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RESEARCH PAPER

Socioeconomic Structures in the Arab Gulf States and Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine the media, economic, and education sectors, while also assessing the state of civil society and human rights in the Gulf region during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the wake of September 11, 2001 events, the ruling Arab dynasties of the Gulf faced significant pressure from the American government to liberalize their political, social, and economic frameworks. This research study is grounded in both primary and secondary source materials. The challenge faced by the Gulf region is not one of low literacy rates, but rather pertains to the quality and nature of the education. The economic status of the Gulf states may be characterized as *economic monarchism.* The most alarming conditions are evident in the realm of human rights.Reforms to raise the standard of education in the region are needed in order to uphold democratic ideals.

Keywords: Civil Society, Democracy, Gulf States, Human Rights, Women Rights

Introduction

For an extended period, democracy advocates have expressed concern over the political and democratic conditions in the Middle East, particularly within the Gulf nations. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States government renewed its commitment to promoting democracy and freedom across the region. This shift led scholars, activists, and pro-democracy organizations to focus greater attention on the state of democracy in the Arab world. As regional and global proponents of democratization intensified their efforts to reform the political, social, and economic systems of Gulf countries, it became essential to understand the dynamics of authoritarianism and democracy in the region.

This article aims to analyze the socioeconomic structures of the Gulf States during the first decade of the twenty-first century. It examines human rights, with particular emphasis on the rights of women and foreign workers, alongside an evaluation of the educational and economic systems in these nations. Additionally, the study assesses the extent of media freedom and the constraints placed upon it within the region.

Literature Review

Despite substantial investments in education since the establishment of formal institutions, the quality of education in the region remained low. One possible explanation for this is that authorities prioritized the expansion of education over its quality. Greater emphasis was placed on increasing the number of schools and teachers, rather than ensuring the calibre of educators or carefully defining the curriculum to be taught (Alhouti 2023, 72–73). However, in recent decades, Saudi Arabia's educational system has undergone significant improvements. Along with a marked increase in school enrolment, the country has also undertaken a comprehensive curriculum reform (Croghan 2024, 36).

The "rentier state theory" (RST), a hypothesis in political science, was originally developed to explain the prosperity of Middle Eastern nations heavily reliant on oil. The

concept of "rents" lies at the core of RST. Rents refer to the profits derived from the sale of natural resources, such as oil, to foreign entities. In many Middle Eastern countries, these revenues fund the national governments, diminishing the need for local populations to engage in labour. As a result, the relationship between the state and its citizens in countries dependent on rents for government funding is distinct (Croghan 2024, 31).

Due to the limited political space allowed by the ruling authorities, civil societies in these countries have not developed the level of confidence required to play a meaningful democratic role (Al-Sayegh 2004, 120; Kamrava and Mora 1998, 904). Consequently, civil society in these nations remains generally weak and largely ineffective (Slackman 2009). Furthermore, these states invest significant financial resources in technologies that exploit security vulnerabilities in computers and smart devices, including spyware and surveillance software. Such technologies are employed by authoritarian regimes to control internet access and hinder human rights advocates from promoting their causes (Sairafi 2022).

Migrant domestic workers in Gulf countries are frequently subjected to forced labour. Instances of forced labour involve the illegal confinement of workers in their place of employment, the confiscation of their passports, and the threat of arrest or other repercussions should they attempt to escape. As a result, migrant domestic workers in the Gulf often travel freely and with varying levels of awareness, only to find themselves in conditions of forced labour upon arrival (Khan 2023, 819–20). In this region, gender reform is not pursued as an independent initiative but is often integrated with other state policies designed to enhance governmental power and influence, rather than solely advancing women's rights. State-sponsored feminism in this context functions as a broader form of guardianship that extends across both public and private spheres (Bilan 2024).

Material and Methods

This research study is grounded in both primary and secondary source materials. Primary sources include interviews and government records, which offer critical insights into the functioning of political systems, institutions, and cultures in the Arab Gulf States through the analysis of official documents. Secondary sources encompass books, articles, reports, and websites featuring relevant content from newspapers, periodicals, and academic journals. By drawing on these sources, the study examines the key characteristics of the socioeconomic systems in the Arab Gulf States.

