

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Toward a New Arab Gulf Agenda

The present dissertation has sought to resolve several longstanding empirical and theoretical puzzles surrounding political life in the rent-dependent societies of the Arab Gulf, problems independent of, if only further illuminated by, Bahrain's Shi'a-led uprising of February 2011 and its far-reaching regional repercussions. The former category of difficulties is based on the observation that, far from the *rentier* assumption of popular apoliticality, in fact the Arab Gulf is not only home to citizens who take an active interest in politics, but indeed three of the six GCC states (and not simply the poorest)—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—feature no less than organized political oppositions, all of them decades-old. Moreover, the extent of this political interest and participation among Gulf peoples is not only considerable in absolute terms for countries assumed structurally capable of mollifying their political opponents, but so too in relative terms. For, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, individual-level survey data from the Middle East and North Africa reveals that, compared to other Arabs, Gulf citizens actually show themselves to be *more* interested in politics, *more* likely to participate in political protest actions, and *less* deferential to their governments. And yet, in spite of this popular political enthusiasm, somehow these Gulf regimes as a distinct class of state still manage to enjoy greater political stability than do other Arab countries. How can this be?

The theoretical difficulty attending these observations presents no less of a problem. This is that, for a conceptual framework that has dominated the interpretation of Arab Gulf politics since its initial articulation some 30 years ago, the behavioral assumptions upon which *rentier* theory rests have remained all but unexplored prior to the present study. Yet, before one can answer the question of why some Arab Gulf regimes appear unable to buy political support with economic benefits, it is necessary to know, in the first place, whether it is indeed

material well-being that tends to determine the political views and behavior of ordinary Gulf Arabs; and, in the second, whether governments are uniformly willing and able to offer such a wealth-for-silence bargain. The *rentier* state hypothesis having sprung from economics, that rational, self-maximizing citizens and rulers would happily barter political privileges for material benefits was presumed as a matter of course and, with no individual-level data to suggest otherwise, eventually achieved the status of a truism, assisted by a convenient parallel to the Western experience that *rentier* founding father Dirk Vandewalle (1987, 160) was soon to point out: “the reverse principle of no representation without taxation.” But such maxims proved poor substitutes for empirical evidence.

Thus, using previously-unavailable data from the first mass political survey of Bahrain along with insights from interviews with a dozen of the country’s political and religious leaders, the foregoing study has aimed to address these problems by answering three basic questions. First, what is it about Bahrain *qua rentier* society that renders its rulers particularly incapable of buying popular political quietude using rent-derived material benefaction? Second, to what extent does the variable that explains the case of Bahrain in fact describe a larger class of dysfunctional *rentier* societies that share this causal feature? And, third, should it exist, in what ways must this latter category demand a revision of the theoretical framework that underlies the prevailing *rentier* interpretation of politics in the Arab Gulf? Here we review our answers to these questions, note their limitations, and finally suggest an updated Arab Gulf research agenda that retreats from the economics-based model of the self-maximizing *rentier* state and citizen in favor of one rooted more firmly in the actual politics of the region.

The Trouble with Bahrain

Two distinct sets of forces combine to hamper Bahrain’s ability to buy the political quiescence of its citizens using rent-funded state benefits. Each of these—one operating on the political demand side and one on the political supply side—owes to the same cause: the broad division of Bahraini society into ethnic Sunni and Shi’i constituencies, these being, if certainly not homogenous, sufficiently cohesive to allow mass political coordination in a type of state whose very productive organization is assumed to preclude any viable (i.e., economic) basis for it. The political salience of ethnicity in Bahrain dictates that, on the side of ordinary citizens, it is not simply economic contentment that influences political views and behavior, but one’s ethnically-ascribed position in society and the fear of societal domination by the rival group.

For politically-sidelined Shi'is, accordingly, opposition to Bahrain's status quo stems not from mere material dissatisfaction, but more fundamentally from their status as ethnic-*cum*-political out-group, and this despite enjoying a demographic majority. At the same time, this ethnic-based political mobilization against the regime on the part of Bahraini Shi'a spurs activism in kind from ordinary Sunnis, as eager to preserve the prevailing system as the former are to alter it. So it becomes that, in the ethnically-contested *rentier* society, it is not only the opposition but also the pro-government faction that rejects the state's material wealth-for-political silence bargain, for seen to be at stake is something more important than material wealth.

Opposition to the current regime is also, for many Bahraini Shi'is, a position for which inspiration may be found readily in religion itself, the historical arc of Shi'ism being precisely one of struggle and self-sacrifice in the face of a more powerful but corrupt and ultimately ill-fated political-*cum*-religious oppressor. In Bahrain, religious rites and celebrations are pregnant with allegory and even explicit comparison connecting the seventh-century conflict to decide the leadership of the Muslim community to the present-day struggle in Bahrain. Indeed, to an outside observer of the most holy Shi'i festival of 'Āshūrā', it is difficult to perceive whether the myriad processions, passions plays, and sermons tell of the battle against the 'Umayyad caliph or that against the Āl Khalifa monarchy. In sum, as many Shi'a believe (or can be motivated by the idea that) they have a collective right to political authority based on religious notions of injustice and betrayal rooted in the very foundations of Islam, their demands are not easily pacified with promises of jobs or monthly living stipends.

