four of these societies (the Wefaq, the Islamic Action, the National Democratic Action and the Nationalist Bloc) organized a controversial "constitutional" conference to discuss the issue of establishing of a genuine constitutional monarchy in Bahrain and for restriction of powers of the Shura Council to only consultative ones. The government at the beginning would oppose the conference, but finally allowed it,

¹¹⁴ "Bahrain's House seeks more powers", *Gulf News*, January 22, 2003.

¹¹⁵ A. Khalaf, "Bahrain's parliament: The Quest for a Role", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 16, 2004.

¹¹⁶ "Bahrain Shura Council urges press to play greater role", *Khaleej Times*, January 31, 2003.

¹¹⁷ "Bahrain warns opposition groups", *Gulf News*, April 28, 2004.

although denied admittance of invited foreign experts, saying that foreigners should not intervene in purely domestic Bahraini affairs.

To summarize, while many praise King Hamad's actions as really introducing some democracy in the Kingdom, the opposition claims that they have just been a window-dressing, calculated to deflect domestic and international criticism.¹¹⁸

The Bahrain Human Rights Society acknowledged that Bahrain has taken "a giant step" in liberalizing its political system and extending personal freedoms but stressed that much more needs to be done. "Political rights have been restricted to candidacy and voting in the municipal and parliamentary elections when the issue is much broader one."¹¹⁹

According to Sheikh Ali Salman, chairman of the Shi'ite popular mainstream Al Wefaq Society, "the security situation has calmed down but the political one is still a stalemate".¹²⁰ Public protests became acceptable and there have not been arbitrary arrests. More freedom of worship and expression was granted to Shi'ites, although they continue to be disadvantaged in state jobs.

A possible future source of tensions can be the growing power of religious fundamentalists, both Sunni and Shi'ite. Some Bahrainis worry that the radicals may eventually move to restrict personal freedoms and attempt to amend constitution to make Sharia the sole source of the legislation. Religious fundamentalists already demand greater public observance of Islamic practices. First indication of this was their proposal to ban alcohol sales to Muslims, closing down hotels catering for weekend tourists from the GCC states, restricting mixing of sexes at Bahrain's University and stop public concerts of Westernized Arab singers.

Yet, taking all the developments into account, Bahrain can definitely be said to have become the most advanced GCC country in the democratic process.

Qatar

Qatar, the smallest GCC country, is ruled under the 1970 constitution by male representatives of the al-Thani family. The Emir holds absolute power, though he consults with leading Qataris on policy issues and works to achieve consensus with the appointed 30-member Consultative Council (whose members have not changed since 1975).

In January 1992, 54 leading citizens presented the Qatari Emir with a petition criticizing the lack of freedom of expression in the media and unclear laws regarding citizenship and naturalization, as well as demanding the establishment of a new consultative assembly with "wide legislative and investigative authority through which actual political participation is provided".¹²¹ The authors of the pe-

¹¹⁸ A. Khalaf, *Daily Star*, December 3, 2002.

¹¹⁹ "Bahrain needs to do more to provide equality", *Gulf News*, February 21, 2003.

¹²⁰ "Bahrain quietly pushes reforms, democratization as new order emerges in the region", Reuters, February 13, 2004.

¹²¹ F. G. Gause III, *Oil Monarchies...*

tion called for this body to prepare immediately a new constitution “that guarantees the establishment of democracy”. They also expressed concern over the abuse of power in the country. The petition did not bring any results. The old Emir, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani had rejected any liberalization of the regime, and the broadening of political participation did not begin until his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, assumed power in 1995 (staging a successful coup against his farther).

First, the new Emir abolished the Ministry of Information, a move calculated to demonstrate his willingness to limit government censorship of the media. Then, in the new atmosphere, the now famous independent al-Jazeera satellite TV channel was opened. The channel, seen and heard in all Arab countries, introduced controversial and provocative new programs and news bulletins that criticize Arab rulers, governments and policies as well as the lack of rights and freedoms in the Arab world, and advocate the need for significant change in Islamic law. Opposition figures and women often participate in al-Jazeera programs, which shortly became the most popular TV program in the whole Arab world.

Next move by Sheikh Hamad was to call for general elections for the Central Municipal Council, a 29-member advisory body that oversees the work of nine municipalities. The Emir allowed women to vote for and run as candidates for seats on the Council.¹²²

This latest move faced certain opposition. In June 1998, 18 noted Islamist figures presented a petition to the Emir that criticized the idea, given that such election would afford women “public authority” and the potential for “leadership over men”.¹²³ The petition, however, did not have any effect on Emir’s policies.

Sheikh Hamad, in his speech at Georgetown University in 1998, while describing his reforms, quoted President John F. Kennedy’s remark that those who fail to make peaceful revolutions possible make violent revolutions inevitable. “We have simply got to reform ourselves. We’re living in a modern age. People log on to the Internet. They watch cable TV. You cannot isolate yourself in today’s world. And our reforms are progressing well. In a tribal country like Qatar, however, it could take time for everyone to accept what we’ve done.”¹²⁴

The first election in Qatar, even before the one to the Municipal Council, was for the board of the Chamber of Commerce, whose members had previously been nominated by the Emir. Close to 3,700 Qatari businessmen cast secret ballots in April 1998, electing 17 members of the board. In turn, the Ministry of Education called for the establishment of elected student unions in all schools. In another exercise of democracy, in November 1998, the Ministry of Finance and Economy canceled the elections for the board of al-Muntazah Consumer Association after it had been discovered that the number of ballots cast was higher

¹²² L. Bahry, “Elections in Qatar: A window of democracy opens in the Gulf”, *Middle East Policy* 1999, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 118-127. In fact, this was not the first experiment in Qatar with elections to the Municipal Council. The first elections of this kind took place in 1963. It lasted few years, but its work was never publicized and have faded away from the view without any noticeable impact on Qatar’s public awareness.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, p. 126.

¹²⁴ Quoted after M. A. Weaver, “Democracy by decree”, *New Yorker* 2001, November 20.

than the number of eligible voters; new elections were simultaneously called for.

The elections to the Central Municipal Council took place on March 8, 1999 without incidents.¹²⁵ On the ballot were 227 candidates, including six women, and about 95 per cent of eligible voters participated in election in Doha, with only a slightly lower percentage participating in the rest of the country (though the number of registered voters was only 22,225 people, which accounted for a small percentage of the total local population of approximately 160,000). The winners of the elections were mostly young technocrats and professionals, elected on the basis of personal preference or family and tribal ties. Significantly, two noted political figures, often critical of the government, lost in the election: Najib Muhammad al-Rubai, a former Minister of Justice, and Muhammad Salih al-Kawari. No women were elected, suggesting that Qatar remains a traditional society.

Despite the fact that the Municipal Council has a limited importance and supervises only the implementation of laws and resolutions concerning the Ministry of Municipal and Agricultural Affairs, the very idea of elections to a governmental body was an important step in democratization of the regime.¹²⁶

The successful municipal elections made Sheikh Hamad easier about conducting the next step: introduction of a permanent constitution (a temporary one has been in effect since 1972) providing for the establishment of elected parliament to be chosen by all Qataris, regardless of gender.

On July 2, 2002, the 32-member committee preparing the new constitution, presented a draft of the document.

On April 29, 2003, in a popular referendum, more than 96% Qataris voted in favor of the constitution (but only 24,000 people registered themselves for voting, not even every other eligible Qatari).

The constitution describes Qatar as a democratic state, grants universal suffrage, and confirms the role of the state in providing for the social, economic, and educational well-being of its citizens. It also confirms Qatar as a hereditary state and specifies Sharia as the main source of legislation. The constitution creates a 45-member council (Majlis al Shura) to legislate, vote on the stage budget and monitor the government activities with the right to question ministers and to vote them out of office through a vote of confidence. The 20 members of the council were to be elected and the remaining 15 were to be appointed by the Emir. All Qataris over 18 years of age were to be eligible to vote and run for office. The constitution was also to provide for freedom of association, expression and religious practice, as well as an independent judiciary.