Results and Discussion

In the following sub-sections, various socioeconomic institutions, including education, economy, civil society, human rights and media, and their structures are discussed (Figure 1).

Education

The introduction of formal education in the region is not very old. However, various informal initiatives had emerged earlier, though it was not until the state began exporting oil that it took full responsibility for funding and shaping the education system. In the 1930s, King Saud introduced public primary education for boys (Salhi 2024, 253). Similarly, in Kuwait during the late 1930s and Qatar in the early 1950s, the newly established modern governments began using oil revenues to construct numerous schools and recruit teachers from neighbouring Arab countries to advance their educational systems. As a result of this rapid progress, education became accessible to the majority of the population in the Arab Gulf States (Alhouti 2023, 72).

Similar to many other Arab nations, the Gulf region's literacy rates (Table 1) are not the primary concern; rather, it is the nature and quality of the education delivered within

the classroom that warrant scrutiny. This phenomenon has been characterized by the terms "education deficit" and "educational poverty" (Salem 2009). Such a situation arises from official regulations that curtail individuals' capacity for free expression. These restrictions particularly impede the social sciences, with political science being notably affected (Slackman 2009). In both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the education system negatively influences respect for democratic values; conversely, in Oman, there is virtually no impact in this regard (Fattah 2006, 40).

Higher education in Saudi Arabia is profoundly shaped by the religious elite, leading to growing discontent among students regarding the curriculum's relevance to their everyday needs (Yamani 2000 *cited in* Fattah 2006, 40). The curriculum contains numerous anti-Muslim statements and sectarian content (Lacroix 2004, 351). Furthermore, the prohibition on teaching non-Islamic philosophy contributes to the situation, as students reportedly spend a significant portion of their school day—approximately one-third—engaged in the study and internalization of religious texts rather than their intended professional subjects. This phenomenon elucidates why many Saudi entrepreneurs prefer to hire foreign workers, thereby exacerbating the rising unemployment rate (*The Middle East in Crisis* 2002, 108–9).

Table 1
Literacy Rates in the Gulf States (2024)

Country	Literacy Rate
Bahrain	98%
United Arab Emirates	98%
Saudi Arabia	98%
Oman	97%
Kuwait	96%
Qatar	94%

Source: World Population Review, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/literacy-rate-by-country

Despite being among the highest in the world, educational spending yields limited returns in terms of economic growth. A comprehensive understanding of the diverse educational systems globally necessitates an examination of how political power is structured within each nation's educational framework, including the identities and approaches of those in positions of authority. Consequently, it is essential to analyze the educational reforms in the Arab Gulf states from a political perspective (Alhouti 2023, 77, 78). Many of these changes were driven by political interests that are often disconnected from the actual needs and priorities of educational institutions. As Abdel-Moneim (2016) suggests, the majority of reforms, including those pertaining to education, were enacted to enhance the legitimacy of regimes and to ensure their continued survival (Alhouti 2023, 79).

In Bahrain and Qatar, Crown Princes played pivotal roles in spearheading reform initiatives. Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa initiated changes in Bahrain, albeit with an overextension in decision-making authority. In Qatar, the Supreme Education Council was co-led by Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and his mother, First Lady Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned, with the RAND Corporation, a consultancy firm specializing in reform, establishing a presence within the Palace. Despite substantial investments aimed at modernizing their K–12 education systems, global education indicators reveal that these systems continue to perform inadequately. Students face challenges related to low educational attainment and insufficient preparation for competitive global markets (Alhouti 2023, 70–71, 85).