This problem is compounded on the supply side by a Bahraini government caught in a veritable catch-22, wherein the very attempt to purchase political stability in fact serves only to open the door, in the state's view, to increased instability. Specifically, the more Bahrain would seek to buy the political loyalty of opponents and would-be opponents using the most comprehensive clientelistic tool available to it *qua rentier* economy—private benefits conferred through employment in the public sector—the more it exposes itself to exactly that danger meant to be relieved in the first place, by inviting those citizens deemed most dangerous to walk in, so to speak, through the front door. As a result, government agencies and services deemed politically or militarily sensitive are made off limits to those (ethnically) identifiable as potential regime opponents, begetting a situation in which state employment is no longer an effective measure by which to procure political loyalty, but demonstrable political loyalty—in effect, the right family name—a prerequisite for most forms of state employment. Finally,

this two-tiered system of *rentier* benefits, including police and armed forces that would prefer to employ Sunni non-nationals than take a chance with Bahraini Shi'a subservient to their co-ethnics in Iran, works only to divide society further between those with a private stake in the regime and those who feel not only unfairly excluded from it, but indeed unwelcome in it.

Each of these lines of argument found compelling evidence in the Chapter 5 analysis of individual-level data from my Bahrain mass survey, an investigation that would constitute the first genuine empirical test of the *rentier* state hypothesis. First, it was demonstrated that Shi'i citizens are not only systematically less likely to be employed in Bahrain's public sector, but they also tend to occupy lower-ranking professional positions when they are employed. For two citizens of identical age, gender, and education level, the probability of government-sector employment (given that one is employed¹) was estimated to be some 36% higher for a Sunni compared to a Bahraini Shi'i. The professional discrepancy was estimated at about 15%. Moreover, the data revealed, whereas 17% of working Sunni males who reported professional data indicated that they worked for the police or armed forces; and whereas 13% of all Sunni households reported at least one member employed in these services, not a single individual from among 127 employed Shi'i males who offered occupational data reported working for the police or military. The patterns of government-sector employment in Bahrain thus tell a fundamentally different story than the one articulated by *rentier* theorists.

The survey analysis also confirmed the primacy of confessional affiliation and identity over against economic satisfaction in determining the political orientations and behaviors of ordinary Bahrainis. For each of six different survey questions measuring normative support for Bahrain's government and political status quo, the most substantively- and statistically-significant predictor was a respondent's ethnicity, and this by no small margin (cf. CH. 5, 246, TABLE 5.73). Moreover, the analysis found, Bahrainis were only further entrenched in their respective ethnically-defined opinions—Shi'a tending toward more negative regime orientations, Sunnis toward more positive—by the additional augmenting influence of religiosity, used to proxy for the strength of one's ethnic identification. The influence of household economy, on the other hand, proved inconsistent and much weaker than that of ethnicity. Indeed, it was shown to be a statistically-significant determinant of political opinion in only four of six models, and among both Sunnis and Shi'is in only two models. And even in these cases,

¹ That is, this sectoral effect was shown not to result spuriously from a Sunni-Shi'i disparity in employment more generally, the likelihood of employment itself being shown altogether independent of ethnic membership.

finally, its largest substantive effect on respondent opinion barely surpassed half that of ethnic membership. In Bahrain, popular political views depend much more upon one's being a Sunni or a Shi'i than upon one's being an economically-contented Sunni or Shi'i.

The last step in this theoretical progression found support in the concluding section of Chapter 5 examining Bahrainis' political behavior. This is the argument that ethnic-based political mobilization in Bahrain is not limited merely to Shi'a citizens as the primary basis of the opposition but draws in simultaneously ordinary Sunnis who rally, in the oft-repeated formulation of al-Ma'āwdah, out of the "need to counter probable harm." Analysis showed that, among both Sunnis and Shi'is, the extent of one's political interest and engagement—including one's likelihood of signing petitions and attending political meetings; participating in political demonstrations; and voting in parliamentary elections—is determined almost wholly by non-economic causes. In fact, of six models of political action, economy played a statistically-significant role in influencing behavior in only two, and in each case only among Sunni respondents (cf. CH. 5, 286, TABLE 5.108). By contrast, ethnic membership and religiosity were shown in each case to affect Sunni and Shi'i behavior in the hypothesized manner: while Sunnis consistently reported less political interest and engagement than Shi'a save for the in case of electoral participation, increased religiosity served to augment these levels of interest and engagement among members of both communities, typically in dramatic fashion. Even as Bahraini Sunnis are generally more inclined toward apoliticality than Shi'a, therefore, still they show themselves prepared, should the need arise, to take concerted action in defense of the regime, and of the larger political status quo it represents.

