

CHAPTER 2

A Theory of Ethnic-based Political Mobilization in the Arab Gulf *Rentier* States

Borne of the newfound importance of oil-exporting nations in the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of the “*rentier* economy” arose in economics as a description of those countries that rely on substantial external rent (MAHDAVI 1970, 428), the latter defined broadly as a “reward for ownership of natural resources” (BEBLAWI 1987, 51), whether that resource be strategically-located territory, mineral deposits, or, more to present purposes, oil or natural gas reserves. A special category of the *rentier* economy, a “*rentier* state” came to describe those economies in which only a few are engaged in the generation of this rent, the archetypal examples of which being the oil-rich kingdoms of the Arab Gulf. In *rentier* states, in other words, the creation and control over wealth is limited to but a small minority of society—that is to say, to “the state,” or, in the case of the Gulf regimes, to the ruling tribe *qua* state—while the vast majority plays the role either of distributor or consumer.

With such an extreme economic-*cum*-political imbalance thus written into the very definition of what it means to be a *rentier* state, a significant portion of the *rentier* literature concerns itself with an inherent puzzle: namely, how are these regimes seemingly so durable? Stated negatively, why do the citizens or residents of *rentier* states not simply confiscate for their own benefit the rent-generating resource from their physical owners?—the latter, after all, are hopelessly outnumbered. Yet, indeed, far from the gloomy predictions about the post-independence fates of the Gulf monarchies, more than 40 years after British withdrawal “the Arab states of the Gulf region continue to be ruled by the same families, sometimes the same individuals, under the same traditional forms and within virtually the same borders that had been engineered by the British political agents as they departed” (SICK 1997, 11). And all this despite their having witnessed three major regional conflicts; several oil crises; the

rise and fall of Arab Nationalism; as well as the Iranian Revolution, the Arab Spring of 2011, and the consequent threat of similar revolutionary episodes across the Gulf. What, then, to pose the question once more, has enabled these regimes to survive?

Beginning with the earliest statements of the *rentier* state framework, theorists have posited that the resource-controlling parties within *rentier* states can, in short, buy off their would-be domestic opponents through judicious economic policy. The form of such policy may be either positive (rent-controllers offer citizens a portion of their wealth as public and private goods) or negative (they agree to *not* expropriate from citizens as they otherwise would like to). In practical terms, these avenues of popular co-optation correspond to two complementary mechanisms by which modern Gulf governments are said to use their positions as economic hegemon to elicit political acquiescence: first, they employ those who need employment; and, second, they agree not to levy taxes “on the basis,” in Vandewalle’s (1987, 160) words, “of the reverse principle of no representation without taxation.” Together these incentives foster a rent-induced consensus that “helps explain why the government of an oil-rich country ... can enjoy a degree of stability which is not explicable in terms of its domestic economic or political performance” (BEBLAWI AND LUCIANI 1987, 10).

“Every citizen” of a rent-based economy, tells Beblawi (1990, 91), “has a legitimate aspiration to be a government employee; in most cases this aspiration is fulfilled.” Given current public sector employment rates in the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), it would seem that this idea obtains today as much as it did 20 years ago: as of 2007, Gulf citizens working in the public sector “are estimated to account for 58% of total GCC nationals employed. ... This ratio ranges between 50% in Saudi Arabia to 84% in Kuwait and almost 90% in Qatar” (ZAHER 2009, 5). Among the respondents in my 2009 Bahrain survey, around 43% report being employed in the public sector. These already-vast proportions, moreover, are on the rise: public sector jobs in the GCC rose at an average of 5.2% per year during 2006 and 2007, with Qatar recording a spectacular 33% annual growth rate, followed by the UAE and Oman at 5%, Kuwait at 4.4%, Saudi Arabia at 2.9%, and Bahrain at 2.4% (5).

By establishing an entanglement of bloated government ministries; subsidizing large, state-owned conglomerates; and spending huge sums on disproportionately large and well-equipped militaries, Gulf regimes can sop up a young populace that is easily disaffected, eager to marry and find housing, and generally college-educated yet nonetheless ill-equipped for work in the private sector. The upshot, so the argument continues, is that the latter will

be content to live their days as government pensioners and social welfare recipients, careful not to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. For its part, the ruling faction gains a political ally—at worst a self-interest-maximizing, apolitical animal—and needs forfeit only a portion of its rent proceeds to guarantee continued enjoyment of the remainder.

The other half of the standard recipe for achieving political buy-off in *rentier* states is that the government graces the population by not levying taxes. “The cry of the American Revolution,” writes Gause (1997, 77), “was ‘no taxation without representation.’ None of the Gulf governments seems willing to take the political risk that direct taxation entails.” First expressed by Luciani (1987, 75-77) in his seminal volume with Beblawi, the notion that rent-dependent governments will exchange political accountability for freedom from taxes has inspired a wide literature. Anderson’s (1987) influential analysis of the Middle East and North African state offers a similar lesson, that a country with sufficient non-tax revenues “may be virtually ... autonomous from its society, winning popular acquiescence through distribution rather than support through taxation and representation” (10). Crystal (1986; 1990) describes how the once-powerful merchant classes of Kuwait and Qatar shrunk from politics after the discovery of oil relieved them of onerous taxation. Ross, perhaps the most prolific contemporary author of empirical works linking aspects of the *rentier* state to political outcomes, has more recently (2004) refined these claims about taxation in light of his findings that it is not higher taxes *per se* that lead to greater accountability but higher taxes relative to the quality of government services. Still other studies abound, including those that extend the investigation to non-petroleum sources of rent such as minerals, foreign remittances, and international aid; and those that explore the link between taxation and representation in countries outside the Middle East.¹

Whatever the precise version of the story, however, the theoretical implications in any case are clear: as Ayubi (1990, 144) rightly observes,

The taxation function is thus reversed in the oil state: instead of the usual situation, where the state taxes the citizen in return for services, here the citizen taxes the state—by acquiring a government payment [i.e., a salary]—in return for staying quiet, for not invoking tribal rivalries and for not challenging the ruling family’s position.

¹ Indeed, the theoretical foundations of this entire line of argument can be said to originate outside the Middle East in the former monarchies of Western Europe, following the state-building tradition of Schumpeter (1918) and Tilly (1975) and later the institutionalist economics approach epitomized by North and Weingast’s (1989) pioneering account of post-Glorious Revolution England. For a considerably more exhaustive review of this wider taxation-begets-representation literature, see Ross (2001, 232-235; 2004, 230-236).

This, then, is the political bargain that has allowed the unforeseen longevity of *rentier* states, and the Gulf monarchies especially, since their rise to prominence over the last half century. Ordinary citizens are content, ostensibly, to forfeit a role in decision-making in exchange for a tax-free, natural resource-funded welfare state. By this conception, economic well-being is the primary variable influencing the extent of popular political interest and expectations of participation in decisionmaking, with other, non-material individual-level factors playing no important systematic role.²

Studying the *Rentier* State

At first blush, then, there seems to be little about this classical account of the *rentier* state that one should wish to argue, much less write an entire academic thesis. We have seen already how government employment of Gulf citizens is indeed extensive and increasing. We know that taxes on Gulf nationals are non-existent and unimaginable for the foreseeable future. And, above all, we observe that the GCC states continue to enjoy, if not democracy, at least much higher levels of political stability than their non-*rentier* Arab counterparts, presumably as a consequence of items one and two. To illustrate this final point consider the extreme discrepancy in rank between the Gulf and non-Gulf countries on one prominent index of regime stability, the Failed States Index compiled by The Fund for Peace. This list, which is published in *Foreign Policy* and in 2009 reached its fifth iteration, grades 177 nations along twelve social, economic, and political indicators of “state vulnerability.”³

The rankings of all Arab countries included in the 2009 index are recreated below in TABLE 2.1. In addition to its ordinal “Failure Rank” given by the sum of all twelve indicators as reported in the final “Overall” column, also listed is each country’s “Selected” total based on

² Some theorists have tried to expand this list of relevant variables. Skocpol’s (1982) work on Iran concludes that resource-exporting states are able to use their revenues to fund draconian security forces that suppress government opposition, and that this repression explains *rentier* regimes’ durability. Boix (2003) argues that the immobility of oil and other natural resource assets precludes political liberalization because elites could not relocate them in the event that such a move spurred popular calls for redistribution. Ross (2001; 2009) tests the argument that rent-based wealth does not lead to democracy because it does not involve the typical changes in socio-cultural attitudes that come via the standard processes of modernization. Such additions, however, are less convincing than the original mechanisms described by Beblawi and Luciani, a fact that Ross himself now concedes in a working draft of “Oil and Democracy Revisited,” admitting, “I no longer find support for two of the three mechanisms discussed in Ross [2001]; nor is there evidence to support mechanisms alleged by others. The only mechanism that seems to matter is the *rentier* effect” (2009, 25), that is, “the combination of low taxes and high government spending that seems to dampen support for democratic transitions” (2).

³ Descriptions of all twelve indicators are available at <www.fundforpeace.org/web/index.php?Itemid=140>. Note that two “selected” indicators below are taken from the political category as it contains six of the twelve.