Teachers, often recruited from abroad, exhibit a wide range of qualifications and competencies. Within schools, rote memorization is often prioritized over critical thinking skills. Additionally, many children are raised by nannies who may lack proficiency in Arabic

or English. Moreover, the presence of guaranteed public-sector employment diminishes the incentive for students to exert additional effort in their studies, irrespective of their abilities. In 2014, the United Arab Emirates mandated military service for men, requiring conscripts with secondary education to serve for 11 months, while those without such qualifications serve for three years. This extended period of service for dropouts is intended to equip them with skills relevant to the civilian job market; however, many veterans have struggled to secure employment after their discharge (*The Economist* 2023). The curriculum remains focused on theoretical disciplines rather than practical skills, failing to align with the requirements of a modern, diverse economy. Vision 2030 seeks to improve Saudi Arabia's sociocultural landscape by promoting women's economic participation and enhancing access to healthcare and education (Croghan 2024, 33, 36)

Economy

The discovery of oil in the Gulf countries during the 1960s resulted in a significant influx of wealth and the establishment of an economy heavily reliant on hydrocarbons, which account for nearly 75% of total government revenues. This wealth has facilitated the development of a unique "Gulf social contract," characterized by an affluent society that lacks fundamental rights. The resources generated were employed to ensure domestic security as public discontent began to rise (Dentice 2018). This situation can be aptly described as *economic monarchism*, as the economies in question do not align with either communist or fully free-market systems. In these monarchical economies, the focus is on the monarchs themselves, whereas in a free market economy, economic dynamics are governed by market forces. In the Gulf, traditional practices such as *muhawwil* and *kafil* continue to endure. In these arrangements, a worker's passport is often confiscated by the *kafil* as a form of collateral. While foreign workers engage in various forms of labor, they are frequently restricted from owning certain types of businesses and real estate (Ayubi 1995, 225–27).

The governing regimes in the Gulf region maintain a strong grip on power and have weathered the most severe economic downturns (Jabber 1988). This area has experienced the least social, cultural, and political transformation compared to other regions in the Middle East (Longrigg 1970, 85). Concepts such as religious coexistence, mutual respect, and interfaith harmony are largely alien to these societies (Kurpershoek 2001, 89, 265). In these contexts, an individual's social standing is primarily determined by their lineage (Ladin 2005, 43). Ghalioun (2004) refers to this phenomenon as the "feudalisation" of modern states, where the ruling elite operates under the assumption that they possess ownership over the state itself, granting them the authority to exploit its resources and populace at their discretion. In these nations, hereditary monarchs wield considerable power. The monarch of Bahrain, for example, has the authority to appoint members of the upper house, who possess the ability to reject any decisions made by the lower house, known as the Council of Representatives (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah 2008).

Leaders are able to mitigate significant threats to their authority due to the high per capita income generated from oil revenues (Bilan 2024, 27). However, analysts have noted that the oil-rich alliance, comprising Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman, must reduce its dependence on oil revenue and eliminate costly welfare programs that extend from birth to death (Reuters 2001). One perspective on hydrocarbon wealth suggests that the state utilized these funds to provide well-paying public sector jobs for its citizens. This approach aimed to distribute some of the wealth among the populace and encourage their participation in national development. Ultimately, job creation became an end in itself, irrespective of the actual necessity for such positions. Consequently, this led to an overstaffed public sector (Alhouti 2023, 74).

During the 1990s, a significant number of nationals were employed in the public sector. The phenomenon of clientelism extended well beyond royal families and influential corporate allies, as civilians were integrated into governmental payrolls. Nationals who had previously been predominantly engaged in the private sector began to populate state bureaucracies, while foreign workers faced increasing restrictions on public employment opportunities. These nationalization policies altered the historical segmentation of the labor market between migrants and non-migrants across various sectors (Thiollet 2022, 27). Traditionally, Gulf Arab nations have been reluctant to implement sensitive economic reforms, opting instead to endure periods of low oil prices until they are subsequently flooded with new petrodollars during economic upswings (Reuters 2001).

The principal cause of the socio-political unrest in Bahrain and Oman in 2011 was youth unemployment, a pressing concern that continues to affect Saudi Arabia later on (Dentice 2018). Increasing dissatisfaction among young people is evident in their frequent small-scale rallies and demonstrations advocating for improved services and job opportunities. Oman, characterized by its limited oil resources, faces significant economic challenges and has a lower standard of living compared to its neighbors (Ottaway 2021). In contrast, Qatar, with its small population and ample natural gas reserves, is not hastily reducing its public salary expenditures. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, however, have made the most rapid progress in this regard (*The Economist* 2023). Following the decline in oil prices in 2014, many countries in the region began diversifying their economies and implementing long-overdue economic reforms, such as increasing taxes, removing subsidies, and relaxing investment regulations (Muasher 2023).