Apart from confirming the ethnic bases of supply- and demand-side politics in Bahrain, the mass survey analysis also offered one final—if essentially accidental—insight, a view into the very heart of Bahrain's Sunni-Shi'i divide. This is the finding of a significant ethnic-based interviewer effect upon survey respondents, who when questioned by a member of the rival community tend consistently to manipulate their answers in predictable ways. Specifically, when asked about their political opinions, both Sunnis and Shi'is misrepresent themselves so as to appear more in line with the views they ascribe to their other-ethnic interviewer simply on the basis of his or her ethnicity. Among Shi'a, this inter-ethnic effect exists in each of the six models of political opinion; among Sunna, four. What is more, this misrepresentation is so pronounced that in the case of several opinions investigated, the predicted responses of Sunnis and Shi'is are utterly inverted when obtained as part of an inter-ethnic interview: now

it is the Shi'a that appear the champions of the Bahraini government, the Sunnis its detractors. In the realm of political action, these effects are reversed: here Shi'is tend to exaggerate the extent of their political interest and participation in order to convey a stronger and more active opposition; Sunnis, when asked by Shi'a, exaggerate the extent of their *non*-participation, to signal a more resolute pro-government faction. In this way does Bahrain's deep-seated ethnic mistrust combine with political posturing to produce not only a broad Sunni-Shi'i divergence in political views and behavior, but so too a remarkable barrier to basic societal interaction.

If study of the Bahrain survey therefore provided compelling evidence in favor of the conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 2 and given further substance in Chapter 3, still this empirical investigation was not without practical and methodological shortcomings. Thus, before proceeding to consider the second question here about the larger applicability of these Chapter 5 findings, we might first pause to assess their limitations, many of which have been treated elsewhere. A first group concerning survey procedure requires perhaps little additional elaboration. Certainly, it would have been preferable to have acquired a sample of more than 500 households; to have completed surveying of all these households; and to have achieved a more proportional representation of males and females among respondents. Yet, as noted previously, on account of Bahrain's miniscule citizen population, the survey's 500-household sample in fact represents a sample-to-population ratio that surpasses that of any other Arab Barometer survey undertaken to date. Furthermore, as examined at length in Chapter 4 (130-132), the final geographical distribution of block numbers included in the sample conforms almost exactly to their relative national-level proportions, as indicated by Bahrain's 2007 census and 2010 parliamentary election records.

As regards the latter points, indeed, interviewing reached only 435 (or 87%) of 500 sampled households, primarily on account of political and social tensions before and during the survey period. Still, because these remaining un-surveyed households were distributed randomly, there is no reason to believe that their omission compromised the representativeness of the final 435-observation sample. About the underrepresentation of female respondents, finally, in particular among rural Shi'a households, little can be said but that the practicalities of surveying Bahrain's isolated and conservative villages make such a result almost ensured. One might have attempted oversampling female respondents, but such a procedure would have militated against the competing goal of reaching a maximum share of the 500 sampled households, most of which were found in hostile environments. In the end, at a time when

any Bahrain mass survey at all seemed frequently in doubt, this and other concessions were made necessary.

Beyond issues of sampling, one may identify shortcomings in the survey instrument itself, or more precisely in the consistency and validity of the indicators used to measure the main theoretical concepts underlying the quantitative analysis: i.e., the independent variables measuring economic satisfaction and religiosity. These issues, also noted where relevant in the foregoing chapters, may be summarized here. The first case is not cause for much worry but bears repeat nonetheless. This is that the indicator used to measure economic satisfaction among Bahrainis in fact was more nearly an indicator of Bahrainis' household economy per se, respondents being asked to rate their household's financial situation from "very good" to "very poor." Unlike in the Chapter 6 investigation of survey data from Iraq, then, where this variable was indeed based on a subjective scale of satisfaction with one's household financial situation, in Bahrain such a direct question unfortunately was not fielded. Moreover, the resulting measure of economy among Bahrainis had less variation than one would have liked, with about two-thirds of both Sunnis and Shi'is reporting a "good" financial situation, and only a combined 2% describing their finances as "very bad." Still, since several other independent variables of interest—including ethnicity, religiosity, and the indicator signifying an inter-ethnic interview—were dichotomous measures with even less variation by their very construction, this latter concern should not be overstated.

More worrying, on the other hand, is the measure of Bahrainis' religiosity, and this on multiple levels. In the first place, in the absence of a direct question gauging respondents' other-ethnic orientations, which was deemed too sensitive to ask, the religiosity indicator served as a necessary proxy for a related but of course not identical concept: the strength of an individual's ethno-religious identification as a Sunni or as a Shi'i. This, in turn, was meant to capture one's personal orientation vis-à-vis the rival group. While acknowledged from the beginning, the conceptual distance of the latter theoretical notion from the actual construct of the religiosity variable was made only further plain by the complementary study of Chapter 6, where there was available a direct measure of Iraqis' orientations toward members of their own and of the other ethnic group.

Concern for the theoretical remoteness of the religiosity measure was compounded, furthermore, by the choice of its actual coding, which presented two imperfect alternatives. A first was based on a straightforward query, but one that invited dishonesty and perhaps a

Sunni-Shi'i discrepancy in interpretation; a second involved yet another layer of proxy but would thereby avoid manipulation and, it was thought, between-ethnic inconsistency. While the latter was thus given preference in the Chapter 5 analysis, in order to check for conflicting results a parallel model was also estimated for each dependent variable that employed the alternative, more direct measure of religiosity. Where the two differed in their substantive effects on political opinion or behavior, this was identified and explored. In the latter analysis, such a procedure proved unnecessary. Yet, unexpectedly, in the analysis of political opinion it happened several times that the alternative "Are you religious or not?" indicator was shown to be a better empirical predictor of political opinion than the baseline measure.² What is more, whereas among Shi'a the alternative measure simply increased the statistical confidence of a substantively-similar estimated effect, and this in only two of six models of opinion, among Sunnis *only* the alternative measure had a non-zero estimated effect on political opinion in half of the models. Exactly why it is that the straightforward indicator should carry rather more validity among Bahrain's Sunnis is not obvious, but, whatever the case, this irregularity does raise questions about the conceptual validity and consistency of the religiosity measures.