TABLE 2.1. *The Failed States Index among Arab Countries*

Country	Failure Rank	Grievance	Delegitimization	Services	Uneven Dev.	Selected	Overall
Sudan	3	9.9	9.8	9.5	9.6	38.8	112.4
Iraq	6	9.7	9.0	8.4	8.6	35.7	108.6
Yemen	19	7.7	8.3	8.5	8.9	33.4	98.1
Lebanon	29	9.2	7.8	6.2	7.4	30.6	93.5
Syria	39	8.2	8.8	5.7	8.0	30.7	89.8
Egypt	43	8.0	8.6	6.4	7.6	30.6	89.0
Algeria	73	7.7	7.7	6.7	7.3	29.4	80.6
Jordan	86	6.8	6.0	5.4	7.4	25.6	77.9
Saudi Arabia	89	8.0	8.4	4.3	7.0	27.7	77.5
Morocco	92	6.8	7.4	6.5	7.8	28.5	77.1
Libya	112	5.8	7.1	4.2	7.1	24.2	69.4
Tunisia	121	5.4	6.6	6.1	7.2	25.3	67.6
Kuwait	125	5.1	6.5	3.5	6.1	21.2	63.4
Bahrain	133	6.4	6.9	3.1	5.9	22.3	59.0
Qatar	138	5.2	6.5	2.6	5.3	19.6	51.9
UAE	139	4.7	6.7	3.6	5.7	20.7	51.8
Oman	146	3.0	6.0	4.5	2.3	15.8	47.2

Source: The Fund for Peace Failed States Index 2009. Available at www.fundforpeace.org. Note that data for the Palestinian Territories are not included in the index.

four indicators representative of the three categories of “state vulnerability,” which are: (1) “Legacy of Vengeance-Seeking Group Grievance or Group Paranoia”; (2) “Criminalization and/or Delegitimization of the State”; (3) “Progressive Deterioration of Public Services”; and (4) “Uneven Economic Development along Group Lines.” These data are instructive in two different respects. First, they afford empirical support for the general *rentier* conclusion that countries bankrolled by substantial external rents are more likely to achieve political stability than those that must depend on healthy domestic economies. We easily perceive, whether by the Overall or Selected total, that the six Gulf states on average far outperform their non-Gulf Arab counterparts in terms of regime stability. Indeed, excepting Saudi Arabia, the GCC countries occupy the five least “vulnerable” positions among all Arab nations. More concretely, even when one includes Saudi Arabia the states of the Gulf achieve mean Overall

TABLE 2.2. *The Failed States Index: Difference in Means between Gulf and Non-Gulf Arab States*

Group	Failure Rank	Grievance	Delegitimization	Services	Uneven Dev.	Selected	Overall
Non-Gulf	128 (20)	7.3 (1.2)	7.6 (0.92)	6.2 (1.1)	7.6 (0.55)	28.7 (3.1)	82.6 (10.7)
Gulf	68 (37)	5.4 (1.7)	6.8 (0.82)	3.6 (0.72)	5.4 (1.61)	21.2 (3.9)	58.5 (47.0)
Difference	60	1.9	0.76	2.6	2.3	7.5	24.1
<i>p</i> -value	0.0033	0.024	0.13	0.0003	0.0018	0.0011	0.0010

Notes: standard deviations reported in parentheses; *p*-values based on two-tailed difference-in-means tests assuming unequal variances.

and Selected failure scores of just 58.5 and 21.2, respectively, compared to 82.6 and 28.7 for non-Gulf societies, as reported in TABLE 2.2 above.⁴ Not only does the Gulf outperform the Non-Gulf group in aggregate, moreover, but it does so also for each of the four individual indicators, and all this with a high degree of statistical confidence.

The other way these data are helpful is that, while they do certainly lend evidence to a broad link between *rentier* states and stability, on closer inspection they also serve to raise fundamental questions about the exact processes by which that link operates theoretically. As noted already, Saudi Arabia, the largest net rent-earner in the entire Gulf, lags noticeably behind other GCC members and even three North African countries, while Libya⁵ and more surprisingly Tunisia boast scores that rival those of the five top-performing Gulf states. Furthermore, according to their Overall scores Qatar, the UAE, and Oman appear to be in a league of their own in terms of regime performance even within the GCC.⁶ Thus we have significant (if not vast) cross-country variation in stability that one cannot explain by relative differences in resource rents—that is, in standard *rentier* terms of political buy-off through rent-funded employment, non-taxation, and public goods. Indeed, the best performer across the board, Oman, has the lowest per-capita rents of any Gulf state save for Bahrain.⁷

These observations call attention to the conditional nature of the *rentier*-stability link, reminding us of the multitude of other possible intermediating variables that may influence how or whether resource wealth translates into state stability. This fact is made plain by the construction of the Failed States Index itself, which is comprised not of one grand “stability” measure but of twelve different subcomponents taken from three larger categories, and no doubt one or another would complain of the omission of some additional indicator. Looking once again at TABLE 2.2, we observe that although the Gulf group achieves lower failure scores than the Non-Gulf group for each of the four selected indicators, nonetheless the magnitude and statistical confidence of this between-group difference varies greatly. Not coincidentally, perhaps, the discrepancy is largest and most significant for those indicators most intimately

⁴ These and all the means of TABLE 2.2 exclude from the Non-Gulf category the extreme cases of Iraq and Sudan, ensuring that these two observations do not unduly influence the tests while rendering the results more robust.

⁵ The strong showing of Libya is not so unexpected, it being the only other Arab state that even approaches the per-capita oil and gas rents of the GCC nations, according to Ross’s (2008) newly-constructed measure. While for this reason Libya may be grouped theoretically with the Gulf states (as it is by Beblawi and Luciani in their original work), in order to maximize in-group homogeneity among constituents of the “*rentier*” category across such relevant variables as geography, political system, history, etc., and so facilitate cross-country comparison, Libya will not figure in the analysis to follow.

⁶ A two-tailed difference-in-means test confirms this, reporting a *p*-value of 0.0478.

⁷ Again, using Ross’s (2008) operationalization.

related to the *rentier* causal logic—the quality of public services and universality of economic development—whereas with regard to the indicators unassociated with material well-being it is less robust. In fact, in the case of the “state deligitimization” indicator, based on levels of corruption, unaccountability, and popular protest, one is unable to affirm with the standard level of statistical confidence that the Gulf average is less than that of the Non-Gulf group.

So it is that after further analysis the *rentier* interpretation of politics in the Arab Gulf does not seem so unassailable. True, the Gulf regimes do not levy income taxes, and, yes, they do benefit their citizenries through employment and other domestic expenditure. They also, at least according to one well-respected operationalization, enjoy more overall stability than their non-Gulf counterparts, on average. Yet in the end none of this can confirm for us what requires confirmation: that it is precisely these economic benefits for ordinary citizens that have *caused* the Gulf states to achieve greater stability. On the contrary, we have from our brief examination of the Failed States Index evidence of variation in stability among the Gulf states that is inexplicable with reference to cross-country differences in public spending and taxation rates merely. What makes Qatar, the Emirates, and Oman stand apart from the geographically and demographically similar Bahrain and Kuwait? Why is Saudi Arabia, in the midst of a massive \$400 billion public spending initiative,⁸ rated as far less stable than any other GCC country, while Oman, the Gulf’s second-lowest per-capita rent-earner, ranks at position 146 above several members of the European Union?

What is more, not only do we witness cross-country variation in overall stability, but we see how the supposed *rentier* advantage obtains more for some of the Index’s individual drivers of stability than it does for others. In particular, the performance of Gulf states as a group vis-à-vis other Arab societies appears to decrease as the indicators move further away from the purely economic toward the underlying social or political. While on the one hand this may be said to be in line with the core *rentier* concern for the economic bases of the state, it also implies that the paradigm thus neglects many other categories of explanatory variables that likely help determine the health of state structures. If initially *rentier* theorists sought to call attention to the crucial role of economics in determining the nature and development of the Arab state, a purpose they have now realized, perhaps it is time we complicate this story further by reemphasizing the conditional nature of the rentierism-stability relationship.

⁸ Announced in 2009, the program was predicated on \$75-per-barrel oil. See “Scenarios: Oil price impact on Gulf Arab spending plans,” *Reuters Online*, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5BJ0KO20091220>>. It has since been augmented by some \$130 billion in new social spending announced in the wake of the 2011 uprisings.

Not all the blame, however, is to be laid at the feet of early expositors of the *rentier* thesis, who, while highlighting the role of the economy, did acknowledge the conditionality of the linkage between economic performance, rent-induced or otherwise, and state stability. Luciani (1987, 65), but two pages into his critical chapter outlining the theoretical framework of the *rentier* state, explains,

The stability of state formations is increased if, beyond being able to appropriate resources for their own ends, they also play an economic role which objectively increases the sum total of resources available to the country that they run. While this is, in itself, neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for stability of state formations, it is reasonable to expect that states that perform a useful economic function will be more easily accepted in the specific form and configuration that they take.

Even more telling, the entire investigation ends with a case study of the Islamic Revolution, a stark lesson in ascribing undue political omnipotence to the Middle East's oil monarchies. No, the problem with contemporary analyses of the *rentier* state stems not primarily from the original theoretical framework itself, which, if it never clearly delineates the “necessary [and] sufficient condition[s] for stability,” seeks justifiably to lay a foundation rather than to see the inquiry through to the end—rather, the real trouble lies with the subsequent attempts in political science to demonstrate the theory's empirical validity. These problems are both methodological and theoretical.

First, in their empirical testing of the *rentier* hypothesis, contemporary scholars have used the causal mechanisms proposed in the early literature—resource rents, government expenditures, and taxation rates—to explain an altogether different dependent variable than that of explicit concern to original *rentier* theorists, namely their modern preoccupation with democracy or the lack thereof. In this way our above examination of the Failed States Index has the important benefit of refocusing the discussion of the *rentier* state back to the political outcome of principal interest to its early framers: state stability (LUCIANI 1987, 65 ff.). For, as Luciani (74) asserts quite unequivocally, “Democracy is not a problem for allocation [*rentier*] states. ... [T]he patrimonial form of government is very well adapted to the specific character of allocation states and vice versa” (77-78). Yet beginning with Ross's 2001 article *Does Oil Hinder Democracy?*, which provoked at least a dozen follow-up studies,⁹ quantitative tests of

⁹ According to his own summation in Ross 2009. Strictly speaking, BARRO 1999 was the first quantitative study to test the influence of oil wealth on democracy, though this was not made the focus of the paper as a whole.

the link between resource rents and democracy have dominated the *rentier* literature. What is more, almost all of these have elected to utilize exactly the same operationalization for their dependent variable: the ubiquitous Polity IV –10 to 10 scale of regime type.¹⁰ The difficulty with this procedure is that, since there is understandably little within- or between-country variation in this measure among the *rentier* states—Saudi Arabia and Qatar are rated –10 for each year of their existence; the UAE is a perennial –8; modern Oman ranges between –10 and –8; and Bahrain and Kuwait from –10 to –7¹¹—and because the fuel rents of the six Gulf states exceed the rest of the world by two orders of magnitude—according to Ross’s own replication data for his 2008 article on oil and gender equality,¹² the GCC mean for per-capita fuel rents is \$11,339, compared to \$270 for the other 163 countries in the sample—for these two reasons nearly all of the variation in “democracy” attributed to “oil” should in truth be attributed to the Gulf only. In which case we find ourselves in the same position we began, namely with the question of how to understand the uniqueness of Arab Gulf politics.