On June 8, 2004, Emir Hamad promulgated the constitution, although it will not come into full effect for another year. During this period new constitutional institutions will be formed and appropriate laws enacted. In the meantime, in May 2004, Emir issued decrees allowing creation of professional societies and trade unions (with a right to organize strikes).

¹²⁵ L. Bahry, "Elections in Qatar"...

¹²⁶ R. Allen and J. Drummond, "Emir's claims for democracy have yet to be tested", *Financial Times* 2001, November 7.

There are at least two reasons why Emir Hamad decided to broaden political participation in Qatar. First, having some problems with the support from members of the older generation, he wanted to obtain it from younger Qataris, many of whom had obtained Western education and were more cosmopolitan. For many of them, democratization means making Qatar prominent among its neighbors, and obtaining a dynamic and leading role in the region.¹²⁷ Secondly, Hamad wanted to win friendship in the West, to oppose threats from his ousted father and to balance off pressures from his more powerful GCC neighbors. In this context it is worth to note, that in 2003 the US moved to Qatar all its forces formerly stationed in Saudi Arabia, and that the main US command center for the Iraqi invasion was also located in the emirate. In Saudi eyes, the close, though sometimes conflicting relations between Riyadh and Doha, and the countries' shared ultra-conservative Wahhabi version of Islam, make Qatar a particularly relevant testing ground for the establishment of a partially elected legislature in Saudi Arabia. Reforms introduced by Emir Hamad have also been carefully watched by all other GCC states.

Although from a certain point of view Qatar is often described as being at the vanguard of democratization in the Arab world, one has to be aware of the shortcomings of its constitution.¹²⁸ It qualifies the right of people to assembly and does not allow operation of political parties. The Emir appoints the government and controls its agenda, has the power to block any legislation, can implement laws by decrees, and can dissolve the parliament at will. The legislation becomes law only with the vote of two-thirds majority and the emir's endorsement. But this has to be understood in the country's context. Qatar citizenry is free of sectarian, ethnic, or even significant political divisions. There is no questioning of the legitimacy of the ruling Al Thani family. Therefore, reforms have been promulgated from the top and not as a response to popular discontent.

Reforms in Qatar did not end in promulgating a new constitution and organization of a municipal election. The recently introduced reform of the educational system can also have a significant impact on the future politics of the country. Classes of Science and English were introduced at the expense of religious courses. In 2002 women were allowed for the first time to study at the engineering faculty of the Qatar University, etc. Moreover, in 2003 Emir Hamad nominated Ahmed al-Mahmud the Minister of Education – the first female cabinet minister in the GCC states. At the same time he appointed Sheikha Abdullah al-Misnad the president of the Qatar University. Emir's wife, Sheikha Mouza Bint Nasser al-Misnad, has been strongly involved in promotion of education and women's rights. Thanks to her personal involvement the so-called Education City was established in Doha where Western universities were allowed to open their branches. Further supporting the role of women, Sheikh Hamad appointed a number of women to important positions in public offices; one became a public prosecutor – the first

¹²⁷ A. Rathmell, K. Schulze, "Political reform in the Gulf"..., p. 15.

¹²⁸ A. Hawthorne, "Qatar's New Constitution: Limited Reform from the Top", Carnegie Endowment – Arab Reform Bulletin, June 11, 2003.

women to held such a post in the GCC states. Along with having voting rights, Qatari women were granted a unique status in the monarchies of the Gulf.

Oman

Oman, once a great maritime power among Arabs, is has been ruled since the 18th century by the al bu Said dynasty. After a series of internal and external conflicts in the 1950s and 1960s, and most significantly the Dhofar rebellion, Qaboos bin Said al-Said carried a coup in 1970 against his unsuccessful father. Supported by the British, Qaboos won and became the Sultan. He quickly proved to be an effective and modern leader. Under his rule, Oman has become one of the success stories in the Arab world. The country advanced economically despite limited oil reserves; education became a government priority, relations with the neighbors were normalized, former internal rivals were incorporated into the system of government, etc.

In the 1990s Oman made several strides towards broadening of the political participation; this happened on the sole initiative of the ruler, without any demands from the public (there is practically no opposition in Oman¹²⁹). First, in 1991, Sultan Qaboos established the new Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), replacing the old State Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Istishari lil-Dawla*) existing since 1981. The 59-seat Council was granted the right to debate on economic, social and development issues, review laws, evaluate government plans and question ministers, and hold joint meetings with the government twice a year. At the same time, it has no right to be heard in Oman's foreign, defense and security policies. The Sultan's decree provided that elders, prominent businessman and intellectuals from each of Oman's 59 provinces choose two potential assembly members and the Sultan appoints one of those two nominees to represent that province. The president of the Council is appointed by a Royal Decree, while his two deputies are elected by the members of the Council in a secret ballot.

After the end of the first three-year term, in 1994, the Council was expanded to 80 seats, giving the Sultan a chance to nominate more people to it, especially former government officials. In a groundbreaking decision, the Sultan appointed the first two woman members of the Council. It was the first case for women to be allowed to participate in a political process of any kind in all GCC states.¹³⁰

In 1997, membership of the Council was expanded to 82 persons and in 2000 to 83 because of the increase in the country's population. Moreover, the Sultan allowed women to stand for election and to vote for candidates to the Council. Over 20 women were among the several hundred nominees in the 1997 elections, and the Council had eventually two women members.

¹²⁹ Only in 1994, some 200 were detained in connection with an alleged plot to destabilize the country. A. H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE. Challenges of Security*, Boulder and Colorado 1997, pp. 136-137.

¹³⁰ A. Juma Alhaj, "The politics of participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: The Omani Consultative Council", *Middle East Journal* 1996, no. 4, pp. 560-571.

In 1997, Sultan Qaboos established a new 41-seat consultative body, the all nominated State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*). This Council, akin to an upper house, reviews the proposals of the *Majlis al-Shura* and forwards those it deems important to the government or to Sultan Qaboos; it can also deal with more important political matters. *Majlis al-Shura* and *Majlis al-Dawla* comprise together the *Majlis Oman*, or Council of Oman.¹³¹

One of the reasons to establish new council was to give the Sultan a chance to accommodate those who were unsuccessful in the elections to the *Majlis al-Shura* and to eliminate potential tensions between rival clans, tribes and businessmen created by the election results. This was clearly visible in the formation of the first *Majlis al-Dawla*, whose nominated members became former ministers, under-secretaries, ambassadors, judges or retired officers. Five women were selected to it as well.

Sultan Qaboos, further supporting the idea of introducing women to the country political life, appointed in 1998-99 the first woman ambassador (to the Netherlands) and named three women deputy ministers in the cabinet. He also included the first woman to the board of directors of the Omani Chamber of Commerce. Finally, in March 2003 he appointed Sheikha Aisha Bint Khalfan bin Jumiel Al Siyabiqah as President of the Public Authority for Craft Industries at the rank of a minister.

The electoral body has been consequently expanded; in the September 2000 elections to *Majlis al-Shura* the electorate consisted of 175,000 people, a quarter of Omani adults (as compared to only 50,000 in 1997 elections, about three per cent of the population, and 5,000 in 1991). Voters were chosen by tribal councils selected by the *walis* or governors and their representatives in the country's 59 *wilayats*. Out of them 114,567 registered for voting, with 87.8% actually casting their ballots. Total of 541 candidates, including 21 women, were in the fray (but only two women were successful, both from the Muscat governorate). In a move towards the goal of having the whole *Majlis al-Shura* elected directly, in 2000, candidates with the highest numbers of votes were for the first time automatically given seats on the Council, rather than being picked from among the top scores by the Sultan.

In the 2003 elections for the first time all Omani citizens who have attained the age of 21 (approximately 822,000), both men and women, were eligible to vote. Nevertheless, only 262,000 (i.e. 32%) registered, and only 74% of the registered, that is around 194,000 actually cast their votes on October 2. The elections did not bring much change in the composition of the *Majlis al-Shura*. Only 15 women stood for election, out of 506 candidates, and, as before, only two (actually the same as during the previous term) were elected, despite even the fact that a third of registered voters (95,000) were women.