Yet, before this discussion would seem to negate the whole of the Chapter 5 findings related to the influence of religiosity on political orientation in Bahrain, one might step back to review how far these concerns actually undermine the results of the survey analysis, which, considered together, paint an overall picture that is remarkably coherent. To begin, we may note that, even in those four models where one or the other measure of religiosity fails to evidence a relationship with a particular political opinion among Sunnis or Shi'is, such a failure is simply this: a lack of statistical support for a hypothesized effect, rather than evidence of a conflicting, theoretically-unexplainable effect. On the contrary, of the six models of political opinion, in no case was the estimated effect of religiosity—whether statistically-significant or not—ever positive among Bahraini Shi'a or negative among Bahraini Sunna. That is to say, never once in 24 estimates (2 ethnicities × 2 measures × 6 models) was increased religiosity associated with more pro-government opinion among Shi'is or more anti-government opinion among Sunnis. Likewise, in the six models of political action, increased religiosity was seen by every estimate to augment—never to decrease—political interest and participation among both Sunnis and Shi'is. All told, of the 48 separate estimates of the influence of religiosity

² One will recall that this latter measure is based on the qualities one seeks in a potential spouse for one's family members, with those identifying religious traits being deemed "religious" individuals. Cf. CH, 5, 170.

contained within Chapter 5, nary a one was in the opposite direction of that predicted. Despite its acknowledged problems, therefore, one must conclude that the religiosity indicator used in the Bahrain survey analysis serves, in the absence of a direct measure of the latter, as an adequate if not ideal proxy for an individual's other-ethnic orientations.³

A final topic we may treat briefly is the actual model specification used throughout the Bahrain survey analysis, as well as that of Chapter 6. Although the several methodological and practical benefits of the multiplicative interactive model have been highlighted already, one may continue to question the worth of this estimation technique whose estimates of greatest interest were not even directly interpretable. To recall these previous arguments, we may say that, compared to the alternative of segregated Sunni and Shi'i models, the interactive specification offered most of the benefits of the former on top of additional advantages that only it could provide. Key among the latter are: utilization of the full sample of observations rather than two precariously-small sub-samples; the ability to estimate the critical effect of ethnic group membership itself, which is necessarily impossible using separate Sunni- and Shi'i-only models; and, not least, greater correspondence to our conceptual argument, which does not ask, "Among Bahraini Shi'is (or Sunnis), what are the factors that affect political opinion and behavior?" but rather, "Among ordinary Bahraini citizens, what is the independent effect on political opinion and behavior of, *inter alia*, being a Sunni rather than a Shi'i?"

At the same time that the interactive model offered these added benefits, moreover, its estimation results were otherwise substantively-equivalent to those obtainable from Sunni- and Shi'i-specific models. In fact, the only real difference between the two sets of estimates—apart of course from the additional estimate of the effect of ethnicity—was in their handling of the several control variables,⁴ and the necessity of an excess of graphs to depict conditional marginal effects. In order to demonstrate this, the Chapter 5 analysis went so far as to present the marginal effects of our main explanatory variables estimated from the standard interactive model alongside those obtained from ethnically-segregated estimations (cf. 221 ff.). Not only

³ Furthermore, by a similar logic may we be more confident in the statistical robustness of the estimated marginal effects of the religiosity variable, several of which fell outside of the standard $p < 0.05$ or even $p < 0.10$ level of significance. For, in the context of our regression analyses, the arbitrary $p < 0.05$ cutoff is simply a mathematical expression for the idea that, in order to rule out the possibility of a non-relationship between two variables, an observed coefficient estimate should be large enough in magnitude that it will occur by random chance less than once in 20 (i.e., $1/0.05$) times. That in 48 opportunities neither of our two different measures of religiosity was ever estimated to have an effect other than that predicted, then, offers some reassurance in aggregate.

⁴ The segregated models allow separate Sunni and Shi'i estimates for each of our control variables—age, gender, and education—whereas the interactive model produces only a single estimate for each. Because the effects of these variables were not of primary theoretical interest, however, this procedure made little practical difference.

were the estimates identical within a few hundredths of a unit, but, by comparing the relative R^2 test statistics of these two methods of estimation, it was shown that the interactive model consistently was able to account for much more of the total variation in Bahrainis' political views and behaviors than were the ethnic-specific models in combination. In sum, if the worst one may say about the multiplicative interactive model employed in the preceding chapters is that it demanded an unsightly profusion of marginal effect illustrations, then one must agree that its many methodological advantages far outweighed its aesthetic drawbacks.