A simple plot of these two variables for the full sample of 170 nations clearly reveals the methodological issue underlying attempts to associate resource rents with democracy in the customary manner. Below FIGURE 2.3 depicts the relationship between a nation’s 2007 Polity IV regime score and Ross’s 2008 fuel rents per capita measure¹³ using data obtained from the latter author for purposes of statistical replication. Now, the first thing one notices is that only a small proportion of the countries are even identifiable due to the large cluster of observations hovering at the far end of the *x*-axis. Of those that do stand out, six are the GCC states, highlighted in red for ease of identification; the others include Brunei (BRN) and Libya (LBY). We see therefore how despite standardization of the rents per capita measure the extreme between-country variation in rent-generation noted above—that is to say, the vast difference separating *rentier* and non-*rentier* economies—obscures the true relationship between resource rents and democracy. Indeed, it is evident that the bivariate least-squares regression line describing this relationship, which purports to show an immensely significant

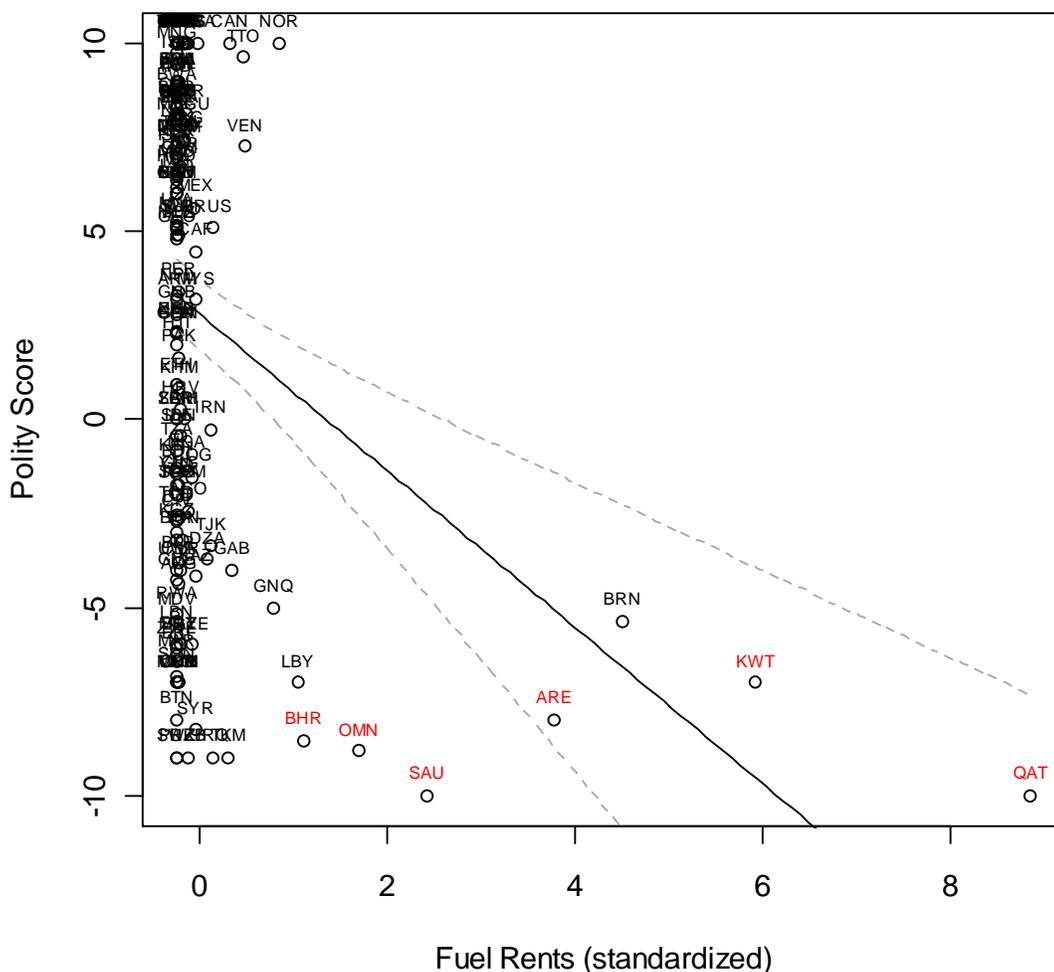
¹⁰ The popular REGIME variable from Gurr’s Polity IV dataset places states on a scale from full autocracy (–10) to full democracy (10) for the years 1800-2008. See <<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>>.

¹¹ Libya, if one wished to include it, is a perennial –7.

¹² A paper, incidentally, which won the 2009 award for best article in the *American Political Science Review*.

¹³ An upgrade over the standard “oil exports-over-GDP” operationalization of rent-dependence, OIL RENTS PER CAPITA is defined as the total value of a state’s yearly oil and gas production minus country-specific extraction costs, including the cost of capital. The new measure is more precise for its inclusion of domestically-consumed oil and gas and, adds Ross (2008), it also “avoids endogeneity problems that come from measuring exports instead of production, and from using GDP to normalize oil wealth” (III-II2).

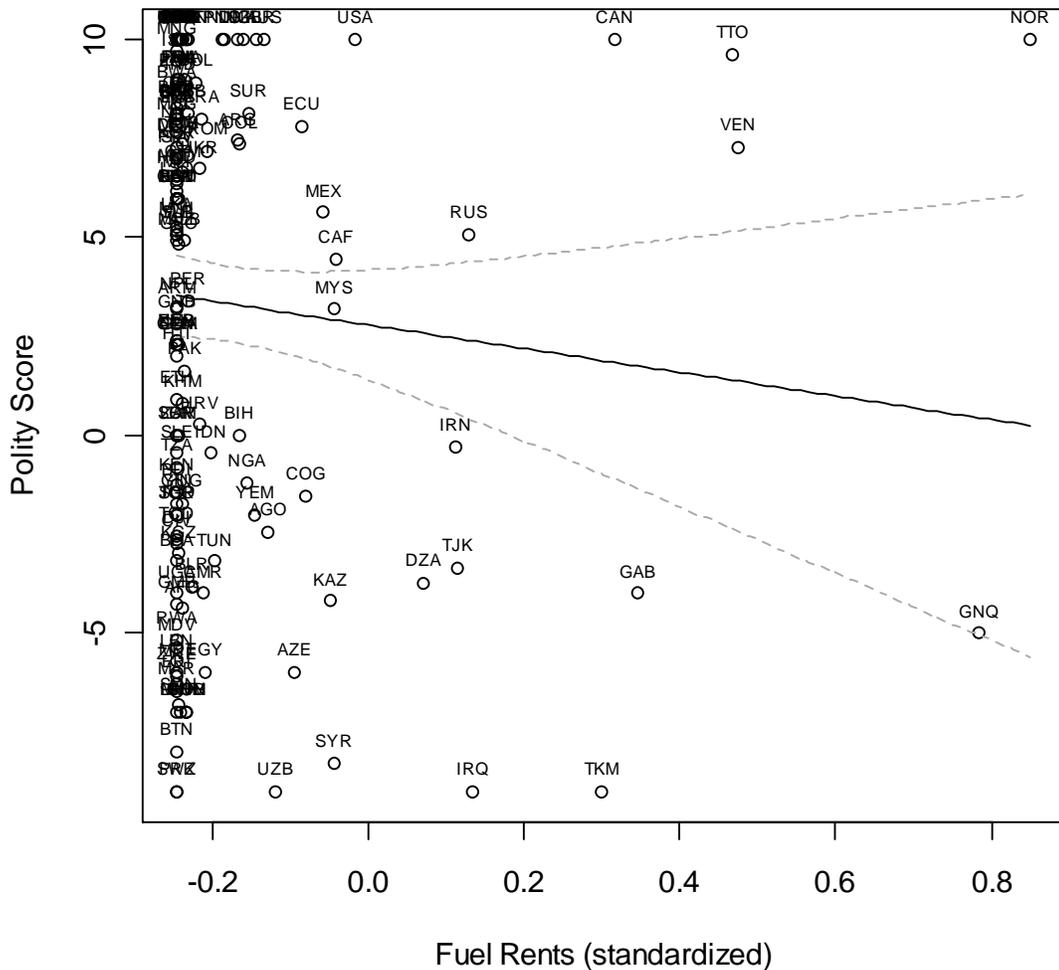
FIGURE 2.3. *Fuel Rents per Capita and Democracy (from Ross 2008)*



negative association between a country's per capita rents and polity score, is almost entirely dictated by the small number of outlying observations comprised of the *rentier* economies of the Arab Gulf along with Libya and Brunei.

When we omit these eight outliers we find that the picture, though more in focus, is still far from clear. FIGURE 2.4 illustrates the results of this exclusion. While the regression line describing the estimated relationship between polity and rents remains apparently negative, its coefficient (slope) is no longer statistically significant. In fact, as indicated by the dotted upper and lower bands of the 95% confidence interval, one is unable to rule out the possibility even that the true relationship is positive (upward-sloping) rather than negative. It might

FIGURE 2.4. *Fuel Rents and Democracy, excluding the Rentier States*



therefore be said that the most common application of the *rentier* state framework in political science today, as an explanation for the lack of democracy in resource-rich nations, not only errs in its choice of dependent variable but, in doing so, paradoxically draws one back to the original task of the *rentier* theorists: understanding the political ramifications of a mode of economy unique to a finite group of nations. At bottom, FIGURES 2.3 and 2.4 demonstrate how the category “*rentier*” exists as a class of state of which one either is or is not a member, as per Luciani’s (1987, 63 ff.) dichotomy of allocative (*rentier*) versus productive (*non-rentier*) states. The mystery, accordingly, is not whether an additional dollar of oil profits in Denmark leads to some marginal political change, but whether it indeed is true that in a handful of *rentier*

states, six of which are the Arab Gulf monarchies, politics operates qualitatively differently than it does elsewhere.

This discussion leads directly to a consideration of the more fundamental, theoretical problem affecting extant attempts to demonstrate the empirical validity of the *rentier* state model. Simply stated, previous studies have failed to test the actual individual-level causal processes that the theory posits. It is, after all, very explicit in claiming that the reason states with sizable external rents tend to be stable (and authoritarian) is because ordinary individual citizens, if satisfied economically, are content to remain deferential politically. Rather than evaluate this specific causal hypothesis, however, investigators have sought to link country-level economic variables such as resource rents, taxation rates, and government spending to country-level political outcomes like regime type or democratization. Yet such studies can, at best, only confirm the existence of these macro associations; absent a new theory that ties the latter together directly without recourse to the individual level of analysis, they bring us no closer to knowing whether the *rentier* model is correct in its account of what underlies these links. For the theory's boldest statement is not what it says about rent-dependent states themselves but what it assumes about their citizens: that it understands the drivers of popular interest and participation in politics, what it is that inclines ordinary citizens to seek an active role in political life or, alternatively, to shrink from it. These are no small claims.