Saudi Arabia's ability to pursue democratization has been significantly impeded by its robust oil economy, which has adversely affected the advancement of civil and political rights. Despite the kingdom's implementation of several Soviet-style development plans, demands for reform and enhanced financial management persisted over the decades. Nonetheless, these reforms consistently failed to meet expectations. In response to this context, characterized by rentierism, oil dependency, and growing demands for change, the Vision 2030 reform agenda was introduced in 2016 (Croghan 2024, 32).

Civil Society and human rights

The Gulf region hosts a significant number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). However, these organizations generally exhibit a depoliticized nature, a situation attributable to the tight control exerted by ruling regimes over them and the alignment of state objectives with socio-political matters (Kamrava and Mora 1998, 904). The most severe challenges are observed in the area of human rights. Human trafficking, physical assaults, harassment, discrimination, and various forms of abuse—both physical and sexual—against foreign workers, including women, are prevalent across the Gulf. Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and other international monitoring bodies frequently report on serious human rights violations and instances of violence. In Saudi Arabia, organizations that claim to advocate for human rights and civil society often find themselves linked to the royal family (Bilan, 2024).

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council, governments have established a monopoly over cyberspace, utilizing spyware and surveillance programs acquired from European and Israeli sources to compromise smart devices. This situation has left human rights advocates without adequate cybersecurity protections. Consequently, activists have faced accusations of cybercrime as a result of these programs' efforts to infiltrate devices and extract sensitive data. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for them to engage in human rights activities and to communicate and share information with regional or global human rights organizations. Notably, the Bahraini government employed the Pegasus program to surveil human rights defenders and political activists. This surveillance has led to accusations of cybercrime against these advocates, subjecting them to imprisonment and legal

repercussions. While some activists have opted to continue their political and human rights work in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom, others have faced imprisonment and torture in their home countries (Sairafi, 2022).

Numerous countries and human rights organizations contend that the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council impose restrictions on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights as delineated in essential international agreements that constitute the foundation of international human rights law. For instance, all six nations uphold the death penalty, limit press and religious freedoms, and enforce constraints on political participation (Brown 2022). In the context of the Arab Gulf states, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to critique the ruling establishment or its policies. Some countries have even enacted legislation that criminalizes criticism of the decisions and actions of the ruling elite (Alhouti 2023, 86).

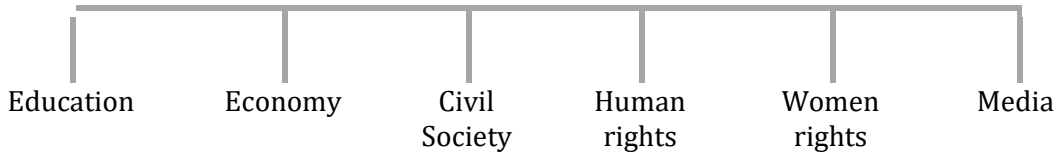

Figure 1 Selected social dimensions of the Arab Gulf States

In April 2022, the United States Department of State published its annual reports on human rights practices. These reports for all six Gulf Cooperation Council countries documented numerous, serious, and verifiable human rights violations across various domains. Common abuses highlighted included arbitrary detention and arrest, significant restrictions on media freedom and free speech—such as libel laws and censorship—and interference with the right to peaceful assembly and association. Often, these infringements involved excessively burdensome regulations governing the establishment, funding, and operation of non-governmental organizations. Additionally, various reports identified other abuses occurring in one or more GCC member states, including severe and potentially life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary or unlawful intrusions into privacy and significant limitations on internet freedom; stringent restrictions on political participation; governmental repression or harassment of both domestic and international human rights organizations; inadequate investigations and accountability concerning gender-based violence; and acts of violence or threats directed at transgender individuals and other marginalized communities.