During the elections, the authorities promoting national integration, called on citizens to rise above their tribal loyalties and vote for the candidates deemed

¹³¹ A. Juma Alhaj, "The political elite and the introduction of political participation in Oman", *Middle East Policy*, June 2000, no. 3, pp. 97-110.

right to represent them. The main slogan of an awareness campaign launched by the Ministry of the Interior in the summer of 2000 was 'Vote for Oman, not for your tribe'. Nevertheless, in all elections held so far most voters have stuck to tribal and clan loyalties when it came to casting their ballots. "Despite the existence of modern state structures, contemporary Omani society continues to be run by a tribal mentality."¹³²

Consultative councils quickly started to play an important role in the country's political life. They met regularly, debated important social and economic matters, proposed new laws, questioned government's officials. Hearings at the *Majlis al-Shura* have been broadcasted live on television.

Another action of crucial importance for the development of democracy in Oman, was the introduction of the Basic Law – the first *de facto* constitution – in 1996. It promulgated the principles governing the Sultanate, highlighted the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and, above all, defined the powers and duties of the executive. It provided for an independent judiciary, due process of law, freedom of press and of assembly, and prohibition of discrimination of any kind. Several laws and regulations required to implement these provisions have been enacted in the following years. In particular, the Supreme Court in Muscat as well as courts of appeals in various *wilayas* were established, and the new press and publication law was introduced.

Oman has a relatively liberal environment, although the sultanate is an absolute monarchy with no political parties.¹³³ All matters are subject to the Sultan's interpretation and decrees. He has a complete authority over all decision-making. The Sultan is both the head of the state and the prime minister, as well as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces; moreover, he controls the portfolios of defense and foreign affairs. But at the same time, Sultan Qaboos is a fair-minded, liberal ruler who tries to maximize the support base for his policies by taking advice from as broad a spectrum of people as possible, but especially tribal leaders, in accordance with Omani tradition and cultural norms. His gradual approach to democratization of the country and political reforms are often praised in the Gulf as the best possible way to do so.

The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of a group of tribally-based sheikhdoms, established as a unified state structure in 1971. Thanks to huge oil revenues, the UAE managed to transform itself in a short period of time into a very modern and wealthy country. Under the constitution, rulers of the seven emirates make up the Federal Supreme Council, the highest legislative and executive body. The Council

¹³² *Ibidem*, p. 101.

¹³³ "Oman – Ruling Structure", *APS Review Gas Market Trends*, February 23, 2004; J. E. Peterson, "Oman: Three and a half decades of change and developments", *Middle East Policy*, no. 2, Summer 2004, pp. 125-137.

elects a state president and the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi Dhabhi emirate, has been the President since the beginning, 1971.

The UAE, like Saudi Arabia, have the least developed system of political representation. The male-only, rulers' nominated 40-members Federal National Council, plays only an advisory role, cannot introduce bills or debate any matter of public concern if the government objects (that is, "if it is detrimental to the higher interest of the union").¹³⁴ Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, the number of issues discussed by the Council, and the number of cabinet ministers appearing before it (including some members of the ruling family) increased. Moreover, its members had the possibility to elect the president of the Council in a rather free manner. In some emirates local consultative bodies to advice rulers have also been developed.

The issue of the establishment of an elected parliament has not yet been put forward, one reason for that being that there is no opposition or any political groups operating in this rentier state.

For approximately a quarter of a century, the UAE did not have a permanent constitution, as numerous attempts to approve one failed due to lack of agreement among the emirates on the prerogatives of the federal authorities; small emirates have traditionally worried that large and rich emirates, like Abu Dhabi, would dominate them. The temporary 1971 constitution became eventually permanent in 1997, though practically no changes were introduced to it at that time, despite the criticism that it contains outdated laws.

The judicial system comprises both Sharia and the secular courts. The judiciary is not independent; its decisions are subject to review by the political leadership. Nevertheless, the basic due process of law exists. Media are controlled by the government but non-censored foreign television broadcasts via satellite and internet are widely available. There are no trade unions in the country; the government limits freedom of assembly and associations.

Women are well represented in the workforce and are well educated (the Emirati women occupy 40% of public sector posts, while 70% of all university students are women) but do not held any high-level positions in the government. Expectations that first women may be nominated to the Federal National Council have not materialize yet. Nevertheless, the First Lady, Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak, the chairperson of the Women's General Union often claims that there is nothing preventing women from taking part in the political life, noting that this is a right which is neither forbidden by religion nor prevented by the constitution. Only the progressive ruler of Sharjah appointed five women to his local consultative council. In the interesting developments, the Crown Prince of the emirate of Ras Al Khajmah was dethroned by his father in June 2003, apparently largely due to the activity of his wife, criticized by conservative members of the ruling elite for being a women's rights activist.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ H. Hamdan Al-Alkim, 'The prospect of democracy in the GCC countries'..., p. 34.

¹³⁵ *Gulf Studies Newsletter*, June 2003.

In general, the country, especially the highly cosmopolitan emirate of Dubai, has been much more liberal and open to the world than other GCC states. One of the reasons for that has been that citizens, local Arabs, constitute only about 25 per cent of the population, the rest being foreign workforce.

Among limited recent political developments, the UAE, under the pressure from the International Labor Organization, have initiated measures to allow formation of workers' organizations in the country. Moreover, the election of officers was allowed in certain public institutions, including the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, suggesting that authorities are testing the possibility of introducing such democratic procedures in other public bodies.

In general, the UAE is the only GCC country where so far no significant movements towards broadening of the political representation have taken place. There is no pressure from the public at large to change the situation as the enormous wealth of the country continues to make most people satisfied. Fatma Al Sayegh argued that restructuring the UAE's political system will be "laden with difficulties", but is nonetheless feasible.¹³⁶

Prospects for further democratization of the Gulf monarchies

Will the broadening of political participation in the GCC states continue? Can the occurrences presented above really lead towards the Western type of democracy?

On one hand, there are many obstacles to the democratization process.

First of all, as times have shown, Gulf monarchies are quite stable regimes, contrary to stereotypical views in the West, where they are frequently seen as anachronistic systems and destined to disappear with modernization.¹³⁷ Thus, rulers do not always see the necessity to transform their regimes quickly and extensively to stay in power. Moreover, they do not think they need the support of their people to govern; constitutions and traditions legitimize their positions. They also feel secure given that the United States and other Western countries, despite the changes in their approach they sometimes pronounced to non-democratic regimes, do not like to de-stabilize the region further after the Iraqi experience and with few exceptions continue to be committed to the maintenance of the GCC countries' status quo due to strategic importance of oil they possess.¹³⁸ In such circumstances, rulers often perceive the broadening of political participation in their countries as another gracious gift they may offer their subjects, rather than an action required to satisfy the vital needs of their populations. The circumstances have seemed differ-

¹³⁶ F. Al Sayegh, "Post-9/11 changes in the Gulf: the case of the United Arab Emirates", *Middle East Policy*, no. 2, Summer 2004, pp. 107-124.

¹³⁷ For example, a well-known U.S. expert F. G. Gause III even recently (June 2002) was convinced that for Saudi Arabia "the short-term prognosis for regime stability is good, because it seems that there will be enough oil money to keep the system working, because the United States will continue to support the regime against regional and domestic enemies, and because the ruling family will not have to face that serious succession issue for at least a decade." *SAIS Review: Saudi Arabia*.

¹³⁸ G. B a g h a t, "The Gulf monarchies"...

ent only in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, where pressure from the West and the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in the first place, as well as the demands of the Shi'ite-led opposition in the latter, are factors strongly influencing the change.