Of course, the form of previous empirical testing was likely determined in large part by the nature of available data, which for reasons one might well understand have not been informed by mass surveys of the political attitudes of ordinary Arabs, to say nothing of those of Gulf Arabs, until quite recently, and even then on a limited and sporadic basis. Thus the failure of extant studies to test the individual-level causal story posited by *rentier* theorists, while significant, is not necessarily a product of theoretical or methodological oversight. With the completion in 2008 of the first wave of the Arab Democracy Barometer (AB) survey project, however, as well as that of my Bahrain study one year later, further neglect of this inquiry now that such an opportunity presents itself would represent continuation down a path that is incapable, ultimately, of answering the most elemental questions to which we seek answers: What causes individuals to incline toward, or abstain from, politics in the *rentier* states?—indeed, in the most emblematic and, in practical political terms, the most important of all *rentier* states, those of the Arab Gulf? Is the prevailing explanation correct in identifying material well-being as the dominant factor determining such an outcome? If so,

is this relationship between personal economy and personal politicality a universal one, or does it obtain only under certain conditions? in certain countries? or for certain individuals?

Thus one might dare to say that the theoretical architecture of the *rentier* state first described in the 1970s and repeated until today—the wealth-for-silence bargain extended to citizens of rent-based regimes—in fact has never actually been evaluated empirically. For all the studies that have since purported to do so, insofar as these have examined associations between country-level phenomena rather than analyze the link between material well-being and political involvement among individuals, like the science of gravity they have tested only the observable outward effects of *rentier* state theory rather than its internal causal processes. And, to be sure, the difference is not inconsequential. We have seen in our consideration of the Failed States Index that not all states are equally successful at converting external rents into domestic stability, there being important cross-country variation within the Arab Gulf that one cannot explain without a clearer understanding of how interceding variables—at both the country- and individual-level—serve to condition the relationship between politics and economics in rent-reliant states.

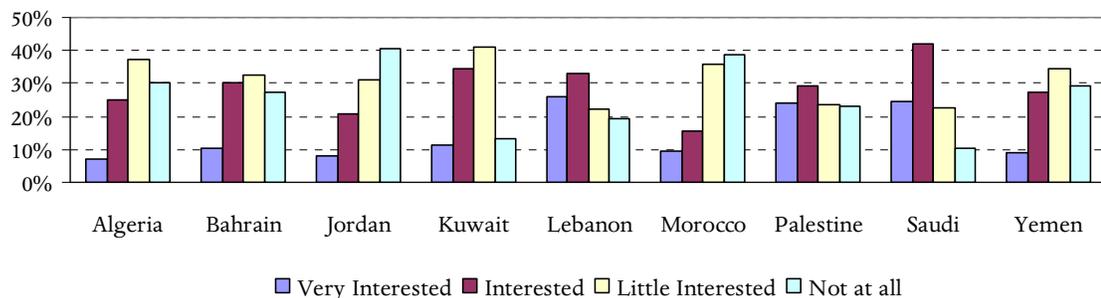
In sum, our current comprehension of politics in the *rentier* states, of which the six Arab Gulf nations represent the archetypal examples, suffers from two critical flaws that the present study aims to remedy. First, the *rentier* framework posits in effect an unconditional relationship between external rents, political buyoff, and ultimately regime stability that is supported neither empirically as represented by our review of the Failed States Index nor by more general observation of domestic political oppositions across the GCC, which in their relative strength and composition vary of course quite dramatically. While it is therefore correct in predicting the superior performance of rent-based countries vis-à-vis their non-*rentier* counterparts in absolute terms, the theory is unable to account for relative differences among the *rentier* (that is, Gulf) states themselves, which for one interested in knowing how politics operates in the region is precisely the most important bit. Second, notwithstanding the vigorous research agenda that has surrounded the *rentier* state, in fact we still know quite little about the causal processes that underlie this category, particularly if one's question does not concern these regimes' relative lack of democracy but rather their unforeseen longevity and the persistence of their supposedly obsolete modes of rulership and citizenship, the latter inquiries being of foremost interest to the early *rentier* theorists. And such will remain the case until we investigate the latter's claims as actually formulated rather than mere proxies.

Mystery Solved?: A Direct Assessment of the *Rentier* Hypothesis

Armed now with the individual-level data required to do so, all that is left, then, is to show that the variation we observe in regime stability both (a) between the *rentier* and non-*rentier* Arab states; and (b) among the six Gulf *rentier* states themselves is simply a function of their relative levels of popular political demands, itself a product of regimes' relative abilities to buy off their domestic constituencies through the standard *rentier* mechanisms, i.e. to make individuals sufficiently well-off materially as to cause them to disavow politics. This proved, one will have finally answered the questions stemming from our analysis of the Failed States Index above and, more generally, will have confirmed the efficacy of the causal mechanisms proposed in the *rentier* state thesis—correct? Not exactly. In fact, as it turns out, probing the relationship between rentierism and the political orientations of ordinary Arab citizens, far from solving our puzzle, only confuses matters much further. This is because, according to data from recent Arab Barometer and World Values surveys, citizens of the Arab Gulf *rentier* states, rather than being *less* political than other Arabs, in fact show themselves consistently as being *more* political, *more* inclined towards politics and political action, and *less* likely to defer to the wisdom of their governments.

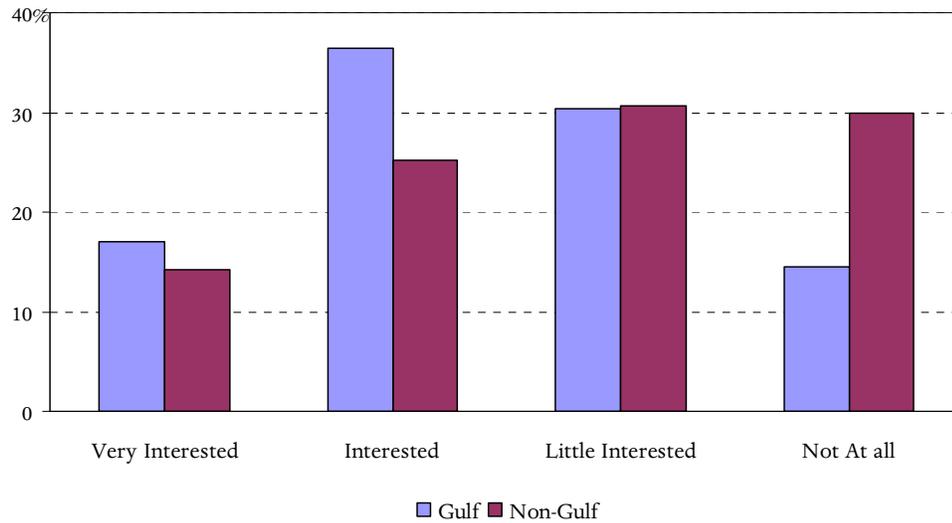
For a clearer illustration of the challenge facing the student of Arab Gulf politics, consider FIGURE 2.5 below, which shows the aggregate levels of political interest in nine Arab countries.¹⁴ Along with Palestinian and Lebanese respondents, citizens of the three Gulf

FIGURE 2.5. *Aggregate Levels of Political Interest in Nine Arab Countries*



¹⁴ The data for Saudi Arabia are from 2003 (the 2000-2004 wave of the World Values Survey); those for Bahrain from my 2009 survey; and the rest from the Arab Barometer between 2005 and 2008. The samples are random and nationally-representative, and range from 500 individuals in Bahrain to 1,300 in Algeria. Respondents were asked: “In general, what is the extent of your interest in politics?” (“بصفة عامة، ما مدى اهتمامك بالسياسة؟”)

FIGURE 2.6. Political Interest in Gulf versus Non-Gulf Arab States



states report, contrary to *rentier* predictions, the highest levels of political interest of all those asked. The proportion of respondents who answer that they are either “very interested” or “interested” in politics is 67% in Saudi Arabia, 59% in Lebanon, 54% in the Palestinian Territories, 46% in Kuwait, 40% in Bahrain, 36% in Yemen, 32% in Algeria, 28% in Jordan, and 25% in Morocco. Furthermore, even including those in Palestine and Lebanon the mean proportion of “very interested” and “interested” respondents reaches just 39% among non-Gulf countries, compared to 51% for Gulf Arabs. This marked discrepancy is depicted in FIGURE 2.6. A formal comparison of means test rejects the null hypothesis that the Gulf average is equal to or less than the non-Gulf average with a *t*-statistic of more than 13. If one would worry that this relationship between Gulf citizens and higher political interest is perhaps a spurious one confounded by intervening variables such as education, economy, gender, and so on, TABLE 2.7 below confirms that this is not the case. Here we find the results of an ordered probit model estimating the effect on political interest of an individual’s residing in a Gulf country compared to a non-Gulf country. We see that even after controlling the effects of AGE, SEX, EDUCATION, ECONOMIC SATISFACTION, and RELIGIOSITY still the GULF RESIDENCE indicator predicts POLITICAL INTEREST at a very high level of statistical significance. In more practical terms, the estimated marginal effect of GULF RESIDENCE—that is, the expected change in political interest if one could hold all other variables constant at their means and simply switch an individual from a non-Gulf resident to a Gulf resident—is to decrease the

TABLE 2.7. *Estimating the Effect of Gulf Residence on Political Interest by Ordered Probit*

Variables	POLITICAL INTEREST (ascending)		
	<i>B</i>	<i>z</i>	$p > z $
AGE (ascending ordinal)	0.0634	6.58	0.000
SEX (dummy: 0 equals female)	0.231	9.53	0.000
EDUCATION (ascending ordinal)	0.123	15.54	0.000
ECONOMIC SATISFACTION (descending ordinal)	0.0342	1.97	0.048
RELIGIOSITY (ascending ordinal)	0.00641	0.40	0.689
GULF RESIDENCE (dummy: 0 equals non-Gulf)	0.345	12.20	0.000
<i>N</i>		8055	
<i>Pseudo R</i> ²			0.0252

Note: Both models are estimated by ordered probit (`oprobit` in Stata 10.2) with robust standard errors.

probability that one has “no political interest” by 10% and the likelihood that he has “little political interest” by 4%; and to increase the probability that he has “some political interest” by 5% and the chance that he has “a lot of political interest” by 9%.¹⁵

Now if one should further wonder, finally, whether after all mere political interest among citizens is about as much an existential threat to the *rentier* model as it is to the Gulf regimes themselves—that is to say, not the gravest one—and that a 9% or 10% boost from Gulf residence is equally anticlimactic, then he will be glad to discover TABLE 2.8, which exhibits two political actions of more moment each of which is similarly impacted by one’s being a resident of a Gulf state and each of which, therefore, once again flies in the face of *rentier* logic. We see for a second time that the GULF RESIDENCE variable as a determinant of political activity is both statistically and substantively significant. In this case, it is a positive predictor of the extent of individuals’ participation in two political actions that are noteworthy at least by Gulf standards: meeting with others to discuss an issue or to sign a petition; and attending a demonstration or protest march.¹⁶ As for its substantive impact, this Gulf residence effect

¹⁵ These as other marginal effect estimates were obtained with Stata’s `mfx2` and `prchange` scripts.