Bahrain's Model Dysfunction

Having so diagnosed the nature of the dysfunction that continues to sabotage the *rentier* state of Bahrain, we endeavored next to argue that this same Sunni-Shi'i competition drives a similar process of ethnic-based political mobilization in other rent-based regimes of the region, and to show such by a complementary analysis of individual-level survey data from Iraq. That the conditions underlying the case of Bahrain in fact apply to a more general class of societies, it was shown, follows from both theory and observation. First, from a theoretical standpoint it is plain that the internal and external causes of Bahrain's dysfunctional *rentier* state—domestic ethnic division, politically-marginalized Shi'a populations, and fear of Iranian-inspired Shi'a radicalization—are not limited to Bahrain merely, but instead are growing today only more widespread and more acute across the Gulf region and beyond. At bottom, therefore, the most basic condition to be fulfilled is a simple demographic one: in those Arab Gulf societies home to a non-trivial Shi'a population—whether the latter be a significant minority (Kuwait), a concentrated regional majority (Saudi Arabia), or an absolute majority (Bahrain)—one should expect to find governments unwilling and/or unable to purchase the sort of political silence predicted by the *rentier* framework. While this is not to posit a specific critical Shi'a mass beyond which such effects are inevitable, it is reasonable on this basis to distinguish Qatar, the Emirates, and Oman from the former cases, their Shi'a communities being both marginal by comparison as well as non-indigenous—and thus easily-deportable.

The contemporary empirical record would seem to support these *a priori* expectations, we continued. Not only does overall regime stability in the Arab Gulf tend to track closely to the relative size of countries' Shi'a populations (as do their bilateral relations with Iran), but, more generally, the current state of Sunni-Shi'i and government-Shi'i relations in the region runs contrary to the notion that Bahrain's ethnic politics are qualitatively unique. Bahrain is

far from alone among Gulf states in failing to achieve the socio-political consensus supposed to prevail in *rentier* societies. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait also have organized oppositions formed, and in each case the basis for political coordination is ethnic or religious identity: in the former, among Saudi Shi'is and non-Najdī and non-Ḥanbalī Sunnis; in the latter, among Kuwaiti Shi'is, Salafi Sunnis, and Sunni followers of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵ Moreover, it was noted, even those countries with relatively small Shi'a populations have demonstrated worry over their potential for political activism or Iranian-backed political subterfuge. Thus, for example, has the United Arab Emirates moved preemptively to expel more than a hundred Lebanese Shi'a families since 2009, these long-time residents accused of sympathizing with or supporting Ḥizballāh. And outside of the GCC, the Yemeni and Saudi governments continue to wage war against the purported Iranian-backed Ḥūthī rebels by arming Salafi tribesmen keen to uproot their heretic Shi'a neighbors from northern Yemen.

To lend more empirical substance to these observations, we sought in Chapter 6 to repeat the investigation of the Bahrain mass survey using analogous individual-level data from another ethnically-divided society. Such an analysis would reveal how far the individual-level relationships between ethnicity and political orientation uncovered in Bahrain apply outside of that specific country context. Yet, lacking the requisite data from elsewhere in the Arab Gulf proper, the complementary study was made to rely upon two surveys of Iraq undertaken in 2004 and 2006. The analysis revealed a broad agreement with the Bahrain findings and, owing especially to the temporal variation present in the two surveys, even offered some additional insights. In Iraq as in Bahrain, citizens' orientations toward the state were shown to depend fundamentally on their perceptions of the ethnic balance of power enshrined therein. For ordinary Iraqis, concerns about the empowerment of ethnic rivals at the expense of one's own group competed with and generally superseded more mundane matters of economic welfare in determining the extent of an individual's support for, and actions taken in favor of or against, the Iraqi government.

Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'is reported holding political views and engaging in political action in a pattern corresponding to the prevailing ethnic character of the government. In 2004, when the coalition-appointed Iraqi Interim Government represented neither Sunnis nor Shi'is per se, signaling instead a basic shift away from the Sunni-dominated Iraq of the pre-2003 era, citizens' confidence in and satisfaction with the performance of the regime was determined

⁵ Ignoring the case of the stateless Kuwaiti *bidūn*.

above all by ethnic affiliation itself, with Iraqi Sunnis holding much more negative views of the interim administration irrespective of their attitudes toward Shi'a. This Sunni-Shi'i discrepancy amounted in each case to around 20% of the two dependent variables (i.e., political opinions) considered. By contrast, the difference in opinion separating Iraqis of below and above average economic satisfaction in 2004 barely surpassed 5%.

By the time of the 2006 survey, however, control over Iraq's government had shifted in elementary fashion toward Shi'a dominance, and so too, accordingly, did the basis of Iraqis' political behavior. No longer were government orientations based upon ethnic affiliation itself but upon citizens' views toward this newfound Shi'a empowerment and the larger shift in the balance of ethnic power that it signaled. Iraqi Sunnis who expressed more worry for the empowerment of Shi'a groups over against that of Sunni groups were shown to report much less confidence in and satisfaction with the performance of the Iraqi government *qua* Shi'a-led government, while Shi'is who were more concerned about the empowerment of Sunni groups vis-à-vis Shi'a groups reported much higher confidence and approval. This effect of what we termed ethnic identity was robust among Sunnis and Shi'is in 2006, and in all but one case it was larger in magnitude than that of economic satisfaction.

