

ABSTRACT

Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf

by

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This dissertation challenges the prevailing *rentier* state interpretation of political life in the countries of the Arab Gulf, a theoretical framework little changed for more than a quarter century. It does so by evaluating for the first time the fundamental claim of *rentier* theory to understand the individual-level drivers of political views and behavior among ordinary citizens of rent-based regimes, in particular its assumption that individuals are content to forfeit a role in political decision-making in exchange for a tax-free, natural resource-funded welfare state. By this conception, citizens' degree of economic contentment is the key variable influencing the extent of their political interest and demands for participation; normative support for their governments; and, ultimately, the overall stability of their regimes, with other, non-material factors playing no important systematic role at the individual level.

Yet this dissertation identifies and elaborates one important conditionality to the basic *rentier* premise that economically-satisfied Gulf Arabs make politically-satisfied Gulf Arabs: the existence of societal division along confessional (Sunni-Shi'i) lines, a condition present in each of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Utilizing the results of over a dozen elite interviews and an original 500-household survey of political attitudes in Bahrain, along with parallel survey data from Iraq, I demonstrate that in societies in which confessional membership is politically salient, this shared identity offers a viable basis for mass political coordination in a type of state thought by its very nature to lack one. Under this condition, I show, the political opinions and actions of ordinary Gulf Arabs are not determined primarily by material considerations but by an individual's confessionally-defined position as a member of the political in- or out-group. Moreover, I demonstrate, concerns about the national loyalty of the confessionally-defined political out-group—that is to say, about the perceived threat of Iranian-inspired Shi'a emboldening—means that the latter community is disproportionately excluded from the *rentier* benefits of citizenship. In sum, in Bahrain and other Gulf societies divided along Sunni-Shi'i lines, neither is the *rentier* state willing to offer its presumed material wealth-for-political silence bargain to all citizens, nor are all citizens willing to accept it.