¹⁶ Respondents were asked whether they have engaged in the following “never,” “once,” or “more than once”:

TABLE 2.8. Estimating the Effect of Gulf Residence on Political Actions by Ordered Probit

Variables	PETITION SIGNING OR MEETING ATTENDANCE			DEMONSTRATION OR PROTEST ATTENDANCE		
	B	z	$p > z $	B	z	$p > z $
AGE	0.000993	0.09	0.932	-0.0464	-3.98	0.000
SEX	0.357	11.18	0.000	0.344	10.78	0.000
EDUCATION	0.100	10.59	0.000	0.0700	7.29	0.000
ECONOMIC SATISFACTION	-0.0364	-1.71	0.087	0.0323	1.52	0.129
RELIGIOSITY	0.00977	0.47	0.636	0.0124	0.061	0.539
GULF RESIDENCE	0.307	7.07	0.000	0.228	5.27	0.000
N		7115			7139	
Pseudo R ²			0.0307			0.0235

Note: Both models are estimated by ordered probit (`oprobit` in Stata 10.2) with robust standard errors.

is approximately on par with the effect of the *SEX* control variable in this model. That is, the augmenting effect of Gulf residence on issue meetings/petition signing and demonstration participation (with its coefficients of 0.307 and 0.228, respectively) approaches that of gender (0.357 and 0.344). So to the extent we can agree that among the countries surveyed one's being a woman rather than a man presents a substantial barrier to participating in such activities, then to a like degree we must be impressed by the substantive influence of one's being a resident of a Gulf country on inclination toward political activism.

Yet perhaps even with this one or another skeptic is not convinced, one who might note that political activity per se does not imply political opposition, that there are many reasons one might sign a petition or join a protest that have nothing to do with frustration with one's government or any political cause at all—in short, that nothing in the preceding precludes the *rentier* position that citizens of the Gulf, if maybe politically energetic, are not still politically deferential in return for their lives of economic privilege. To address this final

(1) "حضور لقاء أو اجتماع من اجل بحث موضوعا ما أو التوقيع على عريضة"؛ (2) "المشاركة في مظاهرة أو مسيرة." Note that in Saudi Arabia, unsurprisingly, this question was not asked. Hence the "Gulf" component of the sample here include just Bahraini and Kuwaiti respondents. This also applies to the TABLE 2.9 model below.

TABLE 2.9. Estimating the Effect of Gulf Residence on Political Deference by Ordered Probit

Variables	POLITICAL DEFERENCE (ascending)		
	B	z	$p > z $
AGE	0.0229	2.08	0.037
SEX	0.0704	2.45	0.014
EDUCATION	-0.0617	-6.57	0.000
ECONOMIC SATISFACTION	-0.105	-5.11	0.000
RELIGIOSITY	-0.0328	-1.73	0.084
GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION (ascending continuous)	0.127	23.51	0.000
GOVERNMENT HELPS IMPROVE LIVES (descending ordinal)	-0.160	-8.93	0.000
GULF RESIDENCE	-0.465	-11.60	0.000
N		5936	
Pseudo R ²			0.0772

Note: Both models are estimated by ordered probit (oprobit in Stata 10.2) with robust standard errors.

ambiguity we require one last test of the explanatory power of Gulf residence, the results of which are summarized above in TABLE 2.9. One notices the inclusion for additional assurance of two new control variables: a measure of government satisfaction¹⁷ and a measure of the extent to which a respondent agrees that his government provides citizens with the means to improve their lives.¹⁸ Finally, the dependent variable of interest here, political deference, is measured as the extent of a respondent's agreement with the following statement: "citizens must support the government's decisions even if they disagree with those decisions."¹⁹

Just as before, though, these new controls do nothing to dampen the effect of the GULF RESIDENCE variable, whose statistical and substantive significance is here as pronounced

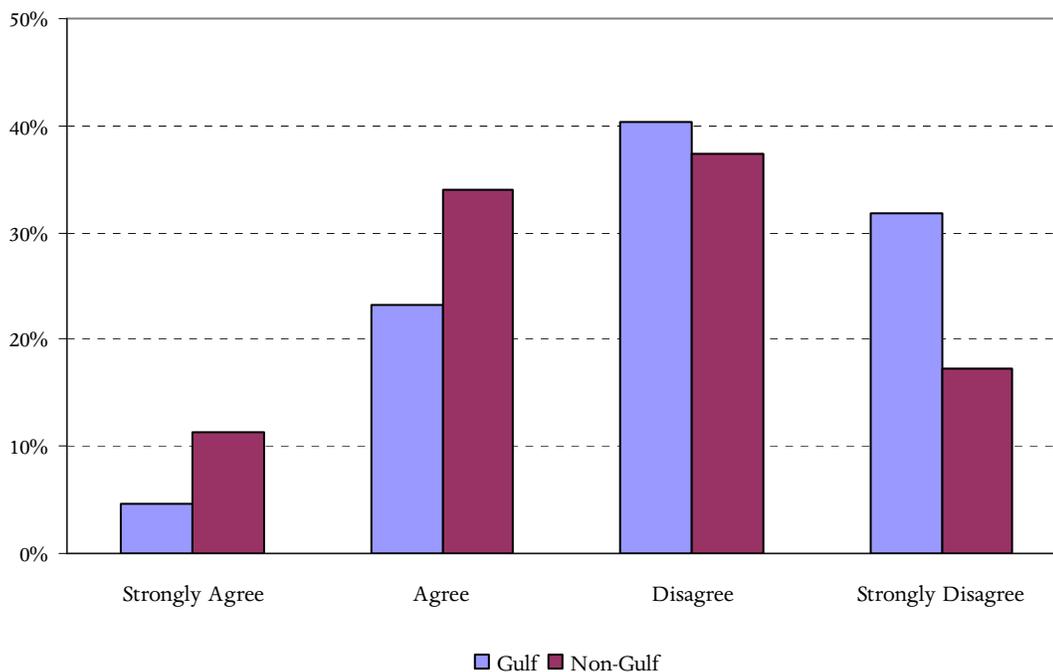
¹⁷ This is a simple 1-10 scale on which a respondent is asked to rate his overall satisfaction with government performance. The Arabic reads, "إلى أي درجة أنت راض عن أداء الحكومة؟"

¹⁸ Specifically, respondents are asked the extent to which they agree that "the government provides citizens the necessary conditions to improve their lives through their own efforts":

"هل تقوم الحكومة بتوفير الظروف الملائمة للمواطنين لتحسين حياتهم من خلال جهدهم؟"

¹⁹ That is, "ما مدى اتفاقك أو معارضتك للعبارة التالية؟: 'يجب على المواطنين دعم قرارات الحكومة حتى لو اختلفوا مع هذه القرارات.'"

FIGURE 2.IO. *Predicted Probabilities of Political Deference amongst Gulf versus Non-Gulf Respondents*



as ever. While the relationships between political deference and the other controls variables are as one might have supposed—older respondents are more deferential, more educated ones less so; those more satisfied with government performance more deferential; those less economically satisfied less so; and so on—once more we find a strong, negative relationship between being a Gulf resident and political deference. In fact, the marginal effect of Gulf residence—again, the difference between two respondents identical across all other controls and distinguished solely by one’s being from the Gulf—is a 15% increase in the probability that one “strongly disagrees” with this statement, a 3% increase in the likelihood that he “disagrees”; and, on the other hand, a 11% decrease in the probability that one “agrees” and a 7% decrease in the likelihood that one “strongly agrees.” For a clearer illustration of what these effects mean in practical terms, consider FIGURE 2.IO above, which shows the predicted levels of POLITICAL DEFERENCE among Gulf and non-Gulf citizens based on estimates from our TABLE 2.9 model. Here we see how these seemingly small percentage changes due to Gulf residence are in fact very substantial: the estimated probability that one “strongly disagrees” with our statement of political deference, for example, jumps from just 17% amongst non-

Gulf respondents to 32% amongst Gulf Arabs. This 15% increase in absolute terms, then, is more than an 88% relative increase in the likelihood of “strong disagreement”; likewise, the 7% absolute decrease in the probability one “strongly agrees” attributable to Gulf residence equates to a drop of over one-half, or –58%; and so on with the remaining two responses.²⁰ Recall, moreover, that these are the residual effects of Gulf residence *after* controlling for the other variables that one might imagine relate on the individual level to political deference. In other words, that the GULF RESIDENCE variable is a consistently strong predictor of the sort of political activities and opinions recorded in TABLES 2.7–2.9 indicates that there is something about Arab Gulf residents, something *independent* of their education levels, their economic satisfaction, their happiness with their governments’ performance, and so on, that renders them more likely to incline toward politics, makes them more likely to undertake political actions, and leads to lower levels of political deference.

What this something is leads us to a separate set of questions—indeed, impels us on to the remainder of the present inquiry; for now, though, what we know is that the foregoing represents no less than the exact opposite of the result one would expect to obtain based on simple *rentier* assumptions. It would be one thing, certainly, if ordinary citizens of the Gulf were found to be neither more nor less likely than other Arabs to be politically interested, active, and deferential. Even this would run counter to *rentier* predictions, but perhaps our measures were imprecise, sample of countries too limited, etc., and thus we might dismiss the outcome as ambiguous. Yet we have seen that citizens of the high-rent Arab Gulf states, far from being *less* political than other Arabs, in fact show themselves consistently as being *more* political, *more* inclined towards politics and political action, and *less* likely to defer to the wisdom of their governments. In sum, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, at least for Bahraini, Kuwaiti, and Saudi Arabian nationals in the latter half of the 2000s, the ostensive *rentier* link between the economic benefits of citizenship and political apathy does not exist.