Finally, although a lack of data from 2004 prevented a similar cross-temporal analysis of Iraqis' political behavior, still our findings evidenced once again the primacy of ethnic orientations over against economic considerations in determining an individual's propensity to undertake political protest action in Iraq. In affecting the likelihood that Iraqis had taken part in a political demonstration, the influence of ethnic orientation was found to be some three times the magnitude of that economic satisfaction among both Sunnis and Shi'is. In short, despite important historical and institutional dissimilarities distinguishing the two cases, the same forces behind citizens' regime orientations witnessed in Bahrain were seen to apply equally in the case of Iraq. This outcome suggests that the same should be true of other Arab societies in which identification as a Sunni or Shi'i is politically-salient.

Having recounted these main Chapter 6 conclusions, we may repeat the procedure of the previous section to note the methodological and theoretical limitations of this second survey analysis. As for the former type, the Iraq survey analysis may well have represented an improvement over that of Chapter 5, not least on account of sample sizes more than three times greater than that utilized in Bahrain.⁶ In addition, the study was able to make use of

⁶ Of course, Iraq's citizen population is more than 50 times the size of Bahrain's.

more direct measures of each of the two main explanatory variables—respondents’ ethnic orientations and their level of economic satisfaction—as well as the temporal variation from separate data points in 2004 and 2006. Still, one may identify several shortcomings. First, the survey did not ask respondents about their sector of work, precluding an analysis of the bases of public-sector employment in Iraq to inform that undertaken in Bahrain. Moreover, in light of the extreme effects of inter-ethnic interviewing revealed in the Bahrain context, the absence of any data—about ethnicity or otherwise—regarding the Iraqi fieldworkers makes possible a severe case of omitted variable bias if Iraqi respondents tended to misrepresent their political opinions and behaviors when asked about them by members of the rival community, and if some non-trivial proportion of the interviews were inter-ethnic. Another potential source of the same bias is the confounding influence of foreign involvement in Iraq at the time of the two surveys. It was shown that those individuals more strongly-oriented against members of the rival ethnic group were also more likely to reject the U.S.-led involvement in Iraq and by association the Western-backed interim government. In order to avoid spurious associations, then, particularly in 2004 when the Iraqi government was still coalition-appointed, the Iraq survey analysis employed a control variable that attempted to capture Iraqis’ views toward the occupation. Despite this effort to limit it, however, some bias may remain.

The greater cause for worry is a more elementary issue: the necessity of resorting in our test of the wider applicability of the Bahrain findings to survey data from Iraq rather than from, say, Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, a practical concession that introduces no little theoretical difficulty. Because this thesis has focused explicitly on the rent-based states of the Arab Gulf, a class of regime that Iraq approximates but poorly, corroboration of the Bahrain results in the context of post-2003 Iraq is a rather unsatisfying substitution for empirical evidence of the same from another Arab Gulf society. In particular, because Iraq’s (Arab) Sunni-Shi’i demographics are a close match to Bahrain’s, the question necessarily arises whether the observed political effects of ethnicity depend in part or in whole on the existence of a Shi’a majority or something approaching it. If Bahrain’s politics are assumed *sui generis* in the Gulf largely on account of its unique Sunni-Shi’i demographics, in other words, then support for the Bahrain findings in the case of Iraq does nothing to preclude the possibility that, at bottom, it is in fact this country-level variable that underlies the observed citizen-level link between ethnicity and political orientations. Whether or how far these findings apply in places where

Shi'i citizens comprise only a sizeable minority (Kuwait) or a majority at the regional level (Saudi Arabia)—these key questions the Iraq investigation leaves unanswered.

The matter of what Chapter 6 can or does teach us about Chapter 5 is therefore one that must balance two competing considerations. On the one hand, the finding that the same determinants of political orientation operate in two Arab societies separated by history, by political institutions, and by economic organization, sharing in common only a parallel Sunni-Shi'i competition over national influence—such a finding would seem to inspire confidence that the individual-level relationships observed in Bahrain are not the product of some unique complex of unhappy circumstances. Notably, this result suggests that the nativist element present in the ethnic politics of Bahrain (and Saudi Arabia) but not in Iraq (or Kuwait)—the Shi'a narrative of an Ancient Bahrain whose utopian, clerical-ruled society was plundered and subjugated by foreign Sunni tribes—is not a necessary condition of Bahrain's ethnic-based political mobilization. Similarly, in showing Sunnis to adopt more oppositional orientations toward the Iraqi regime *qua* Shi'a-led government as their anti-Shi'a orientations increased; and Shi'a more pro-government views as their anti-Sunni orientations increased, the Iraq survey analysis demonstrated that government opposition does not stem intrinsically from Shi'ism itself but from a community's status as a political out-group.

On the other hand, the feature of Bahrain that most distinguishes it from its Arab Gulf counterparts, and whose effect one would thus most like to gauge through any cross-country analysis, is exactly the one it shares with Iraq: its majority Shi'a population. Unfortunately, a want of alternative survey data—and of primary social science research in the Gulf region more generally—is likely to mean that this empirical ambiguity will remain for some time.

Revising the *Rentier State* Framework

From here it is obvious what revisions to the standard *rentier* state framework must be made in light of the foregoing study. A first regards the naïve assumption that economic benefits are distributed in *rentier* regimes in a manner that is politically-agnostic. The clichéd image of the government critic-turned-government minister found little empirical or even anecdotal support in the preceding. Instead, the cause and effect would seem in Bahrain at least to be reversed: *rentier* benefits are not employed primarily to purchase new political supporters, but to reward existing ones. Increased political deference on the individual level is thus a principal cause of receiving greater state rewards; not, as *rentier* theorists would have it, the effect.