For an extended period, Saudi Arabia was the only country in the Gulf region without codified personal status legislation (Polok 2024, 11). Furthermore, it prohibits the formation of any civil society organizations (Salhi 2024, 251). Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Vision 2030 economic and social transformation agenda continued to make progress. Concurrently, restrictions on political expression and action remained in place. Nonetheless, reforms were introduced that enhanced protections for the rights of migrant workers and expanded opportunities for women. The application of the death penalty significantly decreased as the government enacted reforms to the judicial system (Brown 2022). Over the past several years, notable changes have occurred, with Saudi Arabia becoming increasingly open to the outside world and loosening many societal constraints (*The Economist* 2023). While the specifics may vary, all six Gulf States still exhibit unfavorable human rights conditions (Katzman 2005; Sivan 1997, 108; Kamrava and Mora 1998, 906).

The travel, business, education, and relationships of women with males

Women's rights are significantly less safeguarded against human rights violations compared to those of religious minorities and foreign workers. Although women's associations existed in 2009 across various nations—such as 23 in Bahrain, 25 in Saudi Arabia, and 43 in Oman (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009* 2009, 68–69)—the overall status of women's rights remains discouraging. In all Gulf Cooperation Council member states, except for Saudi Arabia, the participation of local women in the labor force was lower than that of foreign women (Aldabbagh 2009, 26).

The situation was considerably worse in the preceding decades. Eickelman observed in the late 1980s that women were entirely absent from the official political structures of the Arabian Peninsula. Furthermore, there were no female judges, police officers, military generals, tribal leaders, or heads of state in these countries. Women were also excluded from legislative and consultative assemblies, city councils, and tribal councils (Eickelman 1988, 199; Peterson 1989, 34). At first glance, it appeared that politics in the Arab Gulf States was exclusively a male domain (Peterson 1989, 34).

Proponents of democracy regard gender inequality and the lack of freedom for women as significant obstacles to the process of democratization (Tétreault 1993, 277; Goldberg, Kasaba, and Migdal 1993; Tetreault and Al-Mughni 1995, 407,409; Ladin 2005, 40; Allam 2009). Women in Gulf societies face various restrictions in their daily lives. While men exert control over women's lives, many men also hold the belief that women are inherently weak and lacking intelligence (Kurpershoek 2001, 90). Women are often perceived as close adversaries (Tetreault and Al-Mughni 1995, 406, 415). In Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, it is relatively uncommon for women to express fearlessness towards their husbands (Ladin 2005, 71). In the early 1990s, women in Kuwait's educational system lagged significantly behind their male counterparts (Tétreault 1993, 282). Oman's social structure is characterized by conservative views on gender equality and a prevailing patriarchal framework (Jones 2007, 173).

Since 1957, Saudi Arabia uniquely prohibited women from driving for several decades. In 1990, a group of seventy Saudi women protested against gender inequality in Riyadh by driving cars around the city, an unusual act during the Gulf War (Ellis Goldberg, Kasaba, and Migdal 1993, 163; Dekmejian 2003, 403; Ibrahim 1993, 298). In September 2013, over 1,100 Saudi activists, both men and women, petitioned the King to lift the driving ban. This petition was inspired by four activists who initiated the online "Women2Drive" movement, coinciding with Saudi Arabia's National Day. The request was subsequently reviewed by the consultative council, which, at that time, included thirty female members appointed by the King in 2013 (Salhi 2024, 261). In recent years, Saudi Arabia has implemented social reforms, notably granting women the right to drive in 2018 (Muasher 2023).

Saudi Arabia has undertaken social changes, notably by diminishing the authority of the country's stringent religious police and generally easing social restrictions on its populace. The United Arab Emirates has pursued similar initiatives for a considerably longer period (Muasher 2023). The objectives of Vision 2030 within Saudi society include reducing gender-based discrimination and increasing women's participation. The fundamental principles of Vision 2030 align with recent legislative advancements aimed at enhancing and promoting the role of women across various sectors of public life. A primary focus of these reforms is to improve women's qualifications and their engagement in the labor market (Polok 2024, 2).