One might recall that the foregoing analysis was intended to explain an empirical anomaly tied to our introductory reading of the Failed States Index, namely why it is that among the Gulf *rentier* states the most stable regimes are not those with the greatest levels of

²⁰ It may be obvious now that the marginal effects reported for our very first model predicting levels of political interest are likewise quite substantial in relative terms. There, the absolute percentage changes for the four respective response categories: –10%, –4%, +5%, +9%, correspond to relative percent changes of –37%, –11%, +18%, and +67%. At the time this was left obscured so as to allow us to develop the devil’s advocate position.

per-capita resource rents (with which they might be able to pacify their populations), as one would expect according to a standard interpretation of the *rentier* political bargain. Instead, we found no apparent relationship between stability and external resource rents in the Gulf, with the largest net rent-earner and public-spender of all, Saudi Arabia, being by far the worst performer, while the second-lowest per capita rent-earner in the GCC, Oman, proved the best. Well, no matter, we thought: if we can simply show that this variation is a result of variation in the underlying political attitudes of citizens in these countries, then the issue is solved. After all, why should we expect a direct relationship between per-capita rents and political placation when the link may be conditioned by any number of intervening variables such as the character of political institutions, the quality of rent-funded economic benefits, and so on? This investigation offered the added bonus, finally, of constituting an initial first test of the individual-level causal story implied in the *rentier* state framework.

Alas, our one empirical anomaly is become two. On the other hand, with this new wrinkle the inquiry is also much more interesting. For now we must explain not only (1) the variation in relative stability of the Gulf states if the answer is not to be found in the relative political orientations of their citizenries, as per *rentier* assumptions; but also (2) how it can be that the Gulf *rentier* regimes, inasmuch as their populations seem to be *more* politically active and conscious than their non-*rentier* Arab peers, enjoy on average far more stability than the other Arab countries. That is, if the ubiquitous stereotype of the Gulf “oil sheikh,” happy to abandon his country to rule by princes and “Islamic extremists” while he revels in a life of luxury and excess made possible by his cut of the nation’s oil revenue—if this apolitical Gulf Arab does not exist, or exists only as an exception or as a possibility of an altogether different political reality, then how is it that the entire region has fared so much better than the rest of the Arab world? Stated differently still, if the Gulf region is home to an unexpected cache of political enthusiasm among everyday people, whither is all this directed if not, apparently, toward ruling families and governments?

To answer these questions we must first form some conception of the origins of this popular inclination toward political life in the Gulf, contradicting as it does so much received wisdom from decades of *rentier* theorists. Here our observations admit of two possibilities, each with its own implications for the efficacy of the *rentier* model. First, political activism may just be a result of structural limitations upsetting the typical system of patronage linking

the region's rulers and ruled—public sectors may now be too saturated to employ additional would-be supporters; immigration and fertility rates too high to allow ample construction of new housing projects; or military budgets too vast to finance competing public goods—in which case the question is one of public policy. To quell heightened political concern states might improve education to produce graduates who qualify for private sector positions and thus need not look to the state for employment; stem the incessant inflow of cheap migrant labor; and, most obviously, cut military expenditures to less than their current world-leading levels. A second possibility, however, is that the *rentier* state paradigm itself has misjudged the drivers of political interest among Gulf Arabs, or has not defined them clearly in the first place. Then the issue at stake is more fundamental and reopens the inquiry into how politics actually operates in the region. In which case standard refrains such as “No taxation, so no [basis for] representation” to describe the political bargain cut in Arab oil monarchies may be more analytically familiar and convenient than they are accurate.²¹

At the most basic theoretical level, then, the aim of the present dissertation is to solve this problem of the dysfunctional Gulf *rentier* state—a state swimming in historical amounts of rent and yet unable to buy political disinterest. The key to explaining the puzzle, it shall be seen, lies in a factor omitted altogether from the *rentier* state framework: the region's deep-seated ethno-religious divide that not only strains internal relations within Gulf Arab societies but also shapes in fundamental ways relations between them, with their neighbors, and with great power patrons, especially the United States. By providing an alternative basis around which class-based politics, otherwise precluded by the allocative nature of the *rentier* state, can emerge in Gulf societies, the Sunni-Shi'i division in Islam, I argue, leads to higher levels of popular political activity and dissent than the standard *rentier* model would predict. Whereas typically citizens of *rentier* societies have incentives to compete independently for a greater personal share of state benefits, in countries with a significant ethnic cleavage, such as exists in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Kuwait, a shared sense of communal

²¹ A possible third explanation, based on the so-called “repression effect” tested in Ross 2001 (cf. note 2), is that states' security forces are for some reason unable to carry out their normal, rent-funded duty of suppressing government opposition. That such a breakdown has occurred, however, is theoretically posterior to and indeed only begs the question of *why* it has occurred. In which case we are returned once again to the same two possibilities: structural difficulties (perhaps the state no longer has the money to fund the secret police; they lack the manpower to keep up with a growing opposition; the police is growing too powerful and leaders wish to reign them in; etc.); or a mischaracterization of the nature of the opposition (i.e., government critics understand the consequences of acting out but choose to do so anyway).

identity and solidarity offers a focal point around which group politics can crystallize and supplant individual jockeying for government favor as the dominant political *modus operandi* in the *rentier* state. This explains why the more ethno-religiously homogeneous²² Gulf states of the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar have been more successful at converting oil and gas surpluses into political stability *à la* standard *rentier* procedure, but it also suggests a reason why heightened political consciousness in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, while perhaps a headache for their ruling families, has not spelled disaster either.

For while ethno-religious categories come to supersede the individual as the basis of political action, these blocs do not emerge primarily as contenders to the ruling family's political power but as competitors against each other—competitors certainly over their relative shares of state benefits, but competitors too over the very character of the nation itself: its history and cultural identity; the bases of citizenship; and the conditions for inclusion in government service. One's political involvement in the ethnically-contested *rentier* state is thus not limited by the acquisition of material goods but is influenced crucially by the pursuit of intangible goods tied to one's group: its relative status in society, its relative political power as enshrined in state institutions, and its relative access to the ruling elite. Thus no little energy is spent vying for greater allocation of resources and societal influence for one's group, decrying the inequitable distribution thereof, and vilifying the opposing faction; yet in the end a great deal of this effort is directed not at the government but at the rival camp. In this sense a potentially-destabilizing force can be captured or deflected by the regime, which often has an interest (and a hand) therefore in perpetuating these inter-ethnic struggles.

Ethnicity, Group Politics, and the Dysfunctional *Rentier* State

“Consider,” says Yates (1996, 35) of a *rentier* society, “the following options for class-based politics: a declining rural-agricultural sector; a state-sponsored industrial sector; a booming service sector. Whence the revolution?” Indeed, beginning with the earliest *rentier* theorists observers have held out little hope that anything resembling a party system or a popular political movement might take root in an allocative economy. Not only, as Yates laments, is there no natural social grouping like a taxpaying middle class from which such a push might originate, but moreover the patronage system itself incentivizes individual—rather than

²² Here as elsewhere I speak only of Arab nationals and exclude any systematic consideration of foreign laborers, the latter subject demanding a separate inquiry unto itself.

group—efforts to secure material benefits. “To the individual who feels his benefits are not enough,” Luciani (1989, 74) explains,

the solution of manoeuvring for personal advantage within the existing setup is always superior to seeking an alliance with others in similar conditions. In the end, there is always little or no objective ground to claim that one should get more of the benefits, since his contribution is generally dispensable anyhow.

Thus it is that in *rentier* societies the economy offers little basis for political coordination, since “the politics of allocation states leave little ground for economic interests of citizens not belonging to the elite to be represented” (76).

All this leads Luciani to make in passing what today can only appear a rather prescient prediction, that in *rentier* societies “parties will develop only to represent cultural or ideological orientations. In practice, Islamic fundamentalism appears to be the only rallying point around which something approaching a party can form in the Arab allocation states.” A look at the region’s two operative legislatures in Kuwait and Bahrain, for instance, seems to confirm exactly this: at the time of writing, a majority of the seats in both parliaments are held by political blocs based on religion.²³ In Kuwait, followers of the Salafī (“Wahhābī”) and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies combine to form a Sunni bloc of 13 (of 50 total) seats, while three separate Shi‘a blocs control a total of 6. Only two blocs are unrelated to religion: a bloc of Sunni and Shi‘i political liberals, which controls 7 seats, and the Popular or People’s Bloc, with 3 seats. The remaining 21 seats in Kuwait are held by individuals from prominent tribal families, generally allies of the ruling family who run euphemistically as “independents.”

More striking, however, is the situation in Bahrain, where save for 9 pro-government “independents” (who naturally are Sunni allies) all the seats in the elected lower chamber are divided along confessional lines: 18 for a united Shi‘a bloc, 6 for a Salafi society, and 7 for a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated society. When the results of this election were announced in December of 2006, even the pro-regime *Gulf Daily News* could not avoid the conclusion that the group politics of religion had won the day, summarizing the outcome with its headline that read in part: “After the Announcement of the Final Results: Religious Control over the Council [of Representatives].”²⁴ And this despite the controversial electoral boycott of two

²³ Neither country allows political “parties” (أحزاب), though in Bahrain political “societies” (جمعيات) and in Kuwait political “blocs” (تكتلات) do exist to serve the same function.

²⁴ Karīm Ḥamad, 2006, “بعد إعلان النتائج النهائية: سيطرة دينية على المجلس,” *Akhbār al-Khalīj*, 4 December.

other influential Shi‘i political groups—one known commonly as the “Shirazi faction,” so-named for its following of Shirazi *marja’* Ayatallāh Hādī al-Mudarrisī; the other a powerful (though banned) underground opposition movement called al-Ḥaqq²⁵—on grounds that the entire process was illegitimate, a disagreement that literally split the Bahraini Shi‘a in two between those who chose to vote (i.e., for the Shi‘a bloc) and those who abstained.

We see, then, that in some of the Arab Gulf *rentier* states ethno-religious categories—at their broadest, Sunni and Shi‘i—do offer viable focal points for mass political coordination that otherwise, for lack of both an alternative basis of cooperation (e.g., common sectoral or class interests) as well as institutional incentives for such joint action, would be quite difficult to achieve. While identification of an individual’s ethnicity or religious tradition may seem a crude substitute for knowledge of his precise political preferences, given the Gulf’s relatively barren political landscape deficient of such institutions as non-governmental organizations, independent media, and proper political parties that could provide information about others’ political characteristics—in the absence of such proxies, therefore, one relies in one’s choice of potential political allies on the only data available: names and genealogies, language and accent, skin color, geographical origin, and so on (CHANDRA 2004). In short, individuals must depend almost exclusively upon ascriptive social categories such as family and tribal descent or religious affiliation; that is, upon ethnic categories. And although the inferences gleaned from such cues are likely only to approximate the true natures of individuals, they are, first of all, very simple and cheap to obtain and, moreover, probably still quite accurate given the impermeability of ethnic, and to a lesser extent religious, boundaries. Political cooperation in this way becomes most likely among individuals of similar ethno-religious makeup, who form a common bond that may be “imagined” in the sense of having a dubious basis in historical fact or in shared political interests (ANDERSON 1983), but one that “denotes not just a certain stream of belief but a certain version of peoplehood” (HOROWITZ 1985, 492).