In turn, the "subjects" at large, maybe except of the Shi'ite population, do not look for political reforms themselves, being worried that change could negatively affect their socio-economic situation. They have generally been satisfied with what they get from their governments, and even the existing extensive control the regimes exercise over them do not dispose them negatively to their rulers. This is why, for example, even the demands of opposition groups have only called for reforms, not for revolution: the opposition has wished to improve the operation of the existing regimes, not to overthrow them.¹³⁹ The middle class in the GCC states – usually the main reformist, pro-democracy grouping in other parts of the world – has little reason to support the downfall of the monarchy. Members of this class, mostly private businessmen, learned that several countries in the region, Iraq and Iran in particular, have not done well since their monarchies were abolished, experiencing, among other disasters, bloody and destroying wars. And, significantly, the professionals and traders suffered in all these developments as much as everybody else. The military and majority of tribal sheiks, large beneficiaries of the existing regimes, usually strongly support the rulers. So far, there has been no "revolutionary proletariat" in the GCC states; in future, only a growing number of young, unemployed school graduates may lead to the establishment of such a group. Last but definitely not least, most people lack political awareness; the civil society, the ultimate source of political change, is in the very preliminary stage of development.

Another reason why prospects for further democratization are not very good is that the existing opposition groups which demand changes in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, are relatively weak and divided, and have not produced charismatic leadership. As such, they cannot be compared with such movements as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, which have strongly challenged authorities. In Oman, Qatar and the UAE there is practically no opposition at all.

On the other hand, there are many factors which can further enhance the broadening of political representation and the "democratization drive".

First of all, as has already been mentioned, in several GCC states: in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, there are significant groupings pushing for democratization. Moreover, the presence of active parliaments and free media, wherever they are present, often boosts democratization process.¹⁴⁰

Then, the economic situation can have a significant impact on the process. At the beginning of the 21st century, the GCC countries are earning far less than they used to during the oil bonanza three decades ago. While they are still relatively rich, several are running budget deficits, borrowing nationally and internationally, and are turning to expense cutting. Moreover, while until recently many

¹³⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴⁰ M. Herb, "Emirs and parliaments in the Gulf", *Journal of Democracy* 2002, vol. 13, no. 4, p. 47.

services were free in the GCC countries, some regimes have begun to charge their citizens for them, and have even considered introducing income taxes. Should citizens be obliged to pay for the running of the state, the state will be forced to open up to their scrutiny.

Another factor that can influence the change is the population of the GCC countries: not only is it growing at a rate that makes the maintenance of so generous welfare states problematic, but it is also becoming more literate, educated, and urban: features that are characteristic for other societies that, in similar conditions, have usually experienced a political upheaval leading to further democratization.

Problems with succession, not clearly determined in all the GCC countries, can have destabilizing impact on the situation, which, paradoxically, can help to reform the regimes. In the case of Saudi Arabia there is a question of who will run the country when the end of the line of the sons of Abdel Aziz is reached. King Fahd is of poor health, and his two potential successors, Crown Prince Abdullah and Prince Sultan, are over 70 years of age as well. In Oman, who will succeed Sultan Qaboos, who has no offspring; in Kuwait, who will succeed Emir Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah and the Crown Prince Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah, who are both old and in a very poor health. Will the future successions in the UAE go to the sons of the very old current ruler, or to sons of the Crown Prince, future ruler-to-be. A change for stronger, more determined and better educated, young leader, possible in these countries in the future, can allow for more regime liberalization, as has already been the case in Bahrain and Qatar.¹⁴¹

The continued existence of the Gulf monarchies is obviously not guaranteed forever. According to some scholars, monarchies may even contain the seeds of their own destruction within themselves; Samuel Huntington referred to the situation as to "the king's dilemma".¹⁴² As F. Gregory Gause III explained: "In an age of increasingly participatory and nationalist politics, the king must present himself as a reformer, as someone who not only represents the nation but listens to it and works to improve its condition. But in doing so, he calls forth both societal demands and social groups that eventually undermine the monarchy. So kings can either be overthrown by 'reformers' early on, or they can stave off such efforts by actually reforming themselves, but this only postpones their day of reckoning."¹⁴³

Western (American) attempts to democratize the GCC regimes can bring both negative and positive results. On the one hand, they are often perceived as a plot to increase Western influence in the region and for that reason reforms, even proposed by the local Arabs, are often rejected "as realizing the American agenda". On the other, the U.S. and European initiatives sometimes enhance actions by the GCC reformists; they provide them with additional rational and certain means to undertake them.

Events in the neighboring states: Egypt, Iran, Yemen, and the new Iraq, which all have more political representation of citizens in the process of govern-

¹⁴¹ J.-F. Seznec, "Stirrings in Saudi Arabia", *Journal of Democracy* 2002, no. 4, p. 40.

¹⁴² S. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, New Haven 1968.

¹⁴³ *SAIS Review. Saudi Arabia...*

ance, indirectly influence also the peoples' thinking across the borders; mostly through media reports but also through their citizens living in the GCC states.

The political reforms can weaken the existing regimes, or even de-stabilize the countries. The opposition forces in most GCC states are to a large extent rooted in Islamic fundamentalism, which, if coming to power through otherwise praised democratic elections, can reform the political system into a much less democratic (rather of the religious theocracy type) than the present one; in the latest parliamentary elections in Kuwait and Bahrain the Islamists already won the majority and continue to press for Islamization of the countries.¹⁴⁴ Vahan Zanoian predicts that may happen in the near future:

The suppression of free flow of ideas in the past, the pent-up demand for change and the strong sense of frustration with both regional political conditions and domestic economic conditions will combine to give a strong initial lead to those with extremist religious or anti-modernization views. Those aspiring for civil society with liberal ideals, considerable religious and cultural tolerance and modernization are nowhere near as well organized as their opponents, simply because historically they were not allowed to be. Thus, these reforms could backfire if any single group or faction, including the religious establishment, had monopoly access (or even disproportionate access) to the means influencing public opinion or to setting the agenda for public debate.¹⁴⁵

Not to jeopardize the future of their countries, but at the same time to prolong existence of their own regimes, the GCC governments need to address basic and long-neglected problems. Some experts believe that the single most important step is to enlarge the domestic political support base of each government and then to change the mode of governance, which "while not necessarily taking the form of full democratization, would entail the formal establishment of civil liberties, recognition of limits on the powers of the state, and the establishment of meaningful procedures for popular political participation".¹⁴⁶ According to Zanoian:

An important pre-requisite to all of the above is a fundamental recognition of the need to establish a consequential dialogue – one that leads to real policy changes – about the role of religion, the relationship of each society with the international community, the objectives of development, the uses of public power and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship... Each country needs to 'make peace' with itself by arriving at a sustainable domestic political reconciliation, and every GCC government needs to arrive at a new 'social contract' with its own population.¹⁴⁷

It remains to be seen whether the rulers of the GCC countries will be bold enough to take further actions to address these challenges.

Democratization is always a long lasting process. One can foresee further developments in the GCC states, which can lead towards that goal, but there are

¹⁴⁴ M. Ottaway, T. Carothers, A. Hawthorne, D. Brumberg, *Democratic mirage in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Brief, October 2002.

¹⁴⁵ V. Zanoian, "Time for making historic decisions in the Middle East", Kuwait, Center for Strategic and Future Studies, November 2002.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

also many obstacles which can slow it down, or even reverse. What is, however, important is that the importance of democracy seems to be a growing understanding among the GCC peoples. In an interesting study carried out by the *Al Khaleej* newspaper in the UAE on March 12, 2002, 36 per cent out of 600 interviewed nationals declared that a lack of democracy is the reason for the failure of Arabs in achieving their expectations.

Summarizing the analysis of political transformations in the GCC states, one can agree with the opinion of Hassan Hamdan al-Alkim that “although democracy may not be realized within the coming decade, it is acquiring a significant importance in the GCC states political life. Thus, its realization becomes a matter of time”.¹⁴⁸ A thought that, however, should always be taken into account, is that democratization may not immediately produce more peaceful and stable GCC regimes.

