

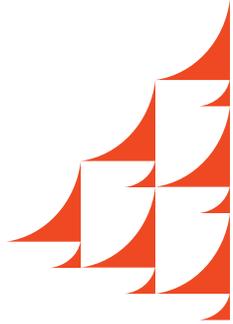
The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding



Kinship Politics in the Gulf Arab States

Scott J. Weiner



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About the Author

Scott Weiner holds a PhD in political science from the George Washington University. His research focuses on kinship politics and state building in the Gulf Arab states. From 2013-14, he was a visiting research fellow at the American University of Kuwait, and also conducted field work in Muscat, Oman. He is the chair of the Middle East Discussion Group of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy in Washington, DC.

Executive Summary

Kinship politics in the Gulf Arab states are often oversimplified. States in the region are not merely “tribes with flags,” nor is kinship in such states a relic of pre-oil politics. Kinship is important to individual identity, the distribution of power and resources within the state, and connections beyond it.

This report introduces kinship politics in the Gulf Arab states with an explanation of the origins of kinship-based governance in the region. Historically, kinship ties were the basis of a sophisticated political system in the Gulf that determined access to power and resources. Differences in these systems created nuanced but important differences in the way these states are governed.

The report then analyzes contemporary kinship politics in the region at the leadership, national, regional, and personal levels. It shows that kinship politics are not a historical relic but rather an integral part of governance in the Gulf Arab states.

Finally, the report recommends that governments inside and outside of the region factor kinship into security, development, and economic policies. Considering kinship politics more directly can better shape outcomes beneficial to the states and people of the region, and their international interlocutors.

Introduction

“Kinship politics matter in the Arab Gulf” is an oft-stated truism but not always a well-researched conclusion. Tribalism is not unique to the region. Gulf Arab states were controlled historically by tribal groups, but so too were states in Europe and Africa. There seems to be something special about kinship politics in the Gulf compared to other regions, but identifying this unique characteristic proves challenging. It is not enough for policymakers to understand that kinship matters in the Gulf. They must also understand how it matters.

Existing academic studies make this task difficult by seizing upon different, but limited, views of kinship. Some treat kinship groups as electoral constituencies for parliamentary candidates. Others treat kinship groups as loyal patronage networks for the powerful. Still others understand kinship groups in ethnic terms. Each perspective explains only one aspect of kinship, missing its pervasive and persistent influence over the provision of power and resources, and the formation of individual identity. Taking kinship groups on their own terms with all of their complexity is vital to fully appreciate their influence in Gulf states.

This report is an in-depth description of how kinship operates in the region. It is divided into two parts. The first part explains why kinship politics in the Gulf Arab states differ from electoral, patronage, or ethnic politics. It also describes how kinship operates in both tribal and urban communities in the region, the latter of which is often underestimated. The second part answers the question of how kinship matters in contemporary politics, describing its influence in leadership politics, national politics, subnational and regional politics, and individual politics.

Kinship is not merely a historical vestige or catchall for explaining the political eccentricities

of the Gulf region. Rather, it is an active part of regional politics that shapes the behavior of members of Gulf Arab societies, including their leadership.

Kinship Politics in the Gulf

Kinship Politics Explained

Kinship refers to a set of people with a genuine belief that they are connected through an apical ancestor.¹ Kinship connections do not require formal genetic proof so long as others in the society genuinely believe that the connection exists. While kinship is based on descent, political contexts and social factors determine its larger significance. This is important because it means that the boundaries of kinship groups and the extent of their power can change over time.

A family member need not be able to trace his or her lineage directly to the apical ancestor to prove membership in a kinship group. In Kuwait, for example, a common way of establishing a person's place in a kinship group is to ask his grandfather's name. In addition, names in the Gulf Arab states often take the form [name] son of [father] son of [grandfather] followed by the family name.² The name itself contains a genealogy. Thus it is apparent that Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa, is the son of Isa and grandson of Salman. In Kuwait, a mere glance at the names of past emirs reveals how leadership in the Al-Sabah family has traditionally passed back and forth between the descendants of the Jaber and Salem branches of the family. A basic understanding of Gulf kinship politics illuminates these important aspects of Gulf power structures.