Such a relationship is reinforced even further by the nature of the public sector in the Arab Gulf, in particular its ever-mounting securitization. Over the past decade, five of the six GCC states counted among the top 11 military spenders as a proportion of GDP, and four fell within the top six (cf. CH. I, 7, note 7). The decision to extend a citizen government employment, accordingly, is one that often—and increasingly—intersects with concerns for national security. To be sure, it is for precisely this reason that most of the region’s militaries and security services are staffed largely with non-nationals assumed to have loyalty to no one but the state, with only officers taken from among the ruling and allied tribes. Service in power ministries such as Defense, Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Justice demands similar precaution. And for those innocuous civilian positions that do remain, preference goes to satisfying political friends rather than buying off political enemies. In societies divided broadly into anti-government and pro-government factions whose members are assumed readily-identifiable on the basis of ethnicity, such targeted decisions to reward or punish are easily made—decisions the transparency of which serve to create as many government critics as government champions. In explaining the economic-*cum*-political clientelism supposed to bind citizens to rulers in *rentier* states, Beblawi (1990, 91) tells that “[e]very citizen” of a rent-based regime “has a legitimate aspiration to be a government employee; in most cases this aspiration is fulfilled.” While he fails to elaborate the opposite case, we may say that ethnic-based societal division and political mobilization, combined with a near-hysterical fear of foreign-inspired irredentism, is the cause of one such exception.

The second basic revision required of the extant *rentier* state paradigm concerns its undemonstrated trust in the economic bases of individual political behavior. This assumption, afforded familiar expression and intellectual encouragement in “the reverse principle of no representation without taxation,” says that citizens who receive from rather than give to a state can have no reasonable basis upon which to expect a vote—actual or proverbial—in how it conducts its business. That rational, self-maximizing citizens and rulers would happily trade political privileges for material benefits is the accepted point of departure for the entire *rentier* hypothesis. Not only this, but any sustained popular political coordination is all but ruled out as a casualty of the *rentier* politics of allocation: for, as 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.” The mistake here, of course, is a too narrow—a too *economic*—definition of these “others in similar conditions.” Certainly, Bahrain and the

rest of the Arab Gulf may not be ripe for proletariat revolution, yet political alliances need not be built upon shared class interests.⁷ Being born Sunni or Shi'i too is a "condition."

In Bahrain and other Shi'a-populated Arab Gulf states, ethno-religious categories offer viable focal points for mass political coordination that otherwise, for lack of both an alternative basis of cooperation as well as institutional incentives for such joint action, *rentier* theorists have hitherto judged unlikely or even impossible. While identification of one's ethnicity or religious tradition may be a crude substitute for knowledge of his actual political preferences, in light of the Gulf's relatively barren political landscape deficient of such institutions as non-governmental organizations, independent media, and proper political parties that could give information about others' political characteristics, one relies in one's choice of political allies on the only data available: names and genealogies, language and accent, skin color, place of origin, and so on. In short, individuals must depend disproportionately on ascriptive social categories such as family and tribal descent or confessional 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, in the first place, very cheap and simple to obtain and, owing to the impermeability of ethnic and to a lesser extent religious boundaries, probably quite accurate. Political cooperation thereby becomes most likely among individuals of similar ethno-religious background, who form a common bond that may not correspond to actual historical connection or even to shared political interests, but one that binds all the same.

For the extant *rentier* framework, the upshot of this ethnic-based mobilization is that political life in rent-based regimes can no longer be summarized neatly and axiomatically as a pragmatic bargain of economic happiness for political quietude. For, even if it were true that material satisfaction engenders more pro-regime orientations on the margin, in the first place such an effect does not lead to *apoliticality* but indeed to an *increase* in political action in defense of a regime and of one's more favorable position therein *qua* member of the dominant ethnic group; and, in the second, it operates as but one of several competing determinants of political views and behavior, which include ethnic membership and orientation. To restate an earlier formulation: that one's interest in politics does not stem from the wish to oversee

⁷ To be fair, one may recall that Luciani continues on to predict presciently (76) that "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." However, whether for a lack of interest or a lack of faith that such ideological-based political coordination, if possible in theory, is in fact likely, this line of argument does not receive further treatment and certainly has not been taken up by modern scholars in their empirical analyses of the theory (e.g., in Ross's several studies).

the usage of one's taxed income does not mean that one is disinterested in politics. So too, there are many grounds upon which a Bahraini or other Gulf Arab may oppose—or support—the political status quo, and the relative fullness of his wallet is only one of them.