As for the actual content of political claims and positions adopted by the resultant coalitions, Horowitz (1985) in his classic volume on ethnic conflict offers some instruction. In “unranked” ethnic systems such as describe those of the Arab Gulf—those defined by parallel, internally-stratified ethnic groups produced by invasion, migration, or redefinition of borders to include previously-separated groups—in such systems, Horowitz explains,

²⁵ Or more properly: al-Ḥaqq (“the right,” in the sense of both “political rights” and also “in the right” or “the truth”) Movement for Liberty and Democracy.

domestic politics is a zero-sum struggle akin to life under the anarchy of an international system, where “[t]he fear of ethnic domination is a motivating force for the acquisition of power,” the exercise of which “entails an effort to dominate the environment, to suppress differences, [and] to prevent domination and suppression by others” (187). As a consequence, says Horowitz, and for present purposes here is the most decisive part (my emphasis below),

[b]road matters of group status regularly have equal or superior standing to the narrow allocative decisions often taken to be the uniform stuff of everyday politics. Fundamental issues, [like] citizenship, electoral systems, designation of official languages and religions, the rights of groups to a ‘special position’ in the polity, rather than merely setting the framework of politics, become the recurring subjects of politics. *Conflicts over needs and interests are subordinated to conflicts over group status and over the rules to govern conflict.* Constitutional consensus is elusive, and the symbolic sector of politics looms large.

For one who has spent some time around the Arab Gulf, this description certainly rings familiar. In the region’s ethnically-divided societies, whether the new public housing development ought to be built in a Sunni or Shi’i neighborhood is certainly cause for spirited debate; yet such distributional matters represent but features of a more fundamental locus of conflict, namely whether the status quo of the entire system of politics ought to be revised or, alternatively, preserved. An important upshot is that, in the Gulf context, the faction that stands to lose from any such revision tends naturally to ally with the ruling tribe, which for its part also has a clear stake in maintaining the prevailing rules of the regime. This situation creates an ethnic “out-group” that is not merely the societal opposition to its rival *qua* ethnic group but constitutes a political opposition to the government and a pro-government ethnic “in-group.” A telling way to gauge the severity of ethnic tensions in the Gulf, accordingly, is to consider the ideological bases of political opposition societies and movements. In places like Kuwait and even Saudi Arabia, one finds that groups traditionally linked to political opposition, such as those based on the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, do indeed play these antagonistic roles despite their members’ ethnic proximity to the ruling families there. In the more charged environment of Bahrain, on the other hand, where the Shi’a opposition is not only more adamant in its demands for constitutional reform but also comprises an absolute majority of the population, ethnic expediency trumps political ideology for the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood blocs in parliament, which together form the core of a pro-government Sunni majority that by the slimmest of margins holds the Shi’a opposition at bay.

There are two basic ways that those in the out-group may find political inspiration in their shared ethnicity or religious tradition. First, and related to this line of argument, they

may come to perceive that society's defining political fault line is not economic but lies in something more elemental; that their relatively lower economic station is not a cause but an effect of their political subjugation at the hands of a united front comprised of the ruling family and its ethno-religiously similar political allies. This is why, for instance, the very question of the nature of the inequity prevalent in modern Gulf societies—whether it is at bottom an economic issue or one of ethno-religious discrimination—is a mainstay of the region's domestic politics and, indeed, constitutes perhaps the most fundamental point of departure for political groups on both sides. In this way, shared religious tradition serves as a source of group identity and solidarity around which political coordination might naturally coalesce.

The other manner in which religion may inspire political mobilization by members of the ethnic out-group is if the doctrine itself carries (or in any case can be interpreted as carrying) lessons in political behavior and principles on the part of its followers. These may exist, for example, in the form of positive or negative regulations regarding proper actions or values in the political sphere or, alternatively, they may arise from the very historical events and circumstances surrounding a religion's genesis and development, such history bearing special political relevance for schismatic traditions, which by definition exist in contraposition to some greater religious and thus political authority. The personalities and events of these founding days, in particular, may evoke powerful remembrances of political grievance when institutionalized in ritual and lore, and when put to good use by shrewd political entrepreneurs looking to rally the troops. Perhaps the most poignant example of this is the Shi'a ritual of 'Āshūrā', which culminates in a frenzy of mass self-mutilation in mourning of the murder of the Shi'i Imām Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī at the hand of the (Sunni) 'Umayyad caliph Yazīd I, to whose despotic rule the Imām refused to pledge political allegiance. Too often these days of heightened religious emotion correspond to increased ethnic tensions and, in the case most visibly of those Shi'a making pilgrimage to holy sites in Iraq, violence and bloodshed.

Yet religion's role in augmenting political interest is not limited to members of the marginalized out-group. By shaping political opinion and spurring political action amongst the latter, it works simultaneously to marshal regime allies in defense of the status quo and, more to the point, in defense of their favorable cut of the political-economic pie. While perhaps regime allies may dismiss the critics as merely blaming their own economic failures on invented discrimination, inevitably they cannot help but be drawn into the ethnic dichotomy injected into the national political consciousness and, aided by a heated geopolitical environment, they

begin to define themselves along the same dividing line. So it is that ethnic identity comes to play a dual role in the community: for members of both the in-group and the out-group, greater ethnic allegiance stimulates increased political action and alters political opinion; but among the former these actions and opinions are in defense of the government and the larger status quo that it symbolizes, while among the latter they form the basis of its opposition.

So far we have illustrated the way in which ethnicity presents a viable alternative to economic- or class-based political coordination in the *rentier* state, the latter options rendered prohibitively difficult by the structure of allocative economies, which encourage individual efforts to secure additional patronage and whose disjointed, state-owned sectors offer little foundation, as Yates aptly points out, for any radical political change. When we peer even closer, moreover, we readily perceive why this ethnic-based political mobilization is not easily suppressed—that is, why those who awaken politically are not easily co-opted using the typical pressure-relieving mechanisms thought to be available to allocative economies. One will recall that the latter are said to educe political quiescence through at least two mechanisms—high public employment and non-taxation—and arguably a third—repression. The introduction of societal division along ethno-religious lines serves to handicap *rentier* states, however, by at best making these options less efficient, at worst by taking them off the table altogether.

In the first place, members of the (Shi'a) oppositional out-group, for concerns over state allegiance, are disproportionately excluded from civil service and entirely disqualified from police or military service, precluding three of the most common avenues of economic co-optation in the *rentier* state. What is more, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and more recently the inadvertent empowerment of Iraq's Shi'a majority, Shi'a populations across the Arab world are seen as being increasingly forceful in their demands for greater authority, invoking historical claims of political right rooted in the very origins of Islam. This activism in turn serves only to mobilize members of the (Sunni) pro-government in-group, which, in order to offset a perceived growth in Shi'a—and, by association, Iranian—influence, organize themselves as a counterweight to perceived domestic Shi'aization and Iranian expansionism, in effect making their own political demands upon governments. Citizen interest in political participation becomes, then, not a function of material well-being as per *rentier* expectations, but one of religious identification and regional power struggles, an extension of the zero-sum struggle inherent to ethnically-divided societies described by Horowitz.

With such a surplus of political energy and limited means to diffuse it, it is no wonder, then, that the ethnically-divided societies of the Gulf—Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia—are today less successful than the other GCC countries in converting their resource windfalls into political stability. On the contrary, one must be surprised that some, especially Bahrain with its full Shi'i majority, have fared as well as they have. Yet stability is of two sorts: total lack of activity; or a balance or complementarity. As Luciani (1989, 84) remarks, "Stability may, in fact, mean political immobilism, which is seldom for the better: what is frozen is not necessarily peace, but conflict." What we have in these ethnically-polarized Gulf countries, on the other hand, is the case of two broadly-delineated countervailing forces—orthodox Sunni Muslims and heterodox Twelver Shi'a²⁶—competing for power and influence not only in pursuit of their relative shares of state benefits, but in order also to shape the very nature of the regimes they inhabit. Of course, the vigor and scope of this ethnic competition depends in large part on the two groups' relative standings in the population, and in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia where Shi'a represent only about a quarter and an eighth of all citizens, respectively, these struggles tend to play out on the provincial or regional level rather than the national.²⁷ All the same, in vying with each other over additional material allocation—what Horowitz calls "the uniform stuff of everyday politics"—as well as over the more fundamental issue of relative group status in the polity, a great deal of society's energy is expended on horizontal contestation, a fight officiated by the ruling family as by a referee in a boxing match, and less is directed vertically toward the referee himself. This explains why Gulf regimes like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, even if home to higher levels of political activism than the *rentier* thesis would predict—higher, indeed, than exists in the rest of the Arab world, on average—have not been consumed by it but are, generally speaking, little worse for the wear.

A Theory of Ethnic-based Political Mobilization in the Arab Gulf *Rentier* States

The foregoing represents a theory of ethnic-based political coordination in the supposedly-apolitical Arab Gulf *rentier* states, one that dispels the myth of the politically-agnostic Gulf oil sheikh as the region's stereotypical citizen, and one that proffers a new independent variable to account for country-level differences in regime stability both between GCC and non-GCC

²⁶ The explicit focus throughout is the Arab Shi'a of the Twelver tradition (in Bahrain, the Bahārnah).

²⁷ Given the transnational character of Islamic and particularly Shi'i politics, however, these proportions mean less now than they did before the introduction of satellite television and the Internet, which allow members of both ethnic groups to keep minutely updated on the status of friends and adversaries at home and abroad.

nations and among the Gulf *rentier* societies themselves. It began by probing the elementary *rentier* assumption that allocative states will win popular political quiescence by distributing a part of their resource windfalls, either directly or indirectly, to ordinary citizens, examining to that end perhaps the best-known quantitative index of political stability: the Failed States Index assembled by The Fund for Peace. From this investigation arose an empirical puzzle with the observation that, in fact, although the six *rentier* economies of the Arab Gulf do seem to enjoy more stability on average than their non-GCC counterparts, in this there appears to be significant variation among the *rentier* states themselves and, what is more, that variation is apparently unrelated to the explanatory variable identified by *rentier* theorists, namely the oil and gas windfalls available to states for redistribution, which we operationalized as Ross's (2008) measure of per-capita resource rents. The question, then, was how to explain these intra-Gulf differences in stability if the answer does not lie in relative disparity in rent income.