Beyond local elections, the Shura Council—serving as the official advisory body to the Saudi government, responsible for drafting and proposing legislation—represents another significant advancement for women in Saudi Arabia. Currently, women occupy

thirty of the council's 150 seats (Bilan 2024). The inclusion of women in the Consultative Council not only transformed the political landscape but also actively promoted the pursuit of greater rights for women. On December 12, 2015, women were granted the right to vote and participated in city council elections for the first time in Saudi history, both casting ballots and running for office (Salhi 2024, 261). Additionally, Vision 2030 seeks to improve the societal landscape of Saudi Arabia by encouraging greater female participation in the workforce (Croghan 2024, 33).

These forms of authoritarian change are primarily concerned with maintaining comprehensive control over social actors advocating for reform, rather than promoting genuine liberalization. Essentially, a hierarchical and regulated approach to gender empowerment and reform initiatives perpetuates existing gender inequities, thereby obstructing the potential of grassroots reforms to yield significant practical benefits and ultimately hindering the state's advancement toward gender empowerment (Bilan 2024). Frequently, there appears to be a lack of political will to implement meaningful reforms, which are often perceived as threats to established authority (Reuters 2001). Moreover, legal and cultural strategies have been employed to enforce practices of gender segregation (Polok 2024, 4).

Foreign Workers

The only regions globally that receive more migrants than the Arab Gulf are North America and the European Union. The oil and gas-producing nations of the Gulf host the highest proportion of foreign nationals worldwide. This region has become a focal point for South-South migration, with the majority of these immigrants hailing from economically disadvantaged countries. In the Gulf, such individuals are commonly referred to as "expats" or "foreign workers," rather than "immigrants" (Thiollet 2022, 3). In the Gulf Cooperation Council, the proportion of foreigners rose from 10% in 1975 to 43% in 2010 (Dentice 2018). By 2020, foreign nationals constituted 52% of the total population within the GCC. Notably, Qatar (88%), the UAE (87%) Kuwait (69%), Bahrain (53%), Oman (39%), and Saudi Arabia (38%) exhibited the highest percentages of foreign residents (Zaccara and Battaloglu 2023, 112).

Religious minorities and foreign workers are among the most vulnerable groups likely to encounter abuses and violations of human rights. The sociopolitical institutions and structures within these societies are structured in a manner that provides cover for perpetrators. Victims often find themselves without recourse to justice, as the legal and judicial systems in these states are frequently biased against them. Lacking citizenship, these individuals possess few rights and are often subjected to humiliation and mistreatment, particularly if they do not adhere to the religion or sect of those in power. This mindset reflects a broader prevailing attitude within these societies.

Foreign embassies and diplomats often acquiesce to these abuses out of concern for losing beneficial trade agreements, access to inexpensive oil and Saudi loans. The execution rate for foreigners significantly exceeds that of Saudi citizens. For example, in 2003, only 19 of the 50 individuals executed were Saudi nationals (Center for Democracy and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia, 2008). Discrimination is evident even against foreign nationals, as Africans and Asians find themselves unable to escape such fates, while Westerners receive preferential treatment. Kurpershoek, a Westerner himself, remarked on the unique status of Westerners among foreign workers in Saudi Arabia. He observed in 2001 that while the heads of Arab, African, and Asian individuals were frequently rolled in public executions across Saudi market squares, no American or European had been executed in such a manner (Kurpershoek 2001, 180–81).

In 2017, Saudi Arabia sought to enhance national employment by implementing an employer-paid fee on foreign workers, thereby narrowing the wage gap between domestic

and foreign laborers in the private sector (Hertog 2022). Foreign workers tend to remain and contribute only as long as their services are required, leading to a clear separation between their lives and those of Saudi citizens (*The Economist* 2023). Evidence of trafficking is prevalent, manifesting in practices such as passport seizure, delayed or unpaid salaries, and forced contract changes. Recruitment agents often impose exorbitant fees for visas, further complicating the situation. Additionally, occupational safety remains a pressing concern (Khan 2023, 819–20). The majority of migrant laborers in the Gulf region hail from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Kenya, and typically reside in overcrowded, often unsanitary labor camps (Zaccara and Battaloglu 2023, 122). Most of these camps lack adequate sanitation and access to clean water (Khan 2023, 820). Many unskilled workers in the construction sector are confined to isolated labor camps, relying solely on company-provided buses for transportation between their dormitories and work sites (Thiollet 2022, 31).