Finally, as for the larger question of how the Gulf region as a distinct category of states continues to enjoy relative stability compared to the rest of the Arab world, and this despite an ever-heightening political consciousness due to the effects of Sunni-Shi'i division and the regional geopolitical rivalry from which it originates, it is plain now that the answer is not simply that the region's would-be political activists are paid by their governments to shut up. Instead, rather than seek to transform regime critics into regime clients, the ethnically-divided states of the Arab Gulf tend to cultivate in their place a more dependable ally: a captive ethno-religious constituency that already shares (or can be persuaded that it shares) an interest in preventing any significant change to the political status quo. Indeed, if the Sunni citizens of Bahrain will tend to support the prevailing political system irrespective of whether it benefits them personally, simply because they prefer it to what they imagine as the alternative, then why bother trying to win over Shi'a citizens who, from the regime's perspective, will never surrender their true loyalties in any event? More dramatically, if hundreds of thousands of ordinary Bahraini Sunnis are willing to mobilize largely of their own accord in order to avert a perceived takeover by Shi'a revolutionaries, why use one's limited resources to court the potential political support of the latter when it can be better spent in rewarding and thereby reinforcing the already-demonstrated support of the former? The same question applies to the regime in Saudi Arabia and, as illustrated recently in the row surrounding its tardy support for GCC military intervention in Bahrain (cf. CH. I, 9-10), that in Kuwait.

Toward a New Arab Gulf Research Agenda

Such fundamental theoretical revisions call for corresponding changes to the present social science research agenda dominating studies of Arab Gulf politics, a paradigm whose narrow focus on macro-level outcomes—in particular, the region's lack of democracy and of armed civil conflict—misses much of the politics in between, or rather gives the distinct impression of a want of political life altogether apart from top-down decisions of resource allocation made by calculating, interest-maximizing rulers whose only concern is the continued co-option of elite competitors via rent-funded patronage. Conspicuously absent from this prevailing model

of the Arab Gulf, then, are the vast majority of ordinary Gulf Arabs, an odd fact for a theory that purports to understand the bases of individual political behavior in rent-based regimes.

Not only have previous quantitative studies operated at the incorrect level of analysis, moreover, but, in so doing, they have relied upon an elastic notion of “rentierism” that has served to draw attention away from the Arab Gulf states as a particular class of regime. In seeking to find universal relationships between macro-level political outcomes and various aspects of rentierism, that is, such studies imply that every country is to some degree a *rentier* state; that some marginal increase in Luxembourg’s oil production would lead to a marginal decrease in its political accountability. Yet the very data they employ suggest the opposite. According to the authoritative measure developed by Ross (2008), for example, the average per-capita fuel rents among GCC states is \$11,339, compared to just \$270 for the other 163 countries included in his sample (cf. CH. 2, 21-25). In fact, then, nearly all of the variation in country-level political outcomes attributed so far to “oil” should be attributed more simply to the distinct character of the Arab Gulf. As one either is or is not pregnant, so too is rentierism a dichotomous state, one whose representatives are clustered disproportionately in one peculiar corner of the globe, toward which scholars seeking to understand its political effects would do well to direct their attention.

Dictating this research agenda in no small part has been a lack of requisite data, helped by a regional political environment generally hostile to public opinion research, and particularly hostile to survey research that would elucidate religious and ethnic demographics. Given this scarcity of individual-level data about the political views and activities of ordinary citizens of the Arab Gulf, to say nothing of their ethno-religious characteristics, it is little surprising that the behavioral assumptions of *rentier* theory have for so long escaped systematic empirical examination. At the same time, however, if the three national surveys treated here—one undertaken in the midst of a security crackdown in Bahrain; the others in an Iraq but one year removed from inter-state war and, in the case of the 2006 poll, on the very brink of armed civil conflict—if such efforts remain possible, then so too are other studies.

And such efforts are ongoing. As mentioned previously, the World Values Survey was administered for the first time in Qatar in December 2010. At the time of writing, the second wave of the Arab Democracy Barometer is being fielded in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Yet, in order to expand on the findings of the present study, these two standard survey instruments must begin to include additional items, or to be more forceful in insisting that existing questions

be fielded. Most significantly, neither the World Values Survey nor the Arab Barometer has succeeded in capturing the ethnic or religious affiliation of Gulf Arab respondents, rendering pioneering mass surveys of both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia unusable for our purposes here. Further, in light of the considerable interviewer effects witnessed in Bahrain, surveys in the region should begin to report basic demographic information about field researchers, most critically their ethnic affiliation in societies where ethnicity is socially- and politically-salient, so that appropriate strategies may be adopted to avoid substantial bias in survey responses.

Above all, having been now sufficiently reminded through the thirty-year ascendancy of *rentier* theory about the importance of economic organization in determining the political character of Arab states, students of Middle East and Gulf politics should begin to proceed back in the other direction, to re-evaluate the received stereotype of the economically- and politically-satiated “oil sheikh” in light of evolving domestic and regional conditions, including Shi’a populations increasingly insistent in their demands for political authority and influence, growing securitization of the region’s government sectors, and the GCC’s open political and ideological competition with a resurgent Iran that has benefited much from the U.S.-imposed “New Middle East.” Such a reassessment of the continued efficacy of the *rentier* paradigm demands, in the first place, a thorough interrogation of its conceptual underpinnings, which implies a return to the individual citizen as the primary unit of analysis, be it quantitative or qualitative. In order to understand the unforeseen longevity of the monarchies of the Arab Gulf, we must first understand the actual processes by which they earn and preserve the political favor of ordinary Gulf Arabs. The hope is that this first true test of the theoretical foundations of *rentier* state theory is not also the last.

Notes for Chapter 7

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