Next we considered the extent to which our inquiry might be informed by existing empirical tests of the *rentier* state framework in political science, concluding that such studies suffer from basic methodological and theoretical limitations that diminish their usefulness for our purposes. Principal among those of the former category is a modern preoccupation with the question of democracy and democratization, a concern that has seen the monopolization of the *rentier* research agenda by works competing against each other to explain the apparent relative lack of democracy in resource-rich nations, with nearly all of these employing exactly the same dependent variable from exactly the same dataset: the Polity IV twenty-point scale of regime type. Not only is this choice out of line theoretically with the *rentier* paradigm's concern with regime stability over against regime accountability, but the results of its use in statistical analysis as typically undertaken are susceptible to bias. In particular, when some measure of rentierism (such as Ross's resource rents per capita variable) is used to predict a country's regime score, the resulting positive and highly significant relationship is an artifact of a small number of outlying cases: the six GCC states along with Libya and Brunei. When these observations are removed, so too is the statistically-significant link between resource rents and democracy; all that remains is evidence of such an association among a finite group of states—the *rentier* states—and a compelling reason to refocus the effort back to the latter.

Yet even in the absence of these methodological issues, we noted, there remains still an underlying theoretical difficulty plaguing extant efforts to study the *rentier* state, namely their failure to investigate the actual individual-level causal mechanisms that form the basis

of the *rentier* hypothesis. If the theory posits that allocative states achieve stability by buying off ordinary citizens with rent-funded material benefits, then evidence of a link between rent income and macro-level political outcomes like regime type, democratic transition, or even taxation and public spending rates is not proof of the theory itself, does not verify its internal causal story, but simply reiterates its own observations. It is as if one were to suggest that a parliamentary candidate was elected through bribing his prospective voters, and offered as evidence the fact that he spent more than ten times the amount of his competitor: at the end of the day one would like to see these supporters' incriminating bank statements or, short of that, at least to ask them the reasons behind their votes. So too for convincing proof of the *rentier* explanation one needs evidence that, among individual citizens of rent-based regimes, there exists a veritable relationship between material well-being and political abstention.

And so we endeavored to do precisely that. More specifically, we aimed to explain our earlier empirical anomaly—the intra-Gulf variation in state stability that appeared to bear no obvious relationship to regimes' relative distributive capabilities as measured by their per-capita resource rents—by making use of an altogether different tool than those employed by extant studies, namely individual-level survey data capturing the political views of ordinary Arab citizens that only recently have become available with the completion of several timely research projects, including the Arab Democracy Barometer and my own survey of Bahrain. By demonstrating a link between a state's stability and the political orientations of its citizens, we reasoned, one could show why a country like Oman, with its comparatively meager fuel rents, still can attain more stability than a rent-accumulating powerhouse like Saudi Arabia if it is more effective at translating the rent income it does receive into lower levels of popular political dissent. This investigation also made a more fitting test of the *rentier* theory causal framework, cutting out as it were the theoretical middle-man of resource rents in order to link regime stability with citizens' political orientations directly.²⁸

Rather than answer our question, however, this analysis of popular political behavior in the Arab world served only to confuse matters further. Contrary to all expectations, citizens of the Arab Gulf countries reported higher levels of political interest and political action and

²⁸ Note that because our "Gulf" sample consisted of respondents from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait only (mass survey data from the other three GCC states so far do not exist), we could not perform the preferable and even more direct test of comparing political dissent in the former three, relatively lower-stability Gulf states against that in the latter, relatively higher-stability group composed of Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Given the results of the analysis carried out, however, this limitation made no practical difference.

lower levels of political deference than did non-Gulf Arabs, even after controlling possible confounding variables such as the sex, education level, economic satisfaction, and religiosity of respondents. Thus cross-national variation in regime stability could not be a direct result of differences in popular political activism because, if this were true, we should expect to see the non-GCC states tending to outperform their Arab Gulf counterparts in terms of stability. As the latter is decidedly not the case, our initial empirical puzzle transformed into two: first, what explains intra-Gulf variation in stability if the answer is neither differences in fuel rents *nor* differences in popular political quietude?; and, second, how is it that the Gulf states, with citizenries that are on average more prone to political action and dissent than those of other Arab countries, still enjoy much more stability than the latter? Whither is all this political enthusiasm of Gulf peoples directed, we asked, if not at their governments?

To resolve this difficulty we turned to another politically-salient feature of Arab Gulf society, a new independent variable to account for relative regime stability that finds no place at all in the extant *rentier* literature: the region's long-standing ethno-religious schism dividing orthodox Sunni Muslims and heterodox Shi'is. This tension disrupts the normal function of *rentier* societies by offering a viable basis for popular political mobilization among members of both groups while simultaneously precluding the most common avenues of political buy-off available to allocative governments. Because Shi'a are often perceived by Sunnis and the uniformly-Sunni Gulf governments as being not only religiously deviant but also politically subservient for doctrinal reasons to their religious authorities in Iran, Iraq, or elsewhere, ruling families find it difficult to appease their discontented Shi'a constituencies because they do not trust them enough to allow them to serve in the leading public employers: the police, military, and power ministries; and it is politically unpalatable for the rulers' pro-government Sunni populations to give Shi'a anything more than low-level civil servant positions in other bureaucracies. Moreover, because many Shi'a believe they have a collective right to political authority based on religious notions of injustice and betrayal rooted in the very foundations of Islam, it is difficult to pacify their demands simply by making them rich or by agreeing not to tax them. At the same time, the prospect of an emboldened Shi'a populace operating at the behest of a belligerent Iranian regime makes it intolerable for their Sunni counterparts to remain on the political sidelines, further undermining the myth of our apolitical *rentier* state.

This revised story of Arab Gulf politics is able to account for each of our above-noted empirical irregularities. In the first place, it explains the intra-Gulf variation in stability: those

states lacking a politically-salient ethnic cleavage, like the Emirates, Qatar, and Oman, tend to adhere to the standard *rentier* framework. With no viable basis for political coordination, citizens in these countries compete individually within the bounds of their existing patronage systems to secure greater personal shares of state benefits, so precluding cooperative political action. Finding their motivation in material gain as per *rentier* assumptions, such individuals reinforce rather than undermine the prevailing political order, begetting greater stability. In *rentier* societies like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, conversely, societal division enables political coordination around ethno-religious categories, leading to the political mobilization of rival groups that battle not only over their respective allocations of state benefits but over the very nature of the regime itself. While some of this competitive force can be deflected by a shrewd ruler skilled at inducing inter-group rather than group-state confrontation, these regimes still will tend to fall short of the stability achieved by the more ethnically-harmonious Gulf countries, as their citizens are stirred politically by factors other than personal economic well-being, and therefore are not so easily bought off as *rentier* theorists would have it.

As for our other puzzle, why it is that on average the GCC states report higher levels of popular political interest and participation than the non-*rentier* Arab countries, this answer is now clear as well: the former display heightened political consciousness and less political deference not because they are *rentier* or Gulf states but because they are ethnically-contested states.²⁹ This interpretation is supported by the fact that respondents in Lebanon, another nation divided intensely along confessional lines, report the second-highest levels of political interest of all the peoples surveyed, higher even than Bahrainis or Kuwaitis.

Ethnic Conflict in the *Rentier* Gulf: The Case of Sunni-Shi'i Relations in Bahrain

The modified framework of the Gulf *rentier* state outlined above will in the ensuing chapters undergo empirical evaluation with reference to one such nation in particular: the Kingdom of Bahrain. This case offers important practical and theoretical advantages. In the first place, due to the sensitive status of religion (to say nothing of intra-Islamic discord) and politics in Bahrain as everywhere in the Arab Gulf, few have succeeded in administering nationally-representative surveys in the region that ask the sort of questions one would need to analyze the link hypothesized here between economic welfare, ethno-religious identity, and political

²⁹ Recall that unfortunately for practical reasons our "Gulf" sample consisted of respondents from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait only.

outcomes at the individual level. Indeed, it is telling that in its 20-year history even the near-comprehensive World Values Survey, which has been conducted in more than 150 countries and whose questions are not particularly sensitive, has managed to administer its poll in the Arab Gulf only twice: in Saudi Arabia in 2003 and in Qatar in 2010, and in each case the most revealing questions about normative political opinion and political behavior were generally not fielded. Of the seven states included in the first wave of the Arab Barometer survey project, similarly, only Kuwait is represented among the Gulf nations. The first practical difficulty, then, is the sheer lack of survey data being collected in the Arab Gulf.

The second is that the data that are available—from the 2006 AB survey of Kuwait and the 2003 WVS of Saudi Arabia, for example—lack ethnic identifiers for respondents, meaning that one cannot distinguish Sunnis from Shi'is. This is of course not by chance. If one should like to make an already-delicate interview even more so, proceed to ask a Saudi or Kuwaiti his religious affiliation. But to test a theory that predicts inter-ethnic variation in responses, it is precisely this information that one requires, making extant AB and WVS data unfortunately of limited use. Hence the real practical advantage presented by the case of Bahrain is that, owing to a nationally-representative survey of 500 randomly-selected households I administered in early 2009, the requisite data actually exist. A full methodological overview follows in Chapter 4; it is enough to say here that interviewers followed the standard Arab Barometer survey instrument and, aided by the plain linguistic and geographical segregation of Bahrain's Sunni and Shi'i populations, were able easily to infer the ethnic membership of respondents. This study, then, was the first of its type to be conducted in the Arab Gulf.

Yet the impetus for and theoretical importance of the Bahraini case lay not in a lack of previous data but in the character of Sunni-Shi'i relations in this Gulf *rentier* state. Almost since the day the ruling Āl Khalīfa dynasty arrived in Bahrain in 1783 along with its Sunni tribal allies, having just wrested the island from the Persian Empire, their relations with the indigenous Shi'a inhabitants have been marked by social detachment, mutual suspicion, and often open hostility. This is especially true of the period following the Islamic Revolution, which saw in 1981 an Iranian-backed failed coup attempt by members of a Shi'a opposition organization, a popular Shi'a uprising stretching much of the 1990s, and since 2002 festering ethnic tension and sporadic violence between government security forces and Shi'a activists increasingly frustrated by stalled constitutional reforms announced by King Ḥamad bin 'Īsā

upon his accession to the throne. Such strained ethnic relations, we shall observe in the next chapter, not only complicate the ordinary task of this *rentier* state of buying political silence, but they also ensure that this silence, once broken, is not easily restored.

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