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As in many societies, family names in the Gulf Arab states convey information about that group. A family name can speak to a group's *place of origin*. The Behbehani family, for example, originated in Behbahan, Iran. The al-Basri family originated in Basra, Iraq. More recently, subgroups seeking to distinguish themselves from a larger family will use their location to do so. For example, a subset of the Balouch family in Oman relocated to Nizwa and thus use the name al-Nizwani. Family names can also speak to the group's *historic occupation*, though many such occupations now are obsolete in the modern states of the Gulf. Al-Kandari refers to a water carrier, for example, while al-Najjar means a carpenter. Family names can speak to a *characteristic* of the family's members. Al-Ayyar means the "jokester." Qabazard is Persian for yellow robe, indicating the dress of a family ancestor. Finally, last names can refer to the *apical ancestor* of the family. Kuwait's royal family, the Al-Sabah, derive their name from Sabah bin Jaber, the first ruler of Kuwait city who is believed to have lived from 1716 to 1764. The Marafie family, whose lineage derives from the Behbehani, is so called because of its apical

¹ Charles F. Swagman, "Tribe and Politics: An Example From Highland Yemen," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 255.

² Some, but not all, Gulf Arab states require this format by law.

ancestor, Mohammed Rafaie. Marafie is a contraction of his name that the family adopted as its moniker.

Originally, kinship politics were a means of survival in the Gulf region, characterized by heat, dryness, and sparse vegetation. Resource scarcity exacerbated competition for access to the basic staples of survival. Kinship groups helped overcome these difficult conditions, by encouraging coordination, resource sharing, and collective defense. Today kinship ties remain salient for both non-urban and urban populations.

Urban Kinship

Kinship was an important aspect of identity in towns along the Arabian Peninsula. These towns were waypoints for global trade routes linking Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and India. Gulf Arab towns were also regional bases for pearling vessels and their crews. Pearling, shipping, and trade were often a family business. This business model kept wealth inside the family. Marriages between merchant families also created bonds of trust. Alongside their Sunni counterparts, many Shia merchant families resettled in the Gulf Arab states from Iran, including the Behbehani in Kuwait, the Fardan in Qatar, and the Lawati in Oman. While cross-sectarian marriage was uncommon, relations between merchant families were good because business success depended on it. A 96-year-old member of a Sunni merchant family in Kuwait claimed that women from Sunni and Shia families would even nurse each others' babies.³

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Merchant families also had close ties with the ruling family. In the pre-oil period, import taxes over merchant activity represented a large share of government income. When Mubarak al-Sabah, the ruler of Kuwait, raised shipping taxes in 1907, three major merchant families took their ships and pearl divers to Bahrain in protest. Mubarak, facing a severe loss of income, was forced to go to Bahrain under the guise of an official visit to convince the families to return.⁴ This merchant power was enhanced by kinship ties, which helped to unify policy positions. Leaders across the Gulf Arab states thus recognized the need for the support of family constituencies to remain in power. Historically prominent merchant families have served as advisors to rulers, and today they continue their influence through service in the cabinet and visits to the royal *majlis* (council).

Tribal Kinship

Tribes in the Gulf, as elsewhere in the Middle East, are divided into subdivisions. The highest level of organization is the *qabila*. The *qabila* is divided into subgroups whose hierarchy differs depending on the tribe and region. These divisions – *fakhita*, *ashira*, and *batan* – denote major strands of the *qabila*. Within each of these subdivisions is the lowest level of tribal organization,

³ Author interview with a member of a Sunni merchant family, Kuwait, February 15, 2014.

⁴ "Political Diary of the Persian Gulf Residency for the week ending 26th May (received 3rd June) 1907 - Koweit, 9th to 15th May," *Political Diaries of the Arab World: Persian Gulf 1904-1965, Volume 2 (1907)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Archive Editions, 1990): 193; Seif Marzouq al-Shamlaan, *Min Tarikh al-Kuwait* (Kuwait: Thaat al-Silasil Publications, 1986): 155.

the *beit*.