Discriminatory citizenship laws, coupled with exclusive institutions, policies, and practices, result in minimal opportunities for formal integration of migrants within Gulf states. Moreover, unlike other countries in the Middle East, the Gulf states are not signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which offers protection to recognized refugees and individuals who have been forcibly displaced. As a result, numerous groups—including Palestinians since 1949, Eritreans in the 1980s, Iraqis after 2003, and Syrians since 2011—have sought refuge in the Gulf without any legal protection (Thiollet 2022, 3).

Media

In the Gulf countries, there exist significant restrictions on press and freedom of expression. The media faces limitations and censorship, and in many instances, self-censorship is practiced to avoid incurring the displeasure of the ruling authorities. As of 2007, Kuwaiti media exhibited a comparatively greater degree of freedom than that of other GCC nations, with Qatar currently holding the leading position (Table 2). Overall, private media ventures in the Gulf have struggled to succeed, with few exceptions, such as Al-Jazeera. This situation can primarily be attributed to government policies and control over media outlets. In 2001, the Saudi government issued a warning to internet users against posting or accessing content critical of the government or its policies. Research indicates that Saudi Arabia ranks among the top ten countries for website blocking, and the nation's broadcast media is state-owned (Teitelbaum 2002, 238; Olayiwola, n.d.; Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'īyah 2008).

Table 2
Index of Press Freedom (2022)

Country	Ranking
Bahrain	167
Saudi Arabia	166
Oman	163
Kuwait	158
United Arab Emirates	138
Qatar	119

Source: Reporters Without Borders

The Omani government employs security measures and restrictions to intimidate and silence the populace. Under Omani law, individuals who produce offensive content or associate with websites that do so may face penalties. With few exceptions, the prevailing media landscape and the professionals operating within it hinder the process of democratization in the region (Beissinger 2008, 90; Slackman 2009).

Conclusion

For an extended period, proponents of democracy have expressed concern regarding the political and democratic conditions in the Middle East, including the Gulf nations. In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, the United States government intensified its efforts to promote democracy and freedom across the region. Consequently, scholars, activists, and organizations advocating for democratic principles began to focus more intently on the state of democracy in the Arab world.

Similar to numerous other Arab nations, the challenge faced by the Gulf region is not one of low literacy rates, but rather pertains to the quality and nature of the education provided in schools. This phenomenon is often referred to as an "education deficit" or "educational poverty." The economic status of the Gulf states is more accurately characterized as *economic monarchism* rather than as free market or communist systems. In these monarchical economies, the central focus remains on the monarchs, contrasting sharply with the principles of a free market economy.

The Gulf region hosts numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). However, a significant issue lies in the generally depoliticized nature of these entities. This situation stems from the strong control exerted by prevailing regimes over these organizations, as well as the alignment of state objectives within socio-political spheres. The most alarming conditions are evident in the realm of human rights, where human trafficking, physical assaults, harassment, discrimination, and both physical and sexual abuse of foreign workers—including women—are prevalent. Reports from Human Rights Watch and other international monitoring organizations frequently document severe human rights violations and acts of violence.

Religious minorities and foreign workers are among the groups most vulnerable to human rights abuses and violations. The sociopolitical institutions and structures in these societies are often designed to provide cover for perpetrators, leaving victims with little recourse for seeking justice. While all six Gulf States exhibit unfavorable human rights conditions, the extent of these issues varies. Women's rights, in particular, are less protected compared to those of religious minorities and foreign workers. Additionally, freedom of the press and expression is restricted in the Gulf Countries. The media faces various limitations and censorship, and self-censorship is frequently employed to avoid provoking the ire of the ruling authorities.

Recommendations

Reforms to raise the standard of education in the area are desperately needed in order to uphold democratic and humanistic ideals. It may also be necessary to take action to give job doers, international employees, and economic actors fair and equal treatment. Even with the introduction of various changes, there is still much room for improvement in the state of human rights. It is possible that civil society activists will have more freedom and space to advance the reform agenda and to give women more freedom at home and in public areas. In order to support the democratic reforms in the region, the international community has a vital role to play.

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