External efforts to democratize the Arab world. Impact of 9/11, the U.S. war on terror and the Iraqi war

In addition to domestic reasons to enhance political representation or even more broadly to democratize existing regimes, there has been in recent years an increased foreign pressure to enhance democratization of the Arab world, and Gulf monarchies in particular. After 9/11, with the U.S.-proclaimed “war on terror” there has been a number of voices in the United States calling Washington to “save the Arabs from corrupt autocrats and radical Islam as it once was about saving the world from communism” and to “pressure Arab states to democratize rather than shielding them”.¹⁴⁹ Rohan Gunaratna in his book *Inside al Qaeda* asks: ‘Why is so many terrorists produced by Saudi Arabia? Because it’s not democratic, it’s not representative of the people.’¹⁵⁰ Some have believed that the U.S. should start seriously supporting pro-democratic movements in the Arab world (as was the case earlier in Europe, while fighting communism) and therefore support people who want to modernize Islam and create open societies there, and stop supporting autocratic regimes, which is done only for short-term political, economic or military gains. Commenting on elections in Bahrain, S. Rob Sobhani wrote in the *Washington Times* on November 25, 2002, that “the United States has a vested interest in the success of King Hamad’s reform movement because tiny Bahrain can be a model for the rest of the Arab world, especially in neighboring Saudi Arabia. Shi’ite compromise a majority in the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia, where 25 per cent of the world’s remaining oil reserves is located. Therefore Bahrain should be rewarded and singled out for its bravery, friendship and pursuit of democracy”.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Alkim, “The prospect of democracy”..., p. 41.

¹⁴⁹ S. Sachs, “Remembering how to rig a democracy”, *The New York Times*, June 30, 2002.

¹⁵⁰ R. Gunaratna, *Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, New York 2002.

Since September 11 the goal of democratizing the Arab Middle East has become elevated by the American government from a verbal ideal to national security imperative. As Washington became convinced that autocracies were making Muslims, and particularly Arabs, especially vulnerable to the appeal of radical Islamist ideologies, the White House came to the conclusion that something has to be done with it.¹⁵¹ First, the administration decided that promotion of democracy should become a key component of the new National Security Strategy, initially released in September 2002. This document, which outlines the government's overall plan for defending the United States and advancing its interest and values, declared that "America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity and the rule of law; limits on the absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property." It claimed further that "We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world."¹⁵²

In December 2002, Collin Powell, the Secretary of State unveiled the "US-Middle East Partnership Initiative".¹⁵³ The initiative rested on three pillars, planning that the U.S. government will: (1) "engage with public and private sector groups to bridge the jobs gap with economic reform, business investment, and private sector development"; (2) "partner with community leaders to close the freedom gap with projects to strengthen civil society, expand political participation, and lift the voices of women"; (3) "work with parents and educators to bridge the knowledge gap with better schools and more opportunities for higher education." Powell announced that \$29 million was allocated for the first part of the plan.¹⁵⁴ The essence of the initiative was supposed to be partnership with different indigenous Arab reformers. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Bill Burns explained that it "means that we in the U.S. governments must listen to ideas and advice and criticism and proposals from the region."¹⁵⁵ While noble in theory, the realization of the program was highly criticized. Most of the money was spent through Arab governments or on training for government officials, not on programs aimed at developing nongovernmental pro-reform organizations. Altogether, the program did not stand a chance to serve "as a catalyst for a tangible political change."¹⁵⁶

Then the administration decided to reorient U.S. diplomacy and American foreign aid policy to lend support to pro-democratic movements in the region as well as develop public diplomatic campaign to win Arab "hearts and minds". In

¹⁵¹ T. [Cofman] Wittes, "Arab democracy, American ambivalence. Will Bush's rhetoric about transforming the Middle East be matched by American deeds?", *The Weekly Standard*, February 23, 2004.

¹⁵² P. J. Dobriansky [U.S. Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs], "Promoting democracy in the 21st century: an essential tool against terrorism", Remarks to the Baltimore Council on Foreign Affairs, February 9, 2004, www.state.gov.

¹⁵³ www.state.gov.

¹⁵⁴ As reported in the *Christian Science Monitor*, January 21, 2003.

¹⁵⁵ Speech delivered at the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, May 16, 2003, www.islam-democracy.org.

¹⁵⁶ T. Wittes, "Arab democracy, American ambivalence..."

particular, the special Arab-language radio stations were to promote American values, especially of religious tolerance, open debate and women rights; the Sawa (Together) radio-station and Al-Hurrah (The Free) television station were established. In turn, study tours, scholarships and English-language studies were offered to expose Arabs to American democratic institutions and help them to learn and understand the country better. At the same time, for the first time ever, the United States government linked the provision of aid to human rights case in the Arab world. In August 2002, the White House rejected the Egyptian aid request to protest against sentencing of Egyptian-American democracy activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim and his colleagues to prison for alleged fraud and defamation.

In the meantime, President Bush himself became a great supporter of democratization of the Middle East, and Iraq in particular. In the commencement speech at West Point Military Academy on June 1, 2002, he declared that “the peoples of the Islamic nations want and deserve the same freedom and opportunities as people in every nation. And their governments should listen to their hopes.” Addressing the United Nations in September 12, 2002, he stated that “liberty for the Iraqi people is a great moral cause and a great strategic goal. The people of Iraq deserve it; the security of all nations requires it.”

The pro-democracy ideology adopted by the U.S. representatives was accompanied by endless editorials and articles in major American newspapers “expounding an extraordinarily expansive, optimistic view of new democratizing mission for America in the Middle East”.¹⁵⁷

Then, in March 2003, President George W. Bush decided to take enormously large and costly action to change the regime in Iraq. Among other motives for the action was his belief that overthrowing Saddam Hussein would allow to democratize the country rapidly, which, in effect, would produce a democratic boom in the Middle East, comparable to the successful one which occurred earlier in Eastern Europe and put an end to the Cold War.¹⁵⁸ To stress the importance of that argument, the operation was termed Iraqi Freedom. There were two other reasons for Bush to invade Iraq: in the U.S. Saddam Hussein was perceived as an accomplice, if not a sponsor, of Osama bin Laden, and Iraq was believed to have weapons of mass destruction threatening the region. As both reasons turned out to have nothing in common with reality, the argument of the importance of democratizing Arab countries to win the war on terror has become an especially important one. Interestingly enough, before the invasion, the State Department expressed doubt that installing a new regime in Iraq will foster the spread of democracy in the Middle East. The State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research produced a report dated February 26, 2003, which argued that “even if some version of

¹⁵⁷ M. Ottawa y, „The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: A hollow victory for the United States”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 12, 2004.

¹⁵⁸ Hanson justified Bush action: “Establishing lawful rule in lawless places entails real costs and dangers. Thus, war or the threat of force may be necessary catalyst. Germany and Japan did not abandon fascism voluntarily. Noriega and Milosevic had to be forced out.” D. Hanson: “Democracy in the Middle East it’s the hardest solution”, *The Weekly Standard*, October 21, 2002.

democracy took root ... anti-American sentiment is so pervasive that Iraqi elections in the short term could lead to the rise of Islamic-controlled governments hostile to the United States.”¹⁵⁹ But President Bush did not take such advice into account and proceeded with his invasion plan.

Arabs did not believe in Bush argumentation at all. For them “controlling oil”, “protecting Israel” and “weakening and dominating the Arab world” have been the motives behind the invasion and occupation of Iraq.¹⁶⁰ “Bringing democracy” has not been the reason they would believe at all. Large majority of Arabs has expected that the war in Iraq would result in more terrorism against the United States and less democracy in the region. For Arabs Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden remained highly admired world leaders.¹⁶¹ Trying to change such opinions, the State Department established the U.S. Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World and appointed Edward Djerejian, former ambassador to Syria, to lead this team of experts to improve America’s communication with the region.

On November 6, 2003, President Bush delivered the now-famous address on the need to strengthen democracy around the world and, in particular, to support its development in the Middle East. He called to end “sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East” and to adopt “a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East”.¹⁶² In terms of Iraq, Bush optimistically stated that the success for democracy there will “send forth the news, from Damascus to Teheran, that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed even in the global democratic revolution.” He mentioned, however, that everybody should be aware of the fact that democracy takes time to develop and because of that American commitment to democracy in the Middle East “must be the focus of American policy for decades to come.” Bush also pointed out that “modernization is not the same as Westernization” and democratization must always reflect cultures and tradition of the region. Moreover, democracy can be realized in different political systems “constitutional monarchies, federal republics, or parliamentary systems.” He spoke positively of the rulers of Morocco, Oman, Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain and Qatar, supported Saudi Arabia’s “first steps toward reform” and urged Egypt to “show the way towards democracy in the Middle East.” President rejected exceptionalism of the Middle East as the region not hos-

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in P. Basham, “Gambling with history: bringing democracy to the Middle East”, www.cato.org.

¹⁶⁰ “Arab Attitudes towards Political and Social Issues, Foreign Policy and the Media”. A Public Opinion Poll by the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland/Zogby International in May 2004 and in April 2002 by Zogby International in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. www.bsos.umd.edu and www.zogby.com. From 64 percent of respondents in Lebanon to 90 percent in Saudi Arabia said they believed the war would result in more terrorism against the U.S. while from 57 percent in Lebanon to 82 percent in Morocco said that war had brought less democracy to the region.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶² www.whitehouse.gov. Characteristically, but what didn’t go unnoticed in the Arab world, President Bush delivered that speech at the convention of the National Endowment for Democracy, an institution of right wing, neo-conservative character and unconditional supporter of Israel, being often criticized for trying to influence domestic politics of foreign countries.

pitiable to democracy, the idea which had often used to dominate thoughts of Western politicians.

The American reaction to the speech was mixed.¹⁶³ Many commentators praised it, some even compared it to President Ronald Reagan's famous June 1982 speech to members of the British Parliament, in which Reagan predicted the imminent demise of communism because of its failure to respect freedom and human rights and reward individual creativity. Others criticized it on the ground that he launched "a moral crusade in politically volatile regions without regard to potentially negative consequences", warning that it may unintentionally bring into power Islamic regimes in the Middle East or plunge the region into a major turmoil.¹⁶⁴ They drew comparisons to Jimmy Carter's policy, which in their opinion unintentionally helped to destabilize the Shah's regime while advocating human rights in Iran. Conservative realists, as Adam Garfinkle, criticized Bush saying that what he really proposed was either "a major shift in U.S. attitudes toward the undemocratic ruling classes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and others which we long called our friends", what could jeopardize U.S. interests in the region, or "a permanent condition of blatant diplomatic hypocrisy", unacceptable as well.¹⁶⁵ According to Thomas Carothers from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Bush has confirmed by that speech his split personality: "Bush the realist actively cultivates warm relations with friendly tyrants in many parts of the world, while Bush the neo-Reaganite makes ringing calls for a vigorous new democracy campaign in the Middle East."¹⁶⁶ Finally, there were skeptics, who claimed that Bush's professed U.S. commitment to democracy was just rhetoric and would eventually surrender to the pressures of economic and political interests.

In the Middle East reaction to Bush's speech was generally negative. Media in the region, usually state-controlled, criticized Washington's arrogance, hypocrisy, and interference in Arab internal affairs.¹⁶⁷

President Bush in his speech did not announce any new initiatives, nor did he define a specific set of policy guidelines. That was left for the White House administration which began working on details of the plan which later became called "The Greater Middle East Initiative". The project proposed technical assistance to countries that hold elections by 2006, setting up centers to train women managers, journalists and NGOs activists as well as women primary school teachers (100,000 by 2008). It called for economic transformation "similar in magnitude to that undertaken by the formerly communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe", mainly through the strengthening the private sector by proposed microfi-

¹⁶³ C. Gershman [president of the National Endowment for Democracy], "A democracy strategy for the Middle East", January 22, 2004. <http://international.ucla.edu>.

¹⁶⁴ Samuel Huntington termed it the "democracy paradox": sometimes democracy can foster forces hostile to its paragon, the West.

¹⁶⁵ A. Garfinkle, "The impossible imperative? Conjuring Arab democracy", *The National Interest*, autumn 2002.

¹⁶⁶ T. Carothers, "Promoting democracy and fighting terror", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2003.

¹⁶⁷ M. Fahmy, "Indignant Arabs say Bush democracy speech a sham", News Center, November 7, 2003, www.commondreams.org.

nancing: \$400 loans to 1.2 million entrepreneurs (with women accounting for 750,000 of that number) spread over five years. Besides these, the project proposed establishment of a Greater Middle East Development Bank, creation of free zones and pressure for Arab countries to join the World Trade Organization. Bush wanted to obtain broad international support for his initiative and planned to launch it at the G-8 summit. The plan was also supposed to alarm the G-8 members, emphasizing that poverty, illiteracy and unemployment in the region, being the roots of extremism, terrorism, international crime and illegal migration were becoming a major threat to their security. At the same time, the plan presented the already existing European Middle East initiative (the "Euro-Mediterranean Partnership", the so-called Barcelona process) and the U.S. State Department sponsored "US-Middle East Partnership Initiative" as complimentary efforts. It also invoked the multilateral reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq as if they were part of the same policy.¹⁶⁸ The project was addressed to what was named the Greater Middle East, the area from North-West Africa to Afghanistan, including not only Arab states but also Israel, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan.

The working version of the project under the title "The G-8 Greater Middle East Partnership" leaked to liberal Arabic daily *Al Hayat* based in London in February 2004, was met with strong criticism from Arab governments, intellectuals and media. They saw in it an unacceptable intrusion in their internal affairs (despite the fact that the project heavily drawn from the Arab-authored Arab Human Development Report).¹⁶⁹ One of the first and angriest Arab critiques of the proposal was written by the chief editor of the Arab Human Development Report, the Egyptian Nader Fergany. He accused the current U.S. administration of "the arrogant mentality", which "behave as if it can decide the fate of states and peoples", and called the Arab states to reject the project.¹⁷⁰ Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak followed the line, describing any attempt to impose reform from outside "delusional" and warned that it would lead to "anarchy". Bahrain's Prime Minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, asserted that "the imposition of any foreign view is not in the interest of the countries of the region". Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal emphasized that the U.S. proposal included "clear accusations against the Arab people and their governments that they are ignorant of their own affairs... those behind this plan ignore the fact ... that we are able to handle our own affairs".¹⁷¹ The Syrian Vice President, Abdel Halim Khaddam went as far as to claim that the initiative was "reminiscent of the situation after World War One, when major powers sought to carve up the region".¹⁷² The Arab League Secretary-General Amre Moussa said that the project was "an unacceptable attempt at dictating the development paths the people should take without consulting

¹⁶⁸ G. Achar, "Greater Middle East: the U.S. plan", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 2004.

¹⁶⁹ As reported by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 17, 2004; www.ceip.org.

¹⁷⁰ N. Fergany, "Critique of the Greater Middle East project: the Arabs sorely need to refuse a reform from abroad", *Al-Hayat*, February 19, 2004.

¹⁷¹ As quoted by K. Gajendra Singh, "America's democracy initiative in Middle East", South Asia Analysis Group, paper no. 1052, www.saag.org.

¹⁷² *Ibidem*.

them.”¹⁷³ The Tunisian human rights activists Moncef Marzouki stressed “the total lack of credibility of the U.S. policy to promote democracy in the Arab world” and went on saying “that U.S. policy as a whole greatly facilitates the growth of extremist Islamist forces, as we are seeing in Iraq and will see elsewhere.”¹⁷⁴ Questions were also raised about the new U.S.-proposed concept of the Greater Middle East, whose only common denominator seems to be that it includes countries “where hostility to the U.S. is strongest, in which Islamic fundamentalism in its anti-Western form is most rife”.¹⁷⁵

The Arab leaders’ criticism of the Bush plan were strengthened even further by the comments of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney that like democracy was a precondition for peace and prosperity in Western Europe, the democratic reform is also essential to a resolution of Arab-Israeli conflict”.¹⁷⁶ To many, this suggested a justification for postponing efforts to solve this conflict. Moreover, as Zbigniew Brzezinski noted, the plan for the Middle East “ignored the historical reality that democracy can flourish only in an atmosphere of political dignity. As long as Palestinians live under Israeli control and are humiliated daily, they will not be attracted by the virtues of democracy. The same is largely true of the Iraqis under the American occupation... The program for Arab democracy will be more successful, and find wider acceptance, if it is matched by efforts to grant sovereignty to the Iraqis and Palestinians. Otherwise, democracy will be seen to many in the Arab world to be window dressing for continued external domination.”¹⁷⁷

Many European commentators were also very critical about the U.S. proposal. Gilbert Achcar wrote in *Le Monde Diplomatique* in April 2004 that Americans now “in the name of democratization” plan “to strengthen [their] grip on Middle Eastern oil wealth and markets and extend its network of military bases and facilities.” European governments did not find the American initiative appealing either. They perceived it as a duplication of their long-term efforts to engage with Arab countries on issues of economic and political reform through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. They feared that American neo-conservatives would appropriate European ideas to support “democratic imperialism” and that the U.S. initiative would jeopardize their own “soft” approach.¹⁷⁸ Thus, European governments and the E.U. itself increased their democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East, “facilitating but not imposing change” and “building partnership” with countries of the region. In particular, they have increased governance funding and aid for the Arab governments that have agreed to negotiate the human rights plans. Great Britain proposed a project entitled “Task Force for Dialogue with the Islamic

¹⁷³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷⁴ M. Marzouki, „The US project for democracy in the Greater Middle East. Yes, but with whom?“, *Al-Hayat*, February 23, 2004.

¹⁷⁵ G. Achcar, „Greater Middle East“. Achcar subtitled that article: “Fantasy of a region that doesn’t exist”.

¹⁷⁶ World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 24, 2004; www.weforum.org.

¹⁷⁷ Z. Brzezinski, “The wrong way to sell democracy to the Arab world”, *New York Times*, March 8, 2004.

¹⁷⁸ R. Youngs, “Europe and the Greater Middle East Initiative”, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 15, 2004; www.ceip.org.

World”, while Germany unveiled the program “Engaging with the Islamic World”, both stressing the partnership approach. European initiatives do not focus directly on promoting democracy in the region; political reforms are rather “hidden” within broader governance and development proposals, “the logic being that the more surreptitious external actors’ efforts, the better the chance for success.”¹⁷⁹

In such a situation, facing all this criticism, the U.S. government scaled-down the original proposal and at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia, on June 8-10, 2004, presented a new version of it under the name “The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative”.¹⁸⁰ That plan was eventually approved by the G-8 leaders. The resolution adopted at that meeting called for “partnership for progress and a common future with the region”. That goal is to be achieved through the establishment of the “Forum for the Future”, a framework for regular ministerial meetings as well as parallel gatherings of civil society and business leaders to discuss political and economic reforms.¹⁸¹ The initiative includes a microfinance program to help small entrepreneurs, a support for training programs for businesses and a project to enhance literacy. A call to settle down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the idea conspicuously absent from the earlier version of the plan, causing wide criticism, was this time included in the document. The plan acknowledged also that reforms cannot be imposed from outside and that different societies will change at different rates.

Thinking about ways to successfully democratize the Arab world, the U.S. recalled the successful Cold War’s so-called Helsinki process, where the West and the communist countries finally recognized European borders and committed themselves not to overturn each other’s governments by force; in exchange they agreed to a dialogue on human rights and increased freedom for civic groups at home. Such an agreement is, however, impossible with the Middle East, at least in the foreseeable future. Thus, in the G-8 plan, despite some wording aimed to “soften” the approach, the Middle East states were treated as “targets” of the reform dialogue and Arab autocrats were not to receive much to be convinced to loosen control of their societies.¹⁸² At the same time, however, the plan includes business and civic actors into its dialogue on democracy; not limiting it only to governments, it provides these groups with the potential for influencing Western policies towards the region (if they grasp the opportunity themselves).

The G-8 adopted reform plan for the Middle East, along with the UN Security Council resolution on Iraq voted at almost the same time indicated an important shift in Bush’s approach to foreign policy matters. In both cases the President accepted far-reaching compromises with the international community: it was the emphasis on multilateralism, quite in contrast with highly criticized earlier American unilateral actions. Time will show whether this was truly a fairly permanent change in the U.S. dealings with the world’s problems or just the election-year image management.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁰ The term „greater” in the draft version was changed for „broader”, as some countries objected to the first one as having some negative political connotations.

¹⁸¹ M. Ottaway, „The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative...”

¹⁸² T. [Cofman] Wittes, “Seize the moment for Arab reforms”, *Daily Star*, June 16, 2004.

President Bush continued the promotion of the democratization agenda during his trip to the NATO summit in Turkey. He called on these Muslims nations to embrace democracy and warned Middle East autocrats, including American allies, that they “must recognize the direction of events of the day”.¹⁸³ The President furthermore acknowledged that Western nations helped to feed extremism by supporting repressive regimes for the sake of the region’s stability. Such policy “did not serve the people of the Middle East... and it has not made Western nations more secure”. Speaking at Galatasaray University Bush stated again that to confront terrorism Muslims nations must modernize. He also warned the Middle East leaders that “suppressing dissidents only increases radicalism.”

Despite a new, better form, the G-8 reform plan received a cold reception in the Arab world. Only five Arab countries accepted President Bush’s invitation for launching it at the summit (only Bahrain from among the GCC states). The most important Arab countries: Saudi Arabia and Egypt (as well as close U.S. allies: Kuwait and Morocco) turned the invitation down, making it clear that they would have nothing to do with the project. Only Jordan openly welcomed the plan as “reflective of the priorities of the region”, but even it warned that reform imposed from outside could backfire. “Opponents of political and social reform will conveniently label reform efforts as mere implementations of a western agenda against the interests of the Arab world and will probably get away with it.”¹⁸⁴ Later also the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, approvingly stated that “the calls for reform coming from abroad need reflection by the people of our region”,¹⁸⁵ while some Arab intellectuals declared that the U.S. plan could give impetus to homegrown reform movement.¹⁸⁶ Nevertheless, many people in the Arab world view the democratization plan as a bargaining tactic by the U.S. to pressure longtime Arab allies into unpopular and difficult decisions, as e.g. pushing the Palestinians to accept unfavorable terms of agreement with the Israelis and supporting American policy in Iraq.

The problem is not that Arab politicians, journalists, intellectuals and people reject what Bush is proposing as such. Majorities of Arabs and other broader Middle East populations support ideas of democracy; they want to live in the states where leaders are freely elected, where there is a freedom of speech and association, where there is equality of all citizens and where the rule of law is respected.¹⁸⁷ The problem is that the same people are against American ideas of democracy and the U.S. policies towards their countries (the U.S. Middle East policy in general, support of Israel, and invasion and occupation of Iraq are the reasons most often cited). “The problem is the messenger not the message” – said the Arab League representative, Nassif Hitti.¹⁸⁸ In general, the U.S. image in the Arab world is very

¹⁸³ S. Sachs, “Bush urges all autocrats to yield now to democracy”, *New York Times*, June 30, 2004.

¹⁸⁴ H. Saleh, “U.S. plan for Middle East worries Arab rulers”, *Financial Times*, June 11, 2004.

¹⁸⁵ H. bin Khalifa Al Thani, “Out of the fog through Arab reform”, *Daily Star*, June 21, 2004.

¹⁸⁶ “US reform plan can boost Arab movements”, Associated Press, July 8, 2004.

¹⁸⁷ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

¹⁸⁸ Nassif Hitti, „Find a fitting cure for the ‘sick man of the world’”, *Daily Star*, July 22, 2004.”

negative and in the last few years has continued to deteriorate: between 2002 and 2004 the number of Arabs who rated the U.S. favorably declined in Morocco from 38 to 11 per cent; in Jordan from 34 to 15 per cent; in Egypt from 15 to 2 per cent; in Saudi Arabia from 12 to 4 per cent.¹⁸⁹ “After what has happened in Iraq, there is unprecedented hatred [of Americans] never equaled in the region”, said President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, the key ally of the U.S. in the region where nearly 100 percent of the population held an unfavorable opinion of the country.¹⁹⁰ Trust towards the U.S. has plunged so deeply that even if Bush is not re-elected, any new administration will find regaining it a very difficult task.

Critics of new American foreign policy goals especially object to selectivity of the neoconservatives: their support of authoritarian regimes in Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Tunisia and Jordan, as opposed to their eagerness to invade Iraq in the name of bringing democratic rule there or attempts to remove from office democratically elected Yasser Arafat. This rises the question whether Washington’s declared policy to support democratization of the Middle East is going to be stable, or is the neoconservative attitude towards democracy a “marriage of convenience” rather than a permanent commitment based on certain ideology.¹⁹¹ In the past, especially during Reagan’s presidency, ‘neocons’ supported friendly autocratic regimes and non-democratic right-wing ‘freedom fighters’; in 1991 they did not oppose canceling first democratic elections in Algeria, only because it was to bring into power anti-American Islamists. It was only after September 11 and the Afghanistan campaign that neocons began to admit that anti-American terrorism was caused by oppressive Arab autocracies and promote the “democratization drive” in the Middle East. As a result, they changed the direction of their previous policy accordingly. Another question asked here is whether the newly proclaimed promotion of democracy in the Arab world will ever rank in the “neocons” policy priorities as high as their commitment to Israeli security (their main argument for strategic alliance with Israel has been that the Jewish state is the only democratic state in the Middle East among Arab autocracies). There are certain doubts about that.

The paradox of the current situation is that the United States has never enjoyed greater power than it does today, yet at the same time U.S. possesses little influence on developments in most countries in the world. The Washington government can compel, but far too often cannot persuade.¹⁹² In effect, many American initiatives, like advancing reforms in the Middle East or defeating terrorism, may not fully succeed.

¹⁸⁹ See note no. 162.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with *Le Monde*, April 20, 2004. Many Americans don’t believe that. “The Arab masses probably hate us less than they abhor their own governments for lack of freedom and economic progress” said Hanson. He also repeated the argument that “both extremist and moderate governments in the Middle East... seek to survive largely through bribery, oppression, and censorship, and by scapegoating Israel and America... In the absence of elections, free speech, or any public audit of government finances, our ‘friends’ must divert the attention of their restless populations to the bogeyman of the West... We must expect and not fear anti-Americanism.” Hanson: “Democracy in the Middle East”.

¹⁹¹ J. Lobe, „Democracy and the neocons: a marriage of convenience”, *Daily Star*, July 21, 2004.

¹⁹² S. R. Berger, “Foreign policy for a democratic president”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

Arab pro-democracy declarations. A response to the U.S. plans?

In the last two or so years some Arab states decided to introduce certain political reforms.¹⁹³ Morocco expanded rights of women; Qatar adopted a new constitution providing for a partially elected parliament and held municipal elections; Bahrain became a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament and active opposition; Saudi Arabia's rulers called for political and economic reform in the whole Arab world (the so-called Prince Abdullah plan), organized several debates with broad range of participants, including Islamists and other opposition figures, and announced first municipal elections. Moreover, in the first half of 2004, the League of Arab States as well as different parties in several Arab countries produced declarations on the need for broad political, social, and economic reforms. There is no doubt that many of these actions were inspired or at least invigorated by American democratization initiatives.

First, in January 2004, there was a large international conference in Sanaa, Yemen, where the declaration was adopted calling for periodically elected legislatures in Arab countries, a free media, the separation of institutional powers and women's empowerment. The conference established the Arab Democratic Dialogue Forum aimed at promoting dialogue, strengthening democracy, human rights and civil liberties, especially freedom of opinion and expression, and reinforcing the partnership between public authorities and civil society.¹⁹⁴

Then, on March 3, the banned Muslim Brotherhood unveiled in Cairo its own reform initiative. The initiative demanded that the Egyptian government rescinds the emergency law and other restrictions on political activity and limit the power of the presidency. The plan further called for reducing the role of the military in politics, privatization of Egypt's economy, purging non-Islamic materials from the media and fostering independence of the judiciary system.

A few days later, on March 12-14, intellectuals and civil society activists, together with former Arab ministers and other government officials discussed the issue of reform in Alexandria, Egypt. The adopted declaration demanded putting an end to the emergency laws existing in many Arab countries, executive term limits, regular elections and a clear-cut separation between legislative and executive powers.¹⁹⁵ The declaration further stressed the universal character of democratic values and the urgent need to promote them in the Arab world. "It is a call on the Arabs to adopt democracy – not because the West wants them to, but because it is best for them."¹⁹⁶ Characteristically, the statement did not mention the occupation of Iraq and Palestine as an obstacle to reforms in the region.

The Arab League, for the first time in its history, managed to take a position on the political reform issue at its summit in Tunis in May 2004 (although not

¹⁹³ A. Kapiszewski, "Democratizing the Arab world"...

¹⁹⁴ R. Roumani, „Will Arab leaders risk losing power to implement reforms?“, *Daily Star*, June 12, 2004.

¹⁹⁵ www.arabreformforum.com.

¹⁹⁶ „A loud silence in Tunis“, *New York Times*, April 1, 2004.

without problems; the first meeting in Tunis in March was cancelled at the last minute due to disagreements over the summit outcome¹⁹⁷). The declaration, adopted at the May summit pledged to 'reaffirm attachment' to human rights, and to 'reinforce' freedom of expression, thought, and worship, and the independence of judiciary as well as to "consolidate democratic practice, broaden participation in political and public life, reinforce the role of all components of civil society... and widen women's participation in the political, economic, social, cultural and educational fields."¹⁹⁸ However, the declaration said that reforms should be implemented in accordance with "A Course for Development and Modernization in the Arab World" – a framework document prepared in Cairo before the summit, where it was explained that reforms should take place according to each country's "cultural, religious, and civilizational understandings and values, circumstance and capabilities". The Tunis summit also adopted a revised version of the Arab Charter on Human Rights, which will enter into force once it has been ratified by seven member states.

In turn, on June 3-4, 2004, the Qatar University hosted a conference of Arab democracy advocates: civil society activists, professors, journalists and members of political movements from across the region. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, in his widely reported speech opening the event stated that: (1) Arab states should consider U.S. proposals for democratic reform rather than rejecting them outright; (2) there are many problems of Arab own creation "that have nothing to do with the outside world", in particular, the ones that do not "spring only from the Palestinian cause"; (3) many Arabs have claimed that if popular participation is broadened it would only result in bringing to power those who would endanger peace security. "Yet, the adoption of reforms has always been the right way to stability"¹⁹⁹. There are not many Arab leaders who would say such things so openly, opposing the popular Islamist standpoint. The conference adopted "The Doha Declaration for Democracy and Reform", calling all Arab states to get modern, democratic institutions; hold free, fair and regular elections; place limits on executive powers; guarantee freedom of association and expression; permit full participation of women in political life; and end extra-judicial procedures, emergency laws, and torture. It also called for the creation of a body to monitor Arab governments' progress on reform and to track the fate of other reform initiatives launched recently in the region. Finally, the declaration stated that "hiding behind the necessity of resolving the Palestinian question before implementing reform is obstructive and unacceptable".

All these declarations have constituted a new phenomenon in the Arab world. Reformists, civil society activists, intellectuals, journalist, although not the un-invited Islamists, with the approval of their governments, and usually with participations of the heads of state and other officials openly debated vital issues related to democratization. But, as Rosemarie Hollis remarked, "it should not stop at

¹⁹⁷ N. MacFarquhar, „Summit's collapse leaves Arab leaders in disarray", *New York Times*, March 29, 2004.

¹⁹⁸ "Arab leaders embrace reform plan", *Arab News*, May 24, 2004.

¹⁹⁹ H. bin Khalifa Al Thani, "Out of the fog through Arab reform"...

the issuing of a statement that everybody is committed to reform. Unless it is accompanied by some real changes, it is insufficient to address the issue."²⁰⁰ On the other hand, these events have provided an opportunity for the West, and the United States in particular, to obtain new forums and identify individuals who could become real and important partners in their democratization attempts.

²⁰⁰ As quoted in R. Roumani, „Will Arab leaders risk losing power”...