The structure of these tribal hierarchies has traditionally been transmitted via oral history. However more recently, tribal groups have begun recording these hierarchies on family trees that emphasize the tribe's long roots. Such tribes are regarded as "*asl*," the "original" or "authentic" citizens in the states in which they reside. As a result, these tribes have high status.⁵ Governments, as well as tribes, are responsible for this new genealogical emphasis.⁶ Kinship groups adapt their tribal presentation in response to specific challenges. As groups grow more successful, powerful, or affluent, they tend to emphasize the smaller *beit* category to preserve exclusivity. In times of uncertainty, including with the current economic challenges facing the region, these same groups tend to emphasize belonging in the broader tribal group.

Tribal groups were not always genetically related. The *Shammar* for example are a major tribal group of roughly four million people in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East. They are in fact a tribal confederation comprising several large families, including the Taghlib, Abs, and Hawazin.⁷ The *Mutair* are also a set of tribal groups led by the al-Duweesh family.⁸ These confederations formed out of competition for control of resources and territory. The tribal territory, known as a *dirah* (plural *diyar*) had borders that were constantly renegotiated. Weaker tribal groups would also pay tribute to stronger groups for use of the land or the resources on it. Control over these resources played an important role in the formation of Gulf Arab states.

Kinship in State Formation

Families and tribes were important political constituencies as states were formed from the late 1800s to the 1970s. During this period, Britain established protectorates throughout the region and appointed royal families to manage domestic affairs while the British controlled foreign policy. To ensure this domestic order, royal families reached out to tribes and families to maintain domestic control. As constituencies, these tribes and families were useful: They were large, hierarchical, and organized groups that royal families could use to distribute patronage. Tribes could also provide fighters to protect the territorial boundaries controlled by the royal families.

Royal families distributed money and weapons to tribes to buy their loyalty. Urban families and tribes alike had direct lines of communication with the head of state, who would often visit major families on holidays. Later, the governments of newly formed Gulf Arab states would grant citizenship to these family and tribal groups, creating access to the resources of these wealthy oil-producing states.

⁵ Author interview with a member of a Sunni tribal family, Kuwait, January 12, 2014.

⁶ Nadav Samin, *Of Sand or Soil: Genealogy and Tribal Belonging in Saudi Arabia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015): 6.

⁷ "The Shammar (Two extracts from *Handbook of Arabia, 1916*)," in *Gazetteer of Arabian Tribes: Volume Thirteen*, ed. R. Trench (Cambridge: Archive Editions Ltd, 1996): 67.

⁸ Appendix I: Divisions of Mutair, 'Ajman, 'Awazim, Rashaida, Shammar and 'Aniza Tribes (Extract from *The Arab of the Desert, 1949*): in *Gazetteer of Arabian Tribes: Volume Ten*, ed. R. Trench (Cambridge: Archive Editions Ltd, 1996): 263; "Muteir" (Two Extracts from *Handbook of Arabia, 1916*) in *Gazetteer of Arabian Tribes: Volume Ten*, ed. R. Trench (Cambridge: Archive Editions Ltd, 1996): 18.

The process of state formation did not happen the same way in every Gulf state, and these differences affect the salience of kinship in politics today. In Oman and parts of Yemen, the irrigation of agriculture invited more bureaucratic intervention by the state, lessening the political salience of kinship, although it remains an important aspect of social, economic, and traditional life. In states like Kuwait and Qatar as well as in parts of Saudi Arabia, tribes held territories (diyar) and control over oases and wells. Governments negotiated directly with individual tribes, giving them a major role in the allocation of resources before and after state formation. The effects of these historical patterns are evident across the contemporary Gulf Arab states. A more in-depth look provides understanding of how kinship continues to shape the region's politics.

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Kinship in Contemporary Gulf Politics

The role of kinship in contemporary Gulf politics is pervasive and instrumental in setting political agendas within the region's states. This section examines kinship's political role at multiple levels: transnational, leadership, national governance, local governance, and personal. For each, kinship is an important part of access to power and resources in the Gulf region.

Transnational Kinship Politics

Boundaries between the Gulf Arab states were defined largely by British-mediated treaties and agreements. Kinship groups, however, predate these agreements and stretch across them. Major kinship groups – Otaibi, Tamim, Al Murra, Mutair, and Harb, for example – exist in multiple Gulf states. Yet members of these families continue to gather on family occasions such as weddings. These gatherings provide a semiregular opportunity for face-to-face association.⁹

The transnational nature of kinship groups also has important economic implications. In the pre-oil period, brothers from merchant families sometimes migrated to different cities in order to find good economic conditions.¹⁰ Today, these brothers and their descendants form a transnational network for economic collaboration. The existence of transnational family businesses integrates the regional Gulf economy, especially since many of these businesses are quite successful.

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The transnational aspect of kinship has important political effects as well. Ruling families in the Gulf Arab states sometimes intermarry, solidifying connections between them and strengthening political alliances. For example, the former ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Ahmed bin Ali al-Thani married the daughter of

⁹ Author interview with sheikh of a major tribal family, Kuwait, February 19, 2014.

¹⁰ Author interview with a member of a Sunni merchant family, Kuwait, January 26, 2014.

the former ruler of Dubai. When he was deposed in 1972, the sheikh fled to Dubai, where he enjoyed a safe haven. The son of Bahrain's current king is Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad al-Khalifa. His wife, Sheikha Shaikha bint Mohammed Al Maktoum is the daughter of the ruler of Dubai.

Given that roughly 2,500 members of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant are Saudi, there has been speculation that the group uses tribal ties as part of a recruitment strategy in the Gulf Arab states. The group has extensive tribal ties in Iraq and Syria, and leverages these ties for tactical gains.¹¹ Additionally, ISIL has actively recruited in Saudi Arabia.¹² However, it makes use of social media and pamphlets more than tribal ties in this regard. ISIL has also received funding from the Gulf. However, the source of this funding tends to be wealthy individual patrons and clerics rather than tribal leaders.¹³ Saudi Arabia's government also closely monitors its financial sector to limit the extent of this funding.¹⁴

Kinship in Leadership Politics

The Gulf Arab states are what Michael Herb calls "dynastic monarchies."¹⁵ They are led by a senior member of the state's royal family. When the leader's rule ends, his replacement is appointed by the consensus of senior members of the ruling family. Succession in Gulf states is not always passed directly from father to son. In addition, the states use different methods of determining succession. In Oman, for example, power has been concentrated in the hands of the Al Said royal family since 1871 with leadership traditionally passing from father to son. However, as the current sultan is not married and has no sons, his successor will be chosen by members of the royal family. If they cannot agree on a candidate, they will default to the person chosen by the sultan – a name allegedly written down inside a sealed envelope to be opened only if such a contingency occurs. In Kuwait, leadership is determined by consensus of senior members of the Al-Sabah family. Historically Kuwait's succession has alternated between descendants of Mubarak al-Sabah's two sons, Jaber and Salem.

Saudi Arabia's succession policy has undergone shifts over the past decade with the creation of a Bayaa (Allegiance) Council in 2007, which designates the line of succession. While the council's role is to institutionalize the process of consensus building in the royal family, it is itself the product of kinship politics. King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz announced the formation of the council to limit the power of the seven influential "Sudairi" sons.¹⁶ Furthermore, the council reportedly was not consulted on the appointment of Salman bin Abdulaziz as crown

¹¹ Erin Banco, "[Give with one hand, take with the other: Why the US and its Gulf allies are failing in the fight against ISIS](#)," *International Business Times*, December 8, 2015.

¹² Glen Carey and Deema Almashabi, "[Jihadist Recruitment in Riyadh Revives Biggest Saudi Concern](#)," *Bloomberg*, June 16, 2014.

¹³ "[Who's Funding ISIS? Wealthy Gulf 'Angel' Investors, Officials Say](#)," *NBC News*, September 21, 2014.; Janine Di Giovanni, Leah McGrath Goodman, and Damien Sharkov, "[How Does ISIS Fund its Reign of Terror?](#)" *Newsweek*, November 6, 2014.

¹⁴ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "[PolicyWatch 2275: Saudi Funding of ISIS](#)," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 23, 2014.

¹⁵ Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Simon Henderson, "After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August, 2009: 8. The "Sudairi Seven" are so called because of their mother Hassa Al Sudairi, a wife of Abdelaziz bin Saud.

prince prior to his ascent to the throne on January 23, 2015.¹⁷ After Abdullah passed away, King Salman removed his brother, Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz, from the line of succession, replacing him with his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef, and appointing his son, Mohammed Bin Salman, deputy crown prince – a new position created by Abdullah. Such reshuffles ensure that a family and its descendants are party to the prestige, honor, and wealth of leadership. Future politics in Saudi Arabia will likely reflect divisions between supporters of Salman and opposition to him within the ruling family. This support will be closely tied into support for Mohammed bin Salman, whose interviews in the Western media and announcement of the Saudi Vision 2030 plan are part of an attempt to legitimize him as a successor to Salman or Mohammed bin Nayef.

Members of the royal family at large also benefit from dynastic leadership. In Kuwait, there are over 1,500 members of the Al-Sabah family. These members receive monthly payouts from Kuwait's government, have unique political access, and are among the most affluent of the country's citizens. In Saudi Arabia, all male members of the royal family are given the title "prince." Such benefits ensure that the royal family remains the strongest kinship group within the state, and that power is concentrated in the hands of its most powerful members. This supremacy is important because many Gulf Arab states have a number of influential families. Thus, advantages to royal family members safeguard against competition from families of similar status.

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Royal families will also use strategic marriage to maintain good relations with influential families. For example, Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah took wives from the powerful Mutair tribe. At the time, Mohammed Shahrar, a Mutairi, was the head of Kuwait's Council of Ministers.¹⁸ Sheikh Jaber's son Ahmed married Husa, the daughter of Ibrahim bin Muhammed al-Ghanim, who was a prominent member of the influential Kuwaiti al-Ghanim family.¹⁹ Such marriages promote cooperation and reduce the chances of antagonism between the royal family and other influential families.

Kinship in National Politics

Government ministers of Gulf Arab states are often drawn from prominent families. Cabinet postings can be a form of patronage, rewarding major families with political influence and appointments in exchange for their support. In some Gulf Arab states such as Kuwait and Bahrain, the cabinet includes many members of the royal family, while in others such as Qatar and Oman it includes relatively few. Cabinets also serve as a feedback mechanism through which the leadership can gauge the popularity of its policies. Since most Arab states in the Gulf lack democratic participation, this feedback serves as a means of ensuring the stability of the state.

Kinship also influences politics in the parliaments of Gulf Arab states where they exist.

¹⁷ "Saudi Allegiance Council Ineffective: Saudi Prince Talal," *Islam Times*, June 21, 2012.

¹⁸ Author interview with a journalist and political activist, Kuwait, February 25, 2014.

¹⁹ H.R.P. Dickson, *Kuwait and Her Neighbours* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956): 41.

Parliamentarians elected to office are often from major kinship groups and are elected by kinship-based constituencies. This constituency can be both tribal (*bedu*) or urban (*hadhar*).

Tribal primaries are common across Gulf Arab states; while often illegal they are rarely prosecuted. When the Kuwaiti police arrested eight members of the Mutair tribe in March 2008 for organizing a tribal primary, it led to demonstrations that turned violent.²⁰ Primaries allow members of a tribe to consolidate support around a single candidate, ensuring victory and tribal representation in the parliament. The candidate may not necessarily have a leadership position in the tribe. In exchange for votes, the candidate helps members of the tribe solve financial problems and obtain permits, and advances the tribe's general interests at the national level.

As low oil prices and dissatisfaction with government policy persist, tribal identity in the Gulf Arab states will likely gain in importance in national politics.

As low oil prices and dissatisfaction with government policy persist, tribal identity in the Gulf Arab states will likely gain in importance in national politics. Tribal identity often inspires more confidence than promises of reform, and governments are loathe to provoke tribal opposition with a crackdown. Economic uncertainty may also exacerbate divisions between historically tribal and urban families. Governments will need to manage carefully the tribal/urban division that may serve as a catalyst for political conflict.

Kinship in Local Politics

Tribal sheikhs continue to serve as intermediaries between the state and tribe members at the local level. In some Gulf Arab countries, sheikhs have an official position within the state bureaucracy and are paid by the government. In others they are leaders of informal networks and exert influence from outside the state bureaucracy. In both cases, however, the sheikh's authority derives from his leadership position in the kinship group. The position of tribal sheikh is often passed down from father to son. The sheikh's family is often granted privileged status as well. For example, the al-Daweesh family historically has led the al-Mutair tribe and its members enjoy high status.

Walis (provincial governors) often come from respected tribal groups and can mediate tribal disputes. They tend to be sent to areas where their tribe of origin is not represented so that they do not show favoritism in disputes involving their own tribe. Still, kinship groups collectively impact politics at the regional level as they tend to settle together in towns and villages. Even during state building, when the government issued housing permits on a first-come, first-served basis, kinship groups managed to circumvent the bureaucratic system. In Kuwait, families swapped housing permits with each other in order to live near their parents, siblings, and cousins. As a result, members of particular kinship groups tend to be heavily represented in the local governance institutions of these areas. Thus candidates from outside that major kinship group seeking elected office must create a successful electoral platform to garner enough support to counter kinship-based voting. While historically urban (*hadhar*) families often critique the nepotism inherent in tribal kinship politics, these same families also

²⁰ "Kuwait," Freedom House, 2009.

tend to support candidates from their families. In general, members of parliament are often bound by a sense of duty to support kinship-based constituents in ways that go beyond pure electoral or patronage politics.

Kinship in Personal Politics

Kinship is built upon relationships between people, and basic principles govern these interactions. Firstly, loyalty to a fellow kin group member is paramount. As an Omani expert put it “The tribe helps you. Even when you are wrong, they help you.”²¹ While kin group loyalty is often associated with tribes, hadhar populations help each other as well. A Kuwaiti from a prominent merchant family explained, “everything affects family here. No way it will just affect one person.”²²

Throughout the Gulf Arab states, families gather weekly to discuss politics, business, and other affairs. In some cases, these gatherings are informal. Elsewhere, they are more explicitly political. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait a senior man of the family hosts formal weekly meetings in a *diwaniya*: A traditional space to gather and discuss affairs of the day over sweets and tea or coffee. Seating is often by seniority, and older men tend to carry the conversation while younger members of the family remain silent unless questioned directly. Since several diwanias occur on a given day, it is not uncommon for a man to visit three or four in a single night, spending 15 minutes or so at each. Recently, a few mixed gender and women’s diwanias have emerged, and unrelated youth sometimes gather weekly in diwanias to eat, watch television, and play video games.²³ In both cases, the diwaniya is a private space where the normative restrictions of public discourse are lifted.

The diwaniya is also an arena for formal politics. Government officials sometimes monitor the tone of discourse at weekly diwaniya meetings to assess the popularity of certain policies. During election season, candidates speak at diwanias and answer questions from the assembled family members. Historically, leaders paid visits to major diwanias on holidays. U.S. officials including ambassadors have also paid visits to diwanias, and former President George H. W. Bush visited them during his Kuwait trip in 1993.²⁴ On the first night of Ramadan in 2016, the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait announced an initiative called #100Diwanias, in which the U.S. ambassador and embassy officials planned to visit a hundred diwanias in Kuwait over the course of the year as part of a public diplomacy initiative.²⁵ The first of these visits was to the Shamlan diwaniya. This choice is significant because while the Shamlan are not major power players in Kuwaiti politics, they are a well-known merchant family whose presence in Kuwait predates the state. Visiting the Shamlan diwaniya represents an appeal to Kuwaiti tradition rather than a statement about power politics in Kuwait.

²¹ Author interview with Omani expert, Oman, March 18, 2014.

²² Author interview with a member of a prominent Kuwaiti merchant family, Kuwait, March 6, 2014.

²³ See also: Bayly Winder, “[The Diwaniya in the Digital Age](#),” *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, January 22, 2016.

²⁴ In 2007, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice [attended](#) a women’s diwaniya during a trip to Kuwait.

²⁵ U.S. Embassy Kuwait, [Twitter post](#), June 5, 2016, 1:22 p.m.

Diwaniyas have also been the site of political action. If there is a demonstration, protesters will sometimes gather at diwaniyas because they know the police will be reluctant to enter the space. A December 2011 police raid on a diwaniya in Kuwait was met with shock by the public.²⁶ Diwaniyas play a unique role in regional politics because they straddle public and private spheres. They are private in that they exist on private property belonging to a family. Yet they are public in that any male can, theoretically, attend the diwaniyas, and the discourse within them is often political.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Kinship politics shape relationships between people at all levels of society in the Gulf. Leaders maintain careful power alignments based on the status granted by kinship. National bureaucracies reflect the interests of kinship groups. Regional-level governance is often based on relations with kinship groups and the distribution of patronage. Finally, personal politics are governed by kinship practices and responsibilities to others in the group. At whatever level, kinship works by creating connections between people, and conveying information about these relationships. While historically tribal groups allowed people to work together to obtain vital limited resources in the harsh climate of the Arabian Peninsula, today kinship continues to play a strong economic and political role in oil-based states.

Western policymakers must take seriously the role of kinship politics in the Gulf Arab states. In a recent speech, U.S. President Barack Obama called for rising above the “base instinct for domination of conquest that had caused conflicts among the simplest tribes.”²⁷ This rhetorical turn-of-phrase appeals to notions of moral progress that are admirable but a characterization of tribes that is misplaced. While often presented as a simplistic or less “developed” form of governance, kinship politics in the Gulf Arab states are both complex and sophisticated. Relations between tribes and families impact the stability of the Gulf Arab states, shape social welfare policies, and determine who sets the political agenda.

Kinship groups also are not a temporary form of social organization. They predate the modern Gulf states by centuries and today play an integral role in the governance of these states. While states have limited the influence and coercive power of kinship groups, these groups show resiliency and remain a stable element of governance in the Gulf Arab states. Just as tribes are not antiquated, they are also not “endangered” as far as politics are concerned. As the Gulf Arab states continue to face the challenges of political dissatisfaction and economic downturn, kinship identity is likely to remain an important safety net for the region’s citizens for years to come.

For Gulf governments, promoting scholarly work on historical dynamics of kinship groups would help dispel common oversimplifications about their role in society. Accurate accounts can help reduce divisions between bedu and hadhar groups in Gulf Arab states by dispelling crude distinctions based on narratives with limited basis in historical fact.²⁸ It could also

²⁶ Kristin Smith Diwan, “[The Politics of Transgression in Kuwait](#),” *Foreign Policy*, April 19, 2013.

²⁷ “[Text of President Obama’s Speech in Hiroshima, Japan](#),” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2016.

²⁸ See: Farah Al-Nakib, “Revisiting Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 1 (February, 2014): 5-30.

strengthen national unity and promote a better appreciation of the rich social traditions of kinship-based societies.

For all policymakers, accounting for kinship politics allows states to design the most effective policy interventions. Local tradition, kinship, and religious custom are different institutions of authority and operate in different ways. Understanding the differences between them is crucial for designing interventions relating to good governance, public health, and civil society. Kinship-based *wasta* (connections or patronage) is related to corruption but it is not identical. Use of tribal patronage networks for business is not a circumvention of the system – it is itself the system. In contrast, corrupt activities like embezzlement or paying bribes are a source of frustration among members of Gulf societies. The Gulf Cooperation Council has formed a committee of regional anti-corruption agencies that has held seven meetings as of May. The committee is planning a Gulf anti-corruption index and is discussing implementing the U.N. Convention Against Corruption.²⁹ International support for these efforts requires appreciating which activities the committee’s members understand as corruption, which does not necessarily include the use of kinship-based patronage.

Kinship has played an active role in shaping the politics of the Gulf. Despite strong states in the region, populations governed by kinship authority are not passive victims of political forces beyond their control. Rather, they are agents who perpetuate centuries-old systems of governance. Understanding this history provides scholars and policymakers insights into how such forms of governance coexist within the contemporary political system.

²⁹ [“GCC anti-corruption cmte convenes in Riyadh,” Kuwait News Agency, May 1, 2016